

Immaterial and Affective Labor in Light of the Derivative

In the summer of 2013, Moira Weigel and Mal Ahern published a [piece](#) at The New Inquiry entitled "Further Materials Toward a Theory of the Man-Child." The piece aimed to critique and dismantle a much older essay entitled "Preliminary Materials for the Theory of the Young-Girl" which was first published in the French journal *Tiqqun* in 1999. *Tiqqun*'s "materials" posited that the figure of the "young girl" had come to represent the "total integration in a disintegrating social totality" and had become "consumer society's total product and model citizen", writing "whatever 'type' of Young-Girl she may embody, whether by whim or concerted performance, she can only seduce by consuming." While Weigel and Ahern understand that the "young girl" was intended to be a generalized figure, tracing the imbrication-- or collapse-- of production into consumption, they also rightfully responded to *Tiqqun*'s distorted and demeaning language, highlighting sentences such as "Deep down inside, the Young-Girl has the personality of a tampon: she exemplifies all of the appropriate indifference, all of the necessary coldness demanded by the conditions of metropolitan life." (Although this statement might beg a deeper and more odd object oriented question: what is exactly is the personality of a tampon?) And, they would also offer the suggestion that rather than the figure of the "young-girl" who had become representative of late capital, we should instead look to the centrality of the "man-child."

Playing with the same "post-gendered" privilege that *Tiqqun* purported to take, Weigel and Ahern go on to formulate their own materials in an attempt to trace the figure of the man-child figure, a figure marked by an inability to exist in relations of duration. Everything, they write, that the man-child does is a "delaying tactic", a "way of putting off the future." Where as the young-girl was, for *Tiqqun*, locked in a feedback loop of capital's circulations and productions, Weigel and Ahern propose a figure repetitiously seeking escape. This is a figure willfully oblivious to its own participation in the recomposition of value, particularly as value has come to reside outside of the wage relation and, indeed, outside of the very measurement of, as Adam Arvidsson has written (2006), the productivity of time. As value has moved beyond the logics of the factory, seeking to capitalize on the "intangible" and converging with the endless modulation of affects, Weigel's and Ahern's critique is meant to suggest that we might see in such an economy the very conditions by which a patriarchal techno-capital is actually in persistent flight, distracted, and incapable of "settling down" as they might suggest. Unable, it seems to be the very grounds from which the heteronormative *oikos*, or household politics, might be refounded.

While we might rightly problematize what appears to be Weigel's and Ahern's implicit desire for such a refounding (they conclude their piece by reinstalling the "mother" as the site of care relations), I do think that their essay points us to ways in which the incessant search for the some-thing, a some-thing-else, be it the always arriving excess of the virtual or the hidden and irreducible lives of objects-, may be an uncanny whisper of capital's territorializing moves. While I do not agree with Alexander Galloway and his critique that Object Oriented Ontology is the language of capitalism, I do side with scholars such as Patricia Clough and Nigel Thrift who are deeply aware that, as Thrift has written, "capitalism and academe have alighted on the same issue." Additionally, and while I won't have time to address this, I would like to keep alive in this paper the thought of "new materialism" because, as I will suggest, we will need an account of such materialism if we are to forge new solidarities in the face of what has appeared to be a

generalized feminization of labor via the productive subsumption of affect, and even "life itself." I would like then to keep a notion of ontology, particularly as it pertains to the digital and to financialized capital, very much alive in what follows.

Reading Weigel and Ahern along side the work of Angela Mitropoulos in *Contract and Contagion: From Biopolitics to Oikonomia*, we see that the repetitious flights of the man-child are, in effect, double movements— expansive movements of flight that simultaneously seek a new frontier while imposing what Mitropoulos would call a "foundation" or a gendered, sexualized, and racialized substratum of difference and dispossession. It is this substratum (what Mitropoulos will link back to genealogy and the genealogical capacity for the transfer of wealth) that underscores and enables capital's simultaneous expansion or "flights", as well as, and this is key, its "restoration of limits."

Such a restoration of limits is what I think has been overlooked in critiques such as Weigel's and Ahearn's, which conclude that we "have all been feminized" via the expansion and valuing of affective and immaterial labor and it is this notion of simultaneous expansion and limitation that I would like to bring in conversation with an ontology of the digital. Here I should say that I do not mean to take the New Inquiry piece to full task. I myself have written such pieces whose intention is to clarify the nature and prevalence of the feminization of labor. For instance, I recently responded to Ian Bogost's claim that mobile, digital technologies are creating a condition of "hyperemployment" by suggesting that referring to "the cozy arrangement between digital technologies, data economies, and invisible labor "employment" runs the danger of side-stepping the deeper (gendered and racialized) antagonisms inherent in the distinction between what is considered labor and what is considered "care." While I think it is invaluable to continually make visible the long history of the naturalization or feminization of specific forms of labor, I also have been increasingly compelled to see the conversation of affective labor, immaterial labor, and affect itself delineated (along with the intellectual baggage that each term brings to the table), rather than conflated. Beyond this, we must also consider our use of these terms in light of what Clough et al have suggested is an emerging onto-sociality of the digital via "big data" and the "social logics of the derivative." This is an approach to labor that might ask us to question "what is laboring" in addition to "who." It is my contention that such an onto-sociality is marked by both expansion and limit— an expansion of the capacities for subsumption into the very matter and substance of the living world, but also what we might think of as a "proliferation of limit", a proliferation of what Celia Lury would articulate as "interfaces."

Therefore, as much as we see subsumption and precarity in our critiques of labor, we must also see a restoring of a specific type of grounds. The development of what has been called "the new economy" (and I'd like to suggest that we stop using that term now) has come on the heels of the recalibration of the violent substratum of difference and dispossession that always accompanied profit, in other words it has come with a re-imposition of an oikos— not merely a devaluing, subsumptive, feminizing flight of expansion, but a grounding of a terrain, which as Mitropoulos (following Marx) illustrates, is necessary for the transfer of wealth.

That ground is simultaneously necessary, but devoid of the ability to enter into the shifting, expanding terrain of contract. And it here, within Mitropoulos' complex analysis of the performative nature of contact, that we see how the *oikos*, which can take many forms and is by

no means singular, is specifically excluded from participation in this performance, which functions, according to Mitropolous, to identify, create, and control "contagion." Rather, the *oikos*, despite its generative capacity to transfer wealth along genealogical lines, is actually defined in relation to contract by debt and obligation.

So, while the man-child (if we can keep with that figure) of capital seeks flight, he also gives rise to new relations of limits and boundaries— limits and boundaries, which are always gendered, sexualized, and racialized. These boundaries may come to reimpose the logic of the *oikos* in any number of ways across different scales— perhaps a moral code of attachment (for example, family as obligation) or as a biopolitical delineation of the "sick" and the "well", or more drastically "those left to die." Indeed, one might only think of student loans to see the ways in which a double move of expansion (we're all students now, often laboring in universities to raise the currency of their degrees) has been coupled with a re-imposition of debt and obligation. As Mitropolous writes, "contract and genealogy", or the very logics of the *oikos* written through the language of exclusion, difference, debt, and obligation, are always the answer to "the dilemma of capitalist futurity." Not seeing this double move of expansion and grounding, as many accounts of affective and immaterial labor seem to do, may, in part, account for why we seem have been so taken by surprise that many of the supposedly contract based "rights" of post WWII America have been relatively easy to cast aside as of late, or why whose casting has met with shrugged shoulders.

A new terrain of contract, which is to say a new terrain of contingency transmuted into risk and made measurable and speculative, has been at play in the now old "new economy." Mitropolous would envision such a terrain as a form of "contractual geometry", relating that geometry to the fractal by suggesting "fractals can admit a mutation, once, in order to discern exposure, spread and pattern... They (fractals) can hypothesize mutation, by inserting stochastic perturbation into deterministic algorithms, but the rest unfold as fractional, self-affine variation" (C&C 154). For Mitropolous, the fractal is a way to think the re-imposition of the limits through the "scalability of pattern of *oikonomic* re/production" (C&C 172). While there is no "neat juxtaposition between the fractal and the ostensibly traditional *oikonomic* markets of ethnicity, identity, and kinship in the contact reorganization of transfers and expansions..." (C&C 172), it does seem for Mitropolous that it is the fractal's self-affine variation that does the work of bounding contagion within the framework of contract (regardless of the contract complexity or temporality.) What to make of the fractal nature of contractual geometry when considering the onto-logic of big data?

In looking to the Netherland's "tulip mania" as an precursor to modern day derivatives, or "contracts to exchange a certain amount of something at a determinate future time at an agreed-upon price" (to borrow Randy Martin's definition in his essay "After Economy"), Mitropolous shows that such a shifting "geometry" of contracts is able to both proliferate and bind contagion by distancing itself from the very gambling and chance it relies on. It does this by establishing, for example, a "legal and institutional boundary between discrete spheres of economic activity (trading houses rather than taverns for instance)—and the legitimation (or not) of who might partake in them" (C&C 184). As the market for tulips emerged so too did a "frontier" emerge where such fractalization sets forth to both colonize and re-harmonize *oikonomic* relations of propriety, property, and transmission. While such historic tracing are deeply helpful for

understanding how such a double movement both expands abundance via contract, while imposing limits or “austerity”, particularly on specific bodies who then become indebted within the newly fractalizing pattern, I am wondering about the relationship of contract, contagion and the digital (or perhaps more specifically, “big data” or what I think of as the proliferation of the algorithmic capture, analysis, and valuation of derivative bits across scales of matter.)

While Mitropoulos suggests that an infrastructure constructed via points of contact, rather than the imposition of foundations, is still possible when we look to the work of authors such as Randy Martin, whose work on what comes “after economy” we see that points of contact, endless contact via a digitalized algorithmic infrastructure *is* the motion and essence of financialization. Micro contact, micro contracts, always shifting, recalibrating, reformulating. Martin writes, “derivatives do not refer to a fixed relation between part and whole but to a collection of attributes that are assembled together in relation to other discernible features of the bodies, or variables, or environmental conditions they encounter. While derivatives are devised in a language of futures and forwards, of anticipating what is to come in the present so that a significant difference can be acted upon, the act of bundling attributes together speaks of a lateral orientation, which is an effect of intercommensurability.”

While a deeper exploration of the working of the derivative is beyond the scope of this talk, I would like to suggest that it is via the digital materiality and the big data logic of the derivative that we are experiencing a re-imposition of the *oikos*, a household logic that we have yet to fully articulate. Affective and immaterial labor begin the conversation, but as this re-imposition terraforms the very experience of social life across scales of sociality and matter, I'm suggesting that we will need a more robust sense of such materiality and logic. While Martin is eager to move from economy to derivative entirely, I would caution that the *oikos* as the violent substratum of difference travels equally, if not more virulently, along with derivative and therefore as Martin writes, whereas

economy promised wealth, it naturalized scarcity. Derivatives suppose a wealth already to hand that, with proper investment and sense of return, would render scarcity unnecessary. The money is there, the mutuality exists, the means to make what is desired are to hand — this is the new political imaginary that derivatives potentially augur, subject to what emerges from the tussle with the ways of a decaying economy.

If this is truly to be the case, we must begin to speak the language and movement of the derivative, to touch and manipulate and enter its material performance.

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