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Autism as Metaphor: The Affective Regime of Neoliberal Masculinity

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Author
Ante-Contreras, Daniel Michael

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Autism as Metaphor: 
The Affective Regime of Neoliberal Masculinity

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in

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by

Daniel Michael Ante-Contreras

June 2017

Dissertation Committee:
Dr. Sherryl Vint, Co-Chairperson
Dr. Keith Harris, Co-Chairperson
Dr. Derek Burrill
The Dissertation of Daniel Michael Ante-Contreras is approved:

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Committee Co-Chairperson

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Committee Co-Chairperson

University of California, Riverside
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For Denise and Dakota,

Who have believed in the person I was, am, and will be,

even when I haven’t
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Autism as Metaphor: 
The Affective Regime of Neoliberal Masculinity

by

Daniel Michael Ante-Contreras

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in English
University of California, Riverside, June 2017
Dr. Sherryl Vint, Co-Chairperson
Dr. Keith Harris, Co-Chairperson

This dissertation explores cultural production about autism—from film, television, literature, and video games to United States legal documents—in order to define and analyze assumptions about white masculinity within the ideologies of neoliberal capitalism. In popular culture, characters with autism are generally limited to operating as either apathetic harbingers of dehumanizing presents and futures (as in science fiction with autistic characters) or as dependents who have a difficult time functioning in modern economies and who must ultimately “overcome” through personal initiative. In both models, autism presents problems of productivity, independence, and finances. In these ways, representations of autism are often intimately connected to neoliberal goals and expose how neoliberal subjects are made to perform. These texts present, then, a means of tracing the evolution of how neoliberalism has impacted culture, identity, and disability. Further, such representations of (primarily men) with autism were produced simultaneously to the idea that a “crisis of masculinity” has resulted from modern social and economic policies. Connecting David Savran’s concept of the “white
male as victim” under late capitalism and Sally Robinson’s concept of the “marked man” to Stuart Murray’s notion of the “Hollywood logic of autism,” this dissertation argues that cultural definitions of autism have had key roles in furthering the privatized, enraged affects that sustain neoliberalism. Through this methodology, the dissertation seeks to further define the intersections of masculinity and disability as a potentially hegemonic coalition through which notions of self-financialization, rational self-interest, and rugged individualism are supported. By noting the relationship between autism and neoliberal subjectivity, the dissertation disentangles the mythologies through which disabilities and masculinities are made productive for regimes that create immense amounts of social, political, and economic suffering. It also furthers research on how affective and cognitive disabilities (as opposed to physical, the focus of most disability studies) are constructed through cultural discourse and, specifically, expands understandings of autism by putting different media in conversation with each other.
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Chapter One

Autism as Metaphor:

The Cognitive Logics of Capitalism

In his case history about an autistic boy, titled “Joey: A ‘Mechanical Boy,’” Bruno Bettelheim claims that “[Joey’s] story has a general relevance to the understanding of emotional development in a machine age” (3). Joey’s journey from autism to “normalcy,” Bettelheim argues, reflects the boundaries of the human condition: “Feelings, Joey had learned, are what make for humanity; their absence, for a mechanical existence. With this knowledge Joey entered the human condition” (7). Bettelheim uses autism as a metaphor to articulate anxiety about the threat of “becoming machine” and losing humanity in the face of modern technologies. People with autism are not human, he argues; instead, they are unfeeling machines that need psychoanalysis to bring them back to the human condition. While Bettelheim published his case history of Joey in 1959—when understandings of autism, still a relatively new diagnosis, were in their infancy—these anxieties have remained relevant to representations of autism, even as new clinical information has emerged. This dissertation will explore representations of autism from the 1960s into the twenty-first century to show how the disorder continues to function as a metaphor that emblematizes the limits of human identity, especially in conversation with notions of economic productivity.

Three decades after Bettelheim published Joey’s case history, the film *Rain Man* (1988), while representing the origins of a new, more sentimental, narrative mode of rendering autism, also recapitulated Bettelheim’s metaphors. In the film, Raymond
Babbitt (Dustin Hoffman), a man with autism, initially lives in an institution with a set routine of watching television and eating. This all changes, however, when his brother Charlie (Tom Cruise) gains custody of him. Unable to communicate effectively outside of his set routine, Raymond finds it impossible to operate within traditional economies, while Charlie eventually values him primarily for his utility as a card counter in Las Vegas. Raymond functions as a machine of wealth accumulation. Ultimately failing to enter into legitimate economic productivity and the “human condition,” Raymond is sent back to an institution at the end of the film, though not before helping Charlie recognize that he needs to reform his behaviors. Charlie’s development from greedy capitalist to slightly more warm-hearted capitalist operates as the film’s central narrative action; Raymond, on the other hand, is unable to follow Charlie’s footsteps into economic and emotional productivity, functioning as nothing more than a prop, a constant signifier of economic and personal stagnation. He fails to achieve the feelings necessary to be deemed fully human and capable of transformation.

These two examples—Bettelheim and *Rain Man*—reflect the central concern of this dissertation: how autism, rendered as metaphor, expresses anxieties about “a machine age” of economic and social unfeeling. In both, the person with autism puts a focus, like a camera lens, on the issues of their contemporary worlds, even if the metaphor that results constructs that person as undesirably inhuman (Joey) or personally and economically stagnant (Raymond). Indeed, the distinction between the potential for and lack of personal transformation is the hinge on which autism is often made valuable culturally. Real people with autism, or their textual identity, disappear into narrative. In
Representing Autism, Stuart Murray directly addresses films like Rain Man and the transformational narrative offered by Bettelheim in order to critique how the savant and other representations of autism contribute to an ideology of capitalist life-making. Murray outlines what he identifies as a politics of “overcoming,” the idea that people with autism can navigate their deficiencies in the pursuit of social, political, and economic integration:

For the majority, non-disabled audience of a mainstream Hollywood feature...such logic is in keeping with the wider cultural politics that utilize an idea of the “benevolent good” to connect individuals to communities and to the state. “Overcoming” autism...is a narrative that carries the national ideologies of promise and achievement. (132)

If autism is an inherently dystopian condition outside of the human, the erasure of it as a disability, through narrative, signals the triumph of national health. To resist the machine one must do what the machine cannot: become emotionally productive in a capitalist world.

Despite Susan Sontag’s call to resist “metaphoric thinking” (3) in regards to illness, such metaphors remain extremely influential. Just as Sontag compares tuberculosis to cancer, suggesting that many of the metaphors from the former transferred (in altered form) to the latter, so too does autism seem to have accumulated meanings similar to cancer, as well as new meanings based on new anxieties.¹ This is evident if we add autism to the progression of illness as a metaphor for capitalism given by Sontag, where tuberculosis, as “consumption,” challenges “the necessity of regulated spending, saving, accounting, discipline” in early capitalism’s version of the homo economicus and

¹ For more specifically on the metaphor of autism as a disease, see Alicia A. Broderick and Ari Ne’eman’s “Autism as metaphor: narrative and counter-narrative.”
cancer, associated with repression and abnormal growth, is the opposite of advanced capitalism’s desire for expansion and irrational indulgence” (63). The use of terms like “withdrawn” and “fortress of the self” in relation to autism expands this “refusal to consume or spend” to a more frightening, for modern capitalism, conclusion: the person with autism is completely indifferent to capitalism and the social structures that maintain it. In a time that emphasizes the necessity to work in collaborative, flexible environments and when human worth is valued through productivity, cultural texts observe an autism outside of economic productivity and often (in narratives about the lack of support for autism services) directly opposed to the austerity of neoliberal capitalism. At the same time, indifference often signifies an ability to be recuperated and “duped,” made to work for economic ends that are unconcerned with human suffering. Thus, autism exists within a metaphorical web full of economic assumptions that prompt how people define real individuals with autism. This dissertation does not want to recapitulate these metaphors in a way that would give them more cultural power; instead, it is concerned with how neoliberalism organizes and produces emotions, defining the human around a specific, narrow vision of gendered affect. To get at this, though, requires understanding the metaphors of autism as they are employed in popular culture, cultural discourse, and more broadly. Autism has become a major vehicle through which cultural production transmits knowledge and assumptions about emotional productivity.

Cancer does not have the same potential as autism to function as a metaphor for the anxieties of neoliberal capitalism because cancer usually appears later in life and, regardless of when it appears, often ends life quickly. Autism is almost always diagnosed
in early childhood and, unless there are co-occurring conditions, is not fatal. The possibility that people with autism will need services for their entire lives necessitates, within austerity capitalism, narratives that allow autistics to “overcome” their illness and become economically productive citizens. On the other hand, whereas Sontag argues that popular understanding of cancer suggested that the disease emerges from a repression of emotions, autism is wrongfully rendered as a lack of emotions. 2 Whereas cancer “proceeds by a science fiction scenario: an invasion of ‘alien’ or ‘mutant’ cells, stronger than normal cells” (68) that requires assault resulting in “collateral damage” to the body, the person with autism is the “alien” (there are no “autism cells,” so autism is a ubiquitous part of the person’s identity), a term often used even by parents of autistic children. 3 The first comprehensive bill passed for autism support was called the Combating Autism Act; the cancer equivalent was merely called the National Cancer Act.

Autism’s potency as a cultural metaphor also emerges not just from what it “looks like,” but from who it affects. Though the nature of certain cancers associates them with particular genders and death rates from cancer vary by race (black women die at the highest rate, though white women have the highest rate of cancer), cancer has so much cultural power because it can target anyone. On the other hand, in AIDS and its

2 Specifically, she states that “according to the mythology of cancer, it is generally a steady repression of feeling that causes the disease. In the earlier, more optimistic form of this fantasy, the repressed feelings were sexual; now, in a notable shift, the repression of violent feelings is imagined to cause cancer” (22).

3 For more on how being autistic has been associated with being extraterrestrial, see Ian Hacking’s article “Humans, Aliens, & Autism.”
Metaphors, Sontag argues that AIDS was so rhetorically convenient (and continues to be now, to a lesser degree) because public officials associated it with “others” (primarily gay men and, sometimes, impoverished minorities). She suggests that this metaphorical value directly concealed the fact that AIDS was a more general problem, and that many groups rejected the idea that AIDS was anything but a disease targeting homosexuals.

Similarly, the idea that autism is a disorder of white men (usually boys) has existed since Leo Kanner’s initial research and continues to affect access to autism resources for women and people of color (Jack 2015). Diagnostically, however, unlike AIDS, white men are much more likely to be diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. The link between white men and autism arrives at a time of shifting ideas about race and gender that are challenging the structural power of “patriarchy” and “white supremacy.” Within this shift, autism accumulates, through stereotypes, the potential for violence, metaphorically standing in for a (white) male capacity for aggression and rage, evident in the fact that the disorder is often used to explain forms of violence associated with white men, such as school shootings, a link that will be discussed in Chapter Three.

Constructing autism as a pathology of white men can circumvent understandings of violence as “white” and “male,” making such violence a condition, autism, rather than an expression of how white masculinity is constructed and experienced.

4 Much scientific and psychological literature has already pointed out that the higher rate of autism diagnoses in white boys is not a matter of any absolute difference in the rate of autism between races. See, for instance, David S. Mandell et al., “Racial/Ethnic Disparities in the Identification of Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders.” In the realm of cultural theory, these disparities can be attributed to differences in the expected behaviors of white men versus men of color, where violent or antisocial behaviors in the former are rendered objects of medical scrutiny whereas, for the latter, are seen as manifestations of criminality.
The history of connecting violence to white men, however, is important because it coincides with shifts in economic structures that men feel have disproportionately affected them (and helped women and minorities). I contend that autism functions culturally in a similar way within the neoliberal period. The phenomenon of “white rage,” visible especially since the rise of the Tea Party movement in the United States but also prominent in the 1980s and 1990s (Faludi 1999; Anderson 2016), historically parallels increased awareness of autism and stereotypes about autistic violence. David Savran has described the rise of what he calls the “white male as victim” who internalizes a feminized and racialized sense of self embedded in fantasies of victimhood. Savran argues that the white male as victim transformed from a countercultural to a hegemonic figure in the latter half of the twentieth-century. While Savran does not discuss disability (instead focusing on the psychoanalytic dimensions of masochism), the intersections between illness, injury, and gender in a text central to Savran’s argument like Jack Kerouac’s On the Road suggests how the white male as victim is also imbricated within a sense of social and physical disability. In other words, men additionally internalize a disabled sense of self.

Similarly, Sally Robinson, at nearly the same time as Savran, put forward the notion of the “marked man,” claiming that “white masculinity most fully represents itself as victimized by inhabiting a wounded body, and such a move draws not only on the persuasive force of corporeal pain but also on an identity politics of the dominant” (6). I would argue that this corporeal pain also becomes mental in a flexible information economy, a cognitive problem embedded in representations of dysfunctional digital
citizens. Masculinity, Robinson says, has become “retrenched and recoded” to construct a new hegemonic ideal: a “masculinity…[that] is increasingly distant from the putatively ‘healthy’ or ‘stable’ masculinity that preexisted the crisis” (12). In these terms, a masculinity that is not “healthy or stable” (or, in other words, a disabled masculinity) consolidates as a cultural means of understanding economic shifts that begin in the 1980s, specifically with the rise of a privatized sense of subjectivity promoted by neoliberal capitalism. Autism, primarily diagnosed in men, offers a way to naturalize a particular inflection of masculinity residing between suffering and dominance. Autism transforms, within the age of neoliberal capitalism, into a metaphor replete with meanings and anxieties related not just to emotional productivity and resistance to capitalism but also to the very position of white men as racialized and gendered subjects. At its most fundamental level, this dissertation is about how autism is used as a means of articulating the concept of the white male as victim and how cognitive disability intersects with the “marked man” in ways not yet explored.

These are just some of the complex concerns into which autism enters in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Angst and anxiety about the present and future attach to autism as both a dystopian possibility of an unfeeling future and as a reaction to a present of increased powerlessness. Autistic (in)difference becomes valued as a direct threat to the state apparatus because it emotionally has no interest in its workings; *Rain Man* allows this narrative to be realized. Though Raymond is benign and lovable, he threatens the idea that citizens should support themselves economically as the foundation of the social contract. This reflects, then, the fact that economic logics increasingly
penetrated the “state apparatus” by the end of the 1980s, with anxieties about how to
legitimately produce more and more wealth becoming a ubiquitous concern of the new
capitalist subject in his pursuit of human identity and social value, a subject which I will
call the neoliberal subject. In the previous paragraphs I used the term neoliberal
capitalism a few times, pointing to the system under which diagnoses of and awareness
about autism have exponentially increased. Sontag published *Illness as Metaphor* in
1978, a year before what most scholars define as the beginning of neoliberalism as a
hegemonic economic structure in the United States (Harvey 2005; Foucault 2008). The
economic shift certainly had an impact on metaphorical and cultural systems, and autism
seamlessly occupies a number of anxieties within a globalized, military-industrial
neoliberalism.

I do not mean to make a blanket statement along the lines that neoliberalism
“produced” autism in the sense that autism, as an oppositional metaphor, has increased in
prominence only because of its distance from neoliberal ideologies. The story is certainly
much more complicated. Instead, this dissertation will attempt to make these metaphors
visible and demonstrate how they operate, what they conceal, and what they can tell us in
regard to anxieties about human subjectivity within the rapidly changing world of the late
twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The following chapters will look at a variety of

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5 As many studies have shown, how neoliberalism emerges and operates within different
national and local contexts varies. When I say neoliberal subject, however, I am pointing
more towards an ideal, the subject perfectly fit to the assumptions and requirements of
neoliberal capitalism. While such a subject is probably empirically rare, it is the basis
against which autism is often judged in cultural production. See, for instance, Inderpal
Grewal, *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* and Catherine
Kingfisher and Jeff Maskovsky, “The Limits of Neoliberalism.”

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media formats and genres in order to begin a comprehensive analysis of the myth-making process surrounding autism as a disability and subjectivity. To do this, each chapter will discuss how metaphors of autism have impacted genres and media formats to different, but related and connected, ends. Such genres and media are united by an underlying logic reflecting anxieties about dehumanization within neoliberalism, producing new subjects which in turn modify the forms of media within which they emerge. Autism, as a primary disorder through which the modern subject defines its humanity, is a central touchstone in new territories of subjectivity.

This chapter sets the foundation for this argument in two ways. First, it sets up the methodologies of the dissertation. Beginning with an explanation of how I am employing the term neoliberalism, the following section will then discuss the concept of “emotional productivity” by centralizing interventions into economic and political systems made by disability studies, affect studies, and theories of neoliberalism. Discussing the many calls to position autism as demonstrative or diagnostic of the digital world to some degree or another, I will suggest that the emotional side of productivity and capitalism has not been adequately discussed, especially within the framework of disability studies, which often focuses on physical access. The section will outline how affect and emotions have become major concerns of capitalist production and put the emerging affective structures of neoliberalism in conversation with the definitions and cultural meanings of autism. It will further compare the emergence of neoliberalism to the ways in which cultural theories themselves have employed autism as a metaphor, operating as a literature review
of the ways that different avenues of scholarship have placed their cultural and social anxieties on autism.

Second, the rest of the chapter will be dedicated to offering an example of a cultural text that uses autism as a metaphor for the affective origins of twenty-first century technoculture, the 2014 biopic on Alan Turing, *The Imitation Game*. By looking back at the invention of the computer, *The Imitation Game* echoes Bettelheim, hypothesizing that “[Alan Turing’s] story has a general relevance to the understanding of emotional development in a machine age.” I will argue that the film uses the biopic genre in order to reimagine the cultural origins of the military-industrial complex within the twenty-first century, a time of simultaneous increased anxiety about the relationship between capitalism and the military and emphatic patriotism in the face of the War on Terror. I claim that Turing, standing in for a distant, apathetic surveillance state, shows how autism is allegorized in modern culture.

Autism’s position in culture relies on a dialectic crucial to neoliberal ideology and rhetoric. People with autism are usually imagined, as is Turing, as a means of deconstructing external threats (in the overcoming narrative) or as potentially detrimental to the internal workings of a system (indifference to capitalism, narratives that show autism “destroying” families). In these ways, Turing functions as an interesting figure to read in terms of the production of cognitive capitalism and the concept of the white male as victim, the two central themes of the film. As he is depicted in the film, he is in many ways the original white male as victim: attempting to maintain an active connection to neoliberal subjectivity predicated in independent success while he creates the very
systems that assure his victimhood, the mass surveillance state embedded in the computational power of the computer. His violence, autism, and victimization are inherently connected in the film as he attempts to transcend his limitations to become, as one character says, “the man I’d always thought you’d be.” Turing is the embodiment, then, of the autistic man that will thread through this dissertation, a purveyor of governmentality subject to that neoliberal tendency to turn non-economic concerns into objects of economic analysis. Rationalizing the world and submitting to that very rationalization, *The Imitation Game* documents the affective anxieties of neoliberal capitalism that threads through every chapter of this dissertation as they attach to a particular subject, the autistic man.

**Neoliberalism, Autism, and Emotions**

Despite Bettelheim’s 1959 proclamation that autism is a useful cultural diagnosis for a machine age, the disorder has become a much more prominent metaphor within the “digital age.” For example, Vivian Sobchack, in an article about the magazine *Mondo 2000* from the early 1990s, uses autism to define the “New Age Mutant Ninja Hacker” as a new subjectivity of the digital age:

> Focusing on electronic, quasi-disembodied forms of kinesis (‘safe’ travel without leaving your desk), interaction (‘safe’ sociality without having to reveal your identity or ‘true’ name), and eroticism (‘safe’ sex without risking an exchange of bodily fluids), the New Age Mutant Ninja Hacker’s ambivalent desire to be powerful, heroic, committed, and yet safe within his (computer) shell leads to an oxymoronic mode of being one might describe as *interactive autism*. (18; italics in original)

While this is of course not the first use of the term autism outside of a clinical context, Sobchack exemplifies the meanings the disorder accumulated at the end of the twentieth
century: as a form of withdrawing from reality, it is both an innovative, alternative mode of masculinity (powerful, heroic, committed while simultaneously “safe”) and, more than just a product of the digital age, a manifestation of shifting labor practices. The politics of interactive autism, she argues, facilitates the digital economy: “Hiding under the guise of populism, the liberation politics touted in the pages of M2 are the stuff of a romantic, swashbuckling, irresponsible individualism that fills the dreams of ‘mondoids’ who, by day, sit at computer consoles working for (and becoming) corporate America” (18).

Becoming autistic is simultaneously a fantasy of becoming corporation and becoming digital, the ideal vehicle for an economy of intense accumulation at the expense of worrying about damage to bodies and populations, categories that are now, to the hacker within his state of interactive autism, obsolete. The goals of corporations are achieved by transforming the population into autistics wrapped in “irresponsible individualism,” a cornerstone of the neoliberal ethos.

Many scholars now emphasize the attitudes and behaviors of the 1980s and 1990s, the moment of the “hacker” as a cultural symbol, as central aspects of a new cultural paradigm, variously called late capitalism (Mandel 1978; Jameson 1991), fast capitalism (Agger 1988; Gee et al 1996), the information economy (Castells 1996), and so on. As these labels suggest, this cultural transformation is often understood as an economic phenomenon (as exemplified by Sobchack), though one that intimately affects the discursive structure and prominence of certain cultural concepts. For instance, masculinity and autism have increasingly become cultural buzzwords during the era of neoliberal capitalism because, in part, of autism’s association with the digital and the fact
that economies that rely on cognitive rather than physical strength redefine the value associated with different masculinities. Alan Kirby, in his book *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture*, is one of the first scholars to attempt to offer autism as the cultural condition of the digital age, akin to Fredric Jameson’s use of schizophrenia as a metaphor for the postmodern condition.

Kirby, finding postmodernism an unsatisfying way to explain cultural production and aesthetics in the twenty-first century, defines digimodernism as an emergent phenomenon by the 1980s and a culturally hegemonic system beginning in the 1990s. He lists “onwardness,” “haphazardness,” “earnestness,” and “electronic digitality” as some of the attributes of this new paradigm. While much of what he says applies most directly to cultural products rather than general attitudes (which makes it hard to see his “digimodernism” as the comprehensive system he claims it to be), he does argue that “earnestness” is central to a post-9/11 mentality in contrast to the complex self-referentiality and irony of postmodern culture. Earnestness, associated with autism (Temple Grandin mentions how “direct” and intent on intimate knowledge of ideas and processes she is multiple times in her 1986 autobiography, *Emergence: Labeled Autistic*), gives Kirby a bridge to think about autism’s centrality within digimodernism. Indeed, he most directly discusses general cultural attitudes while discussing autism.

Kirby’s section “The Invention of Autism” (227-233) attempts to imagine autism as the pathology of digimodernism, offering culture as an explanation for an increase in diagnoses of autism. He notes that one of the attributes through which he characterizes autism, a desire for truth and objectivity that opposes a degraded postmodern
“multicultural” moral relativism, positions “autism as the impossibility of being postmodern” (232). Autism, then, embodies the spirit of digimodernism which Kirby attempts to capture, quite literally functioning as the representative subjectivity of the digital age. At the same time, however, there is an unexplained contradiction in the manner Kirby employs the term autism:

[A]utism [is] the perfectly shaped excluded other of contemporary society: the model of ‘sickness’ generated by the ways in which orthodox social values define health and the ‘normal.’...[I]t is the mark of that which our society despises, marginalizes, and makes impossible, and is produced as the exact contrary of hegemonic social forces in a variety of contexts. (231)

Autism seems, for Kirby, to be both the impossibility of being postmodern and the impossibility of being digimodern.

If we are now in the “digimodern” moment, why would autism, the paradigm’s most representative subjectivity, be what “our society despises, marginalizes, and makes impossible”? Such rhetoric is on display in Franco Berardi’s Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide, an otherwise interesting and complex evaluation of the mental health issues created by modern capitalism that at the same time stokes fears that “[t]he sensibility of a generation of children who have learned more words from machines than from their parents appears to be unable to develop solidarity, empathy and autonomy” (7). In Berardi’s estimation, the digital age has induced a dystopic situation full of autistic traits (distance, apathy, dependence). Autism operates as a metaphor for the digital age, the essential byproduct of reliance on technology; it exists at a tension between being the foundational identity of digimodernism and the “perfectly shaped excluded other” of digimodernism because of its metaphorical capacity, operating as an internal critique of
the dystopian attributes of our current stage of capitalism. Kirby notes that “autism can be broadly identified as behavioral alienation in a capitalist-consumerist hegemony…[A]utism [is] a name for an incurable state of exclusion” (232). Later he says “normalcy is the condition of consumerism; everything inimical to consumerism is reduced to mental sickness” (233).

People with autism, Kirby suggests when documenting stereotypes, clash with hegemonic labor practices within a neoliberal economy such as “the economic tendency toward ever-greater flexibility, multitasking, ad hoc arrangements, job insecurity, rapid turnover…autism’s insistence on sameness, on repetition of past actions, on rigidity is a failure to meet this” (231). A contradiction in Kirby’s logic here is that autism, as he describes it, seems deeply ingrained with a Fordist model of labor, a structured, orderly, repetitive system. Autism as a nostalgic form of seeking traditional structures also emerges in Kirby’s idea that autism opposes the gender shift toward an increased suspicion of the characteristic traits of masculinity: overthrowing previous assumptions by which they were ‘natural’ and to be valorized, a postfeminist culture sees them rather as dubious, as absurd or inadequate or implicitly misogynistic…[It] can be supposed that autism is ‘an extreme of the typical male profile’…[A]utism then [is] constructed as the ever-incipient sickness of masculinity (231-232).⁶

⁶ Kirby’s syntax in his section giving the reasons why autism is (culturally) an increasing diagnosis, which are presented as a list, makes it difficult to reproduce his ideas in quotes. What he is alluding to here, however, is Simon Baron-Cohen’s notion, in The Essential Difference: Male and Female Brains And The Truth About Autism, that autism occurs more often in men because it is an “extreme male brain.” Thus, autism becomes, through Baron-Cohen’s use of averages, associated with hypermasculinity and an extreme form of maleness that Baron-Cohen simultaneously attempts to defend as not statistically more violent than “normal maleness” while giving examples of autistic violence.
Male angst within a feminist or postfeminist culture reflects the narratives I documented earlier of “male rage” within new information economies. Thus, Kirby’s ideas about a digimodern opposition to “multiculturalism” and autism as a “mark” against which society defines itself is potentially bridged through the “white male as victim” and “marked man,” subject positions that are hegemonic yet produced through a sense of being subordinate and marginalized. In these terms, autism manifests as a means of staging anxieties about male obsolescence, and possible resurgence, in and beyond the current stage of what some “male victims” would call “feminized capitalism.”

While Kirby is clearly not saying that autism is extreme maleness or always follows the stereotype of repetitive behavior, instead suggesting that such stereotypes explain an increase in autism diagnoses, his ideas about what autism “means” culturally reproduce many of the contradictory metaphors surrounding the disorder. For Kirby, autism seems simultaneously to reflect the digimodern present, a Fordist past, and an ideal, utopian future: “A society whose values produce autism so perfectly as its excluded other does not deserve to survive; nor will it” (233). Autism can literally mean anything, temporally or culturally, within Kirby’s model of digimodernism, a potential he recognizes within the economic and political metaphors of autism: “identifying the main lines of the dominant economic and social ideology of the day with autism will assuredly increase dramatically the incidence of diagnoses of the condition, though at the expense of emptying the term of all meaning” (230). Many of the texts I will analyze in this dissertation do just this: emptying autism of all meaning in order to fill it with economic and gender assumptions. I will trace the specific economic metaphors produced through
autism, looking at how autism is constructed through neoliberalism. Intense anxieties reside within these metaphors about labor practices, productivity, societal and ideological survival (and the counter-possibility of revolution), and the role of male identity within these shifting structures.

We have now encountered two variant ways in which scholarship positions autism economically: Sobchack, who describes “interactive autism” as an ideal condition for the reproduction of corporate power, and Kirby, who points out that autism is, within digimodernism, defined as a mental sickness *inimical* to the capitalist-consumerist hegemony. The question that should be posed is not “which of these ways of understanding autism is correct?” Instead, I want to look at how both circulate within cultural production, often simultaneously emerging within the same text (as is true in the film I analyze later in this chapter, *The Imitation Game*). This multivalent circulation of autism as a trope is always contingent upon the definitions of value produced under neoliberalism, which I will now define as a means of reviewing how people have defined neoliberalism and the affective structures, organized around emotional productivity, it facilitates. In other words, what does the development of neoliberalism as a structure and a concept suggest about autism’s inherited metaphorical meanings?

The term neoliberalism broadly describes what could be called the financialization of subjectivity, a system which attempts to push economic explanations into spaces where they did not previously exist. In the simplest explanation, neoliberalism is the process of turning non-economic spheres of life into objects of economic analysis.
In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey summarizes the basic foundation on which theories of neoliberalism are generally built:

> Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. (2)

Though many believe that neoliberalism is a system where economic values increase to the detriment of state power, Harvey indicates that neoliberalism expands state power that is used to “liberate” free markets. The political blurs into the economic. Political power and rights, therefore, become measured by economic productivity and the ability to produce, accumulate, and spend wealth. Thus, the United States Supreme Court’s decision on Citizens United vs. FEC emphasizes how inseparable economic viability and the concept of the human have become. The decision has leant itself not just to the idea that that corporations are political actors but that they are also literally *human* (people), turning “humanity” into a spectrum based on economic criteria. Anxieties about this process also emerge in Vivian Sobchack’s idea that interactive autism produces workers “working for (and becoming) corporate America.”

Definitions of neoliberalism, including Harvey’s, stem from a series of seminars given by Michel Foucault during 1978 and 1979, now collected and published under the title *The Birth of Biopolitics*. Foucault offers a comprehensive view of the history of neoliberalism that traces the development of concepts like “human capital” and the impact of these concepts on human subjectivity under a system that formulates the enterprise as its basic unit. Beginning with liberalism, Foucault eventually discusses
modern neoliberalism’s origins within German ordoliberalism, documenting how state phobia has created a particular economic rationality before ultimately arriving at the differences between the German and American models of neoliberalism. Foucault says that for the German model, in opposition to that of the United States,

\[t\]he return to the enterprise is therefore at once an economic policy or a policy of the economization of the entire social field, of an extension of the economy to the entire social field, but at the same time a policy which presents itself or seeks to be a kind of \textit{Vitalpolitik} with the function of compensating for what is cold, impassive, calculating, rational, and mechanical in the strictly economic game of competition (242).

This is implicitly Foucault’s theory of the affective structures of American neoliberalism as contrasted to the German model. By introducing an economic rationality fully into non-economic domains (Foucault gives child raising and immigration as examples), American neoliberalism functions as a system that calculates human equations with a sense of affective indifference ("cold," "impassive," "rational," "mechanical"). Citizens are rendered entrepreneurs of themselves (226), which operates as the logic of neoliberal governmentality such that the government itself must feel little for its people beyond assuring the possibility of accessing markets. While this may seem like a cynical and simplistic reduction of American government, which is certainly an expansive institution, economic rationality is clearly central to U.S. policy and advocacy.

Disability studies, focusing heavily on physical disabilities and looking to define people with disabilities as economically productive citizens, has appropriated the neoliberal rhetoric of access. Indeed, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, partially a result of disability activism, had two primary goals focused mostly on physical disability: making it easier for disabled citizens to get and hold a job and to access
commercial buildings by mandating accommodations such as ramps. A retrospective by Georgina Peacock on the 25th anniversary of the ADA published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* suggests one of the act’s primary goals was “economic self-sufficiency” and that its successes have “demonstrated the importance of contributions that people with disabilities can make to our economy.” In other words, one of the most important functions of the government is to ensure economic productivity and that non-normative bodies are accommodated to conditions of labor and consumption. This makes sense from the standpoint of American neoliberalism, as defined by Foucault, where an economic rationality penetrates all aspects of human life; from other perspectives, it seems like a cold, impassive way of constructing human value. When focus shifts from physical to cognitive disabilities, this notion of mechanical, rational access becomes untenable.

According to Foucault, the combination of physical and psychological factors defines the economic subject of American neoliberalism. Defining capital as “everything that in one way or another can be a source of future income,” he asks the question “if we accept on this basis that the wage is an income, then the wage is therefore the income of a capital. Now what is the capital of which the wage is the income?” His answer implicitly posits emotional productivity as a central aspect of American neoliberalism:

Well, it is the set of all those physical and psychological factors which make someone able to earn this or that wage, so that, seen from the side of the worker, labor is not a commodity reduced by abstraction to labor power and the time [during] which it is used. Broken down in economic terms, from the worker’s point of view labor comprises a capital, that is to say, it as an ability, a skill; as they say: it is a “machine” (224).
Earning a wage is inherently both a matter of the physical ability and the emotional ability to work, the second being an increasingly important category within an information economy of cognitive labor. In other words, the American worker harnesses psychological capacity as a skill, making emotions work productively in pursuit of wages.

I am not arguing that emotional productivity is a new problem associated with information economies, but that its relative importance has increased under neoliberalism which, in turn, has prompted autism to become an increasingly valuable metaphor. What is interesting, given this system of metaphors, is that Foucault has to explain what he means by a “machine” because it suggests a problem with the psychological (and emotional) aspect of human capital. If the neoliberal subject, the entrepreneur, is a machine, then they would lack the psychological, and affective, aspects of human capital. To address this, he states that this notion of the machine differs from “traditional” criticism “that capitalism transforms the worker into a machine and alienates him as a result” (224). In other words, extrapolating from Foucault, neoliberalism introduces economic productivity as a major concern, the assumed private control of individual emotions as a primary way to experience economic subjectivity. The worker is not sapped of their emotions, alienated into a passive shell; instead, emotions function like a machine that the worker must control. Emotions become computational, outputs based on rational, calculating reactions to the production of potential wealth.
The individual, rather than a cog in the machine, has emotional and physical control over the destiny of their machine, a manifestation of the rhetoric of “personal responsibility”:

Ability to work, skill, the ability to do something cannot be separated from the person who is skilled and who can do this particular thing. In other words, the worker’s skill really is a machine, but a machine which cannot be separated from the worker himself...We should think of the skill that is united with the worker as, in a way, the side through which the worker is a machine, but a machine understood in the positive sense, since it is a machine that produces an earnings stream. (224)

Thus, neoliberals attempt to resolve the problem they critique, government systems that control human machines at the expense of economic freedom, by: first, putting the individual in control of their own identity-machine; and, second, by extension, relocating emotional ability within a notion of human capital, where productivity emerges directly from private family and individual choices. “The man of enterprise and production” (147), the homo oeconomicus Foucault associates with neoliberalism, accumulates the emotional capacity to function economically. American neoliberalism is a physical and cognitive experience: “Liberalism in America is a whole way of being and thinking” (218).

Foucault offers, then, an explanation for how emotional productivity became a prominent concern of neoliberalism and, therefore, a description of the system under which autism accumulates metaphorical capital, even if the meanings attached to it operate under competing assumptions. While Berardi, similarly to Sobchack, places anxieties about a dependent, apathetic human condition within terms adjacent to a description of autism, Kirby projects a more inclusive future by arguing that we
disentangle autism from capitalist assumptions about how human behavior and feeling should operate. In either case, autism makes the emotional machinery of capitalism visible, an embodiment of the cold rationality of capitalism or the victim of a rational, cold system projecting its desires onto human subjectivity. In either way of thinking, “emotional productivity” is a primary category for understanding how neoliberalism operates and what the future might look like.

Though some scholars have followed Foucault by explicitly making emotions (rather than “psychological factors”) important to understanding neoliberalism, they often follow the “worker as machine” paradigm—or, more aptly, “citizen” as machine—though with some modifications. In *The Terror of Neoliberalism*, Henry Giroux implies that the idea that economic power equates to political power prompts a new form of citizenship in his criticism of neoliberalism’s “definition of citizenship as an energized plunge into consumerism” (8). Giroux’s argument here is, partially, that citizenship falls to those with buying power. It also requires a particular state of mind. The term “energized” suggests that the requirement for full citizenship is not *just* hyperconsumption but an optimistic, heightened experience of consumerism. Thus, anyone outside of this energy is failing to “do their duty” and to keep the economy stable; unable to contribute to political stability, they are condemned as parasites and waste products (Giroux calls this the politics of disposability) rather than citizens with rights. Consumerism is a physically and emotionally kinetic experience. Affects themselves come to determine citizenship and human status, separating those who exert their energies in the reproduction of neoliberal capitalism from those unwilling or unable to “contribute.” The normal/abnormal split
evaluated and critiqued in most disability studies scholarship becomes, under neoliberalism, tied to citizenship as an economic experience, a conflation important to analyze given the focus on economic “access” in both scholarship and policy.

At the same time, “energized” suggests someone who is the passive recipient of electrical energy. The suggestion that this energy is coerced conflicts with Foucault’s argument that neoliberal subjectivity involves personal responsibility and the control of a wage machine. Giroux’s focus on consumerism has itself transformed into a metaphor that pushes this energized plunge towards different assumptions than the calculating rationality specified by Foucault. The reduction of humans to subjects of consumption reifies the zombie as a neoliberal metaphor. As a metaphor for neoliberalism, the zombie collides with the stereotypes of cognitive and affective disability. For instance, in Zombie Capitalism, Chris Harman suggests that “[w]hat [neoclassical economists] do not recognise is that 21st century capitalism as a whole is a zombie system, seemingly dead when it comes to achieving human goals and responding to human feelings” (12).

Giroux, in Zombie Politics and Culture in the Age of Casino Capitalism, states that “the zombie…provides an apt metaphor for a new kind of authoritarianism…in which mindless self-gratification becomes the sanctioned norm and public issues collapse into the realm of privatized anger and rage” (2). In “Zombieconomics: the Living Death of the Dismal Science” Ben Fine continues the theme of a neoliberal “zombie politics” that is parasitic in its need to spread affects supportive of its project:

[I]t is entirely parasitic upon the living, feeding upon them in order to sustain its own life. Second, in so feeding, it degrades whatever it touches and transforms it into its own condition. The process can only come to an end in that nightmare vision in which we have all become zombies. (154)
All three theorize neoliberalism as an experience of negative emotionality, a
dystopic or even post-apocalyptic condition manifested through what Berardi
characterized as a lack of autonomy and empathy. People become passive through a top-
down model of affective oppression. The neoliberal subject—defined by a lack of human
feelings (other than rage), outside of human teleologies, and dependent on emotionally
productive people—exhibits the stereotypical traits of people with autism. In failing to
engage with the emotional aspect of Foucault’s “human capital” and “enterprise,”
proponents of the idea that neoliberalism is a zombie system see emotions as a panacea to
neoliberalism (Giroux often talks about “hope”) in a way that simultaneously positions
those outside of “human feeling” or those inside states of dependence in a precarious
metaphorical condition. Accepting this as the only narrative of neoliberalism would
ignore the competing cultural imaginaries surrounding autism. Indeed, these competing
imaginaries suggest that emotional productivity is a more complicated concept than
Harman, Giroux, and Fine suggest. Fine’s fear of dependence especially hits at why
neoliberal texts have a hard time seeing people with autism as anything but potential
capitalist subjects or, if this project fails, potentially institutionalized subjects.

Martijn Konings’s *The Emotional Logic of Capitalism*, as one of the more
comprehensive responses to the notion of zombieconomics, redefines the emotional
logics that produce the neoliberal subject. Konings asserts that the majority of scholars
make a mistake when they ignore that neoliberalism is a highly emotional experience. He
sees the hold neoliberalism has not as emerging suddenly from a vacuum but, instead, as
an affective condition which emerges from personal connections to older forms of
liberalism. Neoliberalism does not force its zombie states in a top-down process. Instead, the fact that people feel a deep connection to the ideologies from which neoliberalism emerged gives the system its power: “The discursive force of neoliberalism was anchored in the emotional needs of the social self as it had evolved by the 1970s: neoliberalism was synched to the affective economy of the capitalist subject in a way that progressive discourses were not” (91).

Neoliberalism, at some level, makes people feel good about the possibilities that life can potentially offer, though position that feeling within rational discourses of competition and enterprise. Konings links these “emotional needs” to Lauren Berlant’s (2011) “cruel optimism.” Cruel optimism, for Berlant, is a state of attachment to normativity despite, and often because, normalized political and social relations cause suffering. This suffering is seen as a necessary transition point into the abundant prospects offered to the capitalist subject. Based on these attachments, Berlant proposes a theory of the affectivity of neoliberal citizenship, arguing that “citizenship, in its formal and informal senses of social belonging, is also an affective state where attachments that matter take shape” (163). That is, citizenship is a highly emotional experience which, as Konings suggests, is often satisfied by neoliberal appeals to individualism and self-sufficiency. Such appeals also reify the entrepreneurial subject, a vision of normative masculinity that must reclaim its position from a state of emotional and social disability.

With this review of theories of neoliberalism, I have shown how prominent emotional productivity is to the divergent ways of understanding the emotional requirements of a system that defines traditionally non-economic factors as objects of
economic inquiry. Following Foucault, we could argue that neoliberalism offers emotional productivity as the engine, private and personal, that drives the economic subject; indeed, it transforms economics into an individual experience by making people responsible for how they feel about their circumstances. The difference(s) between the theories of Foucault, Konings, and Kirby and those of Giroux, Harman, Fine, Berardi, and Sobchak are foundational to how culture renders autism as an object of economic inquiry and how, then, we understand the mythologies that undergird human subjectivity or, as Bettelheim said, “emotional development in a machine age.”\(^7\) I am arguing, then, that this notion of emotional productivity produces autism as a multivalent metaphor, as both a form of identity capable of transcending limitations and “overcoming” dependence in favor of inclusion within the emotional experience of capitalism, solidarity, ideologies of independence and value, and so on, and a form of identity that will always be dependent which, therefore, can be duped by dystopic capitalism or point towards a more inclusive future beyond neoliberal affects.

The rest of this chapter will analyze the film *The Imitation Game* as an example of this dialectic where a conflicted critique of the economic subject is staged through the lens of the War on Terror. I will analyze how the film represents Turing’s “machine” (the first computer), and the emotions he invests in it, as a precursor to the neoliberal drive to see humans within the frames of statistics and economic value. Turing represents the

\(^7\) This binary is mostly one of convenience, documenting the difference between theories that lend themselves to the idea that autism is a subjected to the neoliberal structuration of emotional productivity and those that see unfeeling, often digital, autism as the prime *subject* of neoliberalism. This erases the fact that there is little else we could find to intersect between, say, Konings and Kirby.
neoliberal subject navigating emotional productivity. I will read this machine in the context of Turing’s identity as both a gay man and as potentially autistic. By reading the film as an allegory for the origins of the military-industrial complex and the emotional responses to such a governing system within a twenty-first century context, the section suggests that Turing is transformed into a metaphor for the subject required under the modern surveillance state, a metaphor that broaches the way that emotional investment in capitalism and nationalism, the “American way of life,” become valued in the twenty-first century. Turing, then, reflects anxieties about the conflicting affective responsibilities of the economic subject. I will begin by analyzing the film’s main project, documenting Turing’s patriotism in relation to his struggles as a homosexual man, in order to show how this personalized story of persecution exists within a broader narrative of technological supremacy, the military-industrial complex, and neoliberal subjectivity. Turing’s victimization is literally mobilized for a nationalistic, homogenizing agenda. Turing, though, is apathetic about these goals, existing at the intersection of disinterest in political futurity and reliance on an economic logic that erases the suffering of bodies.

**Autism, Victimization, and Becoming Man in The Imitation Game**

*The Imitation Game* documents the work Alan Turing (played by Benedict Cumberbatch) did for the British government during World War II. Stationed at Bletchley Park, Turing and his team worked to decipher the Nazi Enigma code and, therefore, the film proposes, were the ones who nearly single-handedly won the war. Turing eventually accomplishes this goal through the invention of Christopher, a predecessor to the modern computer that he names after a childhood friend (and love
interest). Turing’s invention of Christopher links to the second central facet of the film, the fact that nearly a decade after the war Turing was prosecuted for “gross indecency” due to his homosexuality. Indeed, his arrest frames the film. Beginning with his actual arrest in 1952, the film ends with the decline of Turing’s life due to the chemical castration he undertakes as his punishment. The pain his body endures at the hands of governmental oppression mirrors earlier scenes that depict the bullying he suffers as a child. Other boys at boarding school throw food at him, making fun of him for separating his carrots and peas (an indication of his autistic traits), and later trap him under the floorboards, where he adapts to their abuse by refusing to have an emotional response, causing his tormentors to get bored. He is saved by Christopher (who dies shortly afterwards from bovine tuberculosis).

Having suffered violence to his body and identity, Turing, the film tells us at the very end, committed suicide in 1954. The fact that the film is not just a period piece, however, but a political statement for the twenty-first century is apparent when the summary text at the end declares that “between 1885 and 1967, approximately 49,000 homosexual men were convicted of gross indecency under British law. In 2013, Queen Elizabeth II granted Turing a posthumous royal pardon, honoring his unprecedented achievements.” In a neoliberal twist, Turing’s achievements suture him into posthumous citizenship. He is officially pardoned and, by extension, queer identities ascend into their rightful positions in our cultural, political, and social histories. The film is about righting the wrongs of the past, giving Turing a voice. It posits that the fact a gay man has a voice in the twenty-first century is a testament to how far we have come. He patriotically saved
the Allies in World War II, but his government could not even save him, a strong message in the post-Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell world of gay marriage and “It Gets Better.”

In the end, however, Turing’s homosexuality is just a framing device: the bulk of the narrative has little to do with his homosexuality and instead focuses on more implicit concepts, like the governmental secrecy involved in decoding Enigma during the war, the gender politics involved in including a woman, Joan Clarke, in Turing’s team, and the innovation of military technologies (Christopher).

These two aspects of the film—queer positivism and military technologies—are not separate, however, but instead in constant tension, intersecting in ways that I find productive for thinking about the cultural position of autism in the twenty-first century.

Near the end of the film, Detective Nock, a fictional character who originally began investigating Turing because he believed he was working for the Soviets, interrogates Turing. After Turing has completed telling the story of how he helped win the war, he asks Nock, “What am I? Am I a person? Am I a machine? Am I a war hero? Am I a criminal?” Nock’s answer, “I can’t judge you,” gives an implicit answer: enmeshed within the twenty-first century pro-LGBT rhetoric of not judging, the film as a whole aligns Turing with “person” and “hero.” Turing’s response is striking, however, because it rejects this explanation: “Well then you’re no help to me at all.” What should be an easy question to answer remains a fraught contradiction, a consequence, I argue, of the

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8 Andrew Hodges, who wrote the book about Turing that inspired The Imitation Game, Alan Turing: Enigma, has specifically noted that he wrote the book in order to place Turing’s homosexuality within the context of his historical achievement (Decoding Alan Turing, 2009).
tension between the story of Turing as a homosexual citizen and Turing as the socially
awkward, extremely rational inventor of the computer.

This scene transitions immediately into a flashback of young Turing entering his
headmaster’s office, the headmaster’s words “come in” defying temporality to be heard
as middle-aged Turing sits with Nock. Once the scene changes, the audience sees young
Turing as he is told about Christopher’s death. Turing insists he did not know Christopher
well, stoically fighting off tears, and the headmaster praises Christopher for having a
“stiff upper lip” about his own impending death. He internalizes and represses his
suffering, performing autism in this moment as a way to ignore personal trauma.
Afterwards, the camera cuts to the back of older Turing, now on hormones, as he stares at
his Christopher computer, an array of pieces linked together by thin red wires that
resemble large blood vessels.

The assumption is that the film is finally giving Turing a voice, allowing him to
speak for himself without layers of governmentality and prejudice interrupting him. The
film, indeed, begins on such terms with Turing’s opening monologue:

Are you paying attention? Good. If you aren’t listening carefully you will
miss things...I will not pause, I will not repeat myself, and you will not
interrupt me. You think that because you’re sitting where you are, and I
am sitting where I am, that you are in control of what is about to happen.
You’re mistaken. I am in control, because I know things that you do not
know. What I need from you now is a commitment. You will listen closely
and you will not judge me until I am finished. If you cannot commit to
this, then please leave the room. If you choose to stay remember you
chose to be here. What happens from this moment forwards is not my
responsibility. It’s yours. Pay attention.

While Turing’s homosexuality has not yet entered the film, only known at this point by
those aware of the biography of the real Turing, this request sets a tone of ethical
engagement. Turing, as a persecuted gay man in his own historical context, is allowed within the frame of the film to speak on equal terms with the audience, even asserting some control over them. Indeed, it is assumed that Turing addresses this monologue, heard through voice-over, to both the detectives and to the audience, positioning the latter in the position of the homophobic governmental institution. The audience is confronted with their own complicity with systems of control and repression in relation to sexual identity. The fact that Turing also says this in a voice-over points to the ephemeral nature of this power, detached from his actual historical existence. Turing’s disembodied memory speaks to us rather than the man himself. The demand that we not “judge” until Turing has finished speaking appeals directly to the voice and rights gained by queer citizens within the twenty-first century.

This monologue also, however, perfectly represents anxieties about the competitive, encased masculinity of “interactive autism.” Through the voice-over, Turing becomes an electronic voice, declaring power that has no discernible location yet demands sovereignty. The dissolution or, rather, digitalization, of his body signifies the implicit anxiety of the film, that Turing is a “machine” or represents a form of becoming mechanical. Beyond reading the scene as an expression of queer voice, what he says also implies a power hierarchy where Turing has all the power of speech and space (“leave the room”) and requires almost a nationalistic, militaristic “commitment” from the audience as he tells them to “pay attention.” In line with the erasure of human identity implied through the voice over, Turing here adopts the position of the digital current, powerful and controlling, repudiating any responsibility in regards to the narrative he will recount.
by, essentially, ascending to the very governmental form of “control” that has oppressed him. A similar doubleness is obvious in the next scene, where the investigators sent to check up on Turing (in 1951), whose house has allegedly been robbed, seem suspicious of the fact that he is doing “something with machines.” After they see the machine, Sergeant Staehl highlights the secrecy surrounding Turing’s project: “he won’t say what it’s on.” Nock later says he believes “Alan Turing is hiding something”; though Nock eventually shows sympathy for Turing, these words prompt the investigation that uncovers Turing’s homosexuality. That is, the original secrecy surrounding the machine transforms very quickly into a recognizable narrative of repression and suppression of non-normative sexuality. This is the foundation of the logic in the film that obscures the role of the machine in order to centralize a sentimental rendition of Turing as a gay man.

The conflation of machine and sexuality, in the service of creating empathy for Turing’s suffering at the hands of government surveillance, is most clearly observed in the storyline about Christopher that circulates throughout the entire film. The fact that Christopher appears as both a human and a machine (the latter being a fiction made for the film--Turing never named any of his machines Christopher) highlights the construction of this narrative. The first flashback that includes the human Christopher appears after Turing, newly appointed as head of his team at Bletchley Park, fires two of his colleagues. He says that they are “mediocre linguists and positively poor codebreakers.” In the previous scene, after hearing that his request for parts was denied, Turing says that his fellow codebreakers are “all idiots. Fire them and use the savings to fund my machine.” Turing understands the value of his colleagues in economic terms,
literally embodying the neoliberal tendency to rationalize and calculate. He is an entrepreneur disinterested in actual humans, relying solely on his human capital to help him create his machine. Similar to the transition in the industrial economy from reliance on workers to machines and in an information economy to a smaller, more flexible workforce, Turing sees them as a waste of recourses, second to productivity. As is often true of biopics, the more questionable aspects of Turing’s personality are explained by his own hardships, namely his role as a victim to homophobic social structures. His victimhood allows him to gain a sense of moral righteousness and spectatorial pity.

Hugh Alexander, another of the men working with Turing who was the original leader of the group, says that the act of firing the men is “inhuman, even for you” and MI6 head Stewart Menzies asks “popular at school, were you?” This initiates a flashback that attempts to recuperate Turing’s humanness, placing him in a context that obscures his neoliberal tendencies to calculate and rationalize. The flashback is where Turing is bullied at school: food is poured over his head and he is then nailed under the floorboards. This is our introduction to the affective content of the film, where violence done to Turing as a child forms the foundation of his reclamation as a gay icon wrapped in the idea that the twenty-first century has come far enough to represent such violence.

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9 Many of Turing’s actions in the film, which deal with his attempt to claim power for himself in a homophobic society, can be read as emerging from the affective logic of neoliberalism, about which Konings states that “the subject assumes responsibility for its own powerlessness and is assured that it is doing the right thing in exercising power. Any guilt we might feel should quickly be converted into the outwardly directed aggression that secures our wealth, and not to do so would jeopardize our self-realization. Neoliberal austerity is redemptive, holding out the promise of limitless wealth and assuaging the anxiety we might feel about the disagreeable alliances we have to forge in our pursuit of money. Any reluctance to own our desire for money and any hesitations we might experience in wielding our powers jeopardize our future salvation” (111).
Christopher rescues Turing and states that “they beat you up because you’re different.” The love story aspect of the film begins here. As we see the boys hammering the nails into the floorboards, adult Turing’s voice proclaims “do you know why people like violence? It is because it feels good. Humans find violence deeply satisfying. But remove the satisfaction, the act becomes hollow.” The centrality of physical violence here also already puts Turing into a complex relationship with what it means to be human which his homosexual desire is meant to erase as a tension. He has himself already proclaimed, when Commander Denniston, who supervises Bletchley Park, asks him if he’s a pacifist, that he is “agnostic about violence.” Denniston then brings up Hitler, to which Turing replies that “politics isn’t my area of expertise.” The film represents, I argue, the idea that this agnosticism emerges directly from his autistic behavior; Turing disengages from ethical consideration of human bodies because of affective difference.

Turing’s agnosticism becomes the focus of the second scene where he mentions the satisfaction of violence. After he has finally cracked the Enigma code, he is able to plot the locations of German ships in the Atlantic Ocean. Realizing a ship is about to attack a British ship, he refuses to use this knowledge to immediately help save the British civilians on that ship because he fears that the Germans will realize that they have cracked the code and, therefore, just change the code. Hugh Alexander physically attacks Turing in a moment of rage, to which Turing replies: “Do you know why people like violence, Hugh? It’s because it feels good. Sometimes you can’t do what feels good. We have to do what is logical.” Though Beginning the same way as what Turing says in the earlier scene, the idea that violence is “satisfying” shifts into a rejection of what feels
good in favor of the “logical.” Doing what is logical parallels the economic rationality of neoliberalism. Turing reduces the situation into calculations based on what decision—saving the ship or letting the Germans destroy it—would ultimately result in less loss.¹⁰

Turing embodies a particular instantiation of scientific masculinity that, through its desire for an objectivity that is also at the same time economic, defines the experience of modern masculinity as one embedded in the desire to modulate affect through calculation. In “Constructions of Mathematical Masculinities in Popular Culture,” Marie-Pierre Moreau, Heather Mendick, and Debbie Epstein employ R.W. Connell’s typology of masculinities to argue that mathematicians in popular culture exist within complicit, rather than hegemonic, masculinity. They state that, though mathematicians are often represented (like Turing) as being emotionally or mentally unstable and in need of protection, the discipline of mathematics...has been described as iconic of rationality, with the mathematician personifying the Enlightenment vision, and rationality itself being strongly associated with masculinity. These popular cultural constructions draw on a gendered binary framework, in which the rational opposes the emotional (142-143).

¹⁰ Given my argument, it is striking that the entire idea that Turing calculated how many people could be reasonably saved seems to be a fiction made for the film. In Alan Turing: The Enigma, Andrew Hodges fails to attribute any direct name to the fear that sinking too many U-Boats would alert the Germans, using the vague pronoun “anyone.” He also suggests that it took a while for anyone to realize it would be best to calculate outcomes, unlike in the film where Turing immediately decides to rationalize after he cracks Enigma. Hodges states that the Admiralty decided which intercepts to act on and which to ignore (253-254). Alexander was also not the leader of Turing’s group, another fiction created to add drama to the film. It seems Turing was actually, and almost always, the leader, though he did travel to the U.S. briefly, during which time Alexander did “suppose” he was the interim leader.
Notice, too, that the rational is tied to victimization, a sense that rationality is correct because of underlying vulnerability.

Their construction of mathematical masculinity is especially useful in the context of this chapter because they directly parallel this form of rational, complicit masculinity to the hegemonic domination performed by corporate management and the military:

Historically there has been an important division between forms of masculinity organized around direct domination (e.g. corporate management, military command) and forms organized around technical knowledge (e.g., professions of science). The latter have challenged the former in the gender order of advanced capitalist societies, without complete success. They currently coexist as inflections or alternative emphases within hegemonic masculinity. (150)

Turing and Menzies, represent the coming together of technical knowledge and a vast system of secrecy, whereas Alexander, as a chess player and charismatic leader, and Denniston represent corporate management and military command (what I will define as the organization man in the next chapter), systems which are ultimately inefficient and worried about either meaningless hierarchies or arbitrary equality. In other words, the film renders the transition towards the digital present, predicated on Turing as a figure of a victimized masculinity and individual initiative that, in the politics of the twenty-first century, can also be homosexual.

These realities are centralized very clearly in this scene after Alexander attacks Turing, staging a struggle between a collective corporate management and a rationalist, neoliberal system. While Turing appeals to logic, something is obscured in the way Turing phrases his logic: his actions are still producing violence. This is evident in the dialogue that follows the initial attack. Fellow code-breaker John Cairncross says “there
are 500 people in that convoy. Civilians. Women. Children. We’re about to let them die” and Peter Hilton eventually reveals that his brother is on the ship in question. When Hilton claims “you’re not God, Alan. You don’t get to decide who lives and who dies,” Turing says “yes, we do...Because no one else can.” Confronted with family and reproductive futurity—the women and children—Turing maintains a rational logic of how the game can best be played to produce the most statistically valuable outcome. The camera then cuts from Turing’s face to a scene of destruction, presumably the burning remains of the ship that Turing just willingly allowed to be attacked. The camera pans across the wreckage in this brief scene, showing smoke drift to the sky from every direction as flames blaze on the surface of the ocean. A siren screeches from an unknown source. The scene renders an apocalyptic vision of destruction that, in most war films, would be the consequences of some enemy attack. Here, however, it represents a stunning deflation of distance: the logistical decisions at Bletchley Park are juxtaposed with the real consequences of rationalized violence. In other words, the ambiguity of the cause of the destruction conflates the enemy of traditional war film with Turing’s rationalized violence. At the same time, the scene enacts a recuperation of violence by erasing human bodies. For all the emotional talk about Hilton’s brother, the scene pans across pieces of ships, a technological graveyard devoid of human content.

At one level, this scene lends itself to a queer reading of Turing derived from Lee Edelman’s concept of the sinthomosexual in No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive. Turing could be said to accept his role as a destructive force that challenges the ideologies of security, vulnerability, and futurity that justify a number of military
campaigns. Turing pushes the boundaries of politics, specifically in this scene, beyond the affective attachments to the Child and family outlined by Edelman:

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 authenticate social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child. (3)

The rationalization embodied by Turing seems, at first glance, to offer a social order that entirely circumvents the child as a concern. Indeed, as I mentioned, he claimed earlier that politics is not his expertise. What is really evident here, however, is the slippery disconnect Edelman attempts to navigate between “the real child” and “the Child.” These real children are sacrificed to a logic that is not “queer” in Edelman’s sense. Indeed, The Imitation Game constantly wraps Turing in a political, patriotic logic intimately connected to the future, even if he himself is apathetic about this logic. The scenes of his childhood psychically suture the audience to the Child, offering a historical distance of “how bad things used to be” for homosexual men that authenticates a social order based on the assumption of inclusion.

At the same time, this vision of the future to which the audience is sutured is also situated under a military logic. The very act of rationalizing the deaths of women and children gestures towards a better future, one where England can triumph over Germany by remaining one step ahead of Enigma. Turing adopts a logic adjacent to the masculine ideals of the security state, though the two never quite intersect directly. Without satisfaction, his violence is hollow: necessary, apathetic, collateral and, in its obsessive drive towards technical mastery and disinterest in how technology is used politically, inherently “autistic.” The jouissance of the sinthomosexual is not present here; instead,
extreme rationalization makes death necessary, tied to numbers, calculations, and the “best” outcome. The idea that there is an optimal number of deaths, of the most vulnerable in a society, pushes military logic and neoliberal calculation together. Similarly, his act of breaking off his brief engagement with Joan Clarke, because he fears that the fact she is unofficially helping his team will be found out, both cuts him off from reproductive futurity while giving him a future wholly devoted to his techo-“child,” Christopher. Christopher is his gift to the future that, ultimately, means much more than individual children. This is also the state of the military drone, which finds no pleasure in its attempts to uphold the “American” and the “Western” ways of life through necessary and collateral human expenditures. Autism’s value as a neoliberal metaphor, and as a means of tracing the affective structures undergirding the psychic experiences of capitalism in the twenty-first century, exist here at this complicated intersection between apathy regarding the future as rooted in Edelman’s queer oppositionality and simultaneous reproduction of an economically rationalized violence to which bodies must submit.

Turing’s decision to plot out ship trajectories onto a map and calculate how many people can logically be saved, and how many can be sacrificed, aligns with a violence that feels nothing (is “hollow”) rather than queer jouissance. Through this violence, bodies are rendered invisible. Another example occurs not long after the scene where Alexander attacks Turing. Following his success, Turing, along with Joan Clarke (who has been secretly helping Turing with his calculations), meets with Menzies to report his findings. While Turing and Clarke walk through a train station to the location of the
meeting, the camera cuts to numerous close ups of soldiers’ faces, lingering on them and visibly representing the fact that, indeed, beyond all of the technological rationality of Turing, there is still a war occurring. Turing and Clarke exchange a knowing glance as they pass, and then the scene cuts to their private meeting with Menzies. Turing begs Menzies to help him keep the fact that Enigma has been cracked a secret from British officials. He asks Menzies to do so “while we develop a system to help you determine how much intelligence to act on, which attacks to stop, which to let through. Statistical analysis. The minimal number of actions it would take for us to win the war but the maximum number we can take before the German’s get suspicious.” Here is the most direct definition of the minimum/maximum logic that threads through the film, the origins of a new vision of warfare where bodies are abstracted into statistical and economic analysis. Menzies’s response, “[a]nd you’re going to trust all this to statistics?”, makes it clear that Turing’s machine offers a paradigm shift in warfare. The actions of war are now calculated for their efficiency, stripped of any human center. In order to conceal this shift, from human to machine logics in warfare, Clarke tells Menzies that MI6 “will come up with the lies that we will tell everybody else,” also inaugurating a new era of secrecy within military operations. They propose that false stories be leaked to both the Germans and the British military, which Menzies calls “a conspiracy of lies at the highest level of government.”

Regardless, Menzies agrees to do so and tells Turing “you are exactly the man I always hoped you would be.” A close up shot of Turing shows him sitting stoically, immobile except his throat as he swallows subtly, suggesting nervousness about receiving
attention. The camera then cuts to Clarke, whose eyes nervously move back and forth before she turns her head. The next shot is from Clarke’s perspective, offering the audience identification with her despite the fact that this is Turing’s moment (or, perhaps, as a subtle critique of Menzies praising Turing as a “man” while Clarke and her gender receive no recognition). We see out the window as wounded soldiers, one with an amputated leg and another with a bloody bandage around his head, exit a medical truck. Cutting back to Clarke, the camera shows her facial expressions, which suggest fear or uncertainty. The ending of this scene, at a symbolic if not literal level, represents the return of the bodies repressed in the earlier scene of naval destruction. The camera only suggests that Clarke sees them, however. Turing and Menzies both seem oblivious of the soldiers, while Clarke offers an affective gaze disconnected from Turing’s. When Turing is recognized as most automated and unconcerned about violence he is able to carry the label of a “man” simply because he is operating as an agent of hegemonic power. Clarke, on the other hand, expresses the willingness to gaze affectively on wounded bodies, therefore becoming excluded from Menzies’ praise. To some degree, the film puts onus on Clarke, as a woman, to feel for Turing and to accept the burdens of victimized manhood (including these soldiers) so that Turing himself can operate as a symbol of male power. In other words, for the victimized male to exist and incorporate power, women must recognize him and be willing to accept, rather than repress, him through her gaze. This is exactly what happens in the film’s final scene in relation to Turing and Joan’s relationship, as I will analyze later. Even if Turing swallowing is read as
discomfort, the scene with Menzies fails, like many other scenes, to associate his point of view with a gaze that takes human bodies and suffering into account.

The film, then, operates at a level of politics distinct from Jack Halberstam’s reading of Turing himself in “Automating Gender: Postmodern Feminism in the Age of the Intelligent Machine.” Halberstam begins the article, which is about the effects of computer technology on concepts of gender embodiment, by discussing Alan Turing. Halberstam notes the radical imaginary of Turing’s “sexual guessing game” test, which was meant to demonstrate the possibilities of distinguishing between human and machine. He claims that Turing encountered the fact that “[g]ender...like computer intelligence, is a learned, imitative behavior that can be processed so well that it comes to look natural” (443). Halberstam then discusses Turing’s sexuality, claiming that his “homosexuality made him seem an unfit keeper of state secrets: he was exploitable, fatally flawed, a weak link in the masculinist chain of government and the military” (444). Turing himself, then, was a gender performer, and a bad one: failing to live up to the dictates of a masculinist military, Turing exposes the feminizing potentials of the machine. This discussion of feminism precedes Halberstam’s section on postmodernism, where he argues that postmodernism offers “a coming to consciousness of a subject no longer modeled upon the Western white male” (446).

As the phrase “just the man I thought you’d be” suggests, The Imitation Game rejects the project that Halberstam reads into Turing’s life, instead heralding a new “consciousness” where the “Western white male” again asserts a central position, though masculinity has shifted in ways not deciphered by Halberstam. The new masculinities of
the marked man, the white male as victim, and mathematical masculinity substitute physical prowess and “strength” for unmitigated attachment to logic, reason, and outcomes. In other words, the white male regains his position through leaving behind the image of the stoic man and instead accepting the potentials of disability, which are rendered physical, cognitive, and social. Even if an empathic or affective “female” gaze is critical of this masculinity, the physical disabilities of the soldiers and the oppression Turing faces create a narrative situation where power, surveillance, and rationalized violence are ignored. This occurs even as Turing’s autistic rationality redefines him as an apathetic entrepreneur of the security state. Turing is represented as the strongest symbol of “the masculinist chain of government and the military” if analyzing the film in terms of modern military-industrial culture rather than World War II hierarchies. Where the audience’s identification and affective investment is meant to reside is complex in the film; the audience seems to be read simultaneously as full of patriotism and yet simultaneously critical and skeptical of the practices surrounding war. Though the film purports to be a positive image film about a persecuted gay man, Turing’s homosexuality is subsumed by his autistic affect. What we see in the representation of Turing is the perfect combination of the scientific and cultural definitions of the autistic subject, a subject both authorized through his genius ability to systemize and suggesting an anxiety-inducing focus on machine destruction unaware of human suffering.

The mythology of Turing in the film arrives at a different argument than Halberstam, who understands Turing within the specter of feminized (because of his homosexuality) technology:
the fear of artificial intelligence, like the fear of homosexuals infiltrating the secret service, was transformed into a paranoid terror of femininity. Similarly, the machine itself was seen to threaten the hegemony of white male authority because it could as easily be used against a government as for it; autonomy was indeed its terrifying potential. (444)

To some degree, this perfectly sums up the film: the fear of homosexuality, central to the plot, enmeshes with a paranoia related to Turing’s relationship with the Christopher machine. Indeed, the idea that the machine “could as easily be used against a government as for it” perfectly describes Turing’s political apathy in the film and his desire to create Christopher regardless of the institutional framework. In the twenty-first century, however, the “government” is not an entirely sympathetic institution, and white masculinity often operates outside of and against it. Turing is also not “feminized” in the film, the release of which is located historically at a moment when femininity and homosexuality are no longer mutually inclusive categories. Turing himself ascends back into the category of “man” through his use as a metaphor for the affective logics of white Western supremacy, where a rationalized gaze produces different historical anxieties than feminized homosexuality.

Clarke registers unease or discomfort, connecting their secrecy directly to real bodies. Turing, on the other hand, is valuable to Menzies because of his experience of keeping his homosexuality a secret. The second benefit of having Turing keep military secrets, however, is that he easily forgets about human cost, evident in the next scene where Hilton, angry at the death of his brother, purposefully bumps into Turing as Turing nonchalantly asks Hilton to do a task. At this point, however, the indifferent, secret project that Turing initiates even partially exceeds his own control, becoming an
extension of his affect that grows at an exponential rate. For instance, immediately following Turing’s brief confrontation with Hilton, he discovers that Cairncross is a Soviet spy. He flirts with the possibility of telling Denniston or Menzies, eventually deciding not to due to Cairncross’s threat to reveal Turing’s sexuality. After Menzies, who Turing encounters in Clarke’s room, says that Clarke has been sent to a military prison for being a Soviet spy after Menzies discovered decoded Enigma intercepts in her room (which is a lie), Turing reveals that Cairncross is actually the spy. Menzies says he already knew, and that he knew before Cairncross even started working at Bletchley Park. Turing is, therefore, not “exploitable” as a homosexual man, in Halberstam’s terms, within the film, because there is nothing to exploit: information has reached a point of ubiquitous and instantaneous omnipresence under the vast system of government surveillance and control. This is an anachronistic idea that points directly to the film’s reflection on the age of the computer and the twenty-first century, positioning autism as central to the technological gaze and violence that evolves after the war.

At one level, the film is invested in concealing the irrational logics of control that force Turing into the closet. At the same time, it underscores a rationalized logic that presents its own detached violence that resonates closely with our contemporary political legacy. Turing’s homosexuality is made visible as an issue of surveillance and oppression, even as his autistic traits are suppressed and implicitly connected the affective logics of military-industrial neoliberalism. Near the end of the film, Turing gives a monologue (again a voice-over of his ubiquitous, physically unanchored voice) that exists at the intersection of the rhetoric of freedom, rationalized violence, and the
logics of surveillance and control. The monologue, which is played over archival footage of major battles during World War II, directly subordinates the affective military history of the war to a logic distant from actual human bodies:

Every day we decided who lived and who died. Every day we guided the Allied armies to victory and nobody knew. Stalingrad. The Ardennes. The invasion of Normandy. All victories that would not have been possible without the intelligence that we supplied. And people talk about the war as this epic battle between civilizations. Freedom versus tyranny. Democracy versus Nazis. Armies of millions bleeding into the ground. Fleets of ships weighing down the oceans. Planes dropping bombs from the sky until they blotted out the sun itself. The war wasn’t like that for us. For us it was just half a dozen crossword enthusiasts in a tiny village in the south of England. Was I God? No, because God didn’t win the war. We did.

This scene uses historical footage, offering a level of accuracy, to ironically redefine the narrative of the war and who “won.” Political ideologies are made irrelevant, subordinated to an apathetic technical logic. The humans shown who may die, the bombs dropped—all are inevitably only symptoms of and useless in the face of the calculating, apathetic man. Turing signals his status as the invisible information circuit, the “we” controlling war like a game from a distance. Through an agnostic logic of violence, the affective relationship to bodies, the “millions bleeding into the ground,” has become obsolete. The end of affective warfare also assumes the limit of grand narratives. Turing offers a number of ideological binaries that have no bearing on how the war was won or, even, how it was fought. War instead transforms into a process of calculating outcomes performed by “crosswords enthusiasts in a tiny village,” or, in other words, the disconnected, distant center of decision-making and power that “everyday” decides who lives and dies. This notion of the apathetic, calculating man is central to how science
fiction, and especially Philip K. Dick, takes up autism as a thematic concern, the topic of Chapter Two.

Turing is the machine that fails to feel either *jouissance* or empathy. This failure marks autistic behaviors as metaphors for a system of neoliberal rationality in popular culture, or what Foucault calls the attempt to make non-economic concepts subject to economic analysis (246). *The Imitation Game* is not just about World War II, but instead also about both the possibility of a military-industrial complex and the origins of the systemizing logics made visible in the twenty-first century War on Terror. This system is especially rooted in preemptive victimizing: dehumanizing and objectifying others as a way of assuring that violence does not happen to the self. Turing, throughout the film, struggles to remain a distant subject exacting violence and, through-overs and neoliberal values in his workplace, disavow any rendering of himself as an object. In his essay “The Art of the Motor,” Paul Virilio argues that what he calls “sociopolitical cybernetics” tends to “eliminate not only the weak, but also the component of free will in human work, promoting, as we have seen, so-called ‘interactive user- friendliness.’ This is just a metaphor for the subtle enslavement of the human being to ‘intelligent’ machines” based on, he says, “the total, unavowed disqualification of the human in favor of the definitive instrumental conditioning of the individual” (135). Virilio expresses anxiety about the potential of human agents to lose control in the face of instantaneous telepresence, the slipping away of human embodiment and agency through the use of intelligent machines.
that move information at the speed of light. The project of creating “intelligent machines” was, indeed, Alan Turing’s life work. Virilio makes this connection apparent when he asserts that “the 1950s...deserve much closer historical analysis, insofar as they were the direct product of the military-industrial strategy that had been directed against Nazi Germany” (136) and further notes that those who worked at Bletchley Park, the main setting of The Imitation Game, went on to research the utopian idea “of identifying the human brain with the components of a computer” (136).

Computational rationality finds its origins at Bletchley and through Turing’s desire for a rational, mechanical system where he can predict violence. In the dissolution of the human which intersects with the “military-industrial strategy,” Virilio also finds a dissolution of affect. Ben Anderson makes the connection between Virilio and affect in his discussion of morale: “These processes combine to produce what I would term a logistics of affect that aims to mobilize the potential of a mass formation and transfer that potential into processes of mass destruction (Virilio and Lotringer 1997, 24)” (181). In the film, however, Turing enters a dilemma emerging from the collusion of machine logics and patriotism, especially to the extent that The Imitation Game represents him

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11 Virilio says that in the marriage of Bletchley Park, the computer, and Los Alamos, the bomb, “the destiny of our fin de siecle would be played out” and laments the “future damage caused by the onset of the computerized dissuasion of perceptible reality” (141), highlighting the way that subordination to computerized affect will change the basis of reality.

12 For instance, notice how similar U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham’s statement about a hostage killed in a drone strike is to Turing’s philosophy in the scene where he justifies the death of Peter Hilton’s brother: “You can't stop the drone program because of this. The hostages are innocent victims. I feel terrible for them, but we're at war and we've got to keep prosecuting this war” (qtd. in Vega).
simultaneously as queer and autistic. Affect is specifically mobilized in relation to his personal narrative, even as he allegorizes a completely different potential, a masculinity both patriarchal and vulnerable in its orientations.

Constructing Turing’s identity through such a narrative is literally an attempt to fold him back into life, to welcome him through the progression of LGBT rights into the authorized citizenship he was denied in his own historical context. His potential as an authorized citizen is also tied directly to his role (suggested to be the most important role of all) in winning the war, a type of indirect patriotism connected to the process of folding queer citizens into life theorized by Jasbir Puar in her book *Terrorist Assemblages*:

> The emergence and sanctioning of queer subjecthood is a historical shift condoned only through a parallel process of demarcation from populations targeted for segregation, disposal, or death, a reintensification of racialization through queerness. The cultivation of these homosexual subjects folded into life, enabled through “market virility” and “regenerative reproductivity,” is racially demarcated and paralleled by a rise in the targeting of queerly raced bodies for dying...This disjuncture of the regulating and regulated queer, homosexual, gay disciplinary subjects and the queered darkening of terrorist marks the surprising but not fully unexpected flowering of new normativities in these queer times. (xii-xiii)

*The Imitation Game* represents the origins of the affects guiding this process, where mass government surveillance and violence to bodies become the object of rationalized social reproduction and neoliberal discourses of overcoming and entrepreneurial spirit. Turing’s “life” is directly predicated on the “demarcation” of those targeted for death through rationalized violence. Through the patriotic duty of knowing human beings as statistics—how many deaths will make it possible to win—Turing transforms into the regulating queer man, the very logic of governmental vitality. The fact that the film is, at its core, a
love story connects Turing to a logic of vitality, the “regenerative reproductivity,” that to some degree is meant to explain or, at least, lessen the anxiety about his autistic affect. Though Turing allows the deaths of “Women. Children,” a large component of the film’s frame, I have argued, is producing Turing as child within a rhetoric that is intimately tied to the suggestion that “it gets better.”

Autism operates in the film, then, as a metaphor at the complex intersection of neoliberal rhetorics of overcoming and anxiety-producing apathy in regard to institutional structure and violence. Turing’s allegiances, beyond his desires to produce his machine, are never clear. They are only legible in the context of the patriotic duty he is performing and the film’s own narrative pressures, attached predominantly to his status as a gay man. The skepticism Commander Denniston has about Turing emphasizes the traditionalist anxieties about technology, and also the victimizing gaze constantly staring at Turing. Denniston, never trusting Turing or liking his attitude, believes that he is the Soviet spy (who turns out to be Cairncross). He has Turing’s desk ransacked and searched, during which he states that “double agents are such bastards. Isolated loners. No attachments to friends or family. Arrogant. Know anybody like that?” In other words, Denniston confuses Turing’s autistic disinterest with the possibility that he is a Soviet spy.

Detective Nock makes a similar mistake, since he begins his investigation because he believes Turing is hiding the fact that he was a Soviet spy, though Nock eventually learns that Turing is actually concealing his homosexuality. This framing narrative brings the audience closer to Turing, suggesting that his behaviors and quirks are byproducts of the fact that he must keep his sexuality secret. Turing’s status as an isolated loner,
however, combined with his autistic affect, transforms him into a potential terrorist on
either side of the “hero” and “monster” binary. In being able to rationalize violence,
death, and firing workers, Turing is the hero of neoliberalism and the war on terror, not to
mention the confluence and connections between the two. He is the subject of patriotic
duty who knows that long-term security is more important than real lives existing at the
present moment. If Turing is viciously surveilled, a wrong rectified by the twenty-first
century, systems of governmentality have rightfully ascended to “statistical,” rather than
moral, analysis. In other words, the film endorses the new, technical military logic
embedded in the digital: technology, automated and apathetic, can make the best
decisions that are only invested in economic concerns, not value determinations. Turing
should have nothing to hide, but others might.

At the end of the film, the narrative of a gay man achieving the impossible finds
itself at home (literally) with the rhetoric of the security state and the male victim. Clarke
visits Turing after he has begun his court-ordered hormone therapy. Turing is pale,
twitches, and can barely concentrate. The camera shows him from behind and the side as
much as from the front, stumbling around as he drops objects and stutters. Clarke is
constantly watching him, just as she watched the physically disabled solders earlier in the
film, though Turing’s gaze remains directed away from her during most of the scene. At
one point he breaks down, fearing that the government will take Christopher (the
computer) from him.

The camera alternates between a medium shot from behind, showing Turing’s
back as he strokes Christopher’s wires, and a close up of his face. Christopher is his only
companion at this point. After Turing sees the ring on Clarke’s finger, he states that she finally was able to get the “normal” life she always wanted, alluding to the earlier scene where Turing broke off his engagement to Clarke. Clarke’s response operates as the perfect bookend to the film’s message about Turing’s achievements:

No one normal could have done that. Do you know, this morning, I was on a train that went through a city that wouldn’t exist if it wasn’t for you. I bought a ticket from a man who would likely be dead if it wasn’t for you. I read up on my work, a whole field of scientific inquiry that only exists because of you. Now if you wish you could have been normal, I can promise you I do not. The world is an infinitely better place precisely because you weren’t.

She ends her praise of Turing by echoing a phrase he had directed at her earlier in the film, that “it is the people no one imagines anything of that do the things that no one can imagine.” Christopher looms in the background of a few shots, the visual rendering of Turing’s legacy. In addition to justifying Turing’s achievements, Clarke recognizes and accepts Turing’s disability, nurturing him into the position of the “marked man” by looking at and acknowledging him. Clarke, along with the audience, pities him.

All the pain, emotional distance, and death is worth it in the end because, first, of the fact that Turing utilized the fact that he is not “normal” for productive (in the neoliberal sense) ends and, two, because a social future has been realized that “would likely” (Clarke’s words) not have existed otherwise. The potential here, the “likely,” fuses the nightmare possibility of a destroyed city to the rhetoric of the security state, making concessions about collateral damage in the present as a means of politically controlling future outcomes. Clarke and Turing both arrive at Edelman’s “cult of the Child,” damning the children of the present in the name of a rationalized surveillance
state fittingly capped by technological supremacy: Turing has created “a whole field of
scientific inquiry.” Mentioning scientific inquiry and using the rhetoric of the security
state reiterate mathematical masculinity, which becomes visible in its absence in this
scene.

This is one of the only scenes where Turing shows emotion (the other is when he
has to lie to Clarke about why he is breaking off their engagement and she calls him a
monster). Simultaneously, this scene highlights the fact that Turing, because of chemical
castration, has become an emotional mess unable to think or calculate: he can’t answer a
crossword puzzle, his hands shake and he stumbles over his words. He has entered into
the full embodiment of the white male as victim of government, even as he has brought
mass government surveillance to life. He has become an emotional being, unable to
continue the affective agnosticism that gives him his greatest gift, a rationalized vision of
the world. His feminization is intimately tied to his failure and eventual inability to
remain at least at some level emotionally productive. Therefore, while Turing is
celebrated by the film as a homosexual man, this characterization also relies heavily on a
patriarchal vision of the world and rational masculinity, both tied specifically to Turing as
a “marked man,” subject to government surveillance and working as an apathetic,
apolitical cog of that same system.

The attributes that make Turing a hero, then, simultaneously construct him as a
monster. He is the harbinger of the mass surveillance state and the drone strike. He
embodies the idea that white male intelligence is a potential locus of terror. Indeed, his
character conflates autistic genius and literal “state intelligence.” If being gay makes
Turing legible as a hero to a twenty-first century audience, his autistic behaviors (tendency to rationalize and calculate) hit the root of a number of anxieties and sites of paranoia that form in relation to governance. The Imitation Game is, at its heart, a film about military biopolitics, a system that could not exist, so the film argues, without Alan Turing’s calculations and antisociality. At the same time, that antisociality is exactly what makes his allegiances hard to follow, potentially placing him on the other side of the “terrorism” spectrum as a loner, double agent, and “monster.” Emphasizing Turing’s homosexuality within a narrative of overcoming and queer positivism, The Imitation Game ends up making autism seem suspect. The metaphor of autism relies on the disorder remaining illegible in order to function as a dialectic tied to the affective boundaries of neoliberalism.

Conclusion: Autism as Metaphor for the Logics of Neoliberalism

If we read The Imitation Game resistantly we can see that it also exposes the fact that the assignment of citizenship to particular subjects within narratives of progress and achievement conceals the forms of violence through which such rights are secured. Refusing the conflation of citizenship and supremacy that relies on an affective technology of humanness allows us to read the ending of The Imitation Game not through the comforting idea that we have “come so far” but instead brings us to a realization that certain affects are still weaponized for ideological purposes, continuing the injustices the film suggests have evaporated. In Turing’s case, and for autism in the neoliberal period, this affect is intimately tied to the position of the “marked man.” The fact that it is autism specifically that offers this critique could make people uneasy; however, we should be
much more concerned with the ways in which queerness is made complicit with violence than with affective distance. It is important not only to recognize how autism is represented culturally and to question when it is associated with forms of violence or national complicity; we should also dig deeper to resist the logics of such associations by looking towards Robert McRuer’s (2010) call for a disability studies that does not kneel to nationalist projects. What types of identity are sanctioned and made viable for citizenship, and through what policies and contingencies this process occurs, should be a foremost area of study within a United States that is increasingly unable to translate identity politics into forms of resistance at the level of everyday embodiment.

The primary reason I see Turing, as represented in the film, as so important in this discourse is because of his status as a symbol of a form of authority that is not necessarily “alternative” or “anti-political” but that instead folds seamlessly into existing and evolving frameworks of power. This is accomplished through his identity as white, a male, and a victim. Throughout the rest of this dissertation, the formulation of men with autism as victims registers as the means through which neoliberal ideologies are distributed. I will look at a variety of texts that tackle the issue of an “autistic masculinity” and how such a masculinity offers access to authorized sites of identity as old models of manhood wane.

The next chapter continues to analyze how masculinity and autism became corresponding categories by looking at the first fictional narratives to incorporate autism conceptually, science fiction, specifically those narratives which deal with androids and cyborgs. I will look at how science fictional discourse about autism emerges from some
of the same concerns present in *The Imitation Game*, especially in relation to the individual’s role as a man working within the parameters of a group or as someone able to creatively apply his own initiative to his projects. Thus, I begin by examining the influence of William H. Whyte’s concept of the “organization man” on both neoliberal economics and on the thought of Philip K. Dick, the first fiction author to explicitly include an autistic character. From Dick’s ideas about the “androidification” of humans, I trace this concept more broadly in feminist and disability cyborg theory in order to argue that feminist readings of masculinity were integral to constructions of autism, a conflation that in some ways creates the “marked man” as an oppositional position to feminist thought.

The chapter then progresses to analysis of fictional texts, beginning with the role of the marked man and autism in Philip K. Dick’s *Martian Time-Slip*. Predating neoliberalism, Dick creates a cultural foundation for autism that reflects his paranoia at becoming victimized by overarching government structures. To Dick, to be an organization man is to also be autistic. To counter this process, he pushes his audience to pity marked men and desires to disrupt the governmental imposition of autism by liberating men into masculine independence and agency. Such ideas have inspired feminist science fiction that, while expressing less sympathy for marked men, connect governmentality and autism to express concerns about hegemonic masculinity. I turn to the works of Kathy Acker and Margaret Atwood to analyze how they link *neoliberal* governmentality to autistic men. In other words, science fiction created early metaphors of autism through economic critique integral to instituting what Sally Robinson calls an
“identity politics of the dominant,” the perception that a particular hegemonic position is being victimized, gendered, and racialized. The chapter will analyze the conflation between autism and masculinity in feminist theories of patriarchal capitalism, in which people with autism are the unfeeling representatives of masculine dominance. I will argue that the early development of autism as a metaphor reflects many of the tensions about neoliberal subjectivity transmitted into representations of autism in the twenty-first century.

Chapter Three shifts the conversation more specifically to contemporary matters. Setting the stage for the last two chapters of the dissertation, this chapter theorizes the “white male as victim” under neoliberalism in the post-2008 Recession period. Noting the prevalence of statistics, numbers, and economic logics in cultural texts about autism, such as the television series *Touch*, the chapter offers a definition of neoliberal masculinity, again via Foucault, relevant to these concerns. This definition, in brief, is that neoliberal masculinity is expressed simultaneously through reliance on rhetorics of action, agency, and entrepreneurialism in the act of calculating others as economic objects while necessitating the acceptance of oneself as an object of economic calculations and invisible numerical logics. This sense of subjectivity undergirds the experience of the marked man and is especially relevant to the neoliberal focus of autism narratives and the stereotype of the mathematically skilled autistic boy.

The primary text analyzed in the chapter will be the autobiography of Elliot Rodger, the 2014 Isla Vista, CA rampage shooter. Rodger, who may have been autistic based on his mother’s divorce testimony, has been a contentious subject on ASD
websites. I do not mean to offer a diagnosis of Rodger or to connect autism and violence; instead, Rodger offers an example of how the violence of neoliberalism can be explored through the type of disabled masculinity operating in a world of intense economic logics. Rodger’s autobiography focuses heavily on his anger at women for not liking him, a reflection of toxic masculinity, while he attempts to decenter his own emotional and physical shortcomings, and inability to become rich, by continuously playing the lottery. He puts his faith in his identity as an economic subject of invisible numerical logics, creating a quintessential narrative of neoliberal masculinity. The possibility of Rodger having had autism will not be emphasized in the chapter; instead, I am interested in how his responses to neoliberal structures and his drive towards recreating himself as a neoliberal subject (to counter his disabilities) reflect a narrative that is central to cultural production about autism, specifically in the post-Recession period. Rodger attempted to enable himself through neoliberal rhetoric, rejecting both emotional and economic disability.

This narrative is, then, the primary area of inquiry in Chapter Four, which evaluates the neoliberal rhetorics of what I call “autism family narratives.” Autism family narratives, which began predominantly as memoirs about autistic children, highlight the difficulties of parents in teaching their children to be productive members of society. I argue that these narratives create and forward visions of autistic masculinity that cohere to neoliberal ideas about the future, privileging economic skills and logics while de-emphasizing and actively critiquing solutions that cannot easily be identified as fostering “independence” and “rational self-interest.” A rationalized, neoliberalized vision of
autism consolidated in memoirs about autistic children, such as Clara Claiborne Park’s *The Siege* and, more recently, Jenny McCarthy’s *Louder than Words: A Mother's Journey in Healing Autism*. The gender politics of such memoirs are important to understanding autistic masculinity. These memoirs have been fundamental in the creation of the “warrior mother” archetype, a vision of femininity based both on active entrepreneurialism and traditional forms of nurturing, a type of identity that must often culturally be disavowed in favor of bringing the autistic child to his own sense of neoliberal masculinity.

Thus, I explore how the concerns of these memoirs were transmitted to television series of the twenty-first century. Television series, as opposed to films, allow for an exploration of the *growth* of an autistic character, growth often tied to masculine and neoliberal values. Such texts offer for their audiences, then, a sense of catharsis through watching autistic boys overcome their disability to find integration within neoliberal capitalism. Emphasizing catharsis and private family responses to autism, *Parenthood* visualizes the importance of rejecting the potential horrors of autism in favor of a transformative “overcoming” into a disabled sense of ability and masculinity. This overcoming is predicated, however, on continuously watching a warrior mother suffer physically and emotionally. While many of the family members of the autistic character, Max, personally experience the threatening, chaotic nature of the Recession economy, their own feelings are disavowed and repressed by viewing Max turn from violent self-absorption to success. The technical aspects of the series turn, by extension, from using horror conventions when representing Max to eventually showing him smile in close-ups
and privileging his familial and economic integration at the end of the series. Autistic characters, I argue, are often used in such a matter to displace any negative feelings about economic instability. By contrast, the chapter ends with an analysis of a television series that emphasizes the violence of neoliberal masculinity and the “overcoming” of marked men, *Bates Motel*. Though Norman Bates is not autistic, the series follows the autism family narrative very closely while using the conventions of horror to expand on neoliberal gender relations. Norman ultimately kills his mother and becomes manager of their hotel while imagining that she is still alive and controlling him, incorporating the two aspects of neoliberal masculinity. *Bates Motel* is a prime example of how to use media and genre conventions to represent and disrupt neoliberal ideologies.

This possibility of disruption is the foundation of Chapter Five. Turning to how new media formats can represent autism differently than traditional media, the chapter concludes this dissertation by theorizing the roles of fantasy, play, and gender identification in video games in order to explore the politics of neoliberalism as they relate to conservative and nostalgic responses to the Recession. I analyze media as an affective technology in this chapter, critiquing forms of spectatorship and cultural play to formulate future directions for representations of autism. Putting Laura Mulvey’s ideas about narrative pleasure in conversation with Alexander Galloway’s definition of games as “action,” I seek to unite ideas about games as algorithmic experience with a concept of the masculine player and the virtual politics of ability and agency.

To achieve this goal, I focus on the video game *To the Moon*, a game about a man, Johnny, trying, and failing, to understand his autistic wife as, while he’s dying, he
hires a corporation to literally implant new memories into his brain. He wants to believe that he traveled to the moon. While games are often about offering choices and performing actions, which I will define as neoliberal concepts, *To the Moon* includes minimal gameplay, offering players the ability to make only minor movement choices and to read dialogue. The game also positions the player within the unstable perspective of Johnny, whose fantasies completely erase the desires and needs of his wife. *To the Moon* functions, I argue, as an allegory of neoliberal fantasy internalized at the levels of both mechanics and narrative that, then, reflects back at the player. I will then use this idea to make some final comments about the role, and future, of neoliberal fantasy and autism in the political climate existing under President Donald Trump.

The ultimate goals of the dissertation include: first, offering an understanding how autism has been represented in popular culture of the neoliberal period; second, theorizing how the marked man and men with autism share particular cultural goals in media representations; third, underscoring the ableist logic of neoliberal fantasies as they relate specifically to cognitive and affective assumptions about autism; and, fourth, giving a general definition of gender politics under neoliberalism, with focus on neoliberal masculinity as a binding concept in the fantasy of “reclaiming” social positions for men that feel they are economically and cognitively disadvantaged in the current system. While at its core about autism, this dissertation is also about gender, and how those two categories often become conflated and complexly intertwined under the cold, distant eye of neoliberalism. It is about real and perceived disability and how autism, as a cultural fantasy, has offered a way of expressing many of the anxieties and desires which
underscore neoliberal subjectivity. The ways in which we accept, integrate, and represent people with autism, I argue, also lays the foundation for the future that we can imagine, either one which accepts the measurements and values of economic analysis central to neoliberalism or one that disengages from neoliberalism and, therefore, disrupts the cultural power of the marked man as an economic signifier.
Chapter Two

The Organization Man and the Cyborg:

Autistic Masculinities in Science Fiction

Some of the first literary and visual representations of autism spectrum disorder, both as a named condition and as a metaphor for the affective structures of American culture, emerged in science fiction texts. Though medical research into autism began in the mid-1940s, non-fictional and fictional narratives about the disorder emerged simultaneously in the 1960s. As I will discuss in Chapter Four, Clara Claiborne Park’s 1967 memoir \textit{The Siege: A Family’s Journey into the World of an Autistic Child} set the standard for thinking about the role of families in autism treatment as the first popular personal account of autism. The first direct fictional representation of autism was released three years earlier, Philip K. Dick’s 1964 novel \textit{Martian Time-Slip}. Dick’s novel, and his writings about android subjectivity, created an autistic character type that remained central to most depictions of autism in science fiction until the 1990s and, in some cases, beyond. This type, an autistic boy who is often limited and oppressed by government or conspiratorial agencies while also having immense powers of calculation or technological control that allow him to manipulate reality, is present in novels like Stephen King’s \textit{The Regulators} and Ryne Douglas Pearson’s \textit{Simple Simon} (which was adapted into the film \textit{Mercury Rising} the same year as the novel was published, 1998)
and has re-emerged, though without much success, in the 2012-2013 TV series *Touch*, which I discuss in the next chapter.\(^{13}\)

Dick, then, created the metaphor of autism as a site of governmental anxieties, attaching these specifically to the autistic boy. These anxieties are, for Dick, predominantly linked to the concept of the “organization man,” an entity who has no feelings outside of his corporate and bureaucratic duties. In other words, autism stands in for anxieties about manhood in an increasingly corporate world. According to David Savran, the white male as victim emerged as an oppositional subjectivity to the organization man in the 1950s and 60s. In this chapter, I document how Dick constructs autism through awareness of both of these cultural figures, associating autism with masculinity within the moment of paranoia and social disability embodied by Sally Robinson’s “marked man.” To do so, Dick borrowed directly from medical and psychoanalytic understanding of autism during his time.

One of *Martian Time-Slip*’s central characters is a ten-year-old boy with autism, Manfred Steiner. Rickman (qtd. in RC, pg. 111) has suggested that Dick based Manfred on Bettelheim’s research on Joey, the “Mechanical Boy,” who is referenced in the novel (149). Dick’s use of autism as a narrative trope in conjunction with and against the

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\(^{13}\) These texts also represent innovations, where Dick’s basic formula for autism is expanded to fit other genres. For instance, *The Regulators* is partially a horror novel, with Seth having gained his supernatural ability to transform his suburbs into a mediated murderscape through an encounter with a demon during which he became possessed. *Simple Simon* and *Touch* are both thrillers in which institutional conspiracies (instituted by the military in the former, a multinational corporation in the latter) attempt to take advantage of the borderline supernatural abilities of young autistic boys, suggesting how the anti-government paranoia central to Dick that I will discuss in this chapter transformed as a trope in the 1990s and 2000s.
disorder’s psychoanalytic meanings follows David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder’s contention that “imaginative literature takes up its narrative project as a counter to scientific or truth-telling discourses. It is productively parasitic upon other disciplinary systems that define disability in more deterministic ways” (1-2). Dick represents the first attempt to abstract autism from medical literature, employing it within his own concerns about human identity and the future. This chapter engages with the science fictional imagination about autism that begins with Dick’s novels and broader ideas about culture. These representations are important in part because they are some of the first, beyond a few memoirs, that gave people access to a definition of autism directly connected to the shifting nature of American masculinity within post-War economic and social structures.

Analyzing Dick’s cultural definitions of autism, as they relate to the autistic subject discussed in Chapter One, this chapter argues that science fiction offered an early textual discourse through which autism was situated in relation to the human and social futures. Dick formulated a very specific understanding of autism, as it relates to power, that aligned with his paranoid anxieties about government control. Ultimately, these understandings were also integrated into feminist science fiction that was specifically interested in deconstructing neoliberalism from the perspective of gender. As chapter one laid out, people with autism come, within neoliberalism, to exist culturally within a dialectic: ideal in their ability to rationalize the world and calculate outcomes that are unconcerned about human bodies, and yet also dependent on others due to their disability and volatile in their apathy. They are simultaneously victims and victimizers., subject to the organization and perpetuating that organization’s oppression. As this stoic, rational,
and vulnerable subject became associated with hegemonic political cultures, autism simultaneously became a metaphor for not only governmentality but *patriarchal* governmentality.

The intersections between autism and masculinity will be more directly explored in this chapter by showing how some feminist science fiction in the 1980s used and added innovations to some of Dick’s theories in order to ultimately equate the person with autism with an entrepreneurial form of masculinity. Autism in these texts can be defined as a pathology of neoliberal masculinity. I demonstrate that, through this definition, progressive and radical visions of the future often rhetorically erase people with cognitive or affective disabilities from utopian thinking because of their proximity to stereotypes of masculine behavior. If Dick wanted to liberate the organization man, some feminist approaches desire to abolish the *neoliberal* man as an autistic identity. It is through these ideas that a concept of “autistic masculinity” first gets theorized, especially in its proximity to an emotionless and violent techno-subject that threatens the future existence of human society.

The following section discusses and analyzes theories of two interconnected, but disparate, subjectivities: the organization man and the cyborg of 1980s feminism. I will show how both of these subjects are defined affectively in ways that suggest or exclude cognitive and affective disabilities and have been used to define or reject gendered forms of affect associated with masculinity. In terms of the organization man, I will specifically utilize Dick’s 1972 speech “The Android and the Human” to explore how his definitions of the android, as an unfeeling bureaucratic conduit, look towards a world where
oppression is cured through abolishing autistic traits. Through this definition, Dick made autism available as a trope for science fiction. At the same time, however, Dick forms a level of sympathy for the victimized organization man as a mean of constructing his utopian ideals predicated on liberating men from the subordinate social positions. Writing prior to neoliberalism’s hegemony, Dick’s concerns about androidification and the plight of people with autism emphasize his anti-establishment politics as they emerge from the countercultural currents of the 1960s and 1970s, creatively utilizing scientific literature to make a cultural argument about autism. Haraway, while borrowing much of Dick’s rhetoric, updates these ideas for the early neoliberal period.

Then, the next section will take up this idea by analyzing Dick’s creative works, primarily Martian Time-Slip, and a text adapted from his work, Blade Runner. I will argue that Dick constantly uses a trope of the “autistic dystopia,” a nightmare landscape where feelings are subordinated to, and indeed erased by, organizational and economic concerns. Martian Time-Slip specifically uses an autistic character to emphasize a lack of human empathy in a world that values productivity. Under regimes of productivity, the organization man intersects with the white male as victim. Dick sees, through this intersection, the possibility of liberating the victim through a sympathetic attempt to recuperate masculinity as an independent form of agency. The last two sections before the conclusion will explain how Dick’s understanding of autism impacted later feminist visions of the future, specifically those of Kathy Acker and Margaret Atwood. Acker and Atwood both use autistic characters as a means of critiquing neoliberal and technocratic governmentalities, with Acker especially transforming autism into a metaphor for
patriarchy and masculinity. In other words, resisting Dick’s impulse to sympathetically describe the marked man, Acker and Atwood arrive at the opposite conclusion: pathologizing autism as a gendered affect integral to predatory capitalism which furthers the domination of women. Acker posits that to cure autism is also to cure neoliberalism and patriarchy. Atwood, on the other hand, will clearly linked to Acker’s ideas about autism as violent male affect, begins a process of recognizing how cognitive disability can escape associations with concepts like the organization man and neoliberal man that delimit it as merely a symptom of power.

In science fiction, then, the concerns of governmentality first integrated with theories of autism as a gendered affect symbolizing emerging formations of masculine identity. These texts wrap “autistic masculinity” within the dialectic of victimized and victimizer. The narrative and rhetoric surrounding autism in science fiction, which often function to construct a sort of autistic dystopia, has itself impacted political and cultural discourse about autism in the twenty-first century, such as the use of the word “alien” and fears of a future universal epidemic of autism. In staging the end of the world as what we might call an “autistic event,” authors like Acker and Atwood transform autism into a

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14 For instance, John Donvan and Caren Zucker’s 2010 article in *The Atlantic*, “Autism’s First Child,” cites the exponential increase in autism cases over the years to ask a pertinent question: what will happen when all of these autistic children become autistic adults? When parents die, who will care for them? They outline two solutions. One, “regarding them as tragically broken persons, and hope we are humane enough to shoulder the burden of meeting their basic needs,” which they suggest means institutionalizing them. Or, second, “alternatively, we can dispense with the layers of sorrow, and interpret autism as but one more wrinkle in the fabric of humanity.” While this second seems more positive, it is inherently neoliberal, especially when they mention that we need to replace “pity toward them with ambition.” They also note that schools need to teach people with AD valuable social skills “like knowing how to swipe a Visa card.”
political metaphor enmeshed within feminist visions of the future untethered from autism. In doing so, they reproduce stereotypes in a way that shows how, if Stuart Murray is worried about discussing masculinity in relation to autism creates a “kind of floundering in the complexities of contemporary gender politics…[that] often has little to say about autism itself” (164), the opposite is also true: how science fiction has employed autism is intimately connected to cultural processes of constructing and understanding masculinity as a “marked” form of identity.

The Organization Man and the Cyborg

In 1956, William H. Whyte published *The Organization Man*, a book that comprehensively evaluates the dilemmas created by what he sees as the dominant trend in management, the man submitting himself to the desires, needs, and structures of The Organization. Such a situation creates, Whyte argues, a Social Ethic that “more than anything else…rationalizes the organization's demands for fealty and gives those who offer it wholeheartedly a sense of dedication in doing so” (6). This Social Ethic has three “major propositions”: “a belief in the group as the source of creativity; a belief in ‘belongingness’ as the ultimate need of the individual; and a belief in the application of science to achieve the belongingness” (7). In this way, the organization man is the subject of a rational collectivity achieved through “the application of science”; Whyte’s critique of such a system—as well as its complete opposite, the selfish “defects of individual self-
regard” (404)—anticipates the neoliberal ideology of the distant, unbiased economic
gaze.\textsuperscript{15}

Whyte views the precepts of the organization man as a utopian dream that denies
the fundamental importance of the struggle between individualism and society. Thus, he
states when describing the Social Ethic of the organization man that

\begin{quote}
Man exists as a unit of society. Of himself, he is isolated, meaningless; only as he collaborates with others does he become worthwhile, for by sublimating himself in the group, he helps produce a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. There should be, then, no conflict between man and society…By applying the methods of science to human relations we can eliminate these obstacles to consensus and create an equilibrium in which society’s needs and the needs of the individual are one and the same (7).
\end{quote}

Whyte is not sympathetic to this situation, describing this Social Ethic as a matter of
being “imprisoned” (12) and concludes his book with the forceful assertion that the
organization man \textit{must fight The Organization} (404). The organization man is a victim
of this Social Ethic, forced to repress and ignore his own opinions and suggestions in
favor of maintaining order. To Whyte, for the organization man to ignore the value of
struggle is to “tyrannize himself” (14). Such a situation, were the “individual comes to
regard himself as a hostage to prevailing opinion,” institutes a “tyranny of the majority”
(396). While the form of individualism theorized by Whyte would, to some degree,
eventually arrive through neoliberal ideology, Whyte’s qualified version of individualism

\textsuperscript{15}Indeed, Whyte includes a footnote where he quotes Friedrich Hayek’s opposition to the
scientism of the Social Ethic (23). Hayek is now accepted as one of the architects of
neoliberalism. The essential difference between scientism and neoliberalism is, as the
next chapter will show, that the former requires an external gaze that pathologizes,
calculates, and pacifies men; the latter, however, completely abstracts that gaze into an
indisputable and invisible economic \textit{logic}. Whereas men are faulty, the cold, calculating
structures of the economy cannot be.
points to anxieties about the necessity for men to “sublime” themselves to a wholly bureaucratic logic. Indeed, he constantly rejects the individual who ignores society: “An individualism as stringent, as selfish as that often preached in the name of the Protestant Ethic would never have been tolerated” (9).

Whyte critiques the denigration of individualism, noting that “the danger…is not man being dominated but man surrendering” (32). Thus, in *The Imitation Game*, Alan Turing’s resistance to groupthink and to bureaucratic hierarchy offers an anachronistic vision of the neoliberal variant of the *homo economicus*, a man failing to surrender based on personal imitative.16 Adhering to hierarchy and the group literally assures his victimization. Turing resists, then, the most frightening prospect embedded in Whyte’s organization man: “In further institutionalizing the great power of the majority, we are making the individual come to distrust himself. We are giving him a rationalization for the unconscious urging to find an authority that would resolve the burdens of free choice” (59). As I will show in Chapter Three, it is exactly this paradox between free will (the active entrepreneur) and “the unconscious urging to find an authority” through which neoliberal masculinity finds its definition. Here, however, it is simply important to note how the understanding of this dialectic emerges from anxieties about the organization man as passive and lacking control.

16 Whyte, indeed, has an entire chapter on the “Bureaucratization of the Scientist” where he argues that “in no field, except the arts, does the elevation of administrative values hold more dangers” (218), noting that the main problem is that scientists accept this structure. Turing, on the other hand, does not. Whyte, further, locates collective research as originating in the war period (219).
The transition from control to becoming an object is central to Whyte’s understanding of the process through which the Protestant Ethic dissolves and gives way to the Social Ethic:

Once people liked to think, at least, that they were in control of their destinies, but few of the younger organization people cherish such notions. Most see themselves as objects more acted upon than acting—and their future, therefore, determined as much by the system as by themselves. (385)

Whereas the model of the Protestant Ethic was “authoritarian,” the struggle of the organization man is for the very possession of his soul (397). The problem the organization man has, however, is that he has been fundamentally conditioned, through school and corporate organization, to accept his role. This has occurred at both the level of knowledge and psychology: “No generation has been so well equipped, psychologically as well as technically, to cope with the intricacies of vast organizations” (394).

Despite his dystopic language about tyranny and authoritarianism, Whyte contends that seeing the organization man as the symbol of a “dehumanized twentieth century” (11) invokes a harmful nostalgia that threatens to bring back the unfettered selfishness of the Protestant Ethic. It is through the image of a dehumanized world linked to autism, however, that Phillip K. Dick, in his fictional and non-fictional writings, implicitly and repeatedly alludes to the organization man as an identity through which government and corporations are able to enact immense amounts of violence.\(^{17}\) The crux

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\(^{17}\) Whyte includes a section on popular fiction in his book that could be used to characterize many of the themes present in Dick’s works: “For many years most writers of popular fiction have portrayed society amenably enough, but once they were guileless
of my argument here is that Dick, through the organization man as a cultural concept, theorizes autism as the primary malady of the bureaucratic subject, a subject who must be liberated from their victimization in order to imagine a utopian future. The organization man offers Dick a psychology akin to autistic disinterest and apathy, a man who goes along with his role whole living an automated, machine existence. In other words, through Dick’s desire to critique the organization man, especially as it limits masculinity, autism first becomes a metaphor used in science fiction and, by extension, popular fiction more generally.

The conflation of autism and the organization man occurs, for Dick, most comprehensively in the concept of the android. The android, like people with autism, becomes visible in popular culture as a dual way of being, entrenched within oppressive government control while simultaneously representing a rationalized disinterest in human bodies. The android and the autistic share a metaphorical correspondence within Dick’s theories of governmentality. Dick’s 1972 speech “The Android and the Human” most clearly lays out his theories of the “androidification” of human life and his fears of autistic dystopia predicated on the obedient, organization man. Dick argues that human in this respect, and now they have lost their innocence. Instead of merely showing people not masters of their destiny and leaving the moral latent—there now seems a disposition to go out of the way to show that people cannot be. Society is no longer merely an agreeable setting in which they place their subjects; it is becoming almost the central subject itself. Fiction heroes and heroines, as we have seen, have been remarkably passive for some time. It is not enough, however, to show that they are not masters of their own destiny; there now seems to be a growing disposition on the part of writers to go out of their way to show that they cannot be... many of the best novels of the last decade have been concerned with the impotence of man against society” (255). Unlike the novels Whyte discusses, Dick’s novel, as I will show, attempt to channel this impotence into a new vision of the individual aligned, in many ways, with Whyte.
behavior and identity are converging with those of machines, that as machines become more “animated” and human, human life becomes more “inert” and, therefore, mechanical.

The android, for Dick, is a being that lives by mechanical reflex rather than by feeling: “Androidization requires obedience. And, most of all, predictability. It is precisely when a given person's response to any given situation can be predicted with scientific accuracy that the gates are open for the wholesale production of the android life form.” Dick is nearly directly quoting Whyte through his rejection of obedience, predictability, and scientific accuracy, or what Whyte calls scientism. Rather than physically mechanical (an actual technological construct), for Dick the android is characterized by mechanical behaviors (is mechanical in its psychology). Dick offers insight into who this subject is when he suggests a diagnostic parallel. He argues that people with a “schizoid personality” are useful analogues to his android:

In the field of abnormal psychology, the schizoid personality structure is well defined; in it there is a continual paucity of feeling. The person thinks rather than feels his way through life. And as the great Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung showed, this cannot be successfully maintained; one must meet most of crucial reality with a feeling response. Anyhow, there is a certain parallel between what I call the ‘android’ personality and the schizoid. Both have a mechanical, reflex quality.

Dick was interested in schizophrenia in his literature, and it is perhaps not a coincidence that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s Anti-Oedipus, the first volume in their Capitalism and Schizophrenia project, was released the same year as Dick gave his speech. Whereas Deleuze and Guattari posit “schizoanalysis” as a way to address desire beyond psychoanalytic frameworks, namely the Oedipus complex, Dick’s schizoid is
inherently dystopian in its mechanical inability to resist capitalism or bureaucratic structure. The “mechanical. Reflex quality,” at the same time, potentially signifies autism, which Dick was also interested in (as I will show in my analysis of Martian Time-Slip) and that was, during Dick’s time, often called infantile or childhood schizophrenia.

For Dick, the schizoid suggests a lack of emotional intensity that produces a “person [who] thinks rather than feels his way through life.” The distinction between schizophrenia and autism (Dick’s android) parallels that between a subject who, in its irrationality, denatures the boundaries of power and a subject who, in its mechanical rationality and cold gaze, transforms into a symbol of government without human goals. Dick, then, theorizes the android in order to separate it from and reinvigorate the notion of the human as the specific, individual site of feelings. As Dick says, “ad astra—per hominem,” to the stars, through man; in other words, using technology to colonize space is only worthwhile if the human condition is spread to the “alien” corners of our universe: “My full measure of devotion, in this war we are fighting, to maintain, and augment, what is human about us, what is the core of ourselves, and the source of our destiny.” As we will see with Martian Time-Slip, autism, as the representative pathology of the mechanical world, is not included in this concept of the human.

The android diagnosis simplistically positions the autistic as a metaphor for the potential of an authoritarian technocracy. This is evident in the broader scope of Dick’s argument; rather than just endorsing the human over the android, he endorses the attributes of humans that are able to circumvent and interrupt the science fictional vision
of the dystopian nightmare. He describes the androidified human, suggesting the organization man, as creatures who have...become instruments, means, rather than ends, and hence to me analogs of machines in the bad sense, in the sense that although biological life continues, metabolism goes on, the soul—for lack of a better term—is no longer there or at least no longer active. And such does exist in our world—it always did, but the production of such inauthentic human activity has become a science of government and such-like agencies, now.

This lack of a soul, which parallels Whyte’s idea that the Social Ethic attempts to claim human souls, parallels the rhetoric surrounding autism contemporary to Dick. While Dick suggests that such human-androids have always naturally existed (perhaps as a biological anomaly), he identifies a cause that comes close to political conspiracy: the production of “creatures” who are mere instruments is the domain of “government and such-like agencies.” In other words, political pressures manufacture machine-like people with “schizoid” personalities, offering a cultural explanation for schizophrenia and autism that predates, but mirrors, Kirby’s ideas in Digimodernism. Such people become the harbingers of an oppressive totalitarian government which directs human action. Without oppressive government, there would be very few “schizoid” personalities. The world of the entrepreneur of the self and individualism is one in which men can separate themselves from systems of control.

Dick expands and clarifies the affective assumptions of the organization man in such a way that people with certain cognitive or affective “deficiencies,” such as people with autism, would not exist in a utopian future, a rhetorical strategy that Alison Kafer discusses in “Debating Feminist Futures: Slippery Slopes, Cultural Anxiety, and the Case
of the Deaf Lesbians” when she claims that “utopian visions are founded on the elimination of disability, while dystopic, negative visions of the future are based on its proliferation” (74). Dick labels the subject of this utopian future “the kid,” a type that he constructs which aligns uneasily with Whyte’s entrepreneur or “individual.” The kid, who incorporates masculine agency (though dick mostly uses “they” to describe “kids,” he also positions them as explicitly male when he says the kid does “his thing”), live outside of machine existence. Betraying his immersion in 1960s counterculture, Dick sees youth who refuse to accept established laws and rules as the saviors of the human condition: “But there are kids now who cannot be unplugged because no electric cord links them to any external power source. Their hearts beat with an interior, private meaning.”

Dick posits, then, a return to a rugged masculinity outside of the government and antagonistic to governmentality as the means of escaping autistic dystopia. He praises “the kid” by claiming that “the collective voice of the authorities is wasted on him; he rebels. But rebels not out of theoretical, ideological considerations, only out of what might be called pure selfishness.” The kid, the antithesis of the android, heralds a new order, one built on the individual and a selfishness and resistance to ideology which, in many ways, anticipates neoliberal subjectivity. Indeed, David Savran, looking at 1950s countercultural to help him define the white male as victim, documents how Jack Kerouac, William Burroungs, and Allen Ginsberg presented an independent, socially

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18 “Uneasily” because Whyte rejects “nonconformity,” though the counterculture as a specific entity was still nascent, with Kerouac’s *On the Road* published a year after *The Organization Man*. 
disabled vision of masculinity outside of the contained, repetitive strictures of the organization man that forecasts the neoliberal economy.\textsuperscript{19} I will further explore the centrality of the male victim to Dick himself in the next section, a figure through which the autistic organization man is recuperated and made sympathetic. The key is to liberate that man from the pacifying confines of society.

“The Android and the Human” incorporates many of Whyte’s own conclusions, though with a more radical, anti-society conclusion. In formulating these ideas through the concept of the android, Dick also pathologizes the organization man as “schizoid” or autistic. On the other hand, the “kid” is a man who accepts his rugged individualism. In many ways, Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto,” published three years after Dick’s death during the initial period of a consolidating neoliberal governmentality, updates and challenges Dick’s ideas through both casting an anxious eye on the powers of technology, as it connects to the organization man, while rejecting Dick’s idealizing of the selfish, victimized male. Rhetorically, Haraway and Dick are very similar. Both simultaneously fear and see hope in technology, refusing to believe that technology will always pacify the human. Compare, for instance, Dick’s statement that the technology produced by “applied science” can, like the weapons before them, fall into what the authorities would call ‘the wrong hands’—that is, into the hands of the very people being monitored. Like all machines, these universal transmitters, recording

\textsuperscript{19} Savran quotes Burroughs as saying that the “the Frontiersman has shrunk to a wretched, interfering, Liberal bureaucrat” (96). Savran specifically references the organization man multiple times (for instance, on pages 47, 77, and 90) in order to define how the Beat writers understood their masculinity outside of dominant models of their time.
devices, heatpattern discriminators, don't in themselves care who they're being use by or against
to Haraway’s contention that
the cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family….The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins (293).

In these terms, Haraway’s cyborg sounds similar to Turing as represented in *The Imitation Game*: outside of the bounds of the organization man and the heteronormative family, connected to but detached from military and patriarchal goals. For Haraway, however, this Turing would be imperfect, just as the organization man and Dick’s kid, since each suggest a particular *gendered* affect of governmentality. Through this, autism, disability, and victimization transform into hegemonic performances. Haraway, in attempting to defuse “racist, male-dominant capitalism” (293), arrives at the goals of “argu[ing] for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and the *responsibility* in their construction” and “contribut[ing] to social-feminist culture and theory in a postmodernist, non-naturalist mode and in the utopian tradition of imagining the world without gender” (292). Such arguments have been central to the production of the marked man, who believes that feminism and racial justice are making masculinity obsolete. Through the cyborg, autism and affective/cognitive disabilities come to stand in for this erasure: to imagine a “post-gender” world is predicated on abolishing the gendering of affect in ways that, ultimately, cannot account for affective disability. In other words, if the cyborg tries to rectify the unfeeling governmental oppression lived through and perpetuated through Dick’s android while remaining aware of gender, it does so through anxiety
about autistic embodiment. Thus, where Dick introduces autism into science fiction in *Martian Time-Slip* and through the android, the cyborg operates as a feminist argument against gendered affect parallel to autism, as will be made explicit in my analysis of Kathy Acker’s *Empire of the Senseless*. Acker’s ultimate argument is that to cure autism is to cure neoliberalism, a contention similar to Dick’s that lacks his sympathy.

Haraway’s ideas have already been thoroughly discussed in feminist disability studies, though in ways that often completely ignore the affective histories of the android and cyborg as science fictional tropes reminiscent of affective or cognitive disability. Donna Reeve, in “Cyborgs, Cripples, and iCrip: Reflections on the Contributions of Haraway to Disability Studies,” while arguing that the cyborg is a useful tool for thinking about disability because physical disabilities challenge the binary between impairment and normality, also critiques the fact that Haraway herself says little about disability. Reeve suggests that the cyborg is predominantly associated with ability in a way that is problematic for people with disabilities: “The ease with which cyborg politics offers a new language and possibilities for marginalised groups risks erasing the actual struggles that many disabled people face for economic survival, especially in the majority world” (96). For Reeve, however, the cyborg is primarily envisioned as a highly physical embodiment, one in which the connections between the organic and cybernetic exist at the literal interface of wires, rods, flesh, and bone. How science fiction articulates an affectively and cognitively disabled masculinity remains untheorized.

Similarly, in *Feminist, Queer, Crip* Kafer recognizes that cyborg feminism “tend[s] to represent disability exclusively as an individual, medical problem, a
positioning that depoliticizes disability and disabled people” (22) and “attempts to normalize the disabled body through prosthetics and technological intervention, striving to make disabled bodies (appear) whole” (24), though she also praises Haraway’s contributions to disability studies: “Haraway’s manifesto marks one of the first moments that disability and disabled people appear in feminist critical theory” (106). She predominantly critiques the way in which scholars have employed Haraway’s cyborg, questioning the fact that, while many scholars have criticized Haraway’s orientalizing description of Asian factory workers, most people accept without question the idea that people with disabilities are inherently cyborgs (115). The fact that people with disabilities are labeled cyborgs in opposition to nondisabled people, she argues, creates a dichotomy between disabled and abled embodiment that defuses Haraway’s hope of achieving a radical fluidity.

This dichotomy also, I would add, makes it impossible to recognize how the disabled man functions as a culturally hegemonic subjectivity. This erasure is fundamental to understanding how science fiction ultimately deals with the marked man as site of gendered affect. In targeting the white male, a new category emerges that resists the cyborg future: the disabled man or, more specifically, the autistic man who cannot be accounted for in Haraway’s notion of pleasure or here focus on intense cyborgian ability. Kafer’s critiques and praise are again predicated on predominantly ignoring cognitive and affective disability, despite her call to challenge both able-bodiedness and what she calls “able-mindedness.” The rest of this chapter documents how autism explicitly became a central form of disability to science fiction and how it offered metaphors for the shifting
structures of gender in both the age of the organization man and the turn towards neoliberalism in the 1980s and beyond. The history of the android and cyborg as theoretical concepts point towards the negative role played by cognitive disabilities within certain anti-government, feminist, socialist, and even crip imaginaries.

One way to organize these blind spots is through the marked man as a contested site of both disabled vulnerability and patriarchal desires that nostalgically construct a moment when masculinity can be de-pathologized and expressed. While Dick and Haraway certainly would not agree on these terms, with the former seemingly praising this potential de-pathologization and the latter directly rejecting the white male as a hegemonic subject, the cyborg focus on bodily pleasure and emotive collectivities is exclusionary in a similar fashion to the android: they both posit an “inert” dupe of the dominant political or economic context. Sherry Turkle, talking about computers and AI, contextualizes the role of affect specifically within the 1980s in and against which Haraway was working. She says that “people were special because they had emotions” through asserting that

in the 1970s and 1980s, resistance to a computational model of people led to an insistence that was essential in humans—love, empathy, sensuality—could never be captured in language, rules, and formalism. In this way, information processing reinforced a split between the psychology of feeling and the psychology of thought (145).

The cyborg, then, despite its techo-organic origins, incorporates those qualities “essential to humans” in order to circumvent the fear of inert bodies. Human love, empathy, and sensuality become emotional experiences central to cyborg politics because they counter the autistic impulses of the “computational model” which supports neoliberalism, both
metaphorically (unfeeling bodies manipulated by capitalist patriarchy) and literally (the technological advances that facilitated widespread financialization, especially in the 1990s).

**Philip K. Dick’s Autistic Governmentality**

The origins of the autistic character in science fiction can be traced to *Martian Time-Slip*, where Dick employs autism as a means of reflecting on gender, cognition, and politics under the oppressive mandates of an austerity capitalism that also incorporates the ideologies of the organization man. Including an autistic character, he implicitly argues that social power is a top-down process, that concepts like “autism” and being “defective” are produced through power. In other words, he offers an early explanation of the cultural origins of autism. Such a cultural model, however, is simultaneously produced through an understanding of a cognitively and emotionally disabled masculinity that extends from but also reorganizes corporate and bureaucratic masculinities, a process involving the liberation of men as individuals.

*Martian Time-Slip* follows the lives of several people who have colonized Mars, including a racist, sexist union leader (Arnie Kott), a repairman running away from his schizophrenic past (Jack Bohlen), and Norbert, an organic food salesman who also operates a black market food operation while facing the fact that his son, Manfred, is autistic. The colonial project on Mars is failing, requiring its inhabitants to exhibit skills useful to the future stability of human life on the planet. The novel is on its surface about people dealing with and submitting to austerity as a mode of life and their positions in the economic hierarchy. Early in the novel Norbert, bemoaning the fact that he knows little
about his own business and is burdened by the difficulty of having an autistic son, commits suicide by jumping in front of a “tractor-bus.” Arnie Kott, who learns about the death from his ex-wife, offers his own theory as to why Norbert killed himself: “One thing, when you hear about a suicide, you can be sure the guy knows this: he knows he’s not a useful member of society...It’s nature’s way—the expendable are removed by their own hand” (59). Arnie espouses an ironic theory of disposability, where the person is responsible for their own removal if they are not economically productive and are not willing to conform to their role an organization man, forecasting the neoliberal inflection of social Darwinism.20

While Arnie’s criticism of Norbert seems harsh, similar ideas are more widely accepted in the novel in relation to “genetic defects,” like Manfred, who live in a special camp, Camp B-G. Norbert commits suicide after learning that the United Nations (the governing body of Mars) is trying to pass a bill that would close Camp B-G and potentially require euthanizing the inhabitants as a public relations campaign to make Mars appear to lack the genetic disabilities prevalent on Earth, literally a eugenic project.

20 Many scholars have commented on how neoliberalism appropriates while reconstituting social Darwinism. The usual argument is that 19th and early 20th century theories of social Darwinism were primarily based on racial categories, whereas neoliberalism’s reliance on more ubiquitous categories, like “productivity” and “job creation,” can be applied less discriminately and to a larger proportion of the population. Dick’s novel, with its indigenous Bleekman and UN collectivity which needs to select for “usefulness” on Mars, can be seen as engaging with both the interrelations between both racial and purely economic definitions of productivity. For more on neoliberalism and social Darwinism, see: Robert J. Antonio, “The Cultural Construction of Neoliberal Globalization”; Rodolfo Leyva, “No Child Left Behind: A Neoliberal Repackaging of Social Darwinism”; Henry Giroux, “Beyond Neoliberal Common Sense: Cultural Politics and Public Pedagogy in Dark Times,” where he calls “the dismantling of the social state” an “updated social Darwinism” (49).
to abolish autism. Norbert himself, after initial shock, endorses the UN bill, telling a Camp B-G nurse “what use is it to have a child that can’t talk or live among people?...He’ll never be able to hold a job...He’ll always be a burden on society’” (43). Norbert internalizes the very same logic that Arnie uses against him when he suggests that the most important distinction between being a valuable human and being disposable is holding a job, having some use to society so you are not a “burden.” Besides the characters in the novel, the narrator also seems to agree with this assessment to some degree when they say that Camp B-G is trying to bring Manfred “into communication with the human culture into which he had been born” (35). Thus, at the most authoritative level of the novel, people with autism are designated as outside of not just Mars culture but human culture.

Sentiments about autism are, though, a bit more complex than this in Martian Time-Slip. A central question of much of Dick’s fiction is evident in Arnie and Norbert’s philosophies about who is valuable and who is not: who is more defective, the withdrawn child with autism or the people surrounding him who lack empathy for each other and operate entirely on their own desires? Indeed, earlier the same day, Jack’s wife, Silvia, refuses to allow the Steiners to have more water (a precious commodity on Mars) even though they claim some of their water leaked, which is a lie. After Norbert dies, Silvia wonders if her refusal was the cause, but is relieved when she decides such a scenario seems unlikely. She then turns her attention to being annoyed that she has to watch Norbert’s daughters, who she discusses entirely in terms of class (she labels them “pudding-y, plump, vapid, low-class children” (55)), while his wife talks to the police.
“Low-class,” within Mars’s incredibly organized, selfish structure, designates not only income level but additionally productivity and usefulness, which also determine levels of empathy.

This sense of distrust and anxiety about hierarchy and stability varies by character: Arnie’s ex-wife, Anne Esterhazy, is a philanthropist with a lot of empathy for suffering children, and Norbert even calls Silvia “vital, physically attractive, alive” to contrast her to his wife, whom he, adopting the refrigerator mother theory of autism made popular by Bettelheim, sees as distant and cold.21 Another example is Doreen, Norbert’s lover, who tries to take care of Jack after learning he has schizophrenia. Dick offers emotional and feeling women to counter the harshness and coldness of unfettered patriarchal capitalism (embodied by Arnie) and the repressed organization man. He directly contrasts a rationalized way of seeing the world associated with power to the ability to value people beyond their economic productivity; thus, he recognizes and reifies the two cultural gazes that construct autism. To do so, however, he utilizes stereotypes of female emotionality, forcing women into the role of nurturing and authorizing forms of manhood which are situated outside of traditional definitions of masculinity. If most characters in the novel despise the autistic, with the exception of Anne and the Camp B-G staff, then Dick is positing a “better” world where a more complex human identity emerges with the help of women who maintain their “vital,” life-giving roles. While Dick rejects corporate solutions and ways of seeing the world, he

21 This theory held that “cold,” distant mothers caused autism in their children, a contention that many autism memoirs attempted to reject. See, for instance, my discussion of The Siege in Chapter Four. Also, the chapter “Interpreting Gender: Refrigerator Mothers” in Jordynn Jack’s Autism and Gender.
constructs a male subject who internalizes paranoia about government while, simultaneously, reflecting many tenets of individualism and reconstructing a hegemonic position in terms of gender roles. Women are made to accept the new disabled man and nurture them back into human identity.22

The figure of the marked man is most comprehensively imagined through Jack, who has a unique perspective on the lack of empathy exhibited by his fellow inhabitants of Mars. Jack’s perspective, which in many ways probably mirrors Dick’s, emerges from his own experiences of schizophrenia, giving him insight into autism, which he discusses extensively while repairing one of the teaching machines at the school his son, David, attends (72-73). He implicitly suggests that autism is merely a label given to children who do not respond to institutionalized forms of education. He makes the claim that “[autism]...had become a self-serving concept for the authorities who governed Mars. It replaced the older term ‘psychopath,’ which in time had replaced ‘moral imbecile,’ which had replaced criminally insane’” (73). This astute analysis of the social construction of mental illness, highlighting the fluid nature of psychological diagnoses by recognizing their utility as sociopolitical categories, was not a widely accepted idea within the medical community or even society more broadly during the time in which Dick was writing. By connecting autism to his interest in oppressive political systems, Dick institutes autism as a symbol of the effects of power rather than just a manifestation of

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22 This relates to one of the shifts noted by Haraway in “A Cyborg Manifesto”: “the new economic and technological arrangements are also related to the collapsing welfare state and the ensuing intensification of demands on women to sustain daily life for themselves as well as for men, children and old people. The feminization of poverty...has become an urgent focus” (305).
personal psychology. Autism becomes cultural. How he makes it cultural is, however, entwined with anti-establishment ideals and a sense of masculinity which cannot be pathologized or scrutinized by medical or political institutions. In other words, Dick attempts to recuperate the marked man as an image, allowing him to transcend his medical meanings and reject bondage.

Autism becomes a metaphor for the damaged state of manhood in oppressive governmental systems, a dystopian identity in its manifestations and utopian in the constant hope that autism, along with the political establishment, can be eradicated and liberated from the rhythms of the organization man. For Jack, autism is given meaning through its relationship to the needs of the government; it is, essentially, a form of control or a manifestation of the effects of control. This metaphorizes autism as wholly constructed through politics, defining it as a metaphor for a state of enslavement to the government (which Jack then generalizes to everyone when he compares Camp B-G to David’s “normal” school). Dick, while offering a personal view of autism as an experienced identity, also textualizes the process of autism becoming metaphor. Jack later, in a schizophrenic state, says “people talk about mental illness as an escape!...It was no escape; it was a narrowing, a contracting of life into, at last, a moldering, dank tomb, a place where nothing came or went; a place of total death” (145). Mental illness is not an “escape,” presumably from the structuring of life around economic productivity and the organizational structure of corporate and Martian life, but an intense negation of subjectivity.
Indeed, the fates of Manfred and Jack suggest autism is easily manipulated by authority figures, suggesting that the autistic, like the android, is the organization man. Arnie uses Manfred, who exists simultaneously in the present and future, to predict future events for economic gain, about which Jack says: “Probably he’s got some solid selfish motive, something that will bring him a profit in cold hard cash. I certainly couldn’t care less” (112). Jack accepts his position, remaining apathetic about, and unwilling to critique, those above him. Not long afterwards, Doreen comments on how Jack’s mental illness calibrates his own responses to Arnie: “‘You’re content...merely to do your technical task of rigging up the essential machinery….that’s not a good sign at all’”; Jack responds “‘It’s very schizophrenic, I guess...to be content with a purely technical relationship’” (114). Again, a female character points out the victimized male’s dilemma, attempting to help him achieve his individuality by critiquing his willingness to reside wholly in the technical “machinery.” The instinct to do your “technical” duty without questioning authority, without engaging at all with the particular ideologies (in this case, cold-hearted capitalism) which orchestrate the boundaries of reality, is, for Dick, one of the most negative human attributes; he equates it, therefore, with mental illness. Notice, too, that it is not just any illness, but is metaphorized in its intersection with schizophrenia and autism. The marked man is to be both pitied and maligned.

The relationship between the individual and organizational authority is explicitly represented as mechanical in many scenes during which Jack has schizophrenic visions. In one, he details an anecdote about a schizophrenic break he had while still living on Earth. During a visit to his job’s personal manager, the manager suddenly transforms into
a “manlike structure,” a skeleton “wired together” with “artificial components” taking the place of human organs (79). The manager—an authoritarian who holds power over Jack—presents, through Jack’s schizophrenic vision, the proximity of the human and the mechanical. He is literally an organization man, a cog who lacks human identity and merely functions as an unfeeling conduit. Similarly, the ending scenes of the novel present an older Manfred, who only has half of his body, the bottom half now consisting of mechanical parts. This version of Manfred slips from the future to the novel’s present to thank Jack for letting ten-year-old Manfred escape with the indigenous Bleekman, to join a tribe who understands him outside of human culture. He is allowed, then, to escape and resist, to enter into the life of the “kid” rather than the mechanical existence of organized Martian life. Thus, for Dick, it is not autism per se that is mechanical; the effects of power on individuals (autism being one of these effects) produces machinic subjectivity. A similar description occurs when Jack contemplates Dr. Glaub: “He saw the psychiatrist under the aspect of absolute reality: a thing composed of cold wires and switches, not a human at all, not made of flesh” (109). Psychiatry is itself called into question as a cold, mechanical means of pathologizing identity and, for Dick, primarily rugged, individual male identity.

Martian Time-Slip, like many of Dick’s novels, is concerned with the effects of authoritative notions of economic and social productivity on individual subjectivity and, by extension, with freeing the male subject from governmental scrutiny. His desire to document these effects led him to a fascination with autism and, more specifically, Bettelheim’s case study of “the mechanical boy.” In Dick’s worldview, oppressive
government is a state of autism and, therefore, seeking a better future requires a totalizing push towards emotional and mental health. This is the value of the marked man and of autism as a misunderstood, “natural” form of identity: the oppressed man offers hope in a future that can reconstitute power back into the hands of decentered, but ultimately still male, authority. A world without authoritarian control would also be a world potentially without autism, because government would not be able to produce the disorder as a convenient label. For the victimized and disabled man, a state of total health is often a nostalgic and utopic ideal, the goal worked towards in the liminal space of social and political subordination. In some ways, Manfred also suggests this possible future, where the disabled boy does not have to be subject to pathologizing gazes. Indeed, Norbert humanizes Manfred when he suggests he loves to dance to “unheard music” and suggests, at some level, a utopian hope in his question “[c]ould [Manfred] be made from some new and different kind of atom?” (43)

The narrator in Martian Time-Slip turns a sympathetic gaze to Manfred laden with the hope of erasing his autism by extricating him from oppression. Watching men, who are often Dick’s points of identification, suffer necessitates a re-alignment with the human condition. It is a relationship of victimization and vulnerability, one where an immense capacity for carrying out institutional violence corresponds with the individual’s subjugation to that same violence. As I have stated, this duality threads through Dick’s work and its adaptations. In Blade Runner, the adaptation of Dick’s Do Androids

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23 This logic is taken ad absurdum in Dick’s Time Out of Joint, a novel about a man who, believing he is involved in a newspaper puzzle contest in the 1950s, and increasingly becomes paranoid that some invisible power is controlling him, learns that it is actually
Dream of Electric Sheep, the suffering of the androidified man is central to the plot and is on full display during the ending monologue of Roy Batty, a violent replicant who the main character, Rick Deckard, has pursued throughout the film. Roy, shirtless and bleeding, his hands penetrated by nails, saves Deckard, who was hanging precariously from a roof, despite easily being able to kill him. Like Turing in The Imitation Game, Roy functions as a martyr, literally presented with the wounds of Jesus (and as a harbinger of peace, since at the beginning of the scene he is shown holding a white dove).

Talking stoically, Roy suggests that his memories of governmental violence and slavery will be lost “like tears in rain,” exposing a poetic and vulnerable side of a character who, throughout the film, seemed like an apathetic killing machine. The camera cuts between Roy and Deckard as Roy somberly lowers his head, realizing his death is near, and Deckard gazes at Roy with a look of empathy and understanding. The camera cuts between them for a long time, showing extended close ups of Roy with his head lowered, focusing on the suffering body of a “man”—the replicant as marked man, victimized and victimizer in its inability to feel. As Rutger Hauer, who played Roy, has said, “the replicant in the final scene, by dying, shows Deckard what a real man is made of” (Raw 159). Androids, then, are not wholly unsympathetic in Dick’s work and its derivatives; they are victims and dupes of a system of oppression, just as Deckard, who has been working for the police to kill replicants, also is. To become men, they must navigate their own suffering, as embedded in their disabled senses of identity. Dick, then, the 1990s and he is being used to calculate missile defense against colonists on the moon. In the end, he decides to defect to the moon, the rational calculator and victim who, like Turing, is easily exploitable and ideologically mobile.
used autism as a trope tied very specifically to the position of men within social and political structures, tied to a utopic impulse which imagines masculine independence and freedom opposed to the organization man. Dick simultaneously desires to eradicate autism as an experience of oppression while, at the same time, emphasizing and constantly reusing protagonists and sympathetic characters, with stunted emotionalities, who construct their identities through that oppression.

The next section examines how this figuration of masculinity, and its associations with autism, are central to feminist science fiction imaginaries about the future that incorporate many of Dick’s ideas about the android while, also, utilizing a gender critique with its roots in Haraway’s cyborg. Whereas Dick attempts to reconstitute masculinity through autism and mental illness, as a “marked” identity, cyborg feminism has inherited similar concerns, targeting oppressive forms of capitalism, while simultaneously conflating autism with patriarchy. Some texts rely on what I call a cyborg humanism: the use of a cyborg body in an attempt to extend Dick’s glorification of the human. A hierarchy forms where the cyborg has more access than the autistic to the human. The biggest shift from Dick’s time to the historical moment of the following texts is neoliberalism, with Ronald Reagan and 1980s conservatism emerging as the countercultural potentials Dick lauded quickly dissolved. In this social landscape, the marked man transformed into a hegemonic symbol, a fact that one of the authors I will discuss, Kathy Acker, was perhaps most astute at recognizing. In doing so, however, she positions autism purely as a metaphor, further erasing affective disability from her vision of the future.
Cyborg Resistance to Neoliberal Autism in Feminist Science Fiction

In Kathy Acker’s *Empire of the Senseless*, the schizoid/autistic personality traits Dick associates with the android link explicitly to autistic embodiment, consolidating the disorder as the pathology of the neoliberal condition and, by extension, patriarchy. To cure autism, in *Empire of the Senseless*, is to cure neoliberalism and patriarchy. Thus, Acker anchors the marked man so thoroughly to autism that she, like Dick, can only imagine a future without autistic people. The cultural image of autism is bound together with the neoliberal values that feminists want to critique—resulting in the blurry boundaries between the marked man as hegemonic performance and the complete erasure of autism from utopian visions of the future. Acker’s cyborg, Abhor, ends the novel with a strange declaration of cyborg humanism, starting that she imagines “a human society in a world which is beautiful, a society which wasn’t just disgust” (227). “Just disgust,” for Acker, signifies autism and the oppressive neoliberal man, the subject of unfettered agency which Dick forecasted and which maintains gender hegemony.

Published the same year *Rain Man* was released, *Empire of the Senseless* includes the term autism multiple times. It presents a dystopian nightmare world which the

24 Acker also mentions autism in *In Memoriam to Identity* and in *Don Quixote*, both in reference to an inability to feel and understand human emotions. In *In Memoriam to Identity* R says “I need what you’re doing to me because it’s only pain and being controlled which’re going to cut through my autism. Because it’s pain you give me I love you” (5). In *Don Quixote*, Don Quixote is criticized in the following quote: “‘You are so autistic, knight, that you undertook every adventure any sane human would run away from and after that you ran away. You failed me… You are so autistic, you don’t known when humans’re laughing at you and you alway think human’re laughing at you. Since everyone must despise you; love, being impossible for you, is an obsession. Whatever your love’s recipient happens to feel for you, since you’re autistic, doesn’t influence your belief that you’re not worthy” (196). He is directly labeled, by the narrator, as autistic on
cyborg Abhor must navigate as her life intersects with government conspiracies and an ongoing, violent romance with a male character, Thivai. Abhor, as a multiracial cyborg, represents many of the possibilities inherent to Haraway’s conception of the cyborg: part organic, part inorganic and transracial, Abhor navigates multiple boundaries that decenter the hegemony of science as imagined by white men. She, in other words, embodies an affective resistance to sociopolitical structures that oppress and limit. It is autism through which these structures are most thoroughly explored, the figure that has transformed Abhor’s world into an unfeeling dystopia: “I must have passed out because I had a nightmare: that the world is full of people who no longer feel. They are carrying on their business as usual, because they no longer feel. In the dream I felt my whole being struck still, as if I had died” (38). The world where “people...no longer feel” recycles Dick’s conception of the android, echoing the concept of the organization man who goes about “business as usual” in a mechanical, detached manner. At the same time, Acker updates this concept, specifically focusing on the neoliberal landscape of the 1980s and the government of Ronald Reagan.

This quote implicitly presents this fact through the use of the term “business as usual,” an idiom that also signifies the neoliberal contamination of everyday life, the idea that all life is the “business” of the active, motivated entrepreneur. Here we get a clear view of Acker’s politics of resistance against a capitalist nightmare that is also simultaneously coded as “full of people who no longer feel”—the autistic. Acker makes

page 183. Both novels exemplify Acker’s definition of autism as outside of the human condition because outside of normative emotional and expressive literacy. Notice the repeated conflict between autism and love in these quotes, suggesting Turkle’s idea about the need to revivify the human as a special, differentiated category.
this link directly, using the term autism in relation to Ronald Reagan and the patriarchal order under which Abhor lives: “Dr Schreber was paranoid, schizophrenic, hallucinated, deluded, disassociated, autistic, and ambivalent. In those qualities he resembled the current United States President, Ronald Reagan” (45). Autism becomes, for Acker, the pathology of neoliberalism and the dysfunctional state of masculinity, as located in its most patriarchal figures. The United States and Abhor are, literally, ruled by marked men, Ronald Reagan and Dr Schreber, who use their paranoid sense of victimization to subjugate female bodies and expressions. The sympathetic gaze Dick allows for both autism and schizophrenia here disintegrates, transforming into a wholly negative metaphor for male supremacy.

While Dick’s use of exclusively male autistics and schizophrenics suggests a gendered argument, Acker directly constructs an autistic masculinity. One of the many figures of Abhor’s affectively dystopic world is Mark who “was autistically mumbling as if he had never heard me or anyone” (225). Presenting men who are unable to hear women makes sense as part of a critical feminist politics, but the fact that this hinges on autism, a disorder coming into cultural prominence at the same time that Acker was writing, sets off autistic men as the target, rather than patriarchy. This is true throughout the novel. Acker textually constructs autism as a disorder of men, but not men per se, but the patriarchal political and social order which they represent and support. Thus, an “old man” makes this diagnosis: “‘I think that the people who control the world are autistic...I think most people in society now are autistic. Look around you....Maybe most people are trying to imitate their controllers’” (72). In this paranoid vision, autistic universality is a
top down project, similar to Dick’s idea that autism and other disorders are labels used by those in power in order to control. Rather than the organization man who is controlled, however, Acker sets up a situation where the ruling class, represented most clearly by Ronald Reagan, has transformed into an unfeeling mass, a system with no regard to human concerns. On the same page, autism is defined as a “suicide in life”:

There are different forms of suicide. Autism is a suicide in life. The rich who have suicided in life are taking us, the whole human world, as if they love us, into death. It seemed to me that any form of human suicide was neither a necessary or an unnecessary act, but an act of unbearable anger, an act of murder in which the murderer self-destroys and desires to destroy the whole world” (72).25

The ruling class are again associated with the production of autism, though the specific mention of “the rich” here also explicitly adds an anti-capitalist dimension to the argument that locates the lack of feeling in the greed of capitalist accumulation. In this sense, autism signifies the valuation of identity through an entirely economic gaze, a process that obliterates the “human.” The “rage” she posits occurs at the intersection of class hierarchy and patriarchal domination. Disabled masculinity becomes a problem, then, for Acker’s feminist politics: to ensure a world that is not a nightmare requires destroying the subjects of that nightmare, autistic men. It also means de-pathologizing

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25 Acker’s idea of autism as a “suicide in life” sounds similar to Slavoj Zizek’s reading of Lacan’s “symptom”; he, indeed, also employs the term autism: “If the symptom in this radical dimension is unbound, it means literally ‘the end of the world’—the only alternative to the symptom is nothing: pure autism, a psychic suicide, surrender to the death drive even to the total destruction of the symbolic universe” (75). Also compare what Bettelheim says in The Empty Fortress: “When the autistic child becomes convinced that change may be possible, when his emotions begin to thaw, what unfreezes first is blind hatred and rage. As likely as not he will direct these against the only available object, the self, in suicidal attempts. Thus autism is a position even more extreme than suicide; and suicide, or suicidal tendencies, are a first step toward once again becoming active” (90).
Abhor and allowing her to construct her own identity outside of the stunted “autistic” emotionality embodied by men.

The patriarchal dimension is especially clear when Abhor documents how she herself came to acquire the label “autistic.” Like Manfred in *Martian-Time Slip*, Abhor is rendered autistic by the processes of power and control: “He [Daddy]... gradually let it be known I was a cripple. For this reason, he was shutting me up for the rest of my life. I was a genetic cripple: I was weird. I was dyslexic and autistic. I was too crippled for anyone to love me” (14). Her disability arrives, however, through the patriarch “shutting” her up, another reference to the limitations of female bodily and vocal expression. The word “cripple,” as a stand-in for Abhor’s inability to express her identity as woman, begs for a disability studies framework to engage with Acker’s assumptions. We should deconstruct the automatic conflation made here between the “shutting up” of the female as a negative experience of the “cripple” and “autistic.” This demonstrates Acker’s inability to imagine disability, either physical or cognitive, as anything but outside of *true* emotional and subjective expression.

Patriarchy, both at the local and systemic levels, produces an inability to experience identity in any positive, radical way. This inability is directly linked to cognitive disability. The lack of voice, and the social isolation it produces, is repeatedly connected to autism by Acker, as I suggested above when I mentioned Mark’s autistic mumbling. Not only is Mark “mumbling” but he also is isolated by “never hear[ing] me or anyone.” Beyond just the inability to speak, autism also represents a male refusal to *listen*. Autism *is* patriarchy, or at least a means through which it manifests in the
everyday relations between men and women. Acker seems to argue that isolation, viewed as a hegemonic positionality, silences alternatives, a symptom of systemic power rather than a form of political resistance (as it is considered in 1960s utopian politics and, in some aspects of “the kid,” by Dick himself). In other words, only certain people, who are already visible in discourses of power, can afford the refusal of speaking and listening. Thus, the socially connected organization man transforms into the isolated, individualistic neoliberal man, with autism functioning as a metaphor for how both produce, and are produced by, structures of power. From whatever point this science fictional imaginary emerges, autism seems to inevitably symbolize a dystopian future.26

At the end of the novel, Abhor looks towards a world of “human society” that is “beautiful” not just “disgust” (227). The reassertion here of “human society” by a cyborg, Abhor, is curious, linking to Jasbir Puar’s citation of Rey Chow within her critique of Haraway’s cyborg: “But a different critique suggests that intersectionality functions as a problematic reinvestment in the humanist subject” (55). Similarly, Martina Sciolino notes, in “Kathy Acker and the Postmodern Subject of Feminism,” that despite the

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26 This idea is taken up rather awkwardly in Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), where the main character, an autistic boy named Christopher, seems to fantasize about the nightmare world of the autistic dystopia, which he explicitly imagines through *Blade Runner*: “And when I was asleep I had one of my favorite dreams…And in the dream nearly everyone on the earth is dead, because they have caught a virus. But it’s not like a normal virus. It’s like a computer virus…But sometimes I have different versions of the dream, like when you can see two versions of a film, the ordinary one and the director’s cut, like Blade Runner…Eventually there is no one left in the world except people who don’t look at other people’s faces …and these people are all special like me…and then the dream is finished and I am happy” (198-200). In some ways, Christopher appropriates the autistic dystopia as an inherently utopian space, though the fantasies of human death and the complete dissolution of emotions are exactly Acker’s worst nightmare and, ultimately, merely reproduce the anxieties of the autistic dystopia for the reader.
postmodern move away from the humanist subject, Acker and some other Anglo-American feminists still relied on a liberatory politics in line with such a subject: “While art for Acker is resistant to dominant culture, seeking to emancipate the writer and the reader, such an existentialist perception of art often rests upon a humanist theory of subjectivity” (439). Acker’s humanism is humanist in a very particular way that is imagined through the metaphorical and strategic use of autism.\(^{27}\) *Empire of the Senseless* introduces a nightmare world of male unfeeling, control, and refusal to listen that meets the opposition of Abhor as a figure of radical difference. This is where, however, the conflation of autism and neoliberal regimes of control becomes important to understanding what erasure Acker’s radical politics necessitates and how, ultimately, Abhor may be gesturing towards a humanist future.

Dystopia for Acker is a political, pervasive state of cognitive or affective disability, one that is transitory, not permanent and natural. The potential to return to the human condition is ingrained within attempts to restore normative emotions and to find a voice; Acker repeatedly calls such emotions “love,” which she opposes to autism in every novel she mentions the disorder. Autism, as a lack of love, is not an identity or a non-normative form of embodiment; instead, it is the refusal of identity or the emotional

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\(^{27}\) Puar further states that “‘difference’ produces new subjects of inquiry that then infinitely multiply exclusion in order to promote inclusion” (55). The complicated aspect of Acker’s metaphor is that, by entangling white masculinity and autism so thoroughly (a repeated component of representations of autism more broadly), she ultimately excludes autism *itself*. Ironically, this politics *marks* both maleness and whiteness (as reflections of hegemony) and, therefore, gives these categories traction in the creation of an identity politics of the dominant. Usually diagnosed in white boys, autism locates difficulty in white families that they can erase using their (invisible) white and middle-class privilege. See Chapter Four more on this.
multiplicity which can reconstitute the central position of human experience and embodiment within a postmodernist politics. The idea that autism is a temporary malady suggests Robert McRuer’s discussion of the film *As Good as it Gets*, in which he argues that disability, heteronormativity, and neoliberalism intersect in ways that centralize a politics of overcoming: “According to the flexible logic of neoliberalism, all varieties of queerness—and, for that matter, all disabilities—are essentially temporary, appearing only when, and as long as, they are necessary” (29). That is, in McRuer’s reading of the film, Melvin ceases to have obsessive compulsive disorder (is ostensibly “cured”) when he is able to successfully perform heteronormative love.

In her anxieties about autism, Acker paradoxically arrives at a neoliberal approach to human identity and value. Indeed, there is an impulse in the novel that suggests that deconstructing the victimized man, through heterosexual love, will fix the system. This is evident with Thivai, Abhor’s continuous love interest. In one of the final scenes (which recreates *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*), Thivai gets Abhor imprisoned and then decides to rescue her, during which he says “I hated her guts because I loved her and I didn’t love anyone” (193). If male resistance to feelings signifies the violence she targets in her feminist critique, she predicates such a critique on an emotional ableism—in other words, the privileging of the human defined as an affective subject that rejects mechanical existence. What Acker offers, then, is a surprisingly reductive solution to “business as usual”: autism is a negative state of identity that can be extracted from the human condition through differing forms of love. “Human society,” as Acker’s vision of humanism suggests, will then emerge organically. What makes this gesture postmodern is
that love emerges as a multiplicity: it can be conflicting and expressed through pain while pleasure is not only located within white, male, heterosexual bodies. The problem here is that the inability to feel in the narrow political sense Acker imagines is circumscribed as pathology, as *crippled* and *autistic*. The binary between the pleasurable experience of the cyborg ad the victimized suffering of men reproduces, at its root, seeks to destroy autism while also maintaining structures of power.

Acker’s *Empire of the Senseless* updates Dick’s critique of the organization man, utilizing autism specifically as a metaphor for the structure of patriarchal capitalism at it emerges in the 1980s. Autism, for both authors, operates as an integral, sustaining component of oppressive social structures as much as they are symptoms of those structures. If the society of disgust *is* a society of autism (of cognitive and affective “dysfunction”), then we fail to acknowledge how the human as a category is central to neoliberal definitions of productivity. We should not only see this productivity as physical; it is also enmeshed deeply within concepts of the emotional. Knowing this allows us to recognize how emotional flexibility and notions of “love” against suffering often reduce, rather than enhance, our potential to find alternatives because neoliberalism’s very survival is so dependent on emotional appeals to who is and is not human, who does or does not have the emotional and physical capacity to further “human society.”

Kathy Acker extensively mentions autism in some of her novels as a metaphor for patriarchal capitalist systems. I have admittedly engaged with Acker in a restricted way that fails to showcase the full spectrum of her important political, social, and literary
interventions. I also hope that I never seemed to suggest that, if she were still alive, she would oppose people with cognitive or affective disabilities in any way. Instead, I wanted to shed some light on an entirely ignored aspect of Acker’s works to think about the limitations of some forms of disability and feminist politics in order to show how autism is associated with neoliberalism in ways that inadvertently reproduce humanist rhetoric and that construct autism as a dystopic subjectivity to the detriment of engaging directly with systems of capitalist oppression.

**Information Men: Autistic Dystopia into the Twenty-First Century**

Dick and Acker lived during a time when autism was still a rather protean, misunderstood diagnosis subject to stereotypes and lack of public awareness. They initiated, however, science fictional understandings of autism which have persisted, even in the twenty-first century, a time when autism has entered nearly universally into public consciousness in the United States and is transforming definitions of the “human.”

Regardless, anxieties about the dystopic inflection of autism are still central to political discourse. The autistic dystopia continues to have an important position as a structuring political concept. Indeed, awareness has itself to some degree stoked dystopic rhetoric, as is clear in the passage of the U.S. Combating Autism Act of 2006.28 The fact that autism diagnoses are increasing exponentially—to 1 in 110 children in 2006 and 1 in 68 in 2010

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28 The term “combat” in the title has itself has been a source of contention. The version of the bill reauthorized in 2014 was changed to the Autism CARES Act, or “Autism Collaboration, Accountability, Research, Education, and Support Act.” This bill also had specifically neoliberal goals. Senator Robert Menendez, for instance, noted, in reauthorizing the bill, that “we have to be vigilant and united in our support—to put a focus on transitioning youth and adult services—so that children with autism are able to fulfill their God-given potential and become successful, independent adults,”
(CDC) when earlier estimates, such as from the 1980s, suggested the disorder was very rare—was met with the desire to “assault” and “combat” what was termed a “national healthcare crisis” by the co-founder of Autism Speaks, Bob Wright. John Shestack, co-founder of Cure Autism Now, praised the fact that the CAA is a “federal declaration of war on the epidemic of autism.”

Borrowing Acker’s feminist critique of masculine affect as it connects with autism, Margaret Atwood updates the autistic dystopia in this twenty-first century climate in her MadAddam trilogy, consisting of the novels *Oryx and Crake* (2006), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *MadAddam* (2013). *Oryx and Crake*, including an autistic character (Crake), renders the intersection of autism with a high-tech, biopolitical dystopia, in which genetic engineering has run amok and multinational corporations rule the world. Looking at this situation from two perspectives, pre- and post-apocalypse, the trilogy offers an innovative perspective on the autistic dystopia while, at the same time, relying on past models to understand autism. In other words, the organization or neoliberal man as an autistic identity returns in *Oryx and Crake*, this time as a near conflation of the two. Atwood fears the collusion between violent masculinity and neoliberal capitalism.

The novel focuses on the destruction of humanity as we know it by Crake, a supergenius working for a biotechnology firm. He kills off most humans by including a virus in BlyssPluss, a pill he invents that is highly successful due to claims that it makes the user immortal. The narrative is told from the post-apocalyptic perspective of Snowman, a friend of Crake’s who unwittingly helps him destroy humanity. Snowman
lives among the Crakers, a new race of humanoids, immune to the virus and engineered by Crake. Attempting to create a perfect race, Crake designs the Crakers to be driven mostly by instinct, eliminating much of their emotional spectrum and turning their mating processes into a seasonal necessity, rather than an emotional undertaking (essentially recreating Dick’s android or Whyte’s organization man, whose duty is in reproducing his own subjugation to organization). At the same time, Crake is motivated by a desire to erase the negative violent and sexual aspects of society; to him, functioning as a stereotype of autism, emotions produce chaos. These goals are explained through personal descriptions of Crake which demonstrate his failure to see emotions as anything but delusions: “At HelthWyzer, Crake hadn’t been what you’d call sexuality active…Falling in love, although it resulted in altered body chemistry and was therefore real, was a hormonally induced delusional state, according to him” (226-227). To Crake, then, normative human emotions, like love, are themselves akin to mental illness, disabilities which make it difficult to function at your highest potential.

*The Year of the Flood* and *MadAddam* expand and complicate this narrative, giving more background information and introducing new characters. I want to put those slight complications aside momentarily, however, to emphasize an important aspect of *Oryx and Crake* which both resonates with the feminist constructions of autism analyzed in this chapter and looks forward to the type of neoliberal masculinity I will associate with autism in the rest of this dissertation. Crake functions, essentially, as the neoliberal mad scientist, reflecting many of the qualities of Alan Turing. Both attempt to recreate identity with the goal of intense rationality, in the form of the computer for Turing and
the Crakers for Crake, and both go rogue within the corporate structure without actually becoming critical of neoliberal goals. In other words, both have aspirations outside of the corporation, as individual entrepreneurs, but they exploit systems of exploitation to their advantage. For Atwood, technocratic governmentality, which prioritizes science over human emotions, is embodied by autism. Crake uses the neoliberal biotechnology dystopia to produce his virus and, by extension, the emotionally detached Crakers and the deteriorating world which Snowman and other survivors inhabit. To Crake, however, the post-apocalyptic world is a utopia, reducing human identity to a calculation and excising complicating emotional states.

His motivations, according to the novel, seem reduced to his autistic impulses, his inability to understand human behavior and, therefore, to feel justified in victimizing and killing many people to, essentially, rationalize violence. By killing millions of people, less violence will occur. Crake embodies the logic of governmentality associated with autism in the works of Dick and Acker, though Atwood more specifically focuses on the neoliberal entrepreneur. Crake is repeatedly coded as autistic in the novel while explicitly functioning as a violent marked man. A very clear image of how the novel conceptualizes autism is given when the students at “Asperger’s U,” the nickname for Crake’s school, are described: “Demi-autistic, genetically speaking: single-track tunnel-vision minds, a marked degree of social ineptitude” (228). Crake’s “social,” and emotional, “ineptitude” is associated with a proclivity for violence, which foreshadows the development of the BlyssPluss pills. Snowman comments about how he and Crake would watch executions and child pornography online as children: “[h]e didn’t seem to be affected by anything he
saw, one way or the other, except when he thought it was funny” (99). In other words, the type of autistically violent masculinity Crake embodies conforms easily to the rhythms of neoliberalism which supply more and more outrageous spectacles for those willing to pay. Crake represents Dick’s and Haraway’s fears of the androidification of human life; indeed, in *The Year of the Flood*, Ren calls him a cyborg, by which she seems to mean “autistic”—distant, logical, robotic—rather than the cyborg subject of Haraway. At the same time, what Snowman reads as not being affected is, for Crake, an incredibly cognitive process: noting the destructive nature of human emotions and sexuality, he imagines a world without such violence that, to him, can only happen without humans. He calculates a better outcome logically, with his internalized “rage” at human violence transforming into an autistic “disinterest” in human identity.

Like Acker, Atwood also seems to locate this sense of autism in the male condition more generally, tying this to a critique of digital technology’s ability to instantaneously transmit large amounts of violence to an ideal audience—young boys. Snowman and Crake are both problematic males with autistic traits (though Snowman’s “autism” is more performative), utilizing a sense of disability and victimization to their advantage. Both characters enjoy violent videos and child pornography as children. At one point, when Snowman is dating during college, he says something strikingly similar

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29 A major distinction between Crake and Snowman, however, is their career trajectory. Atwood’s trilogy is heavily skeptical of technocratic ways of seeing the world, associated closely with Crake. Snowman, on the other hand, receives a degree in the arts and seems more artistic and reflexive. In Snowman, perhaps, we see the performance of adolescent angst and victimization which, ultimately, dissolves; victimization and violence are, however, more inherent to Crake’s technocratic autism. This distinction is also relevant to the Craker society, which, though designed as autistic, begin creating mythology and art and, therefore, re-establishing the type of society privileged by Atwood.
to Abhor’s “I was dyslexic and autistic”: “I’m a lost cause….I’m emotionally dyslexic”” (223). Atwood’s description continues: “[h]e was an emotional landfill site.” Snowman appropriates the position of marked man, essentially performing as Crake, in order to attract women, a performance that makes him “potent” (223). The romantic failures of both Crake and Snowman translate into dysfunctional ways of relating to women, obvious especially in their obsession with Oryx. Originally seeing her (a young Asian girl) in porn, both constantly think of her to the point that Crake eventually tracks her down, hiring her as both his private courtesan and as a teacher for the Crakers.

Atwood’s way of constructing men, including one who is autistic, is similar to Ackers, with Crake and Snowman critiqued for their emotional dyslexia which results in the silencing of female voices. Atwood’s emphasis on violent video games (such as Extinctathon, a game that inspires Crake’s virus) and other media also plays into both conservative and feminist arguments, presenting digital culture as implicated in a causal relationship with violent boys while linking to research that does show how ingrained violent masculinities are in video game culture. It is, indeed, from video games where Crake learns many of his technocratic values and begin formulating his violent solution to human shortcomings. Oryx, however, resists the transformation into a lack of emotions represented by Acker and the nurturing role given to women by Dick: “Oryx had neither pity for him nor self-pity. She was not unfeeling: on the contrary. But she refused to feel what he wanted her to feel” (225). Oryx resists the technocratic, rationalized gaze, though from a place of disadvantage that lacks power (as opposed to the more privileged position of Crake). The outcome is that the patriarchal future looks bleak because of an affect that
is inherently gendered as masculine and autistic, a violence embedded in the performance of male self-pity and the drive for unmitigated scientific research which fails to take individuals into account.

Through the progression from Dick to Acker and then Atwood, autism operates as an important sociopolitical metaphor integrated into a dystopian patriarchy. In Crake, as I have noted, this metaphor most closely aligns with the technocratic values of twenty-first century neoliberalism. In “Of Monster and Man: Transgenics and Transgression in Margaret Atwood’s Oryx and Crake,” Chung-Hao Ku criticizes articles that centralize Crake’s autism, saying that they do not “take into account such exterior forces as capitalism and technocracy” (120). To me, autism is very clearly integrated into these concerns, with autism standing in for the affective state of technocracy. Ku makes the same mistake as other articles by erasing autism entirely from his discussion rather than pondering why autism appears culturally as a symbol of capitalism and, indeed, why Atwood felt it important to include a character coded as autistic within a feminist critique of rationalized views of human identity. While acknowledging that pathologizing Crake puts too much blame on him and the real problem is the “collusion between science and capitalism” (120), Ku conflates Crake and capitalism: “he is less a ‘mad scientist’ than a product of the capitalist machinery” (119). If we take into account the history of the relationship between android/cyborg theories and cognitive/affective difference, this notion of Crake as a “product” of capitalism suggests a contextually specific construction for which autism is an incredibly important concept. Even though Ku hints that Crake is using the tools of capitalism to undermine the system (mirroring Haraway’s cyborg), his
conclusion argues otherwise, indicating that Crake is in the end just a failed neoliberal capitalist: “the conspiracy between transgenics and capitalism engenders a monstrous form of homo faber [man, the tool-maker], who would sacrifice any life for scientific breakthroughs, commercial profits, or/and personal retaliation” (125).

Crake is similar to Turing, with autism being central to how the homo faber functions narratively as both a neoliberal subject and the white male as victim, victimizing others by looking towards a world in which he would not be subject to violence or misunderstandings. The man designated by Oryx and Crake as the parallel to autism is, in Ku’s estimation, not the organization man or Ronald Reagan but instead “scientists and techno-capitalists,” the neoliberal subject central to The Imitation Game: “If scientists and techno-capitalists can resist the lure of profits and always take others’ well-being into consideration, homo faber might still put biotechnology back on track” (125). This does not mean, however, that Atwood resists tying autism to this notion of the techno-capitalist, especially because she so clearly utilizes autism as a means of rendering the violent tendencies of masculinity. Taking others’ well-being into consideration would mean not being autistic. Crake, indeed, takes this logic much further, operating as a neoliberal entrepreneur in that he even undermines the organization, recreating the world in his own image.

Crake gestures to Atwood’s innovation in that he does ultimately create a radical future, one where he completely destroys a system based on the “lure of profits” and believes he is taking the well-being of others into account (even if selfishly) by erasing genetic “defects” like emotions from the genome of the Crakers. As The Year of the
*Flood* also reveals, Crake was involved with the God’s Gardeners, the eco group that is the main focus of this sequel. While remaining a mysterious figure, his connections to capitalism are much less clear. At one level coded as a sociopathic android, then, Crake also lays the foundation for a world outside of the drive for *human* profit; or at least, he is part of an important intervention that sees autism as not *only* dystopic, but also potentially part of a feminist and environmentalist coalition (though this possibility is completely erased in *Oryx and Crake* in favor of the threat of autism as outlined in most science fiction). This conclusion problematizes Ku’s own desire for a *homo faber* outside of the neoliberal framework; the idea that biotechnology can be “put...back on track” mirrors Acker’s idea of creating a “human society” without disgust, a reassertion of dominant frameworks (the human, biotechnology) that suggests a simple reformist solution, ignoring the structural, historical, and contextual factors which produced the ideologies behind these concepts and imbricated autism with violent, economy-oriented forms of masculinity. Both Acker and Ku suggest an emotional reformism, the idea that the system can replenish itself only if individual people are willing to “feel” more positively about others.

Atwood’s conclusions are more ambiguous, using autistic masculinity to imagine the state of techno-capitalism in the twenty-first century. Once Snowman is no longer the narrator, as is true of *The Year of the Flood*, some of the holes in *Oryx and Crake*’s male-oriented perspective are revealed, allowing for more direct (but brief) engagement with Snowman’s emotional dyslexia. What is interesting, though, is that this shift also sheds some positive light on Crake, disembedding him from the relatively stereotypical role as
the capitalist android he plays in the first novel. The reader gains more insight, through
the God’s Gardeners, into Crake’s reasoning and into broader utopic desires to dismantle
the neoliberal structures which construct human subjectivity as valuable or disposable
using narrow economic frameworks. Crake is a rare instance of imagining a new horizon
through a character with autism, rather than just showing how the disorder furthers
neoliberal ideologies (by suggesting that people with autism can overcome their disability
and join normative productivity) or ideologies with which I am usually much more
sympathetic, such as feminist ones (which associate autistic subjectivity with the
silencing of female voice).

While there are clearly still remnants of this idea, that the marked man is a
problematic and silencing perspective, in Oryx and Crake, Atwood also allows for an
imagining of the future in which cognitive and affective disability is integral to the
formulation of what may be “better.” What is generally called “mental illness” is often
still frighteningly “inert” if we think about normative forms of emotional and physical
productivity; no ramp can bridge the potential for a person with autism to feel pleasure in
radically deconstructive ways. What Crake shows us, however, is that this is unnecessary;
cointions can emerge without the need of some hegemonic formation of emotional
presence. We still, however, need to disentangle him from his role as symbol of
technocracy.

Conclusion: The End of the Subject?

This chapter has engaged with how autism entered into culture and evolved as a
trope in science fiction, specifically in its associations with gendered capitalist subjects
evoking the anxieties of their eras. Atwood’s take on the autistic dystopia, and the man with autism’s role in laying the groundwork for such a system, to some degree begins the process of extricating autism wholly from the model of the organization man or cyborg. There seems to be a question of why we should feel anxiety about the theoretical, abstract possibilities of the “destruction of the human world.” Crake’s view that humans are destructive and driven by questionable motives is admirable, even if, at the same time, we should be skeptical of the way Atwood constructs a sense of collusion between technocratic violence and autism. The question of how valuable “human” subjectivity remains is taken up in Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry’s response to Haraway’s cyborg, “A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism.” While it is certainly not my intention to equate people with autism and zombies, Lauro and Embry’s work helps me expand critical analysis of affective and cognitive “disorder” to see people with such disabilities as internal to a radical politics invested in eliminating neoliberal capitalism. Indeed, their conception of the zombie has many of the attributes I have already attributed to cultural representations of autism: “the zombie can also be a metaphoric state claimed for oneself or imposed on someone else. This zombie has been made to stand for capitalist drone (Dawn of the Dead) and Communist sympathizer (Invasion of the Body Snatchers)” (87).

I have centralized the “capitalist drone” in these first chapters, where whether the autistic is organization man, neoliberal man, or homo faber, he is represented as an economically functional identity erasing the human. In other words, this understanding of the zombie goes further than the cyborg by giving space for autism and thinking about
the biases evident within cyborg humanism’s emotional productivity. When Lauro and Embry mention disability, they quickly hone into cognitive difference: “The mentally ill historically have been portrayed as having a consciousness that is morally suspect or a total lack of subjectivity” (103). They argue that this supposed lack of subjectivity (which mirrors Acker’s autism as “suicide,” a physical presence that lacks the components that make up humanity) was, during the Holocaust, a “justification for...the extermination [of the mentally ill].” Abhor’s assertion that autism must be cured in order to find a human society without disgust encroaches uncomfortably close to this idea.

Noting that zombies have become ubiquitous as a metaphor, Lauro and Embry set out to document their theoretical value. They claim that zombies suggest “what lies in store for humanity after global capitalism” (86), a project similar to Acker and Haraway that differs in the centrality of cognitive and affective ability. When Lauro and Embry say that they “[u]nlike Donna Haraway...do not propose that the position of the zombie is a liberating one” (87), they are appealing to disability critiques of the cyborg (as an enabling form of embodiment), while also positing this through a metaphor, the zombie, which emphasizes mental, rather than physical, disorder. The desire to either liberate the man, as in Dick, or decenter his hegemony, as in Haraway, Acker, and Atwood, becomes incredibly complicated when issues of autism as an affective, gendered form of experience emerge. Aligned with my own argument that the cyborg is inherently humanist in its orientation, they state that “the cyborg does not really undo the subject position as much as it just cloaks it in high-tech window dressing” (94). The zombie gets us beyond this subject position by suggesting the dissolution of the human both
physically and cognitively: “The vulnerability of the flesh and the instinctual fear of its decay, as well as the dissolution of consciousness—all things that happen as we approach death—are suggested in the monstrous hyperbolic of the zombie as living corpse” (101). The existence of the zombie, they note, is in popular culture generally associated with the brain. Therefore,

[t]o successfully undo the position of the liberal humanist subject, which has been tainted by an inhumane history shaped by power relations that were perhaps suggested by the opposition of subject and object, one must forfeit the already illusory sense of the individual (95).

They associate this forfeiture with two ideas important to this dissertation. First, they discuss “anticatharsis,” the refusal of the emotional explosion which stabilizes an optimistic sense of the world (whether fluid, in Haraway’s sense of pleasure, or wholly oppositional, in Dick’s critique of the android’s lack of feeling). This anticatharsis will be significant for the following chapters, where catharsis around the overcoming of the male autistic, into emotionality and productivity, signifies the triumph of neoliberal man. In other words, there is a cultural impulse, that comes along with the marked man, to liberate men from psychoanalytic and medical viewpoints. Instead, men are encouraged to celebrate, rather than repress, male dysfunction as a natural form of identity attached very closely to neoliberal ideology. Second, Lauro and Embry clearly position the zombie as a capitalist figure, doing this by beginning with the colonial Haitian origin of the zombi. Asserting that the zombi was originally imagined as an enslaved spirit (97-98), Lauro and Embry trace this idea to the capitalist present:

The zombie has thus transitioned from a representation of the laboring, enslaved colonial body, to a dual image of capitalist enslavement: the zombie now represents the new slave, the capitalist worker, but also the
consumer, trapped within the ideological construct that assures the survival of the system. (99)

This is exactly where Acker’s discussion of autism ends: a lack of emotional productivity assures the survival of a system of neoliberal capitalism.

In arguing this, however, Acker emphasizes individual consciousness, associated with the human, in a way that presumes the necessity to shed cognitive and affective disability. Indeed, when Haraway herself echoes Dick by saying that “we ourselves [are] frighteningly inert,” we can view the suggestion here as resonating with emotional inertia, not physical rootedness (as machines do a lot of moving, but not much feeling). In other words, a very human capacity to affectively resist is required in both imaginings of the techno-body. This capacity, variantly labeled “pleasure” and the ability to “feel,” suggests that the anti-government, socialist-feminist horizon is populated by people with affective identities conducive to oppositional protest, that do not embody the values of neoliberal rationalities. It, therefore, positions the boundaries of utopia along the lines of cognitive and affective ability.

Lauro and Embry directly render this dichotomy: “Humanity defines itself by its individual consciousness and its personal agency: to be a body without a mind is to be subhuman, animal; to be a human without agency is to be a prisoner, a slave” (90). The expulsion of a need for pleasurable liberation, then, allows Lauro and Embry to posit the slave/slave rebellion dichotomy inherent to the zombie, deconstructing the affective and cognitive assumptions in cyborg theory to look beyond cyborg humanism: “Capitalism depends on our sense of ourselves as having individual consciousnesses to prohibit the development of a revolutionary collective and to bolster the attitude that drives it: every
man for himself” (106). Every “man” for himself is an explicit goal of Dick’s novels, whereas Acker extends this to every “woman for herself” in the sight against patriarchal governmentality. Indeed, even Whyte admits that individualism is still central to the organization man because he needs an illusion that he has an impact on the maintenance of society. In Atwood, the “self” created through corporate technocracy but individuated as an entrepreneur becomes an explicit problem, only to be solved by the collectivity which emerges in her later novels.

This chapter has been concerned with how autism has operated as a metaphor, from the 1960s to the present, of what capitalism is and what it might become. A recurring means of exploring this metaphor is the dysfunctional white man. This subject takes a new significance through Lauro and Embry’s idea of the zombie as a capitalist worker in the context of the identity politics of the white working class in the twenty-first century. The white male as victim, as an articulation of capitalist subjectivity, has gained a new prominence as autism has itself become more integrated into questions about the future. Rather than completely ignoring, pathologizing, and institutionalizing cognitive and affective disabilities, the question that has increasingly become central is how autistics could be made to function in a neoliberal world and how they should navigate their dependence to perform as entrepreneurs of the self. The rest of this dissertation follows this thread, looking at the development of autism as a neoliberal trope wrapped up within the concept of “crisis,” or, specifically, how economic crisis, a crisis in masculinity, and family crisis are rendered as intersecting problems.
As the first fictional means of understanding autism, the tropes created by science fiction have remained central to these later formulations, even if their politics are, on the surface, radically different. The most lasting image has been that of the autistic male as both victim and victimizer, as both a horrific nightmare of control and a possible site of utopian liberation. The following chapters will focus on these narratives primarily in the period following the 2008 Recession, showing how autism has, paradoxically, been used to shore up the boundaries of the neoliberal subject. To do so, the next chapter will more specifically define “neoliberal masculinity” as the subjective state of the marked man, a form of masculinity at the tensions Dick recognized between being an active subject and a passive object. Neoliberal masculinity, however, does not disavow this tension; it actively seeks it.
Chapter Three

The Neoliberal Lottery:

Probability, Masculinity, and Recessionary Affects in Elliot Rodger’s *My Twisted World*

“The ratio is always the same,” states a voiceover from what sounds like a young boy.

1 to 1.618 over and over and over again. The patterns are hidden in plain sight. You just have to know where to look. Things most people see as chaos actually follow subtle laws of behavior... These patterns never lie. But only some of us can see how the pieces fit together. 7,080,360,000 of us live on this tiny planet. This is the story of some of those people. There’s an ancient Chinese myth about the Red Thread of Fate. It says that the gods have tied a red thread around every one of our ankles and attached it to all the people whose lives we’re destined to touch… It’s all been predetermined by mathematical probability, and it’s my job to keep track of those numbers, to make the connections for those who need to find each other. The ones whose lives need to touch.

As these words are spoken, images of people, planets, and galaxies give way one to another. Lines appear over and between people going about their days, representing the invisible connections, the force of “probability,” ruling their lives. This introduction begins the story of eleven-year-old Jake Bohm in the television series *Touch*, which ran for two seasons from 2012 to 2013.30 Every episode begins with a similar declaration of probability and mathematics: in episode two he declares the numbers of emails and words spoken in a day, “all adding to the giant mosaic of patterns and ratios. Mathematical in design, these patterns are hidden in plain sight”; episode seven begins with an awkward close up shot of a craps table as Jake says “Numbers are constant. Until they’re not”; and episode nine begins with Jake discussing the chromatic scale and “the mathematical

30 This chapter does not focus heavily on television representations of autism, so for more specifically on the unique attributes of this medium, see Chapter Four.
ratios between tones.” The irony of these introductory sequences is that, for most of the series, Jake is not actually able to talk: he is mute due to his autism.

This chapter focuses on the role of “mathematical probability” as a structuring concept for neoliberal capitalism in the twenty-first century, discussing how the period following the beginning of the 2008 Recession instituted a specific formulation of the male victim and neoliberal subjectivity. In this, the chapter is also about the psychological violence of neoliberalism and how such violence has made autism visible as the modern “pathology.” Under neoliberalism, a renewed vision of the invisible logic of the economy emerges in response to economic manipulation, resignifying masculinity as a pursuit of subjection to probability that requires self-financialization. The economic manipulator is vilified, and sometimes feminized, in this period while the new hero functions as a believer in numbers and economic destiny. Men with autism, because they are represented as having attributes and goals in line with an extreme laissez faire understanding of personal identity, repeatedly symbolize this transition to a post-Recession world, as I will demonstrate in relation to the television series Parenthood in Chapter Four and in brief remarks about the film Adam at the end of Chapter Five. Such representations become more prominent in the “post-Recession” period because of the lesson of the Recession, as produced through neoliberal ideologies: the Recession did not show that economic rationality is in need of serious critical examination; instead, it critiques the manipulation of the economy through the risky speculation of private financial institutions. Control has been lost to emotional actors. The solution, then, is to renew neoliberalism by submitting even more fully to market logics. This chapter more
broadly discusses the affective assumptions of neoliberal subjectivity after the Recession, arguing that such affects are often directly labeled “autistic” or internalize a specific iteration of the white male as victim that intersects with emotions generally subsumed under autism.

*Touch* renders these shifts in masculinity and relationships to probability very clearly. As much as *Touch* is about Jake, it is also primarily about his father, Martin Bohm (played by Kiefer Sutherland), as he tries to maintain custody of Jake. Martin’s sister-in-law, Abigail, and the director of an institution, Sheri, continuously attempt to prove that Martin is an unfit father. Martin’s wife died ten years earlier, a victim of the September 11th terrorist attacks. Martin and Jake are, then, the victims of both enterprising women (Martin is an everyman baggage handler and ex-journalist while Abigail, an executive, and Sheri are both in positions of power) and terrorism from the Middle East, quintessential white male victims who cannot establish a normal family because of intrusion from racialized and gendered threats. While the first season focuses on Martin’s custody struggles, the second evolves into a corporate thriller, with Martin and Jake attempting to evade Aster Corps, a company determined to kidnap Jake, fake his death, and use his mathematical abilities for profit. Abigail, though she eventually becomes a sympathetic character, is an executive of Aster Corps and Sheri directly colludes with the company.

Jake uses his abilities to understand important numerical sequences to communicate with his father so that they can intervene positively in the affairs of other people, who are often on the other side of the globe. An ex-psychiatrist, Arthur Teller,
claims that Jake is using a specific numerical sequence to predict the future while a rabbi, Avram, suggests that Jake is, essentially, part of religious prophecy. The autistic boy, then, becomes both victim and savior, dependent and disabled as well as full of mystical agency. He is a savior when interacting with invisible numerical logics; a victim when pursued by Aster Corps, which desires to commandeer Jake’s abilities so that they can manipulate what should, according to neoliberalism, be a truly free market. Through this narrative, the series implicitly naturalizes the “invisible hand” of the market and associates that hand with autism.

If Jake represents neoliberal masculinity, Martin increasingly represents an antiquated model of manhood. Martin must deal with attacks on his fatherhood throughout the series, appropriating the role of Jake’s masculine protector. The irony is that, even later into the series, when it is clear Jake knows exactly what he is doing and predicts the future, Martin is still constantly trying to control him by telling him to not run away or questioning his actions. Performing constantly as action hero victim (Keifer Sutherland’s usual role), Martin gets in fights in many episodes, is nearly killed multiples times, and constantly tries to rationalize his way out of situations. Martin’s rationality, however, can only go so far in a world, as Jake suggests, ruled by probability, symmetry, and patterns. He must constantly submit to irrationality, to accept Jake’s numbers even as they get him into trouble, such as late in season one when he becomes implicated in a shipping container heist or the repeated way he brings scrutiny from various governing systems upon himself (including Child Protective Services, the board and care facility to which Jake is admitted, and Aster Corps).
These government and corporate interests, because they are controlled by human actors, are intrusive and dangerous, suggesting the neoliberal distinction between governmentality and government, with the former clearly privileged in the series through Jake’s numerical system, one that is benevolent and lacks personal biases. The link between this system of numbers and the probability-driven outcomes of gambling are foregrounded in the series, especially the first few episodes. One character, Randall, has won the lottery using a sequence of numbers derived from his guilt about abandoning a woman he was trying to save from the Twin Towers on 9/11. The numbers also happen to be part of the Amelia Sequence, and the woman happens to be Martin’s wife. Randall appears a few other times in the season as he attempts to figure out how he can most righteously spend the lottery winnings; he eventually helps fix a church before, at the end of the season, following his numbers to find Martin and Jake, learning who they are and giving them his car so they can escape the state (and Aster Corps). In the first episode of the series, Jake steals the lottery ticket from Randall and, a little later, a scene shows Randall sitting amongst the hundreds of lottery tickets he bought with the same numbers, positioning him as an irrational subject of a highly rationalized numerical system.

Probability and numbers are important in multiple texts with autistic characters, as has been shown in Chapter One with The Imitation Game’s vision of masculine rationality. Gambling more specifically has a central position in the narrative of Rain Man, with Charlie Babbitt using his low-functioning autistic brother, Raymond, as a card counter.\(^31\)

\(^{31}\) Gambling also plays a relatively important role in a lesser-known film focusing on an autistic character, White Frog (2012). In this film, a wealthy teenager, Randy, hosts gambling sessions at his house, often purposely allowing an economically disadvantaged
This chapter discusses the neoliberal formulation of the “rational” and the “irrational” evident in these representations of autism and probability in order to define “neoliberal masculinity.” The gender politics of *Touch*, with threatening women and disadvantaged men attempting to reclaim relevance in a post-9/11, recessionary world—by using luck, chance, and invisible rationalities—is central to definitions of masculinity that intersect with the image of the marked autistic boy. Martin and Jake are independent, anti-corporate and anti-governmental agents, victims of manipulation and control that, simultaneously, reduce the world to numerical logics and, therefore, further neoliberal goals. This example points to a paradox of neoliberalism: that subjectivity is expressed as masculine independence, agency, and rationality while at the same time as irrational submission to the invisible logics of *economic* agency and rationality. If for Philip K. Dick autism was synonymous with government control, under neoliberalism emotions and behaviors associated with autism more directly link to goals of obsessive independence and rationalism. Aster Corps is a villain, by neoliberal standards, because it uses human interest to manipulate and control. The proper neoliberal subject, on the other hand, must submit.

friend to win. The autistic character, Nick, nearly calls him out, confused as to why Randy would wrongfully subvert the rules of the system. Nick insists “you broke the rules,” and Randy responds: “Are you going to tell everyone? How would that make Doug feel?...Since when are the rules to a stupid game more important than your friends feelings? It’s never just about the cards or the money.” Nick, then, represents full submission to a rational system and rejects any intervention (which here is rendered as welfarism), a trait that the film suggests is directly related to his Asperger’s.

32 As noted in the previous chapter, diagnoses of autism are themselves often rendered as a frightening probability to which we must submit or against which we must “fight.” The shift from 1 in 2000 children having autism in the 1980s to 1 in 141 or even 1 in 64, as recent studies have shown, presents autism as an increasing probability, evoking both a warrior resistance (such as the warrior mothers presented in the next chapter) or a resignation to a dystopian future.
hand, accepts the natural rather than human elements of the economy, such as Randall submitting irrationally to the same numbers, week by week, until they finally pay off for him.

The intersections between masculinity and autism as they relate to this neoliberal subject are clear by reading between the lines of one of the most comprehensive psychological theories of autism and gender, Simon Baron-Cohen’s theories of “the male brain.” His argument about autism, developed in *The Essential Difference: Male And Female Brains And The Truth About Autism*, is that what he calls the “male brain” is less wired for empathy, and more for systemizing, than the “female brain.” There are many important implications of this rather simple idea. First, it constructs autism as an extreme form of masculinity. Second, it links masculinity and autism together through a concept, systemizing, embedded in the notion of seeing the world in terms of systems, taking the human element (empathy) away from personal relationships and reducing the world to overarching logics, as does Jake in *Touch*. This is also similar to the cold eye of neoliberalism, using economic analysis to understand non-economic objects. Third, it naturalizes such cold distance as simply an expression of the “male brain” and, therefore, uses the autism spectrum as a way of concealing the social consequences and manifestations of gender domination. Men construct systems, whereas women feel. Fourth, the “fact” that men are less able to feel empathy (on average) suggests that men naturally tend toward violence, whether they are autistic or not. Independent male action, and violence, counters the manipulation by and affective logics of women and governmental structures in *Touch*. While Baron-Cohen refutes the idea that people with
autism are more violent, his theory contradicts his assurances. Indeed, he says as much when he defines empathy: “Empathy also stops you inflicting physical pain on a person or animal” (23). A similar idea is repeated when he states that “males tend to show far more direct aggression” (35). This comes right before the most striking connection made between violence and the “male brain”: Baron-Cohen suggests the fact that men murder more than women can be explained by this difference in empathy (35-36).

The rest of this chapter analyzes the violence of systemizing as it is ascribed to autism and affects that are defined as autistic. I suggest that Baron-Cohen’s definition of the “male” is neoliberal in its reliance on an individualistic sense of identity divorced from the collective possibilities of empathy. The desire to systemize runs parallel, however, to a fear of being systemized. Thus, autism, as defined by Baron-Cohen, reifies the possibility of neoliberal masculinity. To define neoliberal masculinity in a way that will be relevant to the post-Recession representations of autism discussed in Chapters Four and Five, this chapter analyzes the autobiography of Elliot Rodger, the 2014 rampage shooter who killed multiple people in Isla Vista, California, as a case study. Indeed, the possibility that Rodger was autistic has circulated in the media. My focus will be, however, how Rodger’s narrative reflects the broader relationships to probability and gambling central to neoliberal masculinity.

Whereas Baron-Cohen might see Rodger’s act of violence as existing on a scale of empathy and systemizing, which he argues are inherently “wired” into particular

33 In War on Autism: On the Cultural Logic of Normative Violence, Anne McGuire argues that violence, both metaphorical and physical, against people with ASD is a much larger problem.
genders, I read Rodger as an artifact of neoliberal values. These values led him to an obsession with the idea that the lottery could save him from his inability to become wealthy and attract women. He is a real manifestation (albeit as he narrativizes himself in his autobiography and how the news media have narrativized him) of the performances of neoliberal masculinity and the white male as victim. The desire to associate him with autism emphasizes how central autism is to a systemizing, violent vision of masculinity, even as television representations, as I will show in the next chapter, attempt to assuage such anxieties. The next section gives some background on Rodger and his mental illness in the frame of neoliberal theory. The subsequent sections will use Rodger’s autobiography to define “neoliberal subjectivity” and “neoliberal masculinity” as they emerge in U.S. culture following the Great Recession.

Elliot Rodger: Defining Neoliberal Masculinity

On May 23, 2014, Elliot Rodger stabbed his two roommates and their friend to death in his Isla Vista apartment near the University of California, Santa Barbara. After this brutal attack, the 23-year-old went to Starbucks, where he bought a coffee, before returning to his apartment’s parking lot. He sat in his car, where he uploaded a video to YouTube and emailed his autobiography (My Twisted World) to his parents and others using his laptop. He then drove to the Alpha Phi sorority house. When no one responded to his knocks on the door, he began shooting people nearby. He killed two members of the Delta Delta Delta sorority and wounded a third. For the next ten to fifteen minutes, Rodger drove around Isla Vista, shooting at random people and hitting others with his
car, killing one more person and wounding fourteen. Eventually, as police closed in on him, he committed suicide.

Rodger, the son of a British filmmaker and a Malaysian film assistant, was born in London in 1991 but primarily lived in wealthy Los Angeles suburbs after moving to Southern California when he was five. When his parents divorced in 1999 he began splitting his time between their houses, though he did not get along well with his father’s eventual second wife. He attended therapy sessions for much of his life due to depression and problems with anger and was reportedly prescribed anti-psychotic medication (used to treat schizophrenia and bipolar disorder), which he refused to take. His mother, in her divorce papers, claimed that “Elliot has special needs; he is a high functioning autistic child,” though he never seems to actually have been diagnosed with ASD (Duke). On the Internet, much has been made about whether or not he was on the spectrum, or whether or not it even matters.34

The term autism appears in the Santa Barbara County Sheriff Office’s “Investigative Report” of Rodger’s crimes five times as opposed to only twice in the

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34 Most attention to Rodger and autism has, of course, come from gossip sites and other less reputable news organizations, such as the Daily Mail. Autism awareness websites responded by having their own discussions, with some arguing and commenting that, indeed, Asperger’s leads to defiance and violence. For example, on the liberal website DailyKos, a man, “DaddyO,” who claims to have a daughter with autism made a pro-gun reform argument by stating that “if Elliot Rodger suffered from autism, then he was too sick to have been allowed to own firearms” (emphasis mine). He goes on to call people with mental illness people who are “mentally deficient” and suggests that cognitive disability is visibly legible: “Rodger was diagnosed or observed to be a person with autism.” He also directly states that Rodger’s autism “led to this murder spree” and actually explains Rodger’s misogyny by claiming that he wasn’t a “woman-hater.” Instead, he was just trapped in his autistic inability to speak. This commentary points to a major theme in the next two chapters, the use of autism to depathologize masculinity.
much longer “Report of the Review Panel” about the Virginia Tech shooting.\textsuperscript{35} The report on Rodger is, though, contradictory. It claims that, at an early age, Rodger “was believed to display characteristics of high functioning autism or Asperger’s syndrome” (Brown 52) and that “in 2007 [he] became eligible for services based on a diagnosis of autism” (53). A footnote states, however, that he was evaluated for autism and did not score within the proper range for a diagnosis (54).\textsuperscript{36} The connections made between

\textsuperscript{35} For purposes of comparison, the report on Adam Lanza, the shooter who killed 28 people (primarily young children) at Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012, mentions autism three times in the actual narrative report and another seven times when describing some of the people, experts on autism and advocates for families with autistic children, who testified in front of the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission. Lanza was actually diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome when he was 13 (he was 20 at the time of the shooting), although even this is disputed. The Advisory Commission takes his diagnosis as fact, though it also notes that “[r]esearchers to date have not found any correlation between the presence of an Autism Spectrum Disorder alone and an increased risk for criminal violence” (Sedensky 168). Though James Holmes, the Aurora, Colorado movie theater shooter, self-diagnosed himself as autistic (along with a number of other conditions) in a manifesto, the term “autism” is never used in the report on his murders. The possibility that Cho was autistic was even more central to media coverage of his personality than Rodger’s, with multiple people, including distant family members, explaining his behaviors by claiming he had autism. The report on Cho seems, however, to rule out autism.

\textsuperscript{36} Very few reputable secondary sources exist about Rodger’s violence. Douglas Kellner has, however, written about Cho in \textit{Guys and Guns Amok}. Near the beginning of the book, in a literature review section, he notes that the book \textit{The Shooting Game} claims that one cause of shootings may be cognitive, with shooters having impaired “mirror-neurons” and “mind-blindness” (25), often a synonym for autism. Later, Kellner forwards the possibility that Cho did have autism, but argues that “medical explanations for individual violence cover over the social problems that school shootings and societal violence call attention to” (48). One question becomes why media coverage of school shootings invokes autism so often, whereas coverage of, for example, gang violence or domestic violence often assumes innate or irrational criminality. A simple explanation of this distinction is socioeconomic and racial: school shootings often occur within middle-class, white suburbs and are perpetrated by middle-class, white young men. This demographic adds an element of surprise, where the line “I didn’t think it could happen here” suggests a sense of safety divorced from the violence of urban areas.
Rodger and autism are important rhetorically because they affect the meaning-making process: the idea that people with autism are violent is transforming into a cultural mythology that explains acts that are generally understood as senseless. The combination of a troubled family life and mental illness is an established narrative within understandings of rampage shootings. Autism, however, functions as a contemporary means of exploring the psyche of rampage shooters, one that carries its own set of assumptions tied to, for instance, the perceived narcissism of digital culture.

Rodger’s YouTube videos and autobiography, *My Twisted World*, a rambling 137-page documentation of his life and personal feelings, have offered ways to explain Rodger’s actions that fit many of the established theories about rampage shootings and that seem to support theories about the current state of U.S. culture. Karen Tonso states that rampage shootings primarily emerge from “the harm done by ideologies of masculine supremacy” (1268). Lamenting the fact that he cannot understand why women do not like him, Rodger rants about the evils of women and his fears that he will not be able to reproduce. As he questions his masculinity, often commenting on the small size of his body, he redirects his anxiety by slipping into racism, not understanding why white women would like “an inferior Mexican guy” (87) or “ugly Asian” guy (121). Though Rodger was half-white and half-Malaysian, he claimed whiteness as a means of identifying with privilege and sexual superiority, though, performing as the white male

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37 For more on the social causes of school shootings, see Katherine Newman’s *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings.*
victim, he believed these privileges were threatened. In his final video on YouTube, “Retribution,” Rodger directly lays out his justifications for the shooting:

For the last eight years of my life, ever since I hit puberty, I've been forced to endure an existence of loneliness, rejection and unfulfilled desires all because girls have never been attracted to me. Girls gave their affection, and sex and love to other men but never to me.

Understandings of Rodger’s violence do not, then, merely emphasize autism or mental illness more generally; they tie these to contemporary gender politics, a sense of distant, rational entitlement. His violence, the dominant narrative goes, was prompted by unfulfilled sexual desires interacting with psychosis.

Whether Rodger was autistic is not important to this chapter because I do not accept the idea that such a diagnosis would explain his violence, an argument that could be extrapolated from Baron-Cohen’s theories of autism. Instead, I want to point out how Rodger, as he narrativizes his identity in his autobiography, operates as a marked man, performing his own sense of disability which is clearly both social and affective in nature. I evaluate him as a metaphor for neoliberal masculinity, attached as it is to an economic rationality. This chapter offers a new interpretation of Rodger through a focus on how his sense of masculinity intersected with an ignored aspect of his autobiography: his obsession with the lottery. I assert that contemporary masculinity should be viewed in the frame of both larger economic contexts and individual economic desires. This economic interpretation of masculinity sheds light on rampage violence beyond explanations of gender domination, showing instead how the lottery functions within fantasies of reclaiming a “rightful” social position and fantasies of economic fitness embedded in the volatile relationship between wealth and masculinity. At the same time,
these desires are distant, rational, and based on numbers. Throughout *My Twisted World*, Rodger expresses a deep affective attachment to the lottery in terms of the “hope” it brings him: “I began to feel hopeless,” he writes, “until I saw the current jackpot for the Megamillions Lottery” (104). He spent hundreds of dollars on lottery tickets because he “saw winning the lottery as the only way out” (111) of both his suffering and his plan to murder that developed over a period of years.

Rodger has inadvertently exposed the assumptions of subjectivity within the post-2008 Recession landscape when the risky “gambling” of speculative transactions became one of the most visible aspects of the modern economy, fearing, and trying to capitalize, from neoliberalism as defined by Michel Foucault, a system that institutes “economic analysis of the non-economic” (243). Gambling and neoliberalism both rely on a rational, probabilistic system while simultaneously relying on a subject’s irrational willingness to give up their identity to that same system—to, as it were, see *themselves* as wholly economic objects. Foucault posits that American neoliberalism is “cold, impassive, calculating, rational, and mechanical in the strictly economic game of competition” (242) and is “made up of enterprise-units” (225). In other words, neoliberalism institutes a situation where individuals must see themselves as both objects of economic calculations and as entrepreneurs, as both active and passive in the face of the cold machinery of the economy. This is the tension Rodger embodies. Caught between calculating women as sexual objects and living within anxieties that he himself is a feminized object subject to the whims of (neoliberal) fate, Rodger defines neoliberal masculinity as a form of gambling on probabilities.
The anxiety that individuals are passive objects of economic analysis in need of social restoration coincides with Savran’s “white male as victim.” Especially relevant to Rodger is Savran’s argument that “modern white masculinities are deeply contradictory, eroticizing submission and victimization while trying to retain a certain aggressively virile edge, offering subjects positions that have been marked historically as being both masculine and feminine, white and black” (9). In “School Shootings, Crises of Masculinities, and the Reconstruction of Education: Some Critical Perspectives,” Douglas Kellner notes that “[c]rises in masculinities are grounded in deteriorating socio-economic possibilities for men and are aggravated by the current economic crisis in global capitalism” (498). Tonso, also theorizing the reason for rampage shootings, states that the trope of the “‘school shooter’ encoded ways to react in situations where some young men felt unfairly subordinated in society; shooters used deadly violence to assert and reclaim the ‘rightful’ places they felt denied” (1266). In other words, economic changes over the last few decades have created a situation where men struggle to remain aggressive and masculine while viewing themselves as disadvantaged and victimized by uncontrollable economic forces, a situation requiring novel strategies to experience masculinity. Constructions of masculinity, then, are deeply imbricated with and expressed through shifts in economic structure; neoliberalism, I will argue, produces a historically particular form of victimization embedded deeply within masculine identification that has been constructed as autistic.

Rodger’s desire to win the lottery was not only fueled by a desire for wealth, but also by a desire to reclaim the privileges of masculinity by seeing *himself* as a wholly
economic and numerical object. He appropriated the rhetoric of neoliberalism as a means of valuing his own identity, utilizing gambling to ensure his survival at a time when previously hegemonic categories failed to offer power. In this way, Rodger’s case mirrors Franco Berardi’s interpretation of the Columbine shooters:

[Eric] Harris and [Dylan] Klebold’s psychology could be synthetically described as a suicidal form of the Neoliberal will to win. In the wake of the Neoliberal proclamation of the end of class struggle, the only categories remaining are winner and loser. …The mass murderer is someone who believes in the right of the fittest and strongest to win in the social game, but he also knows or senses he is not the fittest nor strongest. So he opts for the only possible act of retaliation and self-assertion: to kill and be killed. (51-52)

Berardi notes how, for rampage shooters, self-assertion through murder is fitness through other means. Rodger tied his own desire to be a winner to a strong sense that the lottery was the “only way out,” an out that, failing to materialize, devolved into violence. Being a winner is, in other words, a matter of chance, and when Rodger felt it was no longer possible for him to win a jackpot, he transferred his aspirations from gambling to a murderous rampage.

The Numerical Rationalities of Recessionary Masculinity

Elliot Rodger illuminates the distinction between neoliberal governmentality, defined as calculating and rational, and the neoliberal subject, which exists as a calculation within such a system. This section defines the neoliberal subject, and Rodger’s experience of that subjectivity, as one integrally connected to economic rationality before, in the next section, offering a theory of what masculinity looks like under the speculative and economic gaze of neoliberalism. If, as Martijn Konings argues, “[t]he discursive force of neoliberalism was anchored in the emotional needs of the social
self as it had evolved by the 1970s” (91), then the two—the system, construed through discourse, and the subject—are not the same. In other words, the social self under neoliberalism needs a rational, calculating system but is not necessarily a rational subject. This self instead believes in rationality as a structuring logic. Probability and numerical rationality enter here, I argue, as mediators between a subject able to rationalize and calculate who simultaneously submits to the rules of the game, essentially becoming an economic object.

Rodger first encountered lottery tickets when he was 18 at a supermarket. After his mother explained how the tickets worked, he became thrilled at the prospect of becoming rich; he notes in My Twisted World that he “didn’t know anything about the Lottery” but that he understood that “each ticket provides a very small chance of winning millions of dollars” (61). Submitting himself emotionally to the possibility of this “very small chance,” Rodger saw “hope” for the first time: “that ticket, of course, didn’t win. And neither would any of the tickets I buy [sic] after it, but they would give me hope” (61). For Rodger, winning the lottery promised to resolve a sense of powerlessness in a nightmare world where economic and gender privilege failed to signify what they used to—unmitigated access to power. He attempted to “will” the universe to make him a lottery winner, wanting to believe he has the “POWER to do it” (79). Power, in this sense, is natural, threatened only by human manipulation. He reduces natural selection entirely to an economic process:

Because girls are repulsed by me, I was never going to have children and pass on my genes. The only way that I could have been worthy enough to beautiful girls is if I become wealthy at a young age, and the faith I had in that happened [sic] had just been crushed. (109)
Valuing himself in the harsh terms of “worth,” the journey Rodger documents in *My Twisted World* involves gaining, and losing, “faith” in the desire to see himself as an economic object, a desire which he lives through lottery tickets. He seeks power and biological fitness in terms only satisfied by immense wealth, especially tied to the fantasy of instantaneous pleasure he associates with the lottery. For Rodger, gambling offered a fantasy of becoming the “fittest” by assimilating into American masculinity.

Rodger’s violence was not only a response to being rejected by women, but also due to a feeling of rejection from the lottery and, by extension, the concept of the American Dream. He exhibited a deep affective attachment to the importance of personal economic value and mobility: “I was feeling miserable and alone in my room because I failed to win the lottery jackpot that would enable me to rise above them ALL!” (105). Rodger’s negative feelings emerged from a lack of living up to economic expectations and supremacy, especially due to his difficulties concentrating in school and on his personal work (such as writing novels). These dreams of power and of rising above his peers filtered into his unhealthy “relationship” with the lottery: “This obsession, which was barely taking root at the time, sparked a long relationship [with] the Lottery that would only end in disappointment and despair” (61). The term “relationship,” for someone who desperately desired a girlfriend, suggests a strong, vitalizing attachment. While he gives away the ending of the story, that he will not come out ahead, the mythological prominence of the lottery in his life binds Rodger to the hope of a better future, of a financial situation that will prove his worthiness over his peers:
I was meant to live a life of significance and extravagance. I was meant to win this jackpot. It was my destiny … I spent $50 to $100 on tickets, but to my profound frustration I didn’t win, and the jackpot kept rising. This only increased my enthusiasm. I started to picture a whole new, perfect life for myself after I won. (104)

Presenting passive entitlement (he was meant for a particular life), Rodger admits he is paying large sums of money for a sense of hope. As much as he was motivated by the prospect of winning, in the interim, the possibility of hitting the jackpot and his imagination of how he would live after he won sustained his desire to continue gambling.

While Rodger ultimately utilized extreme violence, the dreams that prompted his reliance on the lottery are not unusual; indeed, the link he makes between hope and lotto tickets structures a common experience of neoliberal capitalism, especially when wealth, and economic analysis, proves central to how individuals value themselves. Rodger offers a glimpse into the economics of a world where fitness is based on probability and the luck of the draw. Such a system resembles what Henry Giroux calls “casino capitalism,” which exemplifies the contradictions required to be an economic subject (and object) under neoliberalism. Giroux defines a casino capitalist system as one that “believes that it can govern all of social life” through taking advantage “of a kind of casino logic in which the only thing that drives you is to go to that slot machine and somehow get more, just pump the machine, put as much money in as you can into it and walk out a rich man” (Moyers). Casino capitalism presumes a lack of faith in simple ideologies about hard work and initiative, such as economic mobility in the age of stagnant wages. Instead, potential instantaneous jackpots provide the only available channel for future-oriented satisfaction. “Casino logic” offers a means of submitting the
economic future to a machine with no personal investment in the player (the type of positionality inhabited by Alan Turing in *The Imitation Game*. Touch’s Jake operates similarly); while such a logic leaves many impoverished, it also offers access to the excitement of getting close to the cold eye of neoliberalism, the idea that life can be ruled, and solved, by a logic unanchored from one’s own free will. It, in other words, offers a form of agency structured within an indecipherable system of chance and machine calculation, producing hope in the future while it extracts human capital in the present.

Rodger understands this connection between luck and mobility when he states that he “began to feel hopeless, until [he] saw the current jackpot for the Megamillions Lottery” and “concluded that winning the lottery was the only way [he] could become wealthy at a young age” (104). Becoming wealthy, in the age of neoliberalism, means accepting that agency is predicated on an indecipherable system of chance and machine calculation: “I could invent something, or start a business just like Mark Zuckerberg did with Facebook, but the chances of me achieving such a thing were the same chances I had of winning the lottery anyway” (106). The important aspect of life under such a system is erasing personal inability, such as his emotional struggles, through a transcendent sense of hope (the fantasy of overcoming embedded in U.S. culture and, specifically, autism narratives). For instance, his autobiography documents the many times, at different colleges, that he dropped out of classes. His reasons range from embarrassment about taking the bus to difficulty concentrating when he saw romantic couples in his classes (65, 70, 78, 80, 93, 100). He eventually dropped completely out of
Santa Barbara City College, citing this as that moment that he “knew that the Day of Retribution was now very possible” (101).

His violence, then, resulted as much from financial considerations as romantic ones, with the bleakness of the economic future prompting his desire to capitalize on the logic of casino capitalism to circumvent his inability to remain emotionally productive. To recapitulate what I have said in Chapter One, emotional productivity and ability is central to neoliberal capitalism as defined by Foucault, clear when he defines human capital:

[human capital] is the set of all those physical and psychological factors which make someone able to earn this or that wage, so that, seen from the side of the worker, labor is not a commodity reduced by abstraction to labor power and the time [during] which it is used. Broken down in economic terms, from the worker's point of view labor comprises a capital, that is to say, it as an ability, a skill; as they say: it is a “machine.” (224).

Recognizing the theory that industrial capitalism “transforms the worker into a machine and alienates him as a result,” Foucault instead formulates the idea that, under neoliberalism, the worker operates their own skill machine that combines psychological and physical ability:

Ability to work, skill, the ability to do something cannot be separated from the person who is skilled and who can do this particular thing. In other words, the worker's skill really is a machine, but a machine which cannot be separated from the worker himself...We should think of the skill that is united with the worker as, in a way, the side through which the worker is a machine, but a machine understood in the positive sense, since it is a machine that produces an earnings stream. (224)

Thus, physical and psychological ability, in Foucault’s terms, parallel the rhetoric of individual responsibility and self-reliance. The key term is ability, which homogenizes financial success as the opposite of disability. At the same time, what at first seems to be
a concept fostering independence and ability is also what Foucault calls a “machine,” operating similarly to a slow machine: the slot machine works for the individual just as much as the individual works for the slot machine. The relationship between the two becomes doubly exploitative as both affective capital and human capital circulate between them. For Rodger, lotto tickets function, then, as the sites of his emotional investment, the machine that he attempts to harness within the speculative desires of the twenty-first century economy, but also become signifiers of displaced ability and internalized disability (as he becomes the marked man). The lotto ticket is an affective technology of wealth accumulation, operating as the fine line between the fantasy of capitalist transcendence and the violent victimization of becoming an economic object.38

These parallel narrative anxieties about autism, where the disorder represents a promise

38 A California Lottery ad, titled “Snowfall” (David&Goliath), explicitly renders this relationship. The commercial opens with a shot of a blue sky in which a few lotto balls are falling. While a piano plays a whimsical cover of “California Dreamin’,” the camera cuts to various iconic California locations, such as the Redwoods, the Golden Gate Bridge, and the Santa Monica Pier. By this point, there are hundreds of lotto balls raining from the heavens onto passive spectators. These spectators each appear in different camera shots as individual units, with the exception of a white couple that stands together. Although reticent at first (one woman early in the commercial hides in her house, peeking out at the balls), the people in the ad soon express immense joy at the barrage: a man jumps into his pool, now filled with the balls; another man smiles and looks up with his arms stretched towards the sky as the balls fall on him; a woman lays in the balls making “snow” angels. Whereas all of the balls raining from the sky are white, near the end of the ad a red ball finds its way into the hand of the man whose arms are stretched towards the sky. This is the “power ball,” meaning he is the winner of the jackpot. The others have not won, but this does not prevent them from their performance of jouissance (enjoyment) in the face of the California Lottery. The ad ends with the slogan, “believe in something bigger.” The ad echoes an implication of neoliberalism that a “better” world can only come into being through faith in the logic of mathematical probability, a logic beyond individual control or initiative. It celebrates individuals accepting the possibility of wealth through the neoliberal logic of chance, even as social affinity collapses at the level of the camera (with the actors separated into different shots and locations).
of overcoming or a burdensome calculation that strains resources. For Rodger, however, such logic is internalized rather than externally narrativized: thus, the issue of “overcoming” produces a problem for people with cognitive and affective disabilities and with mental illnesses. To overcome is also to accept a sense of affective subjectivity divorced from personal experience. It also means resignifying pathology in the frame of the neoliberal binary, allowing depathologization through irrational submission to economic rationality.

For Rodger, who could not calibrate his emotions enough to stay in classes or to accomplish his first money-making scheme, writing an epic fantasy novel, the lottery is a site of the production of hope in the financial future, despite the odds and despite losing. A better world can only come into being by having faith in the logic of mathematical probability. Rodger eventually loses this faith, stating that it was “soon broken” after he “visualized [himself] being the winner” (79) and lost anyways. This breakdown in his fantasies resulted in his idea that traditional life paths were not present for him. Sustained temporarily by the will to gamble, his desire to remain relevant and active in a system where wealth is the most important value mutated into the rampage as a means of exposing the injustices of such a system. Rodger explicitly renders the connection between why he gambled and why he ultimately decided to murder in his description of the trip to Arizona he makes after calculating that he had better chances of winning the lottery there:

[I visualized] my whole future before me, with a beautiful blonde girlfriend and the children I would have with her...After all that, who else could the winner be but me?...It was fate, destiny. I took out my tickets, of which I had purchased fifty, and sifted through them to find the one that
matched the winning numbers. I felt dizzy and ecstatic as I did it, feeling so certain that my victory will be confirmed. When I reached the end of my stack of tickets, I didn’t find any that matched...I didn’t react with rage or anguish. I just sat there, cold and dead...I saw groups of good looking young people walking together, laughing and enjoying each other’s company. I felt completely dead inside, and torment racked my entire body, as I realized that I now had no chance to rise above them.

This passage, expressing Rodger’s emotional contradictions as he submits to “fate” and “destiny,” gives the most comprehensive explanation of Rodger’s dreams of winning as they are tied to fantasies of heteronormativity, class mobility, and emotional ability. In other words, the lottery functions as the technology of hegemonic identity, offering him proximity to an ideal of American life and the ability to “rise above” through chance that mitigates his angst. Ultimately unable to achieve this fantasy and failing to be sustained by optimism, he is finally and irrevocably a “loser.”

The transition that Rodger experiences in this passage resembles Kellner’s notion of “running amok,” a term he uses to describe the state of mind of rampage shooters. Noting the affiliation between “running amok” and being “out-of-control,” he quotes psychologist Steven Pinker’s definition of the term:

the amok man is patently out of his mind, an automaton oblivious to his surroundings and unreachable by appeals or threats. But his rampage is preceded by lengthy brooding over failure and is carefully planned as a means of deliverance from an unbearable situation. The amok state is chillingly cognitive. (14)

If the ecstasy of potentially winning the lottery sounds similar to the amok state of murder, it is because they are related through the interplay of rationality and irrationality. Rodger used the lottery to express his deepest desires because lacking privilege was “unbearable” to him. He transformed into the “cold” automated gaze of neoliberalism, the
automaton, at the moment when his potential to become an entrepreneurial, successful individual most comprehensively dissolved. Also notable here is how much this oblivious automaton parallels descriptions of autism, with apathy, intense cognition (the presumed lack of emotion), and rage responses central to understandings of people with autism. As “male” disorders, then, both autism and running amok demonstrate cultural assumptions about masculinity and emotions which shape the possibilities for male responses to immense social and economic pressures.

Feeling “cold and dead” and “dead inside,” Rodger embodied the “chillingly cognitive.” He attempted to remain the organized calculator of his own life even as he was exposed to how laws of probability disrupted and mediated this role. His masculinity, in other words, became an unrealized fantasy. Thus, the calculations in this passage specifically tie his dream of wealth to heteronormativity: having a “beautiful blond girlfriend,” having sex, and reproducing. Within this narrative of male agency resides a passivity performed through the idea that “when [he] woke up, [he] would be a multi-millionaire, and [his] life would be saved” (112). He must calculate the odds but also subordinate himself to the probabilistic mechanisms of the economy-machine. This requires an affective state that is “autistic” in the broader sense of the word, emotional investment in the economic slot machine but also a process of becoming slot machine that facilitates the achievement of masculine power.

Neoliberal Masculinity: Gender and Emotional Fitness

Rodger’s autobiography is, then, a document that shows how gender, affective ability, and economic productivity consolidated under neoliberal responses to the Great
Recession. In this section I specifically link the concept of neoliberal masculinity to Rodger’s gender anxieties, suggesting how the connection between neoliberalism and reproduction is embedded in questions of emotions and affect. Moving away specifically from autistic affect, the section documents larger questions of masculinity and the economy in the post-Recession context that will be central to the narratives of autism analyzed in the following chapters. Rather than just examining Rodger’s misogyny, I suggest that Rodger’s feelings emerged from an attachment to neoliberal rhetoric that could only be resolved through gambling, which gained its power as an activity for Rodger due to its proximity to the numerical logics of neoliberalism. Feeling victimized by external forces, Rodger attempted to rely on similar invisible processes of wealth generation to reconstitute his gender and class status, a necessity he believed emerged from his father’s own failures. To “be a man” within neoliberalism is to both calculate life choices and gamble on them, seeking fitness in the speculative boom and bust cycle.

Rodger’s desires to win the lottery represented a particular iteration of the modern heterosexual male imaginary based on the distinction between winner and loser: “I kept dreaming of the life I would have once I won; the beautiful blonde girlfriend, the luxurious mansion with a magnificent view, all of the exotic cars I would drive to impress girls. It gave me hope. It gave me something to live for” (115). The lottery offered Rodger a fantasy of instantaneous mobility tied to both his economic and sexual desires and, in so doing, a “reason” to continue his optimism. Capitalism has long prompted its subjects to covet what others have, whether money, material possessions, or beautiful women. Rodger, by equating wealth with women, embodies feminists’ claim that the
subjugation of women occurs at the intersection of capitalism and heteronormativity. Indeed, Rodger directly states that a lottery jackpot would allow him to “finally be able to attract the beautiful girls [he] covet[s] so much” (78).

At the same time, Rodger’s life and narrative occur at a moment when, from his point of view, the rightful patriarchal structure of the economy has reached a state of instability. For instance, in the two paragraph introduction to My Twisted World, Rodger renders his anxiety about gender hierarchy:

All I ever wanted was to fit in and live a happy life amongst humanity, but I was cast out and rejected, forced to endure an existence of loneliness and insignificance, all because the females of the human species were incapable of seeing the value in me. (1)

In Rodger’s understanding of the world, his happiness and, indeed, his very humanity are denied by women, who “force” him into loneliness. In this fatalistic fantasy, he lacks agency in the face of a conspiracy perpetuated by women, a logic which he cannot understand but to which he must submit. In other words, Rodger imagines himself as a passive economic calculation, explicitly suggested in the word “value” followed by the penetrative prepositional phrase, “in me.” He could just as easily have said “my value,” but his word choice signifies his disempowerment as assessments of his value are determined by women.

39 This idea is often attributed in its original feminist form to Gayle Rubin’s “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex,”

40 “Cast out” is also interesting here. Though he is explaining a sense of alienation prompted by romantic rejection, “cast” has two meanings that reiterate the dual condition of the neoliberal subject. At one level it represents the precarious nature of giving yourself up to a comprehensive system (“To throw (dice) from the box”) while at another includes the sense of rational planning (“To reckon, calculate”; “To count or reckon, so as to ascertain the sum of various numbers”).
For Rodger, value represented a natural component of identity, one that he lacked and could only access through the lottery. He identified as a victim of neoliberalism’s use of economic analysis on non-economic objects, projecting this onto women at the same time that he applies this logic to them, seeing them as part of his equation to achieve a wealthy, heteronormative future. The word “value” indicates that he structured his anxieties within neoliberal rhetoric, which he appropriated to navigate his precarious position within the power systems of class, race, and gender. David Harvey has argued that the “seductive rhetoric” (42, 2007) of neoliberalism supports a restoration of class power. He suggests that the utopian goals of neoliberalism, spreading freedom and equality, have predominantly failed while neoliberal policies have resulted in a redistribution of wealth from the economic bottom to the top, an explicit goal, he says, of some of the architects of neoliberalism. To reclaim his identification with white masculinity and class power, which he defines through his father’s struggles as a director, Rodger saw all decisions as gambles, essentially economic investments. The lottery tickets operate as a means of reclaiming status as someone who objectifies, allowing him to disavow his life as someone whose value is determined by others. Rodger gambled to restore himself to a fantasy of economic privilege which his father had lost through his own gambles with directing.

41 Earlier, he specifically states that neoliberalism is “associated with attempts to restore or reconstruct upper-class power” (28).

42 For instance, he laments lost superiority: “How could an inferior, ugly black boy be able to get a white girl and not me? I am beautiful, and I am half white myself. I am descended from British aristocracy. He is descended from slaves” (84).
Rodger’s father had a rocky career, as a number of artistic gambles failed to secure him a place as a major Hollywood director despite some success as a second unit director on *The Hunger Games*. Rodger appeals to his father’s ancestral wealth to define the origins of his economic subordination: “Peter is of British descent, hailing from the prestigious Rodger family; a family that was once part of the wealthy upper classes before they lost all of their fortune during the Great Depression” (1). The Great Depression locates the family’s loss of fortunes within a similar frame to the 2008 Recession, a period during which Rodger’s father had to take risks to maintain economic viability. Talking about his early life, Rodger notes his father’s absence: “The only downside of this was my father’s absence from my life. Despite this, I always looked up to him as a powerful and successful man” (8). The gamble of leaving your family to find success and power structures masculinity. He saw his father as a *man* because he made a tough decision. Though Rodger mentions success here, however, his father’s career choices (especially his 2009 documentary *Oh My God*) constantly straddled the boundary of failure. In other words, the gamble always has the potential to garner negative returns: “My father’s career as a commercial director hadn’t been as successful as it was a couple years before. He foolishly decided to invest all of his money in his first feature film” (49). The fact that Rodger labels his father’s decision, rather than the investment itself,

43 In some ways, this idea of the father being *absent* due to financial considerations challenges Rodger’s whiteness in that Rodger’s story parallels immigration narratives. In addition, Rodger’s mother claimed that, after her divorce from Rodger’s father, she was herself financially unstable: “His mother noted that her former husband used the equity in his home to finance the documentary, but she agreed to a one-year suspension of child support. With her monthly income just $3,200 a month, she said had to ‘depend in the generosity of family and friends to make ends meet’” (Duke).
“foolish” reflects Rodger’s devaluation of his father’s ability to gamble and, therefore, his “power.” Rodger phrases his feelings about this episode in a manner parallel to how he discusses the lottery: “I was hopeful about father’s movie, however. He kept talking about how he will become very rich from it, and I fostered a hope that he would become rich. How naïve I was … the movie would only bankrupt him in the future” (49).

For Rodger, being a man meant a constant struggle between power and failure, the exact concepts he juggles through gambling. His father represented a strong image of this type of manhood. Thus, Rodger fears “be[ing] in such an inferior position in front [of his] father” (87). This instance of feeling inferior happens when, while having dinner with his father, he sees “an inferior Mexican guy” with a “blonde white girl.” The hierarchy is unclear, with inferiority attached to both Rodger and the other man. For him, class and racial power have become confused in a way hostile to him, resulting in submission to his father’s gaze: “I wasn’t the son I wanted to present to my father. I should be the one with the hot blonde girl, making my father proud. Instead, my father had to watch me suffer in a pathetic position” (87). His suffering and victimization—in such close proximity to his father, who Rodger describes as “a man that women found attractive” after his father’s “acquisition of a new girlfriend” (11)—ultimately necessitate gambling as the concrete means of expressing masculinity. “Acquisition” operates as a phrase internalizing the rhetoric of neoliberal gender politics, associating economic and gender power.

This power is not, however, wholly physical in nature, even if in the first few pages he points out that he is jealous of other boys for having what he lacks, “physical
Neoliberalism, in creating financialized subjectivities, promises forms of masculinity and power untethered from traditional concepts of manliness or physical strength:

I would get revenge on everyone who thought they were better than me, just by becoming better than them through the accumulation of wealth. I believed that the only way for me to attain this wealth at the time was to win the Lottery, and that is what I visualized doing. (78-79)

Masculinity and precarity (the gamble) are bound together. For the entrepreneurial subject of twenty-first century capitalism, the physical can only take you so far, as demonstrated by Foucault’s dichotomy of the physical and psychological machine; Rodger constantly privileges the idea that masculinity is a process of gambling, which also means an emotional investment in economic apathy. This process emerges from a new paradigm based on the contradictory neoliberal subject and is supported tangentially by nostalgic ideals borrowed from liberalism about the self-made man of the nineteenth century.

Later in his autobiography, Rodger directly links his drive to end his unhappiness to the hope of the lottery: “I had been through so much rejection, suffering, and injustice in my life, and this was to be my salvation. With my whole body filled with feverish hope, I spent $700 dollars on lottery tickets for this drawing” (104). Here the lottery again becomes a means of experiencing the possibilities of reclaiming power, rendered through the “salvation” that emerges through a total surrender to probability. The notion

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44 He says: “I remember getting jealous of other boys who were able to swing by themselves, boys who were even younger than myself. It was the second time I realized my lack of physical capability. The first time I had such an inkling of my shortcomings were those disastrous football sessions at Dorsett House” (6).
of “feverish hope” presents the dichotomy of neoliberal existence: a hope that is both diseased and yet “excited, fitful, restless.” This is the same hope in masculinity and wealth that leads Rodger to desire to marry off his mother: “When I found out about this, I started to harbor the hope that my mother will get married to this man, and I will be part of a rich family. That will definitely be a way out of my miserable and insignificant life. Money would solve everything” (68). The rational, calculating focus on how to make money, meets the irrational, full submission to the gamble of betting his mother or investing hundreds of dollars in the lottery.

Rodger sees the world in terms of gambling because of his inability to become the stereotype of an entrepreneurial man rooted in his lack of status and power. Trying “to pretend as if [he] was part of a wealthy family,” Rodger criticizes the fact that he could have been wealthy “[i]f only my damnable mother had married into wealth instead of being selfish” and “[i]f only my failure of a father had made better decisions with his directing career instead wasting his money on that stupid documentary” (102).

Selfishness and waste are significant counterpoints here based on Rodger’s constructions of gender, with a woman embodying cold distance and a man failing to find economic fitness. Believing himself the victim of his parents’ failures, Rodger relies on the assurances of neoliberal rhetoric and the lottery. He makes this explicit in the paragraph following his rage at his parents:

I couldn’t help but feel a bitter form of envy at all of the rich kids at the concert…[They] will never have to worry about anything in their pleasurable, hedonistic lives. I would take great pleasure in watching all of those rich families burn alive. Looking at all of them really drilled in my mind the importance of wealth. Wealth is one of the most important defining factors of self-worth and superiority. I hated and envied all of
those kids for being born into wealth, while I had to struggle to find a way to claim wealth for myself. I had to be ruthless, and do whatever it takes to attain such wealth. (102)

While violent, this passage still presents Rodger’s passivity: he merely “watches” the families burn. Yet, Rodger claims he will do “Whatever it takes” which, in the period before Rodger’s decision to undertake a rampage, seems to signify gambling. In other words, there is no outlet for him to be actively ruthless beyond the lottery or the violent rage of murder.

If wealth has become “one of the most important defining factors of self-worth,” it does so, in this context, parallel to a world where hard work and entrepreneurial spirit are no longer sustaining mythologies. Rodger’s “struggle” to “attain wealth” for himself manifests only in his pursuit of lottery tickets, the mechanics of a Darwinian world where survival is a random mutation. Again employing neoliberal rhetoric, Rodger defines his self-worth through wealth. When reliance on the chance of the lottery fails, what remains for Rodger is a bizarre version of class struggle where he watches rich families burn. If he cannot have economic fitness, neither should others. In terms of his beliefs in hierarchy and power, then, lottery tickets represent the fine line between his direct violent actions and his ideological violence. Gambling, in his view, makes things right in a way similar to the act of burning. In other words, his desire for violence is not anti-establishment or derived from masculinities in popular culture.45 It is derived directly

45 While My Twisted World mentions popular cultural texts, many of these are not the stereotypical “violent” media usually thought of in terms of school shootings. He does play video games, though he mostly mentions the cartoony World of Warcraft and seems to have liked Pokemon. His interests in World of Warcraft are related, however, to why he gambles: he mentions a few times how he “had become very powerful in the game”
from a capitalist ideology that appropriates neoliberal masculinity, and its attendant victimization, in conjunction with anxieties about class power. Rodger did not hate the “hedonistic and pleasurable” lifestyle he projects onto these rich kids; he hated his exclusion.

Thus, when the “struggle to find a way to claim wealth for myself” inevitably dissolved and when he repeatedly failed to win the lottery, Rodger acted on his suffering by disavowing a future of “great pleasure.” While his violence sets him apart from others who struggle emotionally and economically, Rodger’s reliance on detached logics of probability in the reconstitution of his social and gender identity gestures towards a more widespread feeling of despair. As Berardi argues when discussing school shootings, “[i]t is possible to see this form of psychopathology not as an isolated phenomenon, but as a symptom of a widespread form of suffering” (46). Rodger exposes how gambling operates as a site of shifting economic and gender meanings, shifts rooted in the forms of suffering which have emerged as a result of neoliberalism’s attempts to turn everything into objects of economic analysis and to rely on apathetic economic affects.

Gambling facilitated Elliot Rodger’s strategy to secure a “rightful” place in the world. The primary appeal of gambling for Rodger is that it offers a way of navigating masculinity that counters his lack of “physical capability.” When he states that “the girls don’t flock to the gentlemen. They flock to the alpha male. They flock to the boys who appear to have the most power and status. And it was a ruthless struggle to reach such a

(47). A popular text he mentions is *The Secret*, a book about feeling positively about the future which is probably where he derived his idea of “visualizing success” (78-79, 106 108, 112).
height” (28), he sees this struggle in terms of gambling, the main means of achieving power and status at a time of casino capitalism. Neoliberalism, in foregrounding economic analysis, promises forms of masculinity and power untethered from traditional concepts of manliness and attached to the reclamation of value: “I would get revenge on everyone who thought they were better than me, just by becoming better than them through the accumulation of wealth. I believed that the only way for me to attain this wealth at the time was to win the Lottery” (78-79). For the fantasy of becoming an entrepreneurial man in twenty-first century capitalism, the physical can only take you so far; it is important to become a winner through the acceptance of an economic logic beyond individual control. Ultimately, gambling failed for Rodger because he did not win, though it did momentarily give him access to “hope,” “ecstasy,” and an experience of value through which he submitted to automated processes. He did not overcome, but he experienced the joys of neoliberal rhetoric as they relate to rejecting disability and becoming socially abled. His rampage mirrors many of the attributes of neoliberal masculinity, even as it emerged from his disillusionment with the possibility of winning the lottery and, therefore, achieving the dream of economic mobility in a world of survival of the fittest and chance.

Conclusion: Masculinity and Disability in Recession

Nearly two decades before Rodger’s shooting rampage, in 1998, Matthew Beck, a Connecticut Lottery employee described as a “genius,” killed four of his bosses and then himself at the Connecticut Lottery Corporation headquarters. The murders were probably prompted by grievances Beck had about his salary: he believed that he was being paid
less than he should to perform duties beyond his job description. He killed the people who had denied his promotion and initial grievance. A *New York Times* report on the shooting suggests “Beck killed with a calculated, personal manner” and with “coldness” (Yardley). Local reporter Diane Scarponi noted that Beck had recently shaved his head to “draw attention away from his growing baldness.” Another aspect of interest, only mentioned in Yardley’s report, was a possible romantic angle: “An office romance had soured, and, according to several employees, the woman had begun dating the man who replaced Mr. Beck during his leave.” The woman involved, who was present at the office the day of the rampage, does not seem to have been targeted, a fact that counters the suggestion that he was driven by romantic rejection. Instead, Beck appears to have been driven by *economic* notions of masculinity derived from fear about the underestimation of his personal value. In response, he became “cold” and “calculated,” internalizing the affects which he associated with how the Connecticut Lottery had treated him.

Rodger’s case, then, cannot be read in isolation; it exists parallel to similar events and widespread perceptions of economic suffering that demonstrate the need to further theorize the intersections of economic anxiety and masculinity. Beck’s rampage centralizes interactions between the lottery, a system based on hoping for immense wealth, and the personal grievances of low-level workers who, rather than moving up the economic ladder, often fall or remain in static positions. Masculinity, and its attendant economic anxieties, prove highly important when this violence is read in conjunction with the shifting structures of the economy since the 1980s and the “entrepreneurial” subject of neoliberalism, a subject who attempts to erase physical and emotional
limitations (baldness, the depression for which Beck took medication) through enterprise and calculation predicated on a sense of victimization. In this case, Beck responded to his feeling that his economic value was diminished by the corporate structure of the Connecticut Lottery. Rodger similarly attempted to utilize neoliberal rhetoric to reconstitute his masculinity, becoming obsessed with the California Lottery to fulfill his need for hope in reclaiming social status while simultaneously relying on mechanisms beyond individual control. He had hope because he did not have to maintain complete control in a world of immense uncertainty.

This hope relates to what scholar of neoliberalism Sam Binkley deems “happiness.” In Happiness as Enterprise: An Essay on Neoliberal Life, Binkley critiques the neoliberal orientation of positive psychology to argue that happiness is a technology of neoliberal governmentality that demonstrates the hinge by which a rationality of government both deploys and mediates a certain lag between its institutional face and the private moments of its members, and in the course of doing so satiates all the more thoroughly the most intimate recesses of subjectivity itself (38).

In other words, the distinction between submission and assertion, from a Foucauldian perspective, is narrow and indeterminate. Binkley implicitly theorizes this narrowness between the individual as object and subject of happiness when asserting that “happiness brings people to life, transforming objects into subjects, exhorting us to emotional self-stewardship, empowering individuals to seize the reins of their affective potentials” (3). “Happiness thus becomes a figure of enterprise” through which relationships with others are not understood as mutually productive moments of emotional subject formation but instead as “an environmental circumstance to be maximized, or as an organizational
resource to be exploited” (3). To Binkley, individuals are urged, in the neoliberal society of risk, to utilize such relationships while posing “the problem of our lives and our identities within an engineered trajectory of measurable risk and uncertainty, a cost-benefit analysis whose unfolding is directed by our own competencies, capacities, resources, and choices” (19). Because the future is “unpredicted and unpredictable,” however, this discourse also urges its subjects to accept “the inevitability that happiness is something one stumbles upon, rather than plans for” (77).

Binkley, then, uncovers the role of neoliberal governmentality in producing entrepreneurial subjects through an affective state, happiness, that necessitates calculation of future outcomes and the exploitation of others as resources. Happiness becomes an economic problem, but often one outside of individual control. These are exactly the contradictions Rodger experienced through his lottery habit. Rodger attempted to construct happiness in neoliberal terms, using the rhetoric of value to imagine gambling as his only way “out” of personal despair. He tried to navigate the paradox through which transactions require “a cost-benefit analysis” at the same time that they are ruled by uncertainty, chance, and luck. Rodger saw women as integral to this analysis and to his own happiness, figuring them as objects of his enterprise. The idea that you can stumble upon happiness, however, deconstructs the simple progression on which the “transformation from subject to object” is built. Rodger’s account illustrates that this transformation entails anxiety about becoming the object of the happiness of others or an
object irrelevant to a matrix of calculations. The internalization of neoliberal flexibility and risk creates the necessity to be both subject and object. Even if neoliberal discourses attempt to conceal this relationship, it is released in such a moment of crisis where the gamble fails to operate wholly as a machine of happiness.

Rodger became obsessed with the lottery in order to navigate these contradictions and ensure his “fitness,” both economically and sexually. The crisis of masculinity under neoliberalism internalizes submission to an automated economic logic. To become a powerful agent, Rodger used the lottery not as a “quick fix” but as an emotionally satisfying fantasy, inciting pleasure that includes anxieties about and experiences of subordination. Playing the lottery or going to a casino are technologies of masculinity within a system where men feel they are unable to advance up the economic ladder through work, promotions, and individual initiative. Gambling becomes an alternative form of initiative. The lottery was a safe place for Rodger to express his rage: through the hope of winning he could imagine a reconstitution of his own place in the world. Women would no longer be able to subordinate him to their own feelings of repulsion. They would have to put value in him. When these fantasies failed, he opted out, no longer seeing an optimistic future. For those suffering under neoliberal economics, the lottery

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46 The matrix of calculations, or perhaps “the neoliberal matrix,” is not unlike the “imaginary logic” of the “heterosexual matrix” (28) posited by Judith Butler, or her notion of the performative process through which “the subject only comes into intelligibility through the matrix of gender” (22). She argues that “freedom, possibility, agency do not have an abstract or pre-social status, but are always negotiated within a matrix of power” (22). I argue, however, that Rodger suggests gender has become a component of economic imperatives moreso than strictly reproductive ones. Or, in other words, that reproductive and gender fitness coincide with and are subsumed into neoliberal visions of fitness that are about economic definitions of freedom and agency.
offers, and exposes, the fantasy that wealth is immediate, unbridled, and untethered from traditional concepts of “hard work”; by spending hundreds of dollars, Rodger had a temporary outlet for his violence and sense that the world had gone wrong. He had in other words, access to compulsory happiness, the affective response to possibly “overcoming.”

A structural consequence of neoliberalism is that masculinity fails to signify as a coherent, monolithic way of being attached to productivity, stoicism, and stability. The performance of masculinity is no longer equivalent to dominating and controlling; fears of being controlled and desires to perform as the marked man are now hegemonic and widespread. Playing the lottery or going to a casino are technologies of masculinity within a system of precarity, simultaneously offering the dream of a future of financial calculations and placing the player as an object of those same calculations. Understanding the affects present in Rodger’s acts of gambling also means understanding how masculinity operates and, therefore, why violence like that performed by Elliot Rodger emerges even in places of privilege; for someone like Rodger, gambling represents a fantasy of male victimization and social mobility central to, but destructive for, neoliberalism. The will to gamble, for Rodger, presumed a willingness to see the world as facilitating subordination, violence, and existential dangers. He projected these anxieties onto women, while simultaneously using gambling to get as close as possible to the pleasures of heteronormativity and capitalism. While there is no documentation that other rampage shooters gambled, the feelings, perceived or real, of subordination associated with shooters function similarly: the world has become hostile, a place where
fitness has been assigned in confusing ways that needs to be remedied, first through gambling and, when gambling fails, through violence.

As a cultural means of mediating masculinity and disability, and how those two concepts are entwined, representations of autism draw from these concerns, exploring the idea of attempting to overcome in systems of immense precarity when economic and political logics rule identity. Neoliberalism is often presented as getting people with disabilities closest to experiencing the warmth of independence and capitalism even as this process produces immense anxieties. These anxieties, in the texts I will analyze in the rest of this dissertation, are, within a post-2008 context, assuaged by characters with autism. The next two chapters further discuss the neoliberal masculinity described in this chapter by focusing on its appearance in narratives of autism. Autism offers a simple means to pathologize Rodger, but, I would argue, not accidentally. Autism is often used to conceal and depathologize masculinity as the structuring mechanism of neoliberalism. At the same time, as Rodger suggests, it offers a way to naturalize the disability and suffering at the ideological center of how the subject interacts with economic rationality. The neoliberal subject of angst is a perpetual machine, forged by a system of rules, regulations, and chance. Rodger, in this role, creates a fantasy of the future that is not full of risk, imagining, in essence, the overcoming narrative where disability can be disavowed and integrated into the structure of contemporary subjectivity.

The gamble of neoliberalism, which can achieve something, offers a complex emotional process through which to experience the thrills of subjectivity: “I spent a few more days calming myself down. I then started to feel something that has been lost to me
for a long time: Hope” (60). We must submit to risk and to becoming an object because of the horizon of rational futures without risk. Neoliberalism, then, creates a narrative about both gender and disability that structures everyday life and culture. Rodger, in terms of his obsession with the lottery and the violence that he used as a novel form of gambling, is not another figure in a series of historical aberrations representing the dying breaths of an obsolete masculinity. He points to the structures of subjectivity that shape our relationships to others and ourselves in the speculative precarity of the twenty-first century.
Chapter Four

The Family Narrative of Autism:

The Neoliberal Aesthetics of Disability from *The Siege* to *Bates Motel*

The dualistic neoliberal subject presented in Chapter Three has become a central cultural metaphor in visual culture about autism, especially family dramas. This chapter asserts that narratives of families dealing with autism have been vehicles for naturalizing the gender politics of the neoliberal subject. They disseminate discourses of affective and economic austerity while endorsing the idea that disability can be cured or neutralized by submitting fully to economic solutions. Whereas the previous chapter focused on white male victimization as the fantasmatic starting point of modern economic subjectivity, this chapter investigates the naturalization of austerity motherhood and disabled masculinity and the intersections of these two categories. The family narrative of autism, relying heavily on concepts of motherhood, presents childrearing as a process of creating the neoliberal subject through assuaging fear, paranoia, and anxiety about economic rationalities.

The family narrative of autism is one of the most long-lasting and prominent cultural narratives that constructs how audiences and the general public perceive autism. These narratives emphasize the struggles parents go through to help their autistic child get beyond the “suffering” of disability and to become productive members of the family and society more broadly. Though not all family narratives support the pursuit of a “cure” for autism, many do, seeking the possibility of “overcoming” autism, whether this means by *literally* escaping an autism diagnosis or by fostering an independent, economically-
oriented sense of self for children with autism. These narratives, in short, focus on the
family’s private attempts to help an autistic child enter the “human condition.” By
privatizing support for autism, these narratives incorporate neoliberal goals at their
broadest level, privileging solutions that foster familial independence and are skeptical of
external interventions, especially by the government. The focus on the family and
domestic space also means that the work of taking care of autistic children is
predominantly associated with mothers.

As Stuart Murray suggests, “In all the issues relating to autism there is no more
emotional subject, it appears, than that produced by the condition within the family, and
especially in the central relationship between mother and child” (169). This relationship
between mother and, often, male child is important to understanding the emotional
subject of neoliberalism, a person who internalizes emotions conducive to neoliberal
goals. The emotional valences associated with boys and mothers are, however, quite
different. As a result, narratives about mothers and autistic boys represent how
neoliberalism constructs and necessitates certain gender positions and how, ultimately,
“overcoming” neoliberalism is inherently masculine in its orientation while suggesting
the new patterns of gender I have documented throughout this dissertation. The gender
politics of mothers caring for autistic children produces emotions in the audience which,
in turn, speak to the construction of mothers as both nurturing and austere, taking care of
male victims. They must pity the suffering of the child, but also demand independence
and masculinity. Such mothers resemble those represented, as Chapter Two documented,
in *Martian Time-Slip*. 
Murray’s critique of family narratives is that they are disinterested in the agency of people with autism and, instead, favor the opinions and desires of parents. He explains how families cast themselves as warriors of folk knowledge and, therefore, create a fully private solution to autism: “An idea of the family – often beleaguered and unsupported – ...has been at the centre of ‘the need for answers’” (170). The construction of mothers as warriors, victimized (beleaguered) by outside forces (usually apathetic doctors and governmental bureaucracies) allows parents to construct their own agency in opposition to clinical and psychiatric understandings of autism which ignore parents and rely instead on “expert” knowledge. These understandings were most prevalent in the period when Bettelheim’s notion of the “refrigerator mother” dominated understandings of autism. Murray notes, however, that Bettelheim’s legacy, that “[t]he reaction of the child to the mother, especially seen in terms of emotions, came to dominate ideas about the development of an autistic self” (174), is still evident in the contemporary belief that familial responses to autism are central to childhood development. I expand this idea, however, by analyzing how this “autistic self” is also an economic self, extending Murray’s focus on emotions (“especially seen in terms of emotions”) to claim that the process of constructing the autistic self as economic self is ingrained in both the rhetorical and technical strategies used by texts to produce audience affect.

This affect is generally associated with the coming-to-age of masculinity and the positive emotions which accompany images of successful entrepreneurialism, a situation which puts mothers in a precarious emotional and narrative position. The emotions demanded of audiences of the family narrative of autism, and the fantasies they facilitate,
correspond to the mutually sustaining relationship between neoliberalism and masculinity, as defined by Raewyn Connell:

[T]here is an embedded masculinity politics in the neoliberal project. With a few exceptions, neoliberal leadership is composed of men. Its treasured figure, “the entrepreneur,” is culturally coded masculine. Its assault on the welfare state redistributes income from women to men and imposes more unpaid work on women as carers for the young, the old, and the sick. (Understanding Neoliberalism 33)

The importance of mothers, and their construction as warriors, in autism family narratives, rather than challenging this politics, exacerbates anxieties about gender roles.

In “From Refrigerator Mothers to Warrior-Heroes: The Cultural Identity Transformation of Mothers Raising Children with Intellectual Disabilities,” Amy C. Sousa examines memoirs about children with intellectual disabilities to analyze the effects of the emerging “warrior-hero” archetype which many parents of children with disabilities, especially mothers, adopt. She notes that “[t]hese mothers transform their emotional states of mind by creating new social contexts and feeling rules on which positive emotions can be based” (230). The concept of “feeling rules,” utilized by the warrior mother, suggests a state of mind appropriate to the stereotype of the nurturing mother that also, based on “rules,” allows for the performance of an aggressive rationality. The warrior mother operates as a female counterpart to and facilitates the development of the neoliberal subject of the previous chapter, though, as this chapter argues later, perpetuates the white male as victim by offering a threatening vision of female masculinity against which men define themselves in order to reclaim their “rightful” social positions.

The warrior mother is an austerity parent, a model of parenting predicated on producing a neoliberal subject that rejects excess (in spending as much as emotions). In
“Feral’ Parents: Austerity parenting under neoliberalism,” Sara de Benedictis discusses events leading up to and preceding the UK Riots of 2008 to theorize the rhetorical construction of the “austerity parent.” She notes that “the term ‘austerity parenting’ signifies the emerging emphasis on economic frugality, explicit morality and intensified governance that shapes contemporary parent citizenship” (2). De Benedictis stresses that these imperatives occur under a system of private surveillance, where the government is rejected in favor of “self-governance.” Neoliberalism, then, is internalized at the level of the family: “Parents under neoliberalism are wholly responsible for the mobility and future of their children, and as such parenting is reconfigured as vital to mend the ‘broken society’ and soften the impact of austerity, thus extending the reach of neoliberalism. (8-9). To mold their autistic children as neoliberal citizens, many of the mothers in autism narratives must simultaneously discover their own roles as austere caregivers in masculinized economies, mending what is “broken” by, ironically, relying heavily on the very economic rationalities that put their families in precarious positions.

Austerity parenting conceptualizes a future only possible via a neoliberalized sense of self which, as Martijn Konings notes when defining neoliberal austerity, contains a paradox of victimization:

The subject assumes responsibility for its own powerlessness and is assured that it is doing the right thing in exercising power. Any guilt we might feel should quickly be converted into the outwardly directed aggression that secures our wealth… Neoliberal austerity is redemptive, holding out the promise of limitless wealth and assuaging the anxiety we might feel about the disagreeable alliances we have to forge in our pursuit of money. Any reluctance to own our desire for money and any hesitations we might experience in wielding our powers jeopardize our future salvation. (111)
The affective dimensions of the neoliberal subject, under conditions of austerity, rest on a series of tensions: powerlessness transforming into power, guilt into aggression, anxiety into uncritical ambition to obtain money. Reluctance and hesitations must be “assured” and “assuaged” in the face of “future salvation.” These binaries are not mutually exclusive and do not simply transform one into the other. Instead, they are part of the fabric of the neoliberal subject, constant tensions involved in the interplay of neoliberal rationality and irrationality. Victimizing is the only way to disavow victimization, a dichotomy that works differently for warrior mothers and autistic sons. Konings use of the term “salvation” for the monetary desires of the neoliberal subject driven by a desire for austerity points to the higher power of economic logic to which the aggressive and secure subject must submit. For the autism family, this need for salvation is both an economic imperative and a normalizing gesture, the idea that private wealth can sustain the process of overcoming if everyone stays calm and refuses to be a victim.

The austere mother is a central character in narratives of autism, a victimizing presence which, so male anxiety argues, necessitates its own victimization. In Ugly Feelings, Sianne Ngai attributes the drive towards austerity to fear (of potentially losing one’s position within systems of labor), arguing that this demonstrates “how capitalism’s classic affects of disaffection (and thus of potential social conflict and political antagonism) are neatly reabsorbed by the wage system and reconfigured into professional ideals” (4). Similarly, fear about women’s work and the abnormality of young boys must be “reabsorbed” into the reassuring patterns of genre and convention. These impulses reside in the paranoid psyche of the male victim. Ngai directly opposes paranoia (“a
species of fear based on the dysphoric apprehension of a holistic and all-encompassing system” (299) with “everyday fear’ that sustains existing forms of compliancy and subjection” (302). In the family narrative of autism, however, and, as I am arguing, in the governmental logic undergirding entrepreneurial desire more broadly, everyday fear as a mode of dissolving excess and sustaining austerity directly interacts with, and attempts to suppress, paranoia about an “all-encompassing system.” Fears about women and people with autism, and the possibility to resituate these groups within existing narratives, obscure paranoid fantasies. At the level of the cultural text, austere aesthetics disavow paranoia and turn fear into a productive, neoliberal emotion.

The next section discusses the development of the autism family narrative, specifically emphasizing the role of austerity parenting and neoliberal rhetoric in understandings of disability. I focus on two touchstones of autism memoir, Jenny McCarthy and Clara Claiborne Park, to show how the warrior mother is also a capitalist subject. In advocating for their children and offering privatized family solutions, both authors imagine an “all-encompassing” economic rationality to which individuals must be subordinated and through which they define their role as mothers and women. The rest of the chapter will focus on representations of “austerity parenting” and neoliberal rationality in post-Recession television series. It examines how the format of television allows for an extended visualization of the story of families “struggling against” autism and integrates fear and paranoia at the levels of narrative and the technical apparatus. I will compare a series that, though exaggerating Recession irrationalities, adopts many of the traditional economic and gender ideologies of the autism family narrative.
to a series that critically engages with the neoliberal content of the autism family narrative (Bates Motel). In Parenthood, the necessities of economic austerity are naturalized through audience identification with the eventual overcoming of an autistic character. Bates Motel, on the other hand, directly invokes the image of the male as victim within a neoliberal landscape to question the fantasies through which economic hardship is transformed into male aggression, offering a narrative potentially resistant to attempts to suppress fear and victimization within a politics of aggression and rationality.

**Autism and the Neoliberal Family**

In his foreward to Jenny McCarthy’s memoir *Louder than Words: A Mother’s Journey in Healing Autism*, former CEO of the UCLA public hospital system David Feinberg explains his hopes for the book: “My vision is that through this story, these nonafflicted families won’t dodge those with an autistic child in the supermarket or at the mall, but rather embrace these children and families with compassion, support, and prayer” (xiii). On the surface, Feinberg is calling for empathy and understanding, imagining a world where autism is accepted and visible. At another level, Feinberg employs a rhetoric of pathology and disease to describe people with autism. “Afflicted” operates as a counterpoint to the word “healing” in the book’s subtitle, with meanings ranging from “grievously distressed, tormented; troubled; oppressed, downtrodden” to “affected by or suffering from a disease or other condition; mentally or physically ill or unfit; disabled.” Feinberg does not simply use “afflicted” to describe people with autism,

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47 Feinberg became CEO of the UCLA hospital system the same year as McCarthy’s book was published. In 2015, he left UCLA and became CEO of Geisinger Medical Center in Pennsylvania.
however; he attaches it to the word “family.” An autistic child, in these terms, spreads their disease and disability to the family unit itself, causing distress and oppression (and often a metaphorically “diseased” family, since parents with an autistic child often divorce, as did Jenny McCarthy and her first husband). The religious connotations suggested by “prayer,” which are also prevalent throughout the book, render this affliction as one of biblical proportions, signifying demonic possession. These connotations also manifest in the idea that you should “embrace a child” with autism, suggesting forms of “treatment” for autism where the person is forced to get extremely angry by holding them, since many people with autism do not like to be touched. The logic of the treatment is that the person will struggle until they “give in” and calm down, essentially operating as an exorcism for autism.\textsuperscript{48} Their emotional excesses will be excised, turning them into stoic and tamable children.

Beyond the disempowering and problematic language he uses, what I find particularly evocative about Feinberg’s vision is the locus of compassion: supermarkets and malls, invoked strongly by using the rather than a to describe them, providing these spaces with intimacy, specificity, and an everyday quality attached to white, suburban, middle-class life. Understanding autism for Feinberg does not occur in schools, welfare offices, or at family reunions, spaces where disability is often a fraught, misunderstood subject. Instead, the family with an autistic child is naturally positioned within spaces of consumption and enterprise, in the alienating and iconic centers of suburban life. In other

\textsuperscript{48} The 1969 film \textit{Change of Habit} directly represents this process, with a doctor (played by Elvis) embracing a girl with autism until she, essentially, has her autism exorcised out of her body.
words, supermarkets and malls require the suppression of fear, an austerity of emotions where shared economic desires and rationalities offer unity. Such spaces are also, of course, the stereotyped domain of women, laden with gender assumptions that render the process of embracing children as one made for female nurturers, though nurturers with full faith in economic rationalization.

This focus on wealth, class, and safety within the assurances of U.S. capitalism carries over to McCarthy’s memoir as a whole, which documents her experiences of learning her son, Evan, is autistic. Her privilege hardly concealed, she constantly appeals to the rationality of consumption, such as when she starts a chapter by stating “I lay in bed, staring at the new fifty-inch flat-screen TV that I had pushed up against my bed. It was my new baby monitor” (103). Her ability to buy solutions to her problems gives her a security beyond the scope of most families; this security is exaggerated in the idea, derived from American consumer ideologies, that “bigger is better.” When this economic rationality fails her, such as when doctors give Evan multiple injections before his autism diagnosis, she reconciles the situation in her mind by using impoverished countries as similes: “This was supposed to be a well-respected hospital and I felt like we were in a Third World country” (23). These experiences, where money and prestige fail, must live outside of a true American economic rationality. Whenever she feels that the doctors are gravely wrong about something, McCarthy even transforms her emotions into a symbol of the type of high-tech solutions she is constantly buying, calling them her “emotional guidance system” (40, 65, 83). This system operates as an irrational, intuitive mechanism divorced from medical or scientific knowledge, a higher power to which McCarthy
submits for her answers, just as she submits to the higher power of God when she asks
him to kill her son (41). In the figure of the warrior mother, the act of nurturing is
facilitated by an economic logic that deconceptualizes…

Mothers in autism memoirs perform neoliberal subjectivity, relying on an
economic rationality to gain control of their situations. If their mantra of “whatever it
takes” seems to challenge the notion of austerity parenting, they redeem themselves
through an acceptance of private precarity and rejection of the government. For instance,
this logic emerges when McCarthy contrasts funding and self-funding:

The decision I had to face was, did I just sit around and wait for funding—
which could still take months—or did I self fund, because treatment was
imperative right now in order to pull him through the window [of
autism]….I was having to pay $4,000 a week. When I talked to other
families about how they dealt with so many expenses, the story was
always the same: They’d refinanced their house or borrowed money from
family members (149).

The prefix “self-” is used frequently in neoliberal rhetoric—as in the case of “self-
governance, which de Benedictis uses to describe austerity parenting—in order to place
responsibility for change and “betterment” wholly within individuals. As I noted using
Konings earlier, the idea of self-funding utilizes the neoliberal drive towards rejecting a
sense of victimization. To need funding is to be a victim. Taking control, through self-
funding, allows McCarthy to extricate herself from the morass of “sitting around waiting
for funding.” In other words, she gains agency, becoming independent, by no longer
having to subordinate Evan’s care to the higher power of government bureaucracy. The
irony, however, is that her ability to do so is entirely predicated on her financial means
and class privilege, with mobility and wealth directly connected in this passage. Those
who cannot afford these expenses, presumably the majority of parents with whom she has talked, have to submit themselves to a whole new set of economic relationalities: becoming indebted to financial institutions and family.

The transition from funding to self-funding represents the movement from welfare to debt, from the welfare state to the contradictions of neoliberal independence and agency. Power and agency derive from either having immense wealth or from surrendering to financial systems and economic rationality. She mentions the possibility of refinancing houses in her memoir, published in 2007, the same year as the beginnings of the 2007 financial and subprime mortgage crisis, which resulted in the Great Recession. McCarthy’s memoir points to the centrality of neoliberal subjectivity within narratives of family and disability and demonstrates how submission to U.S. economic rationality accompanies rhetoric of self-empowerment. Notably, this sense of agency is also predicated on female intuition, the “emotional guidance system.” She experiences a heightened acceptance of economic rationality due to Evan’s autism, fighting the excessive horror of autism with the wealth and privatized austerity of a neoliberal subject. Her memoir pares down the challenges of autism wholly to a question of the need to attain support for a cure, evoking a “warrior-mother” image appropriating the technologies of neoliberalism to suppress fear with austerity.

McCarthy’s book offers a contemporary touchstone for the economic subjectivities present in autism memoirs. The mother as financial subject between rational self-interest and nurturing caregiver, who must take initiative (becoming an entrepreneurial subject) to help her child while maintaining focus on the domestic and
private, is a trope running throughout the autism memoir genre. This trope begins with Clara Claiborne Park’s 1967 memoir, *The Siege: A Family’s Journey into the World of an Autistic Child*, the first personal memoir about an autistic child. *The Siege* set the standard for thinking about autism through the privatized needs of the family. Park offers a white middle-class narrative of a mother helping her daughter, Jessy (called Elly in the original edition of the text), “overcome” her disability.⁴⁹ According to Murray, texts… present a particular form of the ‘overcoming’ narrative, usually that of families, in which autism is seen as a potential destroyer of the family unit, but emerges as an affliction that can be fought (the idea of conflict is often central to such formations) through perseverance and love (15).

McCarthy and Park also foreground, though, how this version of overcoming is based on financial and *economic* love and perseverance, especially for the privileged. Autism memoirs represent an economic rationality of trying to overcome autism through wealth. Rather than just a broad “destroyer” of the family, autism is also a burden on the family’s economic stability or sense of economic importance, becoming a substitute or metaphor for the economic rationalities to which the family must submit. Rather than just “overcoming” into able-mindedness or social normalcy, the person with autism (and their mother or, sometimes, father) must also become a *homo economicus*, though a critical perspective on what this entails is generally rejected. This undergirds the cathartic experience of the autism memoir: anxiety and fear are transformed into complete submission to neoliberal subjectivity.

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⁴⁹ She notes that she changed Jessy’s name in the original version because she originally believed Jessy would, essentially, overcome autism and one day read the memoir, an idea she has abandoned in the revised edition.
While Park first published the memoir before neoliberalism became a hegemonic system (though the second edition, with an epilogue, was published in the 1980s), she embeds economic language throughout her narrative that demonstrates how Jessy’s journey also, for her, signified the central importance of overcoming into financial stability. This is rhetorically evident in the way that Park frames her project, using multiple terms with economic definitions to foreground what “the siege” entails:

The fairies had stolen away the human baby and left one of their own...She dwelt in a solitary citadel, compelling and self-made, complete and valid. Yet we could not leave her there. We must intrude, attack, invade, not because she was unhappy inside it, for she was not, but because the equilibrium she had found, perfect as it was, denied the possibility of growth...The world we would tempt her into was the world of risk, failure, and frustration, of unfulfilled desire, of pain as well as activity and love...Confronted with a tiny child’s refusal of life, all existential hesitations evaporate. We had no choice. We would use every stratagem we could invent to assail her fortress, to beguile, entice, seduce her into the human condition (12)

The contrast here between “perfect,” “equilibrium,” “self-made,” and “complete” as adjectives describing autism and “risk,” “failure,” “frustration,” and “unfilled desire” as terms for the “human” world topples the usual abled/disabled hierarchy. The way they attach a specifically economic logic to overcoming disability, however, illuminates the politics involved in privileging failure or frustration. In other words, failure and risk are, in Park’s understanding, more valuable than being “complete” or “perfect.”

Many of these terms, signifying the financialization of subjectivity, acquired economic meanings in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, evidence of shifting economic discourse associated with free-market economies. “Self-made,” for instance, points to the “self-made man,” a concept originating in the first half of the nineteenth
century. On the other hand, the rhetoric of risk, such as risk management discourse, and
concepts like equilibrium and growth were prominent in the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{50}

The transition represented here, then, is from the self-sustaining abundance of complete
independence to the acceptance of a subjectivity predicated on submission to and
mitigation of external forces, the idea that there is a choice, for instance, between funding
and self-funding, with the latter, though more risky, also more personally fulfilling.\textsuperscript{51}

The ideal subjectivity, in other words, is dualistic: accepting the rational
“activity” of economic independence while recognizing that such activity can only exist
within the confines of submission to economic logics of risk and failure. The ideals of
free-market capitalism are naturalized as the “human condition.” The human condition is
the \textit{homo economicus}, and the family has a primary role in conditioning the autistic into
proper economic performance. Indeed, Park alludes to the social and political movements
of her time as a way of constructing Jessy’s autism and the value of the family as a

\textsuperscript{50}The specifically economic meaning of “risk,” “(Exposure to) the possibility of harm or
damage causing financial loss, against which property or an individual may be insured.
Also: the possibility of financial loss or failure as a quantifiable factor in evaluating the
potential profit in a commercial enterprise or investment,” is from the seventeenth
century. Discourses of “risk analysis,” “risk aversion” and “risk management” date from
the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1960s, respectively. Risk, then, had a clear history as an
explicitly economic term which Park could be using. The purely economic use of failure,
“The fact of failing in business; bankruptcy, insolvency,” has existed at least since the
eighteenth century. Additionally, equilibrium and growth have specifically economic
meanings, the former emerging in the nineteenth century and the latter by the 1950s.

\textsuperscript{51}There are, though, multiple ways to read this passage. It is possible to read Park’s
descriptions of Jessy from the perspective of colonialism, with the terms “perfect” and
“complete” resonating as terms that idealize the perfection of pre-contact cultures that,
though pristine and isolated, must be brought into the complexities of civilization (and its
political and economic structures, defined by risk, failure, and unfulfilled capitalist
desire). Autism is, indeed, often associated with primitivism.
private influence on subjectivity. In order to represent the type of transformation she desires for Jessy, she rejects what we could call the Beat ideology of the 1950s or hippie lifestyle of the 60s: “As Elly passed four she went…to movies and parties and hamburger joints and was introduced to young men with beards and guitars. (Some of the young men recognized in Elly the classic cop-out. They said they wished they could be like her, and my heart constricted.)” (117).

The definition of “cop out,” according to the Oxford English Dictionary, points to the conservative gaze Park places on oppositional politics. As a noun, the way Park uses the term, cop out means “a flight, an escape; a cowardly compromise or evasion; a retreat from reality. Also, a person who drops out from society.” As a verb, “to cop out” means “to escape; to stop (work, etc.); to drop out from society; also, to give up an attempt, to evade a responsibility.” Both definitions have negative assumptions, associated with “evading” or “retreating from” (economic) reality and (economic) responsibility. The possibility of a retreat from economic rationality is labeled a fantasy. Hippies, however, saw their actions as a process of “dropping out” from what seemed like pointless, mandated activities. Park, then, implicitly supports the idea that economic responsibilities are natural and that any resistance to the risk and failures of wealth accumulation denies personal responsibility; Jessy, as a symbol of shirked responsibility, must learn to be economic, to not autistically escape or evade.

The gender positions involved in this description are also relevant to these economic roles. Autism signifies a withdrawal from society akin to countercultural politics, an attractive possibility to “men with beards and guitars” (emphasis mine). David
Savran uses the Beats (and, by extension, hippies) to suggest how the “white male as victim” transformed from a marginalized masculinity to, by the 1990s, a hegemonic masculinity (in the form of militia movements and anti-government conservatives). The fact that men want to be Jessy points to Savran’s argument that the white male’s fantasies of victimization involve cannibalizing female perspectives and my own argument, in Chapter One, about how men appropriate disability as a way to “naturalize” a particular masculine affect situated between independence and victimization. Jessy, though a woman, enters into the affective economy of masculinity and, in the struggle between these men and her mother, is rendered as a figure of multiple economic valances: the victim who resists the strictures of society and the person who needs to work on her disabled “sense of what is important” to become an independent agent.

Park’s vision of nurturing her autistic daughter presents, then, economic anxieties embedded specifically within conservative values from the 1960s: she critiques the “cop out” of counterculture movements, makes a slight joke about collectivism (on pages 117-118), and, in emphasizing the metaphor of besieging autism, utilizes multiple terms with established economic definitions. In 1982, Park released a revised edition that echoes

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52 His argument also presents the Beats and hippies as countercultural only in the moment of the organization man, when subordinating identity to collectivity was a central tenet of corporate control. With the return of entrepreneurial man, their independence, individual enterprise, and aggressiveness become dominant, as in neoliberal subjectivity.

53 In her joke about collectivism, she references a popular socialist motto to describe Jessy’s role in the family: “She accepted these variations as she would not have accepted variations in my behavior; even autistic children at length appreciate that different people do different things. The socialist motto held good in our little collective; from each according to his ability.” The irony is twofold: first, because the memoir’s function is to show Jessy’s progression and, therefore, the normalizing of her abilities; second, because
this focus on economic subjectivity. Released within the first couple of years of the 
Reagan administration (and, therefore, the consolidation of neoliberalism within the 
United States), this edition’s epilogue elaborates the type of economic subject that the 
politics of risk and failure attempt to imagine. Park repeats that Jessy represents “a 
success story” (280 and 319), but the criteria that define success are predominantly 
economic. Park first details Jessy’s difficult journey through school and her eventual 
graduation. Education serves a cathartic function that signifies the ability to work through 
acquiring some basic set of skills, attributing an emotional, teleological logic to labor. 
She then highlights a particular set of facts about Jessy’s life that document her economic 
viability: she is involved in job training; “she has a job, part-time still”; “she keeps her 
own checkbook”; “she may pay taxes” (280). Though the rest of the chapter does explain 
Jessy’s ongoing difficulty with typing, her love of cooking, and the progress she made 
with emotional literacy, Jessy’s budding economic independence is prioritized at the 
beginning of the chapter, defining her as a rational subject who can keep a checkbook.54

Economic rationality, as a means of suppressing fear about a child and paranoia 
about “all-encompassing systems,” has been central to the politics of overcoming and

Jessy’s role also reflects a division of labor, which is often integrated into capitalist goals 
of productivity and efficiency.

54 These issues are also central to the 2001 “sequel” of The Siege, titled Exiting Nirvana: 
A Daughter’s Life with Autism. Park repeatedly discusses Jessy’s obsession with her 
checkbook and paying taxes. The Foreward to Exiting Nirvana, written by Oliver Sacks, 
echoes the language of the earlier book: “All of us, perhaps, have to move from some 
primal Eden of self-sufficiency, self-absorption, changelessness, timelessness, into the 
vicissitudes and frustrations and unpredictabilities of the world, into a life that may be 
full of growth and adventure, but that threatens continual contingency and risk” (XI) and 
“she does work, with extreme competence and absolute reliability, as a mail clerk. She 
balances her checkbook; she pays taxes” (XII).
gender in autism memoirs. Economic shifts mediate the narrativization of anxieties produced by raising children with disabilities, informing rhetoric and structure. The rhetorical construction of disabilities does not only subjugate children and adults with disabilities to the logic of family “difficulty” predicated on the notion of “afflicted” or “diseased” families; it also introduces an economic rationality privatizing and limiting what the concept of “overcoming” can mean and offers austerity as the affect of neoliberal subjectivity, embedded within complex negotiations about gender performance and motherhood. Jenny McCarthy is a recent example, leading up to the post-Recession period, of this type of narrative. McCarthy prioritizes private solutions to autism while at the same time concealing the fact that these require implicating oneself in structures of debt often beyond individual control or understanding.

The rest of the chapter will specifically utilize this framework to analyze post-Recession representations of autism on television. The goals will be to illuminate the specificities of the televisual representation of the family narrative of autism; to further analyze the gender dynamics instituted through neoliberal governmentality and austerity; and to begin imagining aesthetics and narratives, within representations of disability, that disavow the neoliberal subject. To accomplish these goals, I argue that representations of autism, like the above memoirs, are often predicated on creating a sense of catharsis which simultaneously signifies the reconstitution of productivity and masculinity. Catharsis has a particular visual function that connects narratives of overcoming autism to the assumptions of neoliberal independence.
In visual representations, most notably on film and television, catharsis functions as the cue for the audience to feel good both about the future possibilities of the autistic character and the economic mechanisms that rule life more broadly. As a concept, catharsis derives from Aristotle’s discussion of Tragedy in *Poetics*, where he argues that “Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude… through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation [catharsis] of these emotions” (VI). Pity and, more relevant here, fear are the emotions of tragedy, directing the emotions of the audience so they can purge the negative emotion. Fear of and for autistic characters and other disabled men transform into neoliberal pleasure. In other words, autistic people are feared in visual texts because they may not succeed in a neoliberal world; their success resolves that possibility. The idea of a transformation, rather than strict purgation, is in line with Carl Plantinga’s model of catharsis:

The process of dealing with negative emotions in film…is not purgation but a ‘working through,’ a ‘dealing with,’ a ‘reconceptualization’— in short, the development of a construal that takes into account the negative circumstances of the narrative and frames them in such a way that their overall impact is both cognitively and emotionally satisfying, comforting, and pleasurable (179).

Both masculinity and neoliberal subjectivity, threatened by the extreme example of the person with autism, are not purged in representations of autism; they instead are reconceptualized and worked into the pleasure of the family as inherently both a space of vitality and disability, a working through that is also performed by negating the threat of the warrior mother.
Televising the Horror of Autism: *Parenthood*’s Neoliberal Redemption

*Parenthood*, which aired for six seasons from 2010 to 2015, follows the lives of the members of the Braverman family as they age, lose jobs, and fight amongst each other. Though the series is a wide-ranging drama, my analysis focuses on two central aspects of its narrative. First, that one character, an adolescent boy named Max, is autistic. Autism literally bookends the series: Max is diagnosed with Asperger’s in the first episode and attains success during the series finale, when he graduates from the special needs school founded by his parents. Much of the plot involving Max emphasizes his parents’ anxieties that he will not have an independent future and the fact that he is violent and unable to form social relationships. Threatening to remain dependent and destructive, the series documents Max’s transition towards independence and, therefore, limits what his parents perceive as an initial rebellion against the risky economic structures in which his family resides.

The second aspect of the show central to my analysis extends the importance of Max as an autistic character in need of learning how to be a neoliberal subject: that almost every major plotline involves economic anxiety, from the precarity of Max’s aunt, Sarah, as she tries to pull herself upright financially to Adam, Max’s father, eventually losing his job. *Parenthood* reflects anxieties about precarity and flexibility within the post-2008 economy, showing how the instability of employment affects concepts of family and individual constructions of gender. The series emphasizes the male breadwinner, with the exceptions of Julia (Max’s other aunt), who must constantly struggle against her stay-at-home husband Joel’s waning sense of masculinity, and Sarah,
who has no male partner and constantly fails to find stable work because her lack of focus and skill. The unemployed man and both employed and unskilled, inept (and therefore perpetually dependent) women are constantly reiterated as economic and familial threats. Kristina, Max’s mother, also eventually seeks to define her career by running for mayor of Berkeley, though she does this for sentimental reasons: to make the world better for her autistic son, and others like him, and because of surviving cancer. She is a warrior mother.

If *Parenthood* represents the delirium and fears of life under conditions of Recession from a middle-class vantage point, it also uses Max to assuage negative emotions and naturalize neoliberal subjectivity. Max’s coming of age into the mythologies of the neoliberal middle-class—utilizing the suffering, risk, and failure to his ultimate advantage—sutures the rhetoric of dysfunction surrounding Max in season one to a conclusion of promise and achievement. Max transitions from a signifier of autistic, dependent horror into a masculine, independent vision of success. As Max matures, his inclusion and successes bring the series more and more in line with the typical autism family narrative. The aesthetics of neoliberal success replace the aesthetics of horror, just as both fear and paranoia dissolve in the face of austerity. Coincidentally, as Max develops, his mother becomes increasingly victimized; as he finally begins finding interest in future careers in season four, Kristina is simultaneously diagnosed with breast cancer, solidifying her identity as both suffering victim and active warrior mother. Max’s status as disabled becomes displaced and, for both Max and Kristina, the motor of their financialization.
A core question when looking at autism on television revolves around the specificity of the medium: What does television offer for narratives of autism that film does not? Murray notes that “[t]he specific representation of autism within the family has become a common feature of television drama in recent years, possibly as the format is thought to lend itself to such analysis of the domestic in a way that feature films do not” (170). This, however, erases the full range of narratives represented on television, including the many crime dramas with autistic characters. Series with autistic characters dealing with domestic issues are also by far eclipsed by the number of films on that topic. While impossible to homogenize representations of autism on television to one explanatory standard, I focus on one important aspect of television dramas about the disorder relevant to innovating or extending the family narrative of autism, how the serial nature of television allows for the visualization of autistic “growth.” Whereas many films focus on young children with autism and memoirs emphasize particular stages of life (though Exiting Nirvana does explore 40 years of Jessy’s life, it does so topically and not chronologically or narratively), the need for character growth in autistic characters intensifies with television series. This growth, occurring generally for male characters,

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55 Such as Criminal Minds, Hannibal, and The Bridge. While the latter two could be said to metaphorically deal with issues of family, this is very different than the “domestic” drama integral to the family narrative of autism.

56 To be fair to Murray, however, the autism family narrative is more popular on television in the United Kingdom, which is his focus. Made-for-TV BBC productions about autism, as he notes, are relatively common, at least by comparison to the U.S. A recent example is The A Word, which has so far aired for one season. The series, similar to Parenthood, follows the life of a family as they find out that one member, a five-year-old boy, has autism. The A World deals with many themes in autism family narratives, such as a desire to cure autism and the strain autism can put on a family.
primarily concerns gender development (transitioning into masculine adulthood) and economic independence.\textsuperscript{57}

Autistic characters on television adopt a measure of agency not present in films, though “agency” has a very specific meaning attached to white, middle-class ideals of gender, heteronormativity, and productivity. \textit{Parenthood} follows this formula, positioning an autistic character within the economic climate of the twenty-first century and integrating austerity both at an emotional and technical level. Through its narrative, the characters and the audience are made to feel good about and have faith in the post-Recession economy. Using exemplary subjects (people with disabilities), texts like \textit{Parenthood} naturalize neoliberalism by privatizing autism around economies of risk and failure. They also, by extension, naturalize a masculinist logic, privileging a link between men and economic productivity which women can often only access, precariously, through the discourse of the warrior mother. Anxieties about the non-working man constantly haunt Max (or more specifically his parents) as Kristina constantly attempts to stake out a role outside of her family which, naturally for the show, induces guilt and conflict.

\textsuperscript{57} The “film” that gets closest to worrying about the transition from “autistic boy” to “autistic man” is \textit{Family Picture} (1993), though it was also technically a television mini-series. The autistic character, Randall, is admitted to an institution once his mother is no longer able to care for him. Randall eventually dies in a random accident, after which his mother, who visited him frequently, claims that she is finally “free.” As in many film representations of autism, \textit{Family Pictures} relies on stereotypes of arrested development very different from the economic and masculine possibilities that open up for a character like Max. At the same time, this is often a matter of low versus high-functioning autism. Low-functioning autism was very commonly represented in the 1980s and 90s, whereas high-functioning autism and Asperger’s Syndrome are more prevalent now.
In the first episode of the series, after learning that Max might have Asperger’s, his parents repeat that there is something “wrong” with him, a dysfunction that becomes associated throughout the series with both masculinity and productivity. When Kristina is about to tell Adam that Max has “high-functioning autism,” she is crying. She functions as a maternal nurturer, her emotions signifying her status as a woman as much as her fears of disability and pity for her son as a “marked man.” Adam insists that Max is just going through a “rough period,” an act of denial often associated with masculinity. They talk over each other in the first half of the conversation through a series of shot-reverse-shots, suggesting the chaos that autism brings to families. Adam stops talking, however, when Kristina, stumbling over her words, says that Max might have Asperger’s. She then claims that “a lot of people with Asperger’s live productive lives.” The chaotic dialogue and shot-reverse-shots continue until Kristina yells, “there is something wrong with our baby!” She, as a mother, is then allowed to speak, listing reasons why she believes Max may be autistic. Adam listens intently and hugs her. They are represented fully in the same shot, though their heads still face opposite directions. Adam defers to Kristina’s emotional guidance system and begins the process of accepting his son’s disability.

This scene sets up Parenthood’s narrative about autism, suggesting that it will reject the parental division evident in the types of texts analyzed by Stuart Murray by allowing the parents to bond over an economic future, the possibility that Max can be “productive.” Max’s parents repeatedly fear that he will remain on the economic margins. He must find success by emerging from the state of horror in which he exists at the beginning of the series. This horror is clear at the end of the episode, when Adam takes
Max outside while they are at a recital where Adam’s niece, Sydney, is singing. Sydney’s singing and warm smile contrast with Max’s stoic frown, shown when the camera cuts outside to a point of view shot of Max looking at his reflection in a puddle. The setting, a dark playground, offers the specter of threats to youth, with autism here standing in for a pedophile or murderer. Adam explains to Zeek, his father, that Max was afraid to go inside because of the candles in the building. Zeek responds with “that’s ridiculous,” and insists that Max go inside. Adam argues with him, mirroring the shot-reverse-shot sequence from the earlier scene. Adam finally says “there’s something wrong with my son,” repeating that there “is something wrong” three times. Adam tells Zeek “I am going to need you to help me” while the camera slowly zooms into Zeek’s face, plastered with the appearance of terror. The camera then cuts to Max, who is still jumping into the puddle, with Zeek and Adam standing in the background, positioned on a walkway above Max. Zeek says “okay” and strokes Adam’s cheek, a surprisingly nurturing gesture for the family patriarch.

Whereas the previous scene renders Kristina’s maternal “instincts,” this scene specifically presents autism as a concern for three generations of men, an object of masculine scrutiny rather than maternal nurturing. Righting the “wrong” becomes a new way to express masculinity: whereas women become warrior-mothers, men become nurturing fathers and grandfathers. If the series reconfigures the relationship between male characters to expand the possibilities of masculinity into the realm of caretaking and

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58 In a different episode, Zeek attempts to bring Max into a family tradition, camping, though Max has little interest and wants to go home, again reflecting autism as a negotiation of masculinity and patriarchy.
disability, these concerns are made masculine rather than offered as a challenge to traditional binaries. This is evident in the focus on baseball in the first episode, with Adam, as the team’s coach, dealing with the fact that Max hates playing. After the playground scene, however, Max surprises Adam by stating that he does not want to abandon his team. Max, then, exists within horror, rejecting masculine identifications, but is also recuperable as both a productive and masculine subject. Adam is rewarded because he gives Max a choice. Max, of course, chooses to simulate masculinity.

The trope of autism as horror, and potential (sexual) predator, emerges throughout the series, signifying the constant possibility that Max will lack a future and, therefore, never become financially viable. In the episode “Amazing Andy and His Wonderful World of Bugs,” late in the second season, Adam and Kristina, learning that the “bug guy” they have hired to perform at Max’s party also has Asperger’s, see a vision of Max’s middle-aged future, which they initially do not like. As they get to know Andy, however, they begin to feel better, knowing that, at the very least, Max will always have a niche, however menial, to fill. The episode initially positions Andy within the conventions of horror. It begins with the camera cutting from Max to a point of view shot from Max’s perspective, gazing into the dark front yard, then to a close-up of Andy staring out of the passenger window of his van. The fact that Andy gazes intently at the house where the camera just cut from Max’s perspective mirrors the conventions of horror and kidnapping films. Even Andy’s physical appearance and the clothes he wears
suggest a threat, as he vaguely resembles Jeffrey Dahmer. After a few seconds, the
camera cuts to a medium shot that dispels the initial possibility of horror: the entire car is
revealed, along with the giant cricket on top and the words “Amazing Andy’s Wonderful
World of Bugs” painted on the side. The tension, derived from the staging of the scene,
dissolves as we realize that Andy will be hired to perform at Max’s birthday party. Fear
and discomfort melt away and become something familiar and acceptable, a transition
that threads through the episode.

Kristina and Adam express discomfort with Andy repeatedly, most directly after he randomly takes a shower at their house. They become uncertain about entering into a contract with him. For advice, Kristina goes to Max’s school, where Andy has performed. The teacher with whom she talks reveals that Andy has Asperger’s, a failure on Kristina’s part to recognize the manifestations of autism. The teacher then replies that “[his Asperger’s] is why we support his business...But I understand. It’s a little different at a party at your house.” This directly addresses the economic precarity of autism, simultaneously implying that the school’s business is an act of charity and that the private space, the home, is perhaps best kept safe from invasion by people with autism. The house, as a private space, has an uneasy relationship with disability, a relationship that the series as a whole, and with Andy in particular, attempts to reconcile through gestures towards the catharsis of neoliberal subjectivity. Kristina responds “I just don’t know if

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59 This points to claims that Jeffrey Dahmer was autistic. Excesses of gendered affect (between a feminine meekness and masculine moments of rage and violence) are rendered visible as signifiers of monstrosity similarly in autism and sexual perversity. Indeed, Anne McGuire specifically has a chapter on how the rhetoric of “terror” and concept of kidnapping are used in autism advocacy in *War on Autism.*
it’s going to work. I mean, we’re going to have all of these kids there.” The sense of horror has carried over from the beginning of the episode, with Andy remaining a threat to children. Thus, he is rendered an economic victim of forces beyond his control and a potential victimizer.

As the episode progresses, Kristina and Adam’s opinions of Andy shift, allowing Andy to absorb economic anxieties they both feel regarding Max. After Kristina’s discussion with the teacher, the next scene jumps directly to the horror of Max’s autism, showing him yelling and throwing books to the floor. Coming to terms with the similarities between Andy and Max (or, more specifically, that they are just projecting fears about Max onto Andy) becomes the struggle for Kristina and Adam in the next scene, when they admit that they never thought about the fact that children with autism would have to “grow up.” In other words, Max will have to learn to transform his aggression into economic stability. Kristina notes that she feels like a hypocrite: “What if one day Max wants to get a job and the people don’t hire him because they’re nervous?”

The episode repeatedly opposes nervousness and comfort, as suggested by the complex emotions produced by the scene where Andy first shows up in his van. To be more specific, the episode, and the series as a whole, seeks to transform nervousness into comfort, documenting the integration of autistic people into the economy as a sign that the economy is sound and that aggression can be redirected into entrepreneurial masculinity. Autistic masculinity must ultimately be cathartically accepted to stabilize the mythologies of neoliberalism.
Nervousness and comfort function as an important structuring dichotomy for the series: the fantasy of stable comfort in the middle-class, liberal existence of the Braverman family repeatedly pushes up against the “nervousness” of the economy. Rather than dealing directly with the structural issues causing economic precarity, *Parenthood* projects these threats onto the possibility of a worker with autism, letting disability absorb the transition from nervousness to comfort. Not wanting to seem impolite, Kristina and Adam begrudgingly accept that Andy will perform at Max’s party. Kristina’s role is minimized at the party to that of party planner and shepherd of the children, with Adam and Zeek directly interrogating Andy about his economic viability. Zeek displays initial disbelief when Adam claims that Andy has Asperger’s. He then qualifies his reaction by saying “and he’s got his own business there?” This question signifies hope for Max’s future, apparent when Adam talks to Andy after the party. At first complimenting Andy (“You’re really good at what you do. It’s also great you’re doing something that you love to do”), Adam then asks him a series of questions: “So you really like this? Your job? Your life? What you do? Are you happy?” Adam is essentially asking Andy about his relative level of comfort, narrowing his life into his job (with the repetition of “job” and “what you do” surrounding “life”). Happiness here signifies two things: Andy’s level of comfort within the economy and Adam’s ability (if Andy is happy) to ignore his nervousness by feeling good about the way neoliberal ideology has treated Andy.

Andy’s response, looking at Adam directly for the first time in this scene and saying “Yeah, sometimes. Are you happy?”, has two contradictory valences, suturing and
rupturing, that we can read in terms of how autism is represented in the series as a whole. This dialogue is explicitly meant to have a suturing effect on the viewer; Andy’s simplistic innocence makes the audience, and Adam simultaneously, realize that Max can have a future of relative (economic) comfort. On the other hand, Andy’s question implies discomfort, emphasized by the word “sometimes.” Sometimes introduces nervousness not to Adam’s relationship with Andy and Max, but instead to his relationship with his own status as a homo economicus.

Earlier in the season, in the episode “Seven Names,” Adam, as a manager, is asked to start laying off workers. Rather than using this to critique the way the economy operates, both Adam and the series as a whole latch onto neoliberal rhetoric. Adam seeks to minimize layoffs by restructuring the workforce in a way similar to “big business.” When these plans fail, Adam resists his boss by saying that “these are people.” His boss replies with the streamlined neoliberal reduction of people to a logic of finance: “Stop thinking, just do it.” His boss, in other words, asks Adam to accept the post-Recession logic that structures their lives. When practicing the speech he will give to the employees he is to lay off, Adam finds himself transforming into a neoliberal manager: Kristina tells him not to cry and his daughter, Haddie, tells him that he can’t expect people to take care of him emotionally when he is firing them. By excising his emotions and accepting the layoffs as natural and necessary, Adam himself becomes a neoliberal subject parallel to Max and Andy. Nervousness about firing, in Adam’s storyline, gives way to comfort and ease. In other words, just as Andy accepts his “role” in the economy, Adam must show others to accept theirs by accepting the economy as cognitive and rational rather than
emotional. Ironically, Adam enters the traditional role of autistic child in family narratives of autism, trained by women in the art of being human. Kristina and Haddie, who often cry, train Adam in the art of being a man as they, themselves, take the roles of warrior mothers.

Through this process, the show often redirects pity about men, de-emphasizing their struggles and victimization in order to bestow women with an excess of emotions and suffering.\textsuperscript{60} Throughout the series, many women, especially Kristina and Sarah, are shown failing and suffering, both in terms of physical illness and in their attempts to create their own careers. This is especially true when Kristina gets breast cancer, an event that calls her ability to care for Max into question but also transforms her into someone who is disabled and marked with a disease that is inherently coded as female (as opposed to autism). “Amazing Andy and His Wonderful World of Bugs” essentially functions, then, as a turning point for the men in the series. The conversations about Andy allow characters to reiterate their faith in economic comfort even if, as Andy says, this is only possible “sometimes,” a fact especially true for women, with Kristina opening Chambers Academy in season six only because Adam and his brother, as entrepreneurs, have been able to make money by opening a recording studio.\textsuperscript{61} Like Andy, who teaches Adam

\textsuperscript{60} This happens in an earlier scene in “Seven Names.” Adam states that having to lay off people is “nothing to be afraid of,” whereas Kristina begins expressing sympathy for the lives of those Adam has to lay off, demonstrating that she knows the personal hardships of the people that work for Adam. She maintains her position as nurturer, then, even as she gives Adam the power to be stoic and masculine.

\textsuperscript{61} Adam and Crosby do not, however, have an easy time with the recording studio, and they often are on the brink of losing everything in season three. The company stabilizes,
about ascending to your place in the economy and accepting your “life” as synonymous with your work, Max ultimately counters nervousness; as Andy shows everyone, Max must find his niche and happiness, even when economic recession necessitates layoffs that will, statistically, heavily affect people like Andy and Max. Nervousness is disavowed through the productivity of people with disabilities while disability later becomes projected onto female characters.

In season four, when Kristina is diagnosed with cancer, Max begins his direct transition into neoliberal subjecthood and into masculine entrepreneurialism. His ability to accept economic rationality resolves the purely economic tensions of the series. He transforms into an accidental proponent of capitalism when he becomes class president in the episodes “I’ll Be Right Here” and “You can’t Always Get What You Want.” His platform only has one plank: restoring a vending machine to his school. Max uses the obsessive behavior associated with his autism to become the savior of laissez-faire consumption. In this role, he again becomes a metaphor for the governing logic of neoliberalism, refusing to allow any discussion occur beyond the vending machine. When he is running for president, he says in his speech as the student body intently watches and Haddie, filling in as the warrior mother due to Kristina’s illness, supports him from the side of the stage, “Another thing about Asperger’s is that I always keep my promises, so

however, and they quickly become profitable as Adam constantly shows off his skills as an entrepreneur.

62 An autistic man getting laid off is narrativized in the film Adam; getting fired introduces Adam to the flexible and precarious job market, with the second half of the film representing his transformation into an entrepreneur of the self, including repeated lessons on how to interview for a job. For more on Adam, see the conclusion to Chapter Five.
when I tell you that I will bring back the vending machines, you can believe me.” This functions at one level as a parody of political stereotypes, referring to the idea that politicians say anything to get elected, and blends these with stereotypes of autism, that Max will somehow be a benevolent leader because he cannot lie (an absurd reimagining of the George Washington myth). At the same time, he is asking his constituents to submit fully to his logic, to “believe him” because he knows how to bring back the vending machines. The speech also challenges the concept of disability, with Max noting that Asperger’s is his “greatest strength.” The camera then cuts to a close-up shot of Kristina’s face as she lays in a hospital bed with an oxygen tube at her nose; a heart monitor is heard beeping.

The last few seasons focus heavily on channeling disability into strength, even as Kristina’s suffering is emphasized. Max is eventually successful, with some help from Kristina’s political savvy, though initially the student council rejects Max’s proposal in favor of funding a dance. Max, reducing his constituents to consumers, does not relent and gets upset about the student council’s attacks on his authority. Thus, the episode continues to reflect some nervousness about his behaviors that are slowly resolved, especially throughout season five when he becomes an apprentice to Hank, a local photographer. Hank’s storyline follows a similar, though more extended, pattern as Andy’s. Hank begins to believe he has Asperger’s after hiring Max. Hank is abrasive, rude, and, picky about details, causing him to often be in danger of losing jobs. This changes for him when Sarah begins working as his assistant, helping him understand when others are not responding well to his behavior. Sarah also, though, works at a lower
level than Max; she is Hank’s inept “assistant,” retaining her low position while Max is being groomed for economic mobility: to work at Hank’s level. Sarah and Hank eventually develop a relationship, primarily coded through the fact that Hank’s Asperger’s complicates his ability to maintain a close relationship. Regardless, the last episode of the series involves Hank and Sarah getting married, a vision of futurity and the masculine pursuit of heteronormativity possible for people with autism.

This is also the trajectory the series gives to Max. His success is clear in the series finale, allowing the audience and his family to ultimately feel good about both autism and the framework of the modern economy. For much of the last season, one of the major plot lines of Parenthood involves Adam and Kristina founding their own charter school for children with special needs. They become entrepreneurs, an extension of their white, middle-class privilege to weather out the Recession. The name of the academy, Chambers, is also a symbol of both the possibilities of female victimhood and perseverance, inspired by Gwen Chambers, a cancer patient whom Kristina met during chemotherapy; Gwen subsequently died. Max attends Chambers, the culmination of having the financial privilege to attend a competitive charter school and the privilege of having parents produce such a school for him. At Chambers, he finally begins to express his (hetero)sexuality, though his obsessions with a female student, Dylan, also situate him within discourse about toxic masculinity, a fact which the series also resolves as he finds success.

The series finale ends, after Sarah and Hank’s wedding (for which Max acts as photographer), with a montage that shows what happens to the characters. Their futures
are predominantly filled with more children: Crosby and Jasmine are shown with their two children; Julia and Joel, who had already adopted one child (in addition to their biological child), have now adopted two more children; Amber, Max’s cousin, is shown with her new boyfriend and her son, which cuts into a scene of Max’s younger sister running around a baseball field. She runs towards home plate where Max waits for her. He hugs her and the camera transitions to a close-up of his face as he connects emotionally with his sister, binding them together as family in a way that resolves the constant tensions and struggles that threatened his relationship with his parents. The camera zooms in, very slightly, towards Max’s face, allowing the audience to identify with him. He has, the camera assures us, transitioned out of the horror of autism, cured of his social dysfunctions and limiting disinterest in human emotions.

The camera then cuts to Max’s moment of catharsis, where his potential to be successful is most clearly visually rendered and where, then, any lingering nervousness about the (economic) future dissolves. The scene depicts a crowd of parents on the left and Max with his classmates, in graduation robes, sitting to the right. Max rises and approaches the front of the room, where Adam smiles proudly and hands him his diploma. Max takes the diploma, walks stoically to the right and then smiles, one of the only moments where he is smiles in the series. He raises his arms in the air and brandishes his diploma, after which the camera cuts to his family clapping, specifically to a close-up of Kristina as she smiles and cries. The camera then cuts to Adam, looking back at his wife, as he smiles. The tension of the first episode of the series, where shot-reverse-shots produce a sense of chaos and conflict, disappears. In the very last scene,
right after Max’s graduation, we see the end of the baseball game, which the Bravermans play in honor of Zeek, who has died. The series returns to baseball, which appeared prominently in episode one, as a last way of binding the activity to the show’s focus on patriarchy and masculinity. As one model of masculinity, antiquated but revered, dies, another, Max, ascends. The family walks off the baseball field as the camera looks down at them and pans away. Max walks along behind them, but speeds up to get between Camille and Adam. Adam puts his arm around Max and the camera fades to the last set of credits for the series. Autism, and the idea of potential success and familial integration for the marked man, ends the series.

The aesthetics of neoliberal success replace the aesthetics of horror, just as both fear and paranoia dissolve in the face of austerity. Masculinity and productivity become pleasurable experiences rather than signifiers of instability and anxiety. *Parenthood* is a prime example of the politics of the family narrative of autism, though it also updates and extends economic fear into the post-Recession period. The instability of gender and neoliberal mythologies necessitates the catharsis produced by disability, working through initial fear into a sense of wholeness, normativity, and success. Non-autistic characters, especially Adam, constantly solve their anxieties by witnessing the success of people with autism as they are asked to submit irrationally to a rationality that involves ignoring their emotions and accepting the affective requirements of austerity. By accepting disabled visions of identity, Adam and Kristina both go through transformations in their gender positions, learning to accept their austere roles as caregivers in a disabling economy. At the level of storytelling and the camera the series also parses victimization,
de-emphasizing male failures by constantly rendering the suffering of women. Such tensions also become resolved in the final season, with Kristina finding pleasure in her role as warrior mother. Neoliberalism is presented as the opposite of horror in *Parenthood* because of the ability to integrate people with autism into the question “Are you happy?” The next section will analyze a reimagining of the autism family narrative, *Bates Motel*, to suggest how the horror of autism and the horror of neoliberalism are aesthetically transferrable as a means of locating and emphasizing the gender politics of neoliberalism. *Bates Motel* literally uses horror as a genre to reimagine narratives of families dealing with a child who has a cognitive or mental disability.

*Bates Motel* and Recessional Gender Fantasies of Victimization

In the final season of *Bates Motel*, a modern reimagining of the *Psycho* franchise, Norman Bates states to Sheriff Romero, who he is visiting in prison, “don’t think I’m unsympathetic to your plight, because I know what it’s like to be locked up.” Norman plays the role of the victim, alluding to his time in a psychiatric facility. In the previous episode, Norman’s mother Norma, claims that she, in pretending to die, “gave up my life to protect you.” The latter quote, part of Norman’s delusions (his mother is dead, since he killed her in season four), eternalizes Norma as a warrior mother, protecting her mentally ill son. Norman, on the other hand, presents himself as eternal victim, creating a fantasy of his mother as a controlling and stifling force in his life. Finally containing her in their house through her death, Norman proudly wears a name tag that identifies him as the manager of their hotel, shown early in the season in a close-up. Norman functions as both victim to the panoptic gaze of his dead mother and as liberated economic subject. In
showing how Norman ultimately arrives at this arrangement, Bates Motel represents the fantasies of marked man as they interact with the instability of the post-Recession period. Norma ultimately, as a warrior mother, finds herself implicated in the stifling toxicity of neoliberalism as she operates as a site of projection for anxieties about masculinity and victimization.

By positioning Bates Motel in the history of family narratives of autism, I do not mean to suggest that Norman is diagnosed as autistic or that autism is a violent psychosis. The series itself does not put much emphasis on diagnosing Norman, becoming central only when medical and psychiatric interventions emerge in season four. Most likely, he exists at the intersection of generally being “psychotic” and having dissociative identity disorder. The series focuses, however, on Norma’s attempts to protect Norman, desperation about the fact that she cannot help him, and fears about his violent behavior, concerns and behaviors commonly represented in family narratives of autism. It also deliberately integrates the economic concerns of the twenty-first century, documenting how Norman’s disability causes him and his mother to find themselves in a precarious situation. Like Max and Jessy, there is fear that Norman will never “grow up” and, therefore, will need his mother for the rest of the life, despite possibly (as happens) outliving her. In an ironic twist to this narrative, Norman recreates his mother in his fantasies, allowing her to support him while he simultaneously seeks his independence.

63 Indeed, the ideas about family and autism in this chapter were inspired by media coverage of moms who have killed their autistic sons, some of which also killed themselves. These murders are often discussed as acts of mercy and love and also, less commonly, used to critique the level of assistance available for people with disabilities. In Bates Motel, Norman’s attempt at a murder-suicide, which kills Norma, is believed to have been perpetuated by Norma, a narrative divorced from the optimism of Parenthood.
explicitly embodying the dialectic of autism in culture in a way relevant to economic anxieties in the twenty-first century.

While Norma follows the path of the warrior mother, the series defuses the catharsis central to the overcoming narrative, testing what happens if disability does not allow a working through of masculinity or economic nervousness. Bates Motel represents a rationalized patriarchal order through which Norman attempts to imagine his subjectivity and against which Norma must, often irrationally, struggle. Norman embodies these two impulses, the rational and irrational, in both his blackouts, automatic responses during which he seeks out the most logical conclusion to a situation (which often involves murdering the people threatening his mom), and his increasing paranoia about the forces out to get him, “forces” that Norma comes to represent in season four. Norman transforms into a metaphor of the paranoid neoliberal forces that rule White Pine Boy, focusing that paranoia on Norma. What happens, however, is that Norman blacks out and becomes Norma, allowing him to embody what he imagines to be her violent, victimizing side. The series revolves, then, around male fears of female economic productivity, putting these concerns in the context of a disability narrative.

While Norma seems domineering in the early episodes, she becomes much more sympathetic through her attempts to protect Norman, even to her own detriment. The negative aspects of her identity are reproduced and performed by Norman, who internalizes her suffering (such as the fact that her brother raped her when they were younger, resulting in the birth of Norman’s older brother Dylan). She is, essentially, an updated version of what Carol Clover has called the “female victim-hero” (4), a figure
that she argues became central to horror films in the 1970s and 80s. Clover documents
how horror uses female victims as a point of identification for male audiences,
challenging the idea that men only want “the experience of a mastering, voyeuristic gaze”
(9). Through this argument, Clover explains how horror films allow “displacement” so
that boys can experience and disavow feminine pleasures: “here we arrive at the politics
of displacement: the use of the women as a kind of feint, a front through which the boy
can simultaneously experience forbidden desires and disavow them on grounds that the
visible actor is…a girl” (18)

In Bates Motel, the “girl” of 70s and 80s horror has become a woman, while the
series meta-narratively renders the politics of identification involved in men internalizing
and disavowing the victimization of a woman. The first four seasons of Bates Motel offer
background information to Psycho, with season five remaking many of the film’s events.
In the first episode of the series, Norma buys the iconic Bates Motel. Unlike Psycho, the
series is set in White Pine Bay, an ostensibly idyllic Oregon coastal town with ties to the
drug trade and sex slavery. Norman and Norma unwittingly become entangled in feuds
between drug lords and discover that their motel was at one point used to hide sex slaves.
The series, then, expands the narrative of Norman Bates to present the harsh, wealth-
fueled world in which he lives. White Pine Bay operates as a neoliberal town, with the
government and police completely entangled with financial interests. These
entanglements mirror the neoliberal matrix documented in the previous chapter: Norma is
forced to accept the economic rationalities encasing her, which exist in the shadows and
are impossible to fully understand from any given vantage point. Indeed, Norma’s
character arc involves her attempting to make sure that her hotel is not made irrelevant by a new highway bypass project, a central plot element for the first three seasons. Having no resources outside of the hotel, Norma becomes stuck in a toxic situation, unable to buy herself to freedom like Jenny McCarthy or Max’s parents in *Parenthood*. Early in season three, she is reduced to the irrational response of destroying the sign for the bypass with her car (after she fails to dent it by throwing rocks), a symbolic act which has no effect on the bypass and, therefore, her submission to subtle economic forces outside of her control.

The first episode of the series, “First You Dream, Then You Die” involves Norma and Norman moving into the house, which Norma bought from foreclosure. At this point, Norman’s disability and his dependence on his mother have been made clear, positioning him as a pitiable dependent. In the opening scene of the episode, which documents the death of his father, Norman stumbles through his house, looking dazed, as we watch him through a series of mostly close-ups, the type used throughout the series to put us in dizzying proximity with Norman’s mental instability. After finding his father’s dead body in the garage, Norman runs to find Norma. He says very little other than “dad?” and “mom?” suggesting his dependence on his parents and infantilized mental state. His longest sentence in this scene comes when he finally finds Norma: “It’s dad. He’s— Hurry.” The incomplete sentence and the fact that Norman slurs his words again define Norman as a disabled character, echoed by the dizzying effects of the camera.

The death of the father is common in autism narratives, often signifying the “break” that causes a child to recede into autism. In *Bates Motel*, the death of Norman’s
father (an abusive alcoholic) gestures towards a larger crisis of men and masculinity, and
Norman’s contradictory position in such a system. It also signifies a more direct
willingness to deal with the effects of masculinity than a series like Parenthood, which
attempts to naturalize identity around implicitly masculine ideals. Norman, we eventually
find out, killed his father, though he does not know this because he blacked out, a first
indication of his tendency to exact revenge as his Norma persona. Dependent on his
mother, he is a suffering victim, a site of audience identification in their pity for his loss;
at the same time, he is victimizer. Norman murdering his father is also potentially
rationalized as an act of self-defense, an attempt to protect himself and his mother from
abuse. In other words, the first murder in the series exists outside of the strict boundaries
of the horror genre, instead using domestic abuse as a means of engaging with gender
politics. By season four, however, Norman believes that Norma killed his father, leading
him to kill her. His allegiances shift, then, towards patriarchal authority as he seeks to
disavow his disability and delusions. He imagines that Norma is crazy and that he is,
really, another of her male victims. The Psycho structure, where Norman literally
becomes his mother, presents the appropriation of female victimhood, directly lived
through by Norma, into the psychic structures underlying Norman’s behavior. This
circular process of victimization, in which Norma and Norman are both caught, is most
clearly represented, in the early seasons, in the rigid, invisibly rationalized violence
perpetuated in White Pine Boy.

During the scene following Norman’s discovery of his dead father, occurring “six
months later,” Norma and Norman drive to White Pine Bay where Norma surprises him
with the hotel. This is the beginning of the “dream” mentioned in the episode’s title, the American Dream of owning a business. While, based on the source material and the act of murdering his father, Norman is psychotic, he notes that moving to start a business is “crazy,” already shifting irrationality onto his mother. The Bates house and motel are shown in a long shot with Norman, turned away from the audience, in the foreground and Norma a short distance from him, lying on their car posing like a model. The shot mimics used car commercials, as Norma uses her body to sell the house to Norman—suggesting her precarious exposure to the (financialized) male gaze. The camera then cuts to a shot from inside the house, at the top of the stairs looking down at an awkward angle. The front door opens and Norma and Norman enter the antique house as Norma says she bought the house from foreclosure. The camera cuts to a shot on the ground floor to the side of the happy “couple,” shifting from the oblique, disorienting shot to a standard shot as a way of naturalizing them as the new owners of the house. The camera soon cuts back to the shot from the top of the stairs, though this time without the oblique angle, and Norma and Norman run towards it. The camera switches back to close-ups and medium shots of them, at their level. These shots slowly ease Norma and Norman into “natural” ownership of the house, though at the same time suggesting how the house, as a bad investment, encases them in potential horror.

The term foreclosure clearly situates the show in the post-2008 Recession period, a shifting economic landscape where some cross boundaries while others are foreclosed from the neoliberal fantasy. For Norma, the foreclosure is a means of starting over, of protecting Norman and finding a level of independence, even as they become financially
dependent on the house. Like McCarthy’s “self-funding,” their agency is simultaneously subjugation to financial interests. Norma and Norman thus embody the dual nature of neoliberal subjectivity in this scene. Norma optimistically states “Norman, we’ve been through a lot. This is our chance to start over.” While acknowledging past difficulties, the “start over” (like the “start up”) envisions an entrepreneurial subject capable of seizing their future through unfettered potential. Norman, on the other hand, posits a world ruled by an invisible logic, suggesting that “maybe some people don’t get to start over. Maybe they just bring themselves to a new place.” Norma’s response—“They do get to start over, but they have to try”—repeats the logic of the homo economicus, though the shift from first-person in her original comment to third-person, a shift initiated by Norman, renders the fantasy as a distant cliché. Norma’s insistence that “it’s all going to be good, you’ll see,” a mantra she repeats throughout the series until it becomes untenable in season four, reflects her irrational submission to a logic devoid of substance, the emotional logic of capitalism. This is also, however, the only logic available for a supportive parent, where Norma must trust in the power of economic investments to maintain stability for Norman.

The next scene shows, however, that it will not be “good,” especially for Norma, whose body will be constantly scrutinized and controlled by men. The camera cuts to Norman, at dusk, unloading the car; a point of view shot shows Norma half-dressed through the upstairs window. Norma is exposed and vulnerable, the screen figure onto which Norman can project his fantasies. Later in the episode, Norman’s propensity to imagine his masculinity against Norma is connected to another character, Keith.
Summers, who expresses the unstable and predatory logics of neoliberal masculinity. Summers, the previous owner of the motel, attacks Norma, as a woman, in order to regain his “rightful” social position and assert economic power. He arrives in the episode right after Norman meets other beautiful women—three high school girls (including Bradley, who Norman later kills) and Miss Watson, who Norman kills at the end of the season when he imagines that she is trying to seduce him.\(^{64}\) Norman’s predation, then, is entangled with the patriarchal logics that constantly attempt to disavow victimization using female bodies.

Summers shows up outside of the house as Norman is cleaning the porch. He quickly becomes aggressive with Norman and lists facts about him: “You’re 17, you’re from Arizona, and your father died.” That Summers knows these facts gives the first indication of a system of surveillance beyond Norma and Norman’s control. Summers then attacks Norman’s business savvy, asking if he actually knows anything about running a motel because he “looks like a little kid to me. I don’t think you could run

\(^{64}\) The scene immediately following Norman’s meeting with Miss Watson involves him coming home later after trying out for the track team. Norma isn’t happy he returned so late, but Norman explains that Miss Watson suggested he try out. Norma says track would take up too much time since she needs him to help with the motel, though she passively aggressively agrees to allow him to join the team. Whether jealous of Miss Watson (she harshly says “Who’s Miss Watson?”) or genuinely concerned about the motel and how much she is forced to do as a single mother, Norma’s passive aggressive rage is common in season one. Whereas in season one she fits the archetype of Mother Bates, controlling and egotistical, later seasons characterize her as more confused, conflicted, and vulnerable. This scene is also important because it channels this rage through economic meanings: she insists that Norman help her with the motel rather than pursue his own interests, tying his identity completely to, simultaneously, her and the need to make money. Her passive aggressiveness even parallels neoliberal subjectivity, giving others the initiative to make their own choices but clearly privileging the more economically-oriented choice as rational.
much of nothing.” He ties Norman’s masculinity very directly to the concept of the *homo economicus*, but also to a disabled sense of self embedded in Norman’s arrested development. Once Norma comes out of the house, Summers says that the motel is his “family’s property” and asserts patrilineal authority over the property by declaring his great-great-grandfather built the house in 1912. Throughout the scene, the camera shows Summers standing below the porch with Norma and Norman positioned on the porch, rendering the economic hierarchy created through Summers losing the motel. Norma tells Summers “I’m sure it was very hard for you to lose it to the bank. And, uh, I’m very sorry, but, uh, well, it is ours now.” She gestures to “the bank” as a higher authority, situating them both as subject to the economy. Summers says that Norma does not know anything about the town and asks, “What makes you think you can run this place by yourself?” He questions, implicitly based on her gender, her fitness for running a business. Norma walks towards him, nearly to his level, and assuredly responds “because I can. Now get the hell off my property.” Summers’s patriarchal knowledge, the fact that the male members of his family have been an integral component of the community for decades, is devalued by the staging of the scene, with Summers positioned lower than Norma and off of the porch entirely. Norma claims the property as her own, asserting ownership that, throughout the episode and series, remains immensely precarious.

This scene’s hailing of the effects of the Recession complicates spectator identification. Summers constructs himself as a victim of the predatory, unfeeling agenda of financial institutions. Norma, on the other hand, supports the bank, the villain of the Recession, adopting the austere affect of banking by showing disinterest in Summers’s
narrative, becoming a warrior mother who claims what is hers. What this scene and the
next present, however, is how Norma becomes the male fantasy of the threatening woman
in a context when men perceive they are losing their natural, paternal rights. She
functions as the victimizing Other of the white male as victim even as she, ultimately,
also has very little power. This is clearly rendered later in the episode, when Summers
rapes Norma. His response is to attempt to reclaim his masculinity through transforming
Norma into a victim—the very process Norman goes through when he becomes paranoid
about Norma and kills her in season four. While Norma initially capitalizes on this
economic climate by buying the house and motel, the neoliberal impulse to value humans
through notions of productivity, and the emphasis on competition and masculinity this
produces, immediately become threats to Norma and her ability to protect Norman.

Norma hears strange sounds outside the house at night. The camera occasionally
associates us with the perspective usually aligned with the monster of horror films,
positioned outside of the window gazing in at Norma (as Norman did earlier in the
episode). Norma goes about her domestic duties, washing dishes and cleaning the
kitchen. The camera, which moves from inside to outside and then back to the inside of
the house, blurs the boundary between the two economic perspectives present in this
scene: the middle-class interior and the impoverished, foreclosed exterior. In one shot,
the camera is positioned outside and Norma, after hearing a sound, looks directly at it,
associating the audience with the external monster as the female “hero-victim” returns
our gaze with an intensely anxious but self-assured expression. The locus of horror in this
scene, however, is not Norman. Unlike Parenthood, Bates Motel does not allow cognitive
or affective disability to immediately signify as a threat, instead situating Norman within an already misogynistic, competitive neoliberal landscape where he transforms into an iteration (a return of the repressed) of the violent politics of victimhood present in this scene. To reclaim the authority taken from him, Summers breaks into the house, kicks Norma to the floor, and rapes her, an act of sexual dominance that he ineffectually links to his economic power. After he tapes her mouth shut, literally silencing her, he says “this house, this house is mine. And everything in this house is mine.” Summers disavows his victimization, claiming that the house, and by extension Norma’s body, is still his, relocating his subjugation to economic logics to his hatred of Norma.

After Summers starts raping Norma, Norman appears and incapacitates him. Norma later kills Summers after he claims, “you liked it.” She exists at the intersection of victim and victimizer, a duality central to Norman’s later pathology as he himself identifies Norma as violent and himself as male victim. The first scene which employs horror conventions in the series is used to convey the politics of male victimization. Norma refuses to report the rape, stating that she doesn’t want it going public (along with Norman’s mental illness). Worrying about her ability to support Norman economically and conceal his mental illness, Norma erases her own needs. She must maintain the integrity of her business and the domestic sphere, the private space untainted by external intervention. Bates Motel challenges this narrative, however, by being very clear about the gender politics of neoliberalism. Norma’s status as a neoliberal subject precludes her identity and rights as a woman, which remain subordinate (and even detrimental) to her attempts to be a productive member of White Pine Bay. While she was a victim of rape,
Summers’s body, which Norma and Norman dispose of, remains a threatening signifier of male power for many episodes, especially after the body is found, subjecting Norma to more scrutiny and, eventually, arrest.

After she kills Summers, Norma again appeals to the notion of starting over, as she did earlier in the episode: “It will be in all the papers, everyone in town will know about it….It will ruin us! …We came here to start over. I am starting over!” The logic of starting over, already exposed as impossible, opposes public surveillance, threatening her position as a warrior mother who can aggressively keep the private and public separate. Norman panics about what they are going to do with Summers’s body, paranoid about surveillance by authorities, whereas Norma begins to rationalize the situation, telling Norman to calm down. She comforts Norman, telling him it is going to be okay, despite the fact that she was just raped. (She even goes as far as apologizing to Norman for being raped, inculcating the logics of rape culture, where the woman is to blame for violence done to her.) Rather morbidly, Norman states that they are “screwed,” invoking a metaphor of penetration, similar to the anxieties that led Summers to rape Norma. Thus, the structural fantasy of male victimization is set directly against actual female victimization.65

65 In season two, Norman briefly dates a girl named Cody who initially believes Norman is gay. She takes him to a party on a beach while she makes out with another guy next to him. The guy grabs Norman’s leg, causing Norman to get defense and insist they leave. Cody leaves with Norman and eventually asserts forcefully “I’m not gay.” Norman’s need to construct stability around his sexual orientation reflects this fear of penetration, ironic since Norman literally performs as his mother throughout the series, internalizing both male and female identities (and in the final season has sex, as Norma, with a man). He must disavow this side of his identity, however, imagining himself as a heterosexual victim of Cody’s friend. This is similar to scenes that occur while Norman is in Pineview.
The series follows a similar pattern in its first three seasons, showing Norma increasingly vulnerable as she attempts to protect Norman from the crime bosses of White Pine Bay while Norman begins murdering, mostly women, embodying an aggressive masculinity that he, of course, projects as *femininity* in the form of his fantasies of Norma. The series constantly exposes the sentimental possibility that disability can “overcome” in a way parallel to economic mobility as a fantasy. Indeed, Norman gets worse as seasons pass, internalizing his status as violent victim. For instance, after killing Miss Watson at the end of season one while in a trance, he attends her funeral in the first episode of season two, weeping uncontrollably. As Norman becomes more violent, Norma makes an economic compromise. Finally deciding that Norman needs help, in season four she decides to marry Romero, stating that “I need insurance. You have insurance. So I thought you could marry me.” Norma narrows her personal transactions into economic ones to find help for Norman, still stuck with the hotel that generates very little revenue due to the bypass. Though Norma *does* love Romero, which becomes more clear as the season progresses, Norma constantly asserts that she only wants his insurance, trying to protect Norman from becoming enraged. Norma needs the insurance because she wants to send Norman to an expensive mental health facility, Pineview Institute, finally having recognized that Norman is getting more delusional and potentially dangerous under her care. Being placed in the institution, he attempts to suggest this his psychiatrist, who is gay, is abusing him, using this as blackmail to ensure his escape.

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66 This does happen, though, for one character, Emma, a friend of Norman’s who has cystic fibrosis. In seasons three and four, she gets a lung transplant secretly paid for by Norma’s brother.
however, fuels Norma’s sense of victimization, evident in the shift in how Pineview is visually represented.

In season three, when Norma first visits Pineview to see if she can get Norman admitted, the facility looks decadent, spacious, and bright. She only enters the entrance area of the facility, which includes an ornately decorated vestibule, a large office, and a lobby with expensive furniture and a fireplace, resembling the lobby of a fancy hotel. When Norman is admitted to Pineview in season four, however, the close-up shots and the fact that many of the scenes of him there take place at night create a darker and more cramped atmosphere, putting the audience in close proximity to Norman and the other patients in opposition to the distance and spaciousness offered by the front office and lobby. The camera often cannot show Norman without some other patient interfering visually. While different from the literally cramped county psychiatric hospital to which Norman is admitted earlier in the season, the use of camera in both locations have similar effects: suggesting imprisonment, terror, and surveillance. Indeed, this is exactly the imprisonment to which Norman alludes when talking to Romero in season five.

This horror, however, is viewed subjectively from Norman’s perspective, signifying a mental illness he refuses to accept. Instead, he projects his violence onto his mother, presenting himself as the victim of a conspiracy by believing she is trying to get rid of him by keeping him in the institution. He, in other words, transforms into an exaggerated, extended version of Keith Summers, dislocating the real locus of post-Recession instability and projecting it onto Norma. In a season four episode before he enters Pineview, “Goodnight, Mother,” Norman has a vision of his dead father telling
him that Norma is framing him for her own violence. His father states that “you need to control her, Norman, before she destroys you.” The logic here is both existential, about Norman’s very survival, and economic, since the act of initializing Norman interrupts his ability to seize a productive, independent future. Though Norman at first claims that his father is just a manifestation of his “illness,” he becomes silent during a close-up where his father kisses him on the forehead. He convinces himself that Norma killed his father and confronts her in the next scene, accusing her of also killing Miss Watson, Bradley, and Audrey (the mother of another character, Emma, who Norman killed in the previous episode). This scene is one of very few where Norman expresses deep rage outside of his Norma persona. Norman first accuses Norma of being crazy and victimizing him, stating “I don’t think you’re in your right mind, and you’re trying to sabotage me,” as the camera cuts between them. Norma remains silent and composed, though also visibly afraid as Norman simultaneously cries and yells in a rage: “You are trying to blame me! You are trying to have it all pinned on me and have me locked up! Well I am not going to let you do that!” Again accusing his mother of irrationality, Norman presents himself as a victim and to gain pity.

Just as when Summers rapes Norma, this scene also utilizes horror conventions to convey the threat of masculinity: Norma runs quickly to the stairs as Norman chases her, shown through a camera shot from the top of the stairs resembling the first episode. Norma looks for a gun under her bed and Norman, when he enters the room, reveals that he has it. He ridicules Norma’s performance of victimization when he sarcastically calls her “poor little Norma.” Norma attempts to get the gun, fails, and again runs, locking
herself in another room after which a long shot shows Norman staring towards the camera, which is positioned near the door. Norma calls Romero, telling him that he needs to help her get Norman into Pineview. Later, she exists the room in another series of horror shots, with the camera in front of Norma as she moves through the tight corridors of her house while wielding a pair of scissors. She finds Norman, sitting and turned away, in the basement. He turns around and says that he knows she wants to send him to Pineview: “I’m not going to let you lock me up, because I’m not the one doing crazy things.” Norma attempts to convince Norman to accept being committed, in response to which Norman ironically asks “to let you run amok?”—a term often associated with rampage murders perpetuated by young white males, as discussed in Chapter Three. Norman then proposes murder suicide, saying “We’re broken. We tried. We just want peace and happiness, but the world won’t allow that. Let’s take ourselves out of the equation.” Romero shows up, however, and Norman is admitted to Pineview.

The remainder of the season shows Norman entering and leaving Pineview, leading up to his actual murder-suicide attempt, which only kills Norma. In resisting the cathartic logics of the autism family narrative, Bates Motel presents how fantasies of overcoming are, often, predicated on real violence, in the form of accepting performances of economic identity that create and reproduce vulnerability and precarity. In other words, Jenny McCarthy, Clara Claiborne Park, and Parenthood present a vision of the world that is safely middle-class, based on concealing and utilizing privilege that is ultimately solidified and made comfortable through the ability of an autistic child to become a neoliberal subject. This progression fails at all levels in Bates Motel. Bates
Motel reimagines the family narrative of autism, critically engaging with the figure of the victimized male as the central node of economic meanings. Norman attempts to overcome his disability through delegitimizing it, accepting an economic role that requires putting his mother in a victimized position. Killing his mother, Norman did exactly what Summers failed to accomplish: reclaiming the hotel and, in theory, his masculinity. What he really solidifies, however, is the dialectic of neoliberal identity. He can run his business independently as the entrepreneurial man while always under the fantasmatic gaze of his mother, irrationally submitting to her desires. She, even in her absence, will continue to abuse and oppress him, an allegory of the psychic structure undergirding the anxieties of neoliberal masculinity. Nervousness remains, and rightfully so: there is ultimately no pleasure in identifying with the victimized female or witnessing her subordination to patriarchal logics in Bates Motel.

Conclusion: The Family’s (Economic) Breakdown

The family narrative of autism formed as an important counternarrative to the concept of the “refrigerator mother” popularized by Bettelheim. It allowed families to reclaim power as caregivers to children with autism and gave their stories validity. It also, however, produced more focus on the difficulties of parents than the desire of people with autism and, as this chapter has demonstrated, foregrounded a vision of economic subjectivity tied to making sure that people with autism are productive members of white, middle-class society. Catharsis became a privatized emotional state tied to the ability of families to reform autistic children around the narrow goals of masculine entrepreneurialism. Thus, authors of memoirs about raising autistic children, from Clara
Claiborne Park to Jenny McCarthy, often centralize economic diction and seek private solutions that appeal to an economic rationality embedded deeply in U.S. culture. Narratives of autism, then, are always simultaneously expressions of financialized subjectivity, pieces of a mythos which mediates the localized fears and all-encompassing paranoias of modern life.

In the texts analyzed in this chapter, how audiences feel about the economy is also a matter of how they feel about the ability for men to transform into productive members of society and for women to mediate that relationship while subordinating their own goals and, often, suffering and failing. The struggle, as Parenthood notes, requires private solutions to exorcise the horror of autism, the alien impulses disrupting normative patterns of behavior. Max must transform to unshackle himself from his inherent violence, and, in doing so, makes his parents feel good about their relationship to the post-Recession economy. They, along with the audience, learn to accept their own irrational submission to the detrimental economic logics that rule their lives. If neoliberal gender politics are solidified, they are also concealed: masculinity and disability conjoin together to naturalize economic hardships and the logics and whims of a system which everyone must disavow as beyond their control.

In other words, such texts use autism to render in positive terms what is, at its base, a rather terrifying vision of a post-Recession future. Andy in Parenthood, for instance, operates essentially as a worker drone, though unlike in the works of Philip K. Dick, this fact sutures the audience of the series to the benevolence of free-market capitalism. The narrative of autism has shifted, then, from representing people with
autism as symbols of dystopian worlds of “business” where humans have no value outside of their organizational labor to hard-working harbingers of a future that is rightfully oriented towards the invisible hand of economic logics, as we see also in The Imitation Game. In Bates Motel, then, this pursuit is resignified: Norman’s status as hotel manager in season five emerges from a cycle of violence targeted towards women, especially Norma. Norma, as a warrior mother, transforms into a threatening specter in both her economic rationality and irrational desires to nurture and protect Norman. Forced into the toxic financial web of the Recession period, she becomes subject to the horror of motherhood in a precarious world of aggressive neoliberal masculinity. Bates Motel challenges, then, the optimism of the autism family narrative through older horror conventions that it redirects at neoliberalism.

In the next chapter, I investigate the possibility of new ways of representing autism by shifting to new media representations. Recapitulating the politics of viewing the overcoming of an autistic character and the role of the marked man in narratives of disability, the next chapter examines conventions and histories that gaze towards a future without the horror of neoliberalism. Even Bates Motel remains caught in this web, despite also being critical of the victimized white male as a cultural figure. New media representations present possibilities outside of traditional conventions and assumptions. The particular conventions of video games, for instance, allow for a much different relationship between player and autism than written and visual texts. In this way, the meanings of the marked man in video games allows for me to explore the idea of autism beyond victimized economic fantasies. It is important to find and create narratives about
autism disinterested in fully transforming autism into an economic metaphor, a process which exposes the disorder to pleasures and anxieties which, ultimately, are more clearly tied to the desires of the masculine entrepreneur. The next chapter begins to disentangle these figures by theorizing the concepts of *action* and *ability* as they are projected onto narratives of overcoming, offering some final comments on the politics of the white male as victim as they exist in our current world and going forward
Chapter Five

Autism and Economic Mobility in Digital Culture:

Identifying with the White Male as Victim in *To the Moon*

This dissertation began with a discussion of how autism became, in scholarship and popular understanding, central to theories of subjectivity in the digital age. Autism, standing in for a number of anxieties about the human condition as it interfaces with technology and economic productivity, has appealed to the fears and aspirations of neoliberal culture in the United States and more broadly. I have focused primarily on how traditional media have rhetorically constructed autism and how their techniques and conventions have been used to incorporate autism into the concerns of the neoliberal period. In the representations I have analyzed and others, autism is explored as a form of identity, of humanity, and of masculinity, functioning as a gauge for a number of economic paradigms of the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. I have argued that the value autism gained as a trope has paralleled shifts in the definitions of masculinity that have occurred predominantly as a result of neoliberal economic policies, a situation which has been exacerbated by particular formulations of autistic masculinity following the 2008 Recession. During this period, the “marked man” has taken on renewed significance as a political figure, standing in for the contradictions of neoliberal masculinity and shifts in the significations of gender.

The last chapter began, through *Bates Motel*, to suggest the possibility of creating counternarratives to how autism is normally represented. Doing so requires remaining aware of how autism narratively functions within patriarchal logics and neoliberal
ideologies. *Bates Motel* has used the conventions of the television series format and of the horror genre to disrupt the typical logics of catharsis surrounding autism. Catharsis, as a normalizing process, requires purging “horror” in favor of fantasy: the idea that people with autism can, ultimately, represent the benevolence of neoliberal masculinity for non-disabled audiences. This chapter, as a means of concluding the dissertation, more directly begins to theorize how reliance on neoliberal narratives about masculinity and disability can be interrogated through new generic structures and media which have emerged simultaneously with neoliberalism. In other words, the chapter interrogates the technical and encoded logics of neoliberalism in order to gesture towards potential “short circuits” in hegemonic constructions of disability and gender.

So far I have mostly ignored the new media formats that emerged and evolved concurrently with medical and popular understandings of autism and that are, in many ways, central to public awareness about autism. New media have instituted modes of identification and new conventions which are often crowd-sourced, resistant to top-down production, and rely less on *viewing* (or what Stuart Murray calls “autistic presence”) than they do on *playing*, *being*, and *action*. It is predominantly through these means that information about autism has been disseminated and ASD communities have been formed. Indeed, if *Rain Man* stirred awareness about autism, it also produced a desire to form communities that could demonstrate that autism is much more complex and diverse than Dustin Hoffman’s portrayal. While the Internet makes it difficult to control the types of information about autism that are available, it has also created new ways of exploring subjectivity that challenge stereotypes. For example, returning to Elliot Rodger, the ways...
in which rampage shooters are discussed on autism forums actively incorporate and challenge media narratives while disrupting the positive image projects which have been central to representing autism. Many who post on Wrong Planet, a website for people with autism, empathize with rampage shooters and use shootings as a way of discussing their own violent actions, behaviors, and feelings. The modes of production and collaboration embedded within new media create new means of identifying and new collectives within and against traditional modes of disseminating information.

This chapter reflects on one form of digital media, the video game, in order to define the distinctions between seeing and playing autism. This distinction, I will argue, is paramount to future dialogue about autism and its role in facilitating cultural paradigms like the “white male as victim.” The video game is the quintessential new media form of the “white male as victim” but simultaneously one that can potentially encode the demise of the fantasies and stereotypes through which such subjectivity is performed. The chapter, then, centralizes the role of technology in suturing individuals to neoliberal narratives and concepts of ability and overcoming. A film like The Imitation Game or series like Parenthood allow their audiences to feel good about the ability of neoliberal economic policies to mark certain people with autism as valuable and independent; they produce a sense of identification with the “normal” and with the idea that people with autism can access normality as economic subjects. Video games, on the other hand, are the medium of the marked man, through which players actively transform into victimized

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67 Some discussion threads that exemplify the way people with autism sometimes use rampage shooters to construct their own identities include: “James Holmes may have Aspergers?” (little_black_sheep); “Did Elliot Rodger have Asperger's?” (layla87); and “What's the chance that Adam Lanza was autistic?” (ProvokesThinking).
subjects. While there is a lot of potential for normalizing processes in games, there is also a possibility of utilizing the performance of victimization to expand how the white male as victim understands and experiences oppression.

Representations of autism in video games are still relatively rare and adopt stereotypes from other media and popular understandings. A 2015 GameInformer interview with Ken Levine, the lead designer of the popular video games Bioshock (2007) and Bioshock: Infinite (2013), offers a glimpse into one example of design philosophy when it comes to autistic game characters. In the interview, Levine revealed, nearly eight years after the game’s release, that one of Bioshock’s characters is autistic: “[Brigid] Tenenbaum’s a Jew. Tenenbaum’s a highly functioning autistic” (Futter). Levine offers his theory of how to design game characters by disavowing these aspects of Tenenbaum, arguing that characters are a set of experiences rather than identity labels:

Those are instrumental in getting her to that place, but a different autistic Jew wouldn’t have ended up there, because there is something about her and what she wants – her absolute adoration of science – to the point where she fails to see every other thing...She’s blinded to everything, including what to us would be the obvious aspects of morality.  68

Levine employs stereotypes of autism, many of which are similar to the portrayal of Alan Turing in The Imitation Game, to explain how Tenenbaum is unique. His declaration of Tenenbaum’s backstory, that she was imprisoned in a concentration camp where she

68 He lays out his philosophy of character creation and development: “The first thing you think about is, ‘Who is this character, and what does he want, and what’s in his way?’ That’s how you develop a character...If you start from, ‘This is a black dude’ or ‘This is a Jewish dude,’ you’re kind of missing the point. I try not to look at characters as their skin color, race, sex, creed, or their gender. I think that’s an inauthentic way of thinking about character, because that’s not what defines people. What defines people is their experience.”
eventually helped the Nazis with their experiments, suggests that her autism is the reason she lacks morality enough to torture other human beings in the name of science.\textsuperscript{69}

Despite Levine’s Twitter “clarification” of his comments, he pathologizes autism as a violent and amoral subjectivity, as an exaggerated from of the clinical gaze that, like Philip K. Dick’s android, is disinterested in human suffering.\textsuperscript{70} This is clear when he states that “she never brought the moral angle to any of her scientific works...Because of her autism, it never cracked through. She was disconnected from any human aspect or any sense of empathy.” He claims, however, that Tenenbaum has achieved empathy by the beginning of \textit{Bioshock}. In the game, she insists that Jack (the character controlled by the player) help her reverse her experiments on the Little Sisters, genetically modified young girls who are used to extract and act as a host for biological material that can enhance human physical and mental functions. Levine characterizes Tenenbaum’s empathy as a sudden “flowing in,” an epiphany distinct from her autism.

Tenenbaum is, ultimately, “redeemed” by the game’s narrative, but this happens within a game entirely focused on relatively traditional gameplay, where Jack’s repetitive violence—the generic mode of the first-person shooter—is left unexamined until a critique of how games force players to perform certain actions that occurs during \textit{Bioshock}’s conclusion. (It is revealed this Jack is a genetically modified slave, being

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\textsuperscript{69} Tenenbaum, in this way, functions essentially as the victim transformed into oppressor, a male fantasy displaced onto a woman.
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\textsuperscript{70} His Twitter post stated that “Autistic savants don't lack empathy. I can see how my comments might imply that. Tenenbaum lacked empathy b/c autism doesn't [sic] define her.” This offers an unconvincing reversal, where a stereotype of autism is meant to suggest that autism \textit{doesn’t} define the character.
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controlled by another character, Frank Fontaine, throughout the game.) She is, basically,
background noise, relegated entirely to narrative and a backstory which did not emerge
until years after the game, standing in as both a stereotype of autism and as a minor
digital device used to justify, explain, and compel player actions. Her initial sense of
amoral violence and, in the game, sudden empathy stand in for the player, allowing him
to relegate both any moral qualms about repetitive game violence and the need to nurture
or protect the Little Sisters entirely to Tenenbaum. She does the hard work of being both
violent and empathetic, operating as a projection of the player’s own lived contradictions.
She is only included as a character to facilitate, and as a contrast to, the main male
protagonist.

It seems unlikely that a video game with an autistic protagonist controlled by the
player, or even a video game equivalent of *Rain Man*, will emerge to change the fact that
video games attempt to simulate relatively enabled positions of power. Whether first-
person or third-person, games often offer experiences that suture the player to able,
normatively accessible perspectives; having an autistic protagonist would require a
radical transformation of the formula beyond even what indie games are generally willing
to do.\(^1\) The immersive and interactive nature of games make an autistic perspective an

\(^1\) Many games do, of course, appeal to people with autism, such as the *Pokemon* series,
which involves collecting creatures and calculating a variety of numbers and statistics.
Plenty of other games also offer perspectives that are not abled in ways we would expect
for video games. Autism, however, is often not part of this conversation. Beyond the
game this chapter will discuss, one of the only examples of an autistic character central to
a game is Amy in the game *Amy* (2012). This game, which follows a zombie narrative,
employs the highly problematic “autistic psychic” character type and has many plot
similarities to the television show *Touch* (Amy’s caregiver is protecting Amy from an
organization that wants to use Amy’s psychic abilities). The game has been described as
The conventions of the video game as a medium can be harnessed to break with traditional narratives about autism.

The next section begins to address this goal by exploring how games centralize the intersection of gender and ability evident in the concept of the white male as victim. First discussing Laura Mulvey’s definitions of visual pleasure, I then apply her ideas to the particularities of gaming through Alexander Galloway’s concept of games as “actions.” In other words, I locate how Mulvey’s ideas about the structure of film are relevant to and complicated by gaming. If the patriarchal structure of scopophilia sutures male spectators to a sense of pleasure, the algorithmic nature of new media cited by Galloway has more in common with specifically neoliberal modes of masculinity than those theorized by Mulvey. Games often internalize the contradiction between experiencing and disavowing a sense of victimization, simultaneously creating affectively threatening situations while marking women as passive and without physical ability. Women are rendered disabled in order to facilitate the fantasy of male power. The “one of the worst games ever made,” though due to its clunky mechanics rather than anything to do with its representation of autism (which is hardly ever mentioned in reviews). As this chapter will argue, however, mechanics and narrative should both be seen as central to a new way of gaming that takes disability into account.
concept of ability, then, structures a gamer’s relationship to the game apparatus even as that very apparatus extracts much of the gamer’s ability and agency.

The remainder of the chapter will analyze the indie game *To the Moon*, which includes an autistic character. I will argue that *To the Moon* allegorizes the gamer’s reliance on the affective technologies of masculinity. The game’s main character, Johnny, literally hires a company to, while he is dying, implant an ideal false memory into his brain, that he became an astronaut and went to the moon. The player performs slight, repetitive tasks by controlling two employees of the company as they travel through Johnny’s memories about his life with River, his autistic wife. The game offers a traditional narrative that, through the layers of gameplay and mechanics, disrupts the centrality of neoliberal masculinity. It utilizes a female autistic character to critique gameplay as it relates to assumptions about the “ability” that games facilitate. If games attempt to produce an illusion of agency for the gamer, what would it mean to recognize subjugation to these systems and perspectives through the game?

*To the Moon* answers this question in a way that foregrounds both the politics of representation surrounding autism and the specificities of the game as a medium. By doing so, it offers a means to think about how to depathologize autism as it relates to current generic conventions, reproducing many of the stereotypes of autism present in other texts discussed in this dissertation while reflecting on the very process through which those stereotypes are constructed. That process primarily involves the actions of neoliberal masculinity that, in attempting to reclaim a nostalgic sense of a “rightful” social position, pacifies and neglects other voices and experiences not wrapped into
anxieties about ability and agency. The game literally renders the anxieties about social mobility central to its medium, challenging the ways in which technologies offer mediated ability to some while devaluing others.

Thus, this chapter addresses the question of subjugation to the gaming algorithm by asserting that there should be a reconsideration of the concept of “ability” as it interacts with gamic action. Doing so requires discussing both how disability is represented in games and how it functions as a ludological framework informing gameplay. Such a project is aligned with recent queer gaming criticism which critiques normative assumptions about gameplay and what the gamer desires. For instance, Mattie Brice argues for difficulty and failure in games by noting that the “average player”—“white, a man, heterosexual, American, and a whole list of other privileged qualities”—is offered “a bestowed agency” that makes him “feel good” in ways that perpetuate the gulf between the lives of average players and people who fit into marginalized identity categories. In this way, independence is “bestowed.” Bonnie Ruberg challenges the idea that “fun” and “happiness” (attached as they are to power, agency, and winning) should be the goals of games, instead arguing that “looking at games that go beyond fun creates new spaces for players, games, and queer worlds at the margins” (110). I discuss To the Moon, then, as an inherently limiting game, one that uses action against its own player to destabilize how that player relates to and performs neoliberal subjectivity.

Concepts like “bestowed agency” and “happiness” often correspond to questions of intense, mediated ability—obvious especially in the neoliberal project of gamification
supported by scholars like James Paul Gee and Jane McGonigal.\textsuperscript{72} Indeed, one of the most comprehensive pro-video game arguments is that they instill skills and values—in other words, the physical and psychological abilities discussed by Foucault in his definition of neoliberalism—necessary to information economies, an assumption that has remained since early scholarship on games. Gamers enact neoliberalism and masculinity, then, at multiple levels, both in the present moment of play and in the future potential to be plugged into neoliberal systems of value. These potentials are integrated directly into the video game medium. I analyze To the Moon because it explicitly renders technology’s potential as an integral component of neoliberal projects while using a character with autism to decenter the forms of identification often built into games. This chapter makes some final remarks on the future of masculinity and autism in media representation, how they interact, and why narratives gesturing beyond neoliberalism are so important.

**Video Games, Visual Pleasure, and Neoliberal Action**

Video games, while different from traditional media at a technical level, incorporate and reproduce many of the same narratives. Laura Mulvey’s theories of visual pleasure have a lot to offer studies of how video games, especially mainstream games, have structured the dichotomies central to viewing and playing practices, specifically the divides solidified between male and female as well as abled and disabled.

\textsuperscript{72} I call these scholars “neoliberal” because of their insistence that game mechanics be boiled down to a mechanical formula useful to corporate interests. Their bubble of game studies contends that sites of labor and education should be reworked to follow the model of games because this would produce more happiness and increase skills relevant to modern information workforces. For example, in her chapter “The Rise of the Happiness Engineers,” McGonigal supports the rather dystopic sounding project of engineering happiness, arguing that “[w]e are finally perfectly poised to harness the potential of games to make us happy and improve our everyday quality of life” (39)
Noting that “the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form” (57), Mulvey discusses how this unconscious is sustained: “Phallocentrism…depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world” (57). Early games, especially following Nintendo’s rise as the most successful gaming company, repeatedly incorporated the trope of the victimized woman (Zelda and Princess Toadstool, for example) to give meaning to the narrative and to induce a sense of urgency and desire to play within the player. Women in games often act as a stable signifier of castration and victimhood in order to conceal the fact that games are, at their most basic narrative level, an experience through which the player’s avatar is fighting against and rejecting their own victimization. Even Tenenbaum, who Levine constructs as an intelligent and well-rounded character, relies wholly on Jack’s action and ability while she primarily hides in a safe room.

Men are bestowed a voice, and the ability for action, that allows them to accrue power in opposition to static and passive female characters. As Mulvey says, “woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by the symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image” (58). Women are marked, in other words, so that men do not have to be or can disavow the feeling of markedness. Mulvey, quoting Budd Boetticher, states that what counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love of fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance (62).
The *Mario* and *Zelda* series are relatively straight-forward examples of how the types of narrative and subconscious structures Mulvey discusses are integrated into games. Revolving around everyman characters fighting against false kings to save women, the narratives transform victims into heroes.\(^{73}\)

On the other hand, games are primarily structured through the *actions* that they necessitate, actions based on a constant sense of peril. If, like Mulvey says about film, video games “coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order” (59), they utilize fantasy to prompt action rather than, simply, the act of spectatorship and identification. They encode and reflect the feelings and desires embedded in the player. These fantasies are parallel to the dichotomy between terror and satisfaction Mulvey associates with film but take on a different significance:

In the highly developed Hollywood cinema it was only through these codes that the alienated subject, torn in his imaginary memory by a sense of loss, by the terror of potential lack in fantasy, came near to finding a glimpse of satisfaction: through its formal beauty and its play on his own formative obsessions. (59)

For Mulvey, this complicated process, through which terror transforms into satisfaction, occurs in two ways that can happen simultaneously or separately: via scopohilia, the pleasure of looking, or ego libido, the idea of projecting one’s identity onto a character and, therefore, forming a sense of identification. In relation to the former she describes a “voyeuristic separation” (60) central to structuring pleasure.

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73 Mario is the original victimized everyman in gaming. Marsha Kinder notes that the designer of *Mario*, Shigeru Miyamoto, described Mario as “a kind of Everyman who rises to heroism in the face of adversity” (p. 105). He is a marked man and a point of identification for every *man*, transforming victimization into heroism.
Video games exist somewhere at the intersection of these modes of viewing, though the ego libido is more prominent than in film because of the active way the player interacts with the protagonist. Indeed, Freud’s definition of scopophilia that Mulvey uses, “taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (59), conflates with the controlling relationship the player has in relation to the protagonist and the power that the protagonist has over the player in terms of functioning as an access point into the virtual world and through the limitations and boundaries of the game’s code. The latter half of this relationship, and how it ties gender and ability together, is especially clear in relation to what Mulvey says about Lacan’s definition of the mirror stage:

The image recognized is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ego ideal, the alienated subject, which, re-introjected as an ego ideal, gives rise to the future generation of identification with others.” (60)

Applying this idea to video games, the avatar that the player controls operates as an “ego ideal” that is controlling in its movements through game space. The player, who is performing only minor input actions, creates actions to and in the game that suggests, by proxy, an immense amount of physical and cognitive ability, whereas inability and passivity often become associated with female characters.74

To better understand how this sense of ability manifests in games requires, however, distinguishing films as Mulvey discusses them from the formal and technical

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74 Mulvey says something similar: “The male protagonist is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action” (63). The important difference is that, in a literal sense, the player himself creates the action in video games.
aspects of games which, in their early days, had to articulate pleasure in much less realistic and fully-fleshed narrative worlds. Pleasure, then, was often not fully “visual,” operating instead through the interactions between player and game. The agency of the player formed the primary site of gaming pleasure, as in the proto-open world structure of *The Legend of Zelda* and the repetitive possibility of saving the princess in *Super Mario Bros*. While games have become far more graphically advanced, they still retain these older models of pleasure. If, as Mulvey argues, “the cinema poses questions of the ways the unconscious (formed by the dominant order) structures ways of seeing and pleasures in looking” (58), games simultaneously pose questions of how the unconscious structures ways of playing and *performing actions*.

Alexander Galloway highlights these exact functions of games in his book *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. Galloway’s basic definition of games, which he uses to contrast them to older form of mass media, is that “video games are actions” (2). For him, the defining aspect of games is that the player causes material change:

> While the mass media of film, literature, television, and so on continue to engage in various debates around representation, textuality, and subjectivity, there has emerged in recent years a whole new medium, computers and in particular video games, whose foundation is not in looking and reading but in the instigation of material change through action. (4)

While the distinction he makes between representation and textuality and action prematurely forecloses a number of discussions about games, especially as evidenced by Ken Levine’s character design philosophy, he clearly articulates a theory of how new
media formats are unique. Though games still involve looking and reading, these are sub-activities that facilitate or materialize a sense of action that occurs literally, with the player running up against, utilizing, and/or exploiting the very materiality of game consoles.

I believe it is important to expand Galloway’s definition, however, by remaining aware of how Mulvey explicitly discusses gender and implicitly implicates ability within the narrative and viewing structures of film. In other words, an algorithmic culture itself has a specific gender politics. Centralizing action also means that the “ego ideal” and the sense of empowerment possible through narrative pleasure transforms into a much more fraught interface between player and technology. Galloway suggests that the experience of technology is directly linked to shifts in the economy, stating that “nondiegetic operator acts in video games are an allegory for the algorithmic structure of today’s informatics culture” and “[the] quantitative modulations and numerical valuations required by the new information worker are thus observed in a dazzling array of new cultural phenomena” (17). Games are experiences predicated very directly on the player

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75 This distinction that Galloway makes between mass media and new media, I would argue, represents a problematic side of video games studies, where discussions of representation, sexism, racism, etc. are quickly shut down by appealing to ludology and gameplay. Ken Levine’s ideas about Tenenbaum, for instance, are wrapped wholly in subjectivity, representation, and textuality rather than actual algorithmic concerns. Galloway is too quick to separate concerns about identity from the monolithic thing he calls “informatic control,” such as when he states that “in contrast to my previous ideological concerns, the point now is not whether the Civilization algorithm embodies a specific ideology of ‘soft’ racism, or even whether it embodies the core principles of new media adopted from Manovich, but whether it embodies the logic of informatic control itself” (101). How informatic control internalizes and perpetuates racism is an important question, one that Galloway curiously sidesteps, even as he seems very invested in the “information worker” as an abstract subjectivity throughout his book.
enacting their role as workers in an information culture, a fact that is exploited by scholars who want to harness games as a means of creating skilled information workers.

While games create illusions and facilitate fantasies of power and control, an argument that Marsha Kinder makes when she states that “the repetitive, segmented, serial nature of the narrative leads to a disavowal of obsolescence, castration, and death” (110), the very structure of the game as a medium requires an active acceptance of losing control in the face of numerical valuations. This is especially true of role-playing video games, where maximizing character statistics often becomes a defining component of the game; in the Final Fantasy series, tough boss encounters threatens these logics, making the player’s calculations constantly inadequate. Ironically, the Final Fantasy and Pokemon series offer many choices (Final Fantasy VII is, in many ways, about player choice and freedom) while also attaching player experience specifically to primarily invisible numerical logics that constrain. The algorithm, in other words, is a symbol of power and an apathetic machine process that threatens power. Playing a game is, then, highly imperiling. Quoting Jacques Derrida, Galloway claims that “play…is the perpetual inability to achieve order” (31).

The idea that games institute particular cultural or economic values extends to analysis of neoliberalism. Andrew Baerg has specifically employed “Foucauldian-inspired governmentality theory” (116) to claim that the digital game “naturalizes a neoliberal approach to decision making in daily life” (119).³⁶ Bearg claims that games

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³⁶ “Foucauldian-inspired governmentality theory” reflects the concept of the self-as-entrepreneur and Foucault’s definition of neoliberalism as “economic analysis of the non-
attempt to implement freedom and choice through a sense of “calculative rationality,” a process that recreates the player as “homo aeconomicus,” a “neoliberal subject” who “functions in the world through a risk management undergirded by grids of calculation applied in different social spaces and circumstances” (123). As I will show, it is exactly this focus on freedom and choice that some indie games, and specifically To the Moon, deconstruct, minimize, and actively critique. To do so, they engage with the role of “procedural rhetoric” in games, Ian Bogost’s concept of how games persuade their audiences using algorithms. Baerg states that “the procedural rhetoric of the digital game functions like the neoliberal free market economy in offering choices to players who can use its resources to further their own interests within the parameters of the game’s rules” (119). Like Galloway, Bearg understands this emphasis on action and agency as reflecting the individual’s limiting relationship to information systems: “That digital games necessitate choices about configuration renders them a vital part of a culture that increasingly mandates our engagement with complex information systems and their respective rules” (118). Prompting the fantasy of freedom within a highly regulated system, games allegorize neoliberal masculinity.77

If games are action, gamers are homo economicus who must limit their own actions within the frame of the game, calculating outcomes in such a way that their own

77 In “Complete Freedom of Movement: Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces,” Henry Jenkins argues that video games function as spaces for boy culture, substituting for natural environments that disappeared with industrialization.
virtual agency is always precarious. In *Bioshock*, for instance, what seem like important moral choices (like saving or sacrificing Little Sisters to gain powers) are ultimately economic choices: how much ADAM can you get from Little Sisters to be able to meet the challenges of the game. Indeed, *Bioshock*’s narrative ends, by showing that Jack has been controlled the entire game, with the idea that agency in games is always based on control. The narrative logic of games is patriarchal and attached to disavowals of “castration” through women; at the same time, the procedural rhetoric and actions of games always threaten the same feeling of castration, offering an illusion of choice and freedom based on rules that only exist as invisible algorithms. Video games, as a medium, thoroughly integrate the contradictions of the male victim, especially through how they facilitate or foreclose action.

This is worked out at the level of narrative through what Linda Williams has called the “hero-victim,” a figure she associates with cinematic melodrama: “the mode of melodrama defines a broad category of moving pictures that move us to pathos for protagonists beset by forces more powerful than they and who are perceived as victims” (42). Whereas Williams discusses cinematic melodrama, which primarily includes female protagonists, video games function as melodrama for men, integrating the structures of neoliberal masculinity as a means of articulating the struggles of male protagonists and

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78 A lighthearted example that reduces games to their most economic, constraining logics is *Animal Crossing*. Ian Bogost, in “The Rhetoric of Video Games,” discusses how *Animal Crossing* simulates the concepts of debt and conspicuous consumption, with the player’s agency, expressed through buying items for their house, always subordinated to how much Tom Nook (the local shop owner) profits off of the player’s debt and to how much the player continuously wants to buy new items, never satisfied (117-120). The player of *Animal Crossing* is literally a *homo economicus*, caught between financial independence and dependence.
offering their actions, often violence, a moral and economic imperative. As Chapter Four suggested, melodrama is an important genre for narratives of autism, especially on television and film. Often the catharsis around overcoming autism operates as a normalizing gesture, one embedded in accepting the realities of neoliberalism as a system of value. Similarly, the contradictions offered by becoming a hero-victim allows an iterative performance of informational heroism that, in the end, is constantly a fantasy.

Playing a video game also means, then, performing as a neoliberal hero-victim.

The idea that games are machines of global capital is the primary argument of Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter’s analysis of the imperial aspirations of gaming technology, *Games of Empire*. Using Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s notions of “Empire” and “the multitude,” Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter comprehensively examine the geopolitical and labor dimensions of the video game industry. More implicitly, however, *Games of Empire* is often an investigation of the intersection between gender and the geopolitics of games, such as when the authors note that “[f]irst-wave video games and second-wave feminism were contemporaries” (18). This fact, however, has not made video games particularly enlightened when it comes to gender, as they note: “While elsewhere male prerogatives were being challenged, virtual games thus congealed as a sphere of cultural ‘remasculinization’ (Kim 2004)” (20). As Sally Robinson argues, however, “resmasculinization” never assumes a perfect correspondence with an earlier vision of masculinity. Rejecting the idea that the concept of a crisis of masculinity will always result either in the deconstruction or retrenchment of masculinity, Robinson notes that “crises produce both retrenchments and recodings…[A]ssuming that history is
comprised of a struggle between ‘traditional’ and ‘alternative’ constructions of masculinity misses the dynamism of shifts in gender meanings” (10). The forms of masculinity that appear in video games are, then, part of the larger “challenges” to and reconstitution of masculinity, efforts that have produced the contradictions of neoliberal masculinity.

The rest of this chapter analyzes how neoliberal masculinity manifests in one example, To the Moon, to explore how new media, and video games specifically, can be designed and used to deconstruct the fantasies of white male victimization as they emerge from fears and rejections of cognitive, affective, and physical difference. If, as Baerg argues, video games specifically inculcate neoliberal values (tied to both able-bodied and -minded freedom and choice and entrepreneurial masculinity), then they also have the ability to complicate neoliberal subjectivity. To the Moon disrupts the workings of melodrama and catharsis as normalizing projects. While ostensibly representing a narrative of overcoming, the game utilizes the video game medium to critique the traditional assumptions of action and the “hero-victim” through centralizing an autistic character who complicates the spectator’s grasp of the game’s narrative. In this way, the game can be viewed as an example of Mulvey’s call for “transcending outword or oppressive forms…[and] daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive of a new language of desire” (59). If games often, like film, allow for fantasies by which

the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, [and] project his look on to that of his like, the screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence (63),
then *To the Moon* uses assumptions of male power and action to directly render stereotypes as to make them, and neoliberal masculinity, impotent. *To the Moon* is an example, then, of Galloway’s concept of “countergaming” which relies on “radical action”—”a critique of gameplay itself...[N]ew grammars of action, not simply new grammars of visuality” (125). This chapter ends the dissertation with a call to experiment with new practices of viewing and playing outside of the boundaries of white male victimization; doing so allows the articulation of narratives beyond the neoliberal valuing of human identity.

**Neuronormative Play and Viewing Autism in *To the Moon***

*To the Moon*, created by Kan Gao using the commercial game-making program *RPG Maker*, is often cited as an indie success due to its commercial popularity.\(^7^9\) This success is surprising given that one criticism of the game is that it is not, by some definitions, “a game”: game mechanics are so slim in *To the Moon* that you are essentially interacting with a narrative.\(^8^0\) The extent of player input involves using

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\(^7^9\) For comparison, it currently has over 29,000 positive reviews on the digital game seller Steam, whereas *BioShock*, which had a much larger budget and has received far more media and academic coverage, has just over 17,000.

\(^8^0\) Kan Gao’s second game, *A Bird Story*, minimizes mechanics even further, involving only simple movement and interaction inputs within any puzzles. The game is also open to analysis from the perspective of disability studies, since there is absolutely no dialogue, at some level reflecting an experience of deafness as the main character, a bullied and socially isolated child, goes through his life. *A Bird Story* is essentially an “intermission” between *To the Moon* and its true sequel, *Finding Paradise*, which is set to be released in Summer 2017. *Finding Paradise* seems like it will closely mirror *To the Moon*’s mechanics and narrative structure. Screenshots that have been released show Dr. Watts and Dr. Rosalene, *To the Moon*’s protagonists, traveling through a male character’s memories, similarly to how they do with Johnny in *To the Moon*. The game’s description
keyboard keys to walk around and make a few, mostly irrelevant dialogue choices while solving simple, repetitive puzzles. Agency and ability are severely limited at the level of game design. Even the elements of a role-playing game (such as menus, character levels, and equipment systems), which give *RPG Maker* its name, are mostly absent from *To the Moon*. The menu in the game is mostly included to give brief, often cryptic descriptions of game characters and important artifacts. Choice, then, is marginalized. Whereas most games wrap their emotional states into a sparse telos of “winning” that involves the freedom of diegetic action, *To the Moon* is invested in emotional story-telling made compelling through a puzzle narrative which requires the player to work backwards through time. Thus, one of the reviews for the game on Steam claims that “[t]his is not a random game that you must end. This is an experience that you must feel” (X LetItSleep). Another says that “I cried. And you'll cry. And you won't feel ashamed to cry for this game” (Rato). The game foregrounds its medium’s potential as an affective tool.

*To the Moon*’s narrative revolves around a dying man’s inability to understand his wife, River, who was diagnosed with Asperger’s when she was an adult. The fact that River is autistic is revealed about halfway through the game. Though Asperger’s is not directly mentioned, the player witnesses a scene where River’s doctor mentions she has a “pervasive development disorder.” Johnny asks if there are any books on the disorder, and the doctor suggests they look into Tony Attwood (a psychologist who has written extensively on Asperger’s). When the doctor tells Johnny to also read the book, however, on Steam also promises a similar narrative, of overcoming disability, as that which I will explore through *To the Moon*: “A story-driven experience about two doctors traversing through a dying man's memories to artificially fulfill his last wish” (“Finding Paradise”). Even the title recapitulates the “escape” promises by going to the moon.
he refuses. The doctor also offers to refer them to a counselor, asking if there is anything “unsettling” in their relationship; River quickly answers no, and Johnny replies with “…No, it’s fine.” Johnny’s perceptions of their troubles, however, are made clear in the game’s narrative present: in a coma and about to die, the game documents the fulfillment of Johnny’s contract with Sigmund Corp, a company that uses a machine to change the memories of their clients, making them believe they had memories different from their actual life experiences. Johnny hires them to insert in his mind the belief that he was an astronaut and went to the moon, a life where he may never meet River. The main goal of the game is to help insert that fake memory into Johnny’s mind and, on the way, find out why he wants to go to the moon in the first place.

The fantasies offered by Sigmund Corp allegorize the potential of games to offer visual pleasure and an illusion of agency. Like game companies, Sigmund Corp fabricates experiences, utilizing conscious and subconscious desires to earn profit. As I will discuss later, Johnny’s desire to go to the moon operates explicitly as a response to his economic precarity: he needs the fantasy of going to the moon because he feels stifled by his life.81 The Sigmund Corp machines functions, then, as a video game, projecting fantasies of agency. It is no coincidence, then, that the perspective to which we have most access in the game is that of a white male (Johnny), the traditional gamer. Further, the

81 *To the Moon*’s narrative resembles, and may be inspired by, a number of cultural texts, including the films *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and *Inception*. Most interesting, based on my analysis in Chapter Two, however, is how the game mirrors Philip K. Dick’s short story “We Can Remember It for You Wholesale” and the films based on the story, *Total Recall*. The story follows a low-level worker, Douglas Quail, who has dreams of visiting Mars and so goes to a company to have a false memory implanted. The story is more overly dystopian than the game, with Douglas finding himself in layers of false memories and controlled by secret police.
player controls two scientist-employees of Sigmund Corp, Dr. Rosalene and Dr. Watts, as they travel through Johnny’s memories. The scene where River is diagnosed with Asperger’s, for instance, is only accessed by the player because the doctors have traveled through Johnny’s memories, making their own commentary as they go. After learning about River’s diagnosis, Dr. Rosalene states “I told you so,” referring to earlier in the game when she attempted to diagnose River. Rosalene and Watts function as corporate representatives and seekers of objective scientific and psychological “truth,” truth which is only accessed through Johnny’s perspective. They organize and exploit his memories, transforming them into consumer satisfaction.

To achieve this satisfaction, the game ultimately relies heavily on the patterns of viewership central to the notion of “overcoming” disability, reflecting Johnny’s privileged position. In the end, Johnny is finally able to feel good about his life, with the doctors (after some problems) implanting the idea that he traveled to the moon. The audience of this concluding scene (consisting of the game’s main characters, Rosalene and Watts, some side characters, and other random people) stand on a bridge and watch a space shuttle blast into the sky. Johnny and River, now NASA employees, are in the space shuttle, fulfilling the dreams reflected in the title of the game. The player’s desires for this happy ending are identical to Johnny’s based on the game’s patterns of identification, embedded as they are in the visual pleasure discussed by Mulvey. Johnny is an ego ideal; even if he is now old and dying, the player experiences his life, romance, and desires, internalizing them as they attempt to understand River. He is a stable, able-
minded (“neurotypical” as he is called) perspective through which to organize the player’s emotions.

The fact that the final scene is about escapism, literally implanted by a company, is concealed within the game’s affective logic. The scene is an exact rendering of the fantasies produced when a non-disabled audience witnesses a moment of “overcoming” disability. After watching along with the audience on the bridge, the player’s perspective shifts to inside the shuttle, where we witness Johnny and River holding hands. Brief sequences show the long, happy life and marriage Johnny and River will have together. They blast off from Earth towards their dreams of economic stability and heteronormative futurity. While the player is still with the audience on the bridge, River’s friend Isabelle, who also has Asperger’s, says “The way she is, I didn’t think she would succeed.” Johnny’s friend Nicholas responds: “All the better then, isn’t it?” Another member of the audience, Johnny’s doctor, says “I hope it’s worth the wait.” Success, hope, and betterment coincide in the spectacle of a woman overcoming her disability to join NASA and achieve a life of romance and love. She succeeds by transcending the idea that her identity precludes her from the economic and social realities of the United States.

This spectacle parallels the scene of national integration about which Robert McRuer expresses fears in “Disability Nationalism in Crip Times”:

disability studies does not yet have a necessary recognition of uneven biopolitical incorporation—an awareness, translating from [Jasbir] Puar’s theorizing, of disabled subjects who in certain times and places are made representative and ‘targeted for life’ even as others are disabled in different ways, or cripped, or targeted for death. (171)
Life is apportioned only to those who exist within spaces and bodies intelligible to neoliberalism. In *To the Moon*, this intelligibility emerges directly from the perspective of a male character who simultaneously functions as a corporate client. River is reborn through Johnny’s choices, and through the cognitive freedom offered by the market. River arrives at health as defined by Lauren Berlant: “Health itself can then be seen as a side effect of successful normativity, and people’s desires and fantasies are solicited to line up with that pleasant condition” (106). The game ends with a fantasy of health, both heteronormative and able-minded, viewed from the perspective of an audience. Watts and Rosalene stand in for *us*, the players, as we are all melded together in the transformative moment of catharsis: the limitations of autism is purged as science, truth, and the American Dream prevail.

The game’s narrative emphasizes the creation of ideal neoliberal subjectivity through the use of technology, mirroring Baerg’s argument about games. The irony is that River is *both* targeted for life and death in the game’s narrative, a fact that the reliance on identifying with Johnny obscures. River is actually dead during this scene. The game integrates the traditional politics of viewership and the types of narratives often associated with autism, concluding with a moment of visual pleasure embedded in the idea of overcoming economic and social limitations. The pleasure is “visual” in how it renders the spectacle of River’s overcoming but also action-based in how it *simulates* agency even as agency disappears on multiple levels, from the erasure of River’s perspective to the fact that the player has lost complete control of the game at this point. The player has become passive, unable to perform in-game actions for the rest of the
game. At the moment where River’s ability is centralized, then, the game itself has most comprehensively failed the imperatives of its medium. The player has no fully entered River as a surrogate of agency.

Gao, reflecting on the emotional content of the game, has suggested that *To the Moon* is “not a depressing game and you come out feeling hopeful rather than sad” (Bitmob). The ending sutures the audience into a moment of catharsis relying heavily on emotional impact as a positive, self-affirming experience. Though Johnny does die right after this sequence, he achieved his dreams through techno-freedom. The conundrums of neoliberalism are themselves, however, central to the game’s plot, which juxtaposes fantasy with economic reality. The next section explores this aspect of the game in conjunction with the use of the game as a medium foreclosing choice and reorganizing the reliance of masculinity on fantasies of health and ability. The game constantly decenters agency, ability, and *action*, representing Johnny’s “choice” to go to the moon as uninformed and idealizing. The idea that the ending offers “hope” requires erasing an important question: what about River? The inclusion of an overcoming narrative misdirects the player. The space shuttle scene is not actually happening but, instead, visualizes Johnny’s fantasy. The doctors have engineered Johnny’s brain to make him think that he and River have transcended the dull realities of their rather contentious married life, recreating their narrative on his terms. At the level of the game as a game, however, this act of engineering happiness is emphasized and Johnny’s perspective decentered. His performance of neoliberal masculinity relies on technologies and
narratives that can sustain his normality but is ultimately interrupted at the level of game design.

Masculine Agency in Recession: Beyond the Fantasies of Neoliberal Man

The affective nexus in the game that leads up to and justifies this ending as “hopeful” transforms an unease with capitalism into unabashed celebration of neoliberal subjectivity. As Berlant suggests, “fantasy is the means by which people hoard idealizing theories and tableaux about how they and the world ‘add up to something’” (2). The events of the game do not “add up” to the ending, but that is exactly why the ending is so powerful: it offers narrative escape. The politics of hope Gao creates is meant to, at a broader level, make the audience feel good about their own viewing relationship to both neoliberal economies and people with autism, concealing how viewing practices are mired in blind spots in ways productive to hegemony. The irony of To the Moon is that Johnny is himself disabled. The ending is, therefore, also a fantasy of his own overcoming, projected specifically onto River as a “marked” character. As Rosalene and Watts attempt to implant Johnny’s astronaut fantasy, they encounter problems, such as a scene where Johnny’s memories suddenly end. They learn that, as a child, Johnny experienced the trauma of his brother, Joey, dying after their mom hit him with a car. Johnny then took medication which made him forget about his brother’s death and, by extension, the first time he met River, which involved them watching the stars. Thus, he forgot why he wanted to go to the moon. The puzzle of the game ultimately returns, then, to heteronormativity and to River, even if this realization is delayed to the point of being far too late for River. As a result of his memory loss, Johnny also became Joey, losing his
own interests in space exploration in favor of Joey’s aspirations to become a journalist. Johnny performs his identity, unraveling a fantasy of stable neuronormativity that parallels Isabelle’s suggestion that she, unlike River, has had to learn to perform normativity.

To disentangle this complicated narrative knot, Watts and Rosalene change Johnny’s memories to include Joey living, allowing Johnny to join NASA and blast off to the moon with River. If the conclusion of *To the Moon* reproduces hope in the face of disability and adversity, the game represents how this hope specifically emerges from a male imaginary tied to disavowing its own sense of victimization and disability. Rethinking how autism is represented is, then, a matter of understanding the very technologies that sustain our relationships to the entrepreneurial subject of neoliberal capitalism. If video games, and entertainment more widely, reflect “informatic control” as it relates to neoliberal governmentality, then the affects produced by games (such as happiness or fear) must be analyzed in the context of the entrepreneurial subject. The question is not just the algorithm but also what Bonnie Ruberg calls the “affective rhetoric” (111) of games. To think about an autism that does not need to “overcome” or suggest economic productivity is to also challenge what makes us feel good and happy in neoliberal terms. Rethinking how autism is represented also means emphasizing the role of the “marked man” in articulating a gender performance that utilizes disability to gaze longingly at an ideal economic future where men can succeed, on their own terms, through internalizing their economic value. In *To the Moon*, these neoliberal concerns, and how they operate as fantasies, are explicitly foregrounded.
Not only does the final scene erase the complexities of the everyday life of people with autism to suggest that “anything” is possible, even for the disabled; it also enmeshes this within economic fantasies of rising above our current debt culture and Johnny’s sense of being subordinated to economic structures that he cannot control. When walking around on the bridge during the concluding scene before the shuttle launches, a child says to his father “I want to become an astronaut too, dad.” His dad replies “one day, you just might.” Johnny’s fantasy is also, then, clearly an economic fantasy, tied to his desire to or perception of living in a world in which anyone, including a woman with autism, can, essentially, waltz into a NASA job. Becoming an astronaut, a quintessential American fantasy, functions as a nostalgic reference to a hope in financial stability and to an older model of masculinity which, in the gaming apparatus, can still be accessed as a viable form of agency. The dream of “going to the moon” functions as a nostalgic signifier of the 1960s, a time often idealized by the white male victim. It also plays on the function of the video game in creating a generation interested in specific models of economic subjectivity and in training children in the use of digital skills, as well as how spectacles are constructed, like the first man walking on the moon, as a means of inserting such potentials into public consciousness.

Johnny struggles against economic barriers throughout the game, similar to how the player repeatedly encounters a lack of freedom or choice, plugged into particular affective states and puzzles that frustrate and conceal the narrative. The experience of Johnny’s perspective is, then, itself limiting. An early scene of economic hardship occurs when Johnny tells Isabelle that River has an illness. He immediately puts her illness
within an economic frame: “Fortunately, it’s treatable. But, the medical bills…We can’t afford to finish building this house, Isabelle.” Isabelle’s response is one of the first indications that To the Moon’s world is or resembles the United States following the 2008 recession: “I’d help, but Ted and I have barely been getting by since the market crashed.” In response, Johnny posits an economic “reality” against a fantasy of wealth, naturalizing the conditions under which he lives and foreclosing resistance against “reality” as “crazy”: “I’m going to tell her we can afford everything. I don’t want her to do anything crazy.” River functions as irrational, a means of projecting and dissolving any critique of economic policy. Johnny, on the other hand, presents himself as rational and calculating, believing he has the freedom to make the right choice in this situation, one that signifies he is protecting River and, therefore, a decision with which the player, who has no power over Johnny’s decisions, can agree. His perspective, and by extension that of the player, represents one that fuses ableism and neoliberalism. To the Moon, as I have said, mirrors the process by which games, which have plenty of capability to explore multiple narrative perspectives, rely heavily on making the subject feel whole and validated in their experience of the (game)world.

The game constantly works against this experience, however, breaking with the masculine agency that emerges most explicitly in the concluding fantasy of traveling to the moon. Isabelle’s critique of Johnny offers a perspective outside of that of the protagonist, an uncommon aspect of games. In the scene where Johnny worries about

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82 This is similar to the first episode of Bates Motel, where “crazy” both signifies Norman’s fears about submission to the whims of the economy and has an obviously gendered valence, with a woman described as irrational.
River doing something crazy, Isabelle gives us the first comprehensive critique of Johnny’s perspective, which she ties to cognitive ability and typical ways of understanding the world: “If she chooses not to save herself for the sake of this place, so what? It’s what she really wants. I really dislike when you neurotypicals think you know what’s best for others.” Johnny continues by saying “I don’t want to be alone, Isabelle. I’m not going to let her die” and, to Isabelle’s response “that’s arrogant,” Johnny says “I don’t care.” Here, the conventions of romance are used in a way that facilitates identification with Johnny, especially in the biopolitical context of neoliberalism, where the benevolent male character is making a (romantic) financial decision about the importance of River’s health. His conviction to not let River die emerges, ultimately, in the final scene, where she is reborn as the savior of neoliberal masculinity. At the same time, Johnny’s cognitive processes are subverted as “neurotypical” even as the player has no way of making a different choice or internalizing a different perspective. In this, the player is also critiqued, eternally stuck in Johnny’s questionable fantasies. If this position is “arrogant,” it is still exactly what the memory machine, and the game itself, allows to happen. Noting how this position is also that of neoliberal masculinity, Johnny renders his fears of being alone by claiming that he feels he “owes a debt” to River.

*To the Moon*, then, combines critique of the video game’s capacity, as a medium, to exclude, with criticism of dominant viewing and playing practices, creating an experience that induces all the wrong emotional responses—hope, happiness, tears at the display of romantic love. The game makes an ironic switch: capitalism continues to make Johnny, the consuming subject, valuable. The subtler aspects of the game interrupt these
emotions, including its tedious and repetitive gameplay and puzzle-narrative, which constantly keeps the player in a state of frustration, piecing together knowledge which, ultimately, River has rather than Johnny because she actually remembers their first meeting. In one scene, Gao uses music to set a mood counter to the “hopeful” ending, disrupting a smooth affective progression by complicating the interactions of characters outside of Johnny’s fantasy. During this scene, which occurs temporally before River’s illness, River, Johnny, Nicolas (a friend of Johnny’s), and Isabelle sit in a restaurant. Johnny and River announce that they are going through with the plan to build the house, despite it being “a bit of a squeeze” to pay for it. After they talk a bit about the construction, Isabelle and River leave. When Nicolas asks Johnny if he ever told River that Johnny, essentially, was only originally interested in her when they were in school because she was weird, there is a sudden change in the music: from light-hearted and quick-paced piano music to eerie, discomforting notes reminiscent of a horror film. The change in the music registers discomfort with Johnny’s position despite the fact that he is really the only node of identification, for Watts, Rosalene, and the player.

The game constantly deconstructs any affinity with neoliberal masculinity, exposing the logics of the white male as victim. Johnny’s idealizing fantasies, the only possible position for the player to inhabit, ultimately make no narrative or ludological sense. The procedural rhetoric of the game works, then, against narrative progression and point of view. To the Moon mimics the agency, ability, and masculine rationality often attributed to games, utilizing these to project disability onto an autistic woman. In doing so, the game centralizes the logics through which autism is made valuable in
neoliberalism in relation to overcoming economic limitations. At the same time, the game delimits the “action” typically associated with games and actively works against Johnny, its protagonist, a character who constantly attempts to navigate his own relationship to economic recession. The game centralizes the importance of idealizing fantasies in moments of immense suffering, despair, and uncertainty, allowing a man to live vicariously through an autistic woman. This is also the state of gamic action, which fragments victimization, allowing the experience of victimization while also projecting it elsewhere. To the Moon, then, interprets the typical structure of games while understanding that how someone feels or how games produce affect are also tied to who is not allowed to feel and to who is sacrificed to narrative in order to make others happy and productive.

**Conclusion: Autism and The Affective Logics of Futurity**

To me, To the Moon points to the importance of interrupting idealizing fantasies tied directly to neoliberal identity and foregrounds how such narrative structures are often facilitated by technologies that cater to a fictionalized sense of ability. Johnny escapes his disability to find comfort as a subject of cognitive capitalism, finding value in River through the melding of romance and achievement. This achievement, and the sense of neoliberal masculinity to which it is tied, is inevitably a fantasy, entirely outside of the frame of economic collapse and the desires of an autistic character. The act of desiring ability is also an act of accepting the economic frameworks which have brought disparity in the first place. In To the Moon, the white male as victim attempts to suspend his victimization and project it through the use of technology rather than accepting it as a
means of negotiating his relationship to the algorithmic, rationalized gaze of a neoliberal information culture. Similarly, the texts discussed in this dissertation have projected ability, agency, and neoliberal subjectivity onto autistic characters, whether that occurs through a cathartic moment of overcoming or the dystopian argument that the intersection of masculinity and autism forms the foundation of patriarchal dominance.

*To the Moon* functions as an allegory for many of the viewing practices I have discussed throughout this dissertation. Imagining a world where a man is threatened by economic collapse, the game yearns for simplistic romantic clichés, national ideologies of achievement, and the assurance that the system works perfectly because an autistic character is able to be productive or overcome disability to achieve emotional states conducive to a better future. On the way to these conclusions, however, the opposite emerges: Johnny is destabilized, the collusion of capitalism and insurance companies fails to support the affective and physical health of the marginalized, and the very apparatuses through which desires are produced become sinister and exploitative. *To the Moon* vividly renders the process through which masculinity is facilitated and validated through the economic aspirations of an autistic character, aspirations entirely borne from fantasies of agency in the face of immense psychological and economic precarity.

Autism produces and resolves, for many cultural representations, a sense of unease about what the future looks like. The texts discussed throughout this dissertation have primarily been future-oriented: *The Imitation Game*, while ostensibly a period piece about World War II, gazes temporally forward towards both LGBTQ rights and the autistic emotional states of the war on terror and personal computing; Philip K. Dick and
Kathy Acker used science fiction to articulate a vision of the future wrapped entirely in unfeeling governmental logics and, to differing purposes, victimized and autistic men; Elliot Rodger submitted himself to a philosophy of economic viability invested entirely in the hope that the neoliberal mechanisms of chance would bestow him a better future; it is the hope of such a future that, for an autistic character like Parenthood’s Max, justifies the instability and disinterest in human suffering which accompanies the logics of economic recession; Norman Bates and To the Moon’s Johnny suggest how fantasies of victimization are intimately tied to a future that is constantly deferred, one built on complex disavowals of social, cognitive, and affective disability that operate to institute a very particular set of gender politics. For To the Moon, this gender politics is especially urgent, embedded as it is in the procedural rhetoric of new media, forms of communication which have quickly become central means of understanding and engaging with autism.

The stakes regarding representations of autism are relatively high: will cultural images of male disability continue to support, through cathartic experiences of victimization, the very structures which limit many people with disabilities on a daily basis? Will the white male as victim remain a hegemonic cultural figure? Or will new narratives emerge that can counter the merging of disability and masculinity that supports neoliberal futures? Autism is one means through which the white male as victim is articulated and, therefore, through which the New Man of neoliberalism is being formulated, especially following the 2008 economic crisis that, in many ways, has also registered as a crisis of masculinity. For instance, in the 2009 film Adam, the eponymous
protagonist has to deal with the death of his father and eventual loss of his job in a way that transforms him from an autistic “alien” to a fully functioning economic subject. Like Johnny, he has fantasies of space, represented through his obsession with astronomical facts. Adam gets stuck in these obsessions, clear in a scene near the beginning of the film which shows him in his bedroom preparing to sleep after attending his father’s funeral. The camera, which seems to be positioned near the ceiling a little off from the center of the room, and the low artificial lighting almost seem to mimic a surveillance camera. An astronaut suit sits next to a telescope in the corner of his room, a suit which he will wear later in the film in a ridiculous and childish performance. Asperger’s, while a potential vehicle of the entrepreneurial self, can also produce an eternally suspended identity that cannot seize the economic future. This distant, estranged point of view recurs throughout the film, with multiple distant camera shots of Adam from different rooms that suggest an ethnographic, or possibly even clinical or carceral, gaze. His autism limits him, imprisoning him in a repetitive life with no prospects.

When Adam begins dating his new neighbor, Beth, however, the camera also moves closer to him; he becomes less alien as he engages in conflicts with Beth’s father, a wealthy accountant who is put on trial, and eventually convicted, for cooking the books for his mistress. As Beth’s father falls out of favor as an example of an entrepreneurial man, Adam rises. Beth teaches him how to interview for jobs and, as a final means of assuring Adam’s independence, she refuses to go with him when he moves across the country for a new job. The film ends “one year later” by showing Adam working happily at an observatory as a tour guide. An establishing shot shows a bright rural scene where
the observatory peeks over the top of a tree-lined mountain, an ideal location for someone who likes seclusion. The camera cuts to the inside of the observatory and slowly pans at an angle down while we hear Adam doing what he does best: rambling about space and telescopes. He confidently mentions facts while a large group of people stand around him listening. After the group leaves, a woman comes carrying boxes and gives Adam a package; as she begins leaving he asks if she wants help carrying the boxes, contrasting specifically with an earlier scene where he fails to help Beth carry groceries up some stairs. In both of these aspects, his confidence and recognition of his duties as a man, Adam has finally achieved masculine and neoliberal independence, finding his niche and obsessively sticking with it.

He opens the package to find a copy of Beth’s children’s book, titled *Adam*. Inside, Beth left a note reading “Dear Adam, Look how far we’ve come. Love, Beth.” He begins reading the story, which we hear through a voiceover of Beth, and the camera offers a long close up shot of Adam’s face. He stares blankly for a while, seeming at first to be angry, then shakes his head a bit as his eyes tear up and he smiles, a rare moment of emotion. The song playing during this scene, “Can’t Go Back Now” by The Weepies, proclaims: “Yesterday when you were young/Everything you needed done was done for you/Now you do it on your own/But you find you're all alone, what can you do?” and later “I can't really say/Why everybody wishes they were somewhere else/But in the end, the only steps that matter/Are the ones you take all by yourself.” These lyrics emphasize the transition from child to adult, dependence to independence, which the ending of the film solidifies, with Adam alone and having to take steps “all by [him]self.” The song
nostalgically evokes a sense of security that, in the end, can also only come from self-reliance.

Men with autism, then, are often used to produce a vision of the economy which allows men to reclaim their rightful social positions and to find independence, offering idealized narratives where disability is disavowed. They overcome to become a new model of a loyal neoliberal subject, willing to subject themselves to a rationalized logic that contains their earning potential. Like River, Adam is formed by his romantic partner, created in the image of neoliberal man in order to offer a transcendent hope not only that anything is possible but that neoliberal economics, and the valuing of human beings as objects of economic analysis, is a benevolent process through which individuals can tap their potential. Adam, as a victim, is propelled into a precarious economic fantasy. Beth’s father, manipulating finances rather than submitting to the invisible logics of numbers, falls out of favor as the future becomes populated by Adams: men willing to seize their independence as menial workers, doing their jobs in order to look towards a future of both a repaired economy and masculinity. Autistic masculinity is inherently a project meant to repair social disability in ways which smoothly align with hegemonic social, political, and economic patterns.

This is the recurrent narrative that *To the Moon* reproduces and devalues, asking what it might be like to imagine a future where River’s perspective, disengaged as it is from economic concerns tied to neoliberal masculinity, may prove viable. The affective logics of neoliberalism require her demise through the act of fantasy. It is important to disentangle the logics of the marked man from the horizon of possibility. This is
especially true in the present political climate, where the white male as victim is enjoying power while autism is, again, targeted as something that can be “cured” and made to disappear. Donald Trump, claiming that autism is caused by vaccines, has repeated this rhetoric, attaching it to his political agenda.\textsuperscript{83} Trump appeals to the fantasy that men can be men again, leaving behind the disabilities which have plagued their ability to be successful economic subjects. Understanding and critiquing these fantasies means redirecting the white male as victim into conversations yearning beyond neoliberalism that can see the oppression mandated by neoliberal regimes. In mobilizing the white male as victim, Trump proposes a neoliberal future. Representations of autism often nostalgically plug into the same desires. Disrupting this circuit means fundamentally challenging the associations between disability, masculinity, and neoliberalism and, therefore, imagining a future outside of dystopia, outside of neoliberalism, and outside of the reparative masculinities sought by the act of catharsis. This is a future with autism and without cold neoliberal gazes focused on analyzing human viability and value.

\textsuperscript{83} Trump has linked autism and vaccines multiple times, including on Twitter when he stated “I'm not against vaccinations for your children, I'm against them in 1 massive dose. Spread them out over a period of time & autism will drop!” For more on Trump’s feelings about disabilities (and how he links them to a lack of masculinity) and the threat he poses to people with autism, see Emily Willingham’s article in \textit{Forbes} “Donald Trump Will Be A Disaster For Autistic People.”
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