

## Good Wives: Algorithmic Architectures as Metabolization

Below is the text of the talk I gave at [Digital Labor: Sweatshops, Picket Lines, and Barricade](#), which was held in New York last week (November 14th-16th) The title of the talk is "Good Wives: Algorithmic Architectures as Metabolization."

This talk has a few different starting points, which include a [forum](#) I held last March on Angela Mitropoulos' work *Contract and Contagion* that explored the expansions and reconfigurations of capital, time, and work through the language of Oikonomics or the "properly productive household", as well as the work that I was doing with Patricia Clough, Josh Scannell, and Benjamin Haber on a paper called "[The Datalogical Turn](#)", which explores how the coupling of large scale databases and adaptive algorithms "are calling forth a new onto-logic of sociality or the social itself" as well as, I confess, no small share of binge-watching the TV show the Good Wife. So, please bear with me as I take you through my thinking here. What I am trying to do in my work of late is a form of feminist thinking that can take quite seriously not only the onto-sociality of data and the ways in which bodily practices are made to extend far and wide beyond the body, but a form of thinking that can also understand the paradox of our times: How and why has digital abundance been ushered in on the heels of massive income inequality and political dispossession? In some ways, the last part of that sentence (why inequality and political dispossession) is actually easier to account for than understanding the role that such "abundance" has played in the reconfiguration or transfers of wealth and power.

So, let me back up her for a minute... Already in 1992, Deleuze wrote that a disciplinary society had give way to a control society. Writing, "we are in a generalized crisis in relation to all the environments of enclosure—prison, hospital, factory, school, family" and that "everyone knows that these institutions are finished, whatever the length of their expiration periods. It's only a matter of administering their last rites and of keeping people employed until the installation of the new forces knocking at the door. These are the societies of control, which are in the process of replacing the disciplinary societies." For Deleuze, whereas the disciplinary man was a "discontinuous producer of energy, the man of control is undulatory, in orbit, in a continuous network." For such a human, Deleuze wrote, "surfing" has "replaced older sports."

We know, despite Marx's theorization of "dead labor", that digital, networked infrastructures have been active, even "vital", agents of this shift from discipline to control or the shift from a capitalism of production and property to a capitalism of dispersion, a capitalism fit for circulation, relay, response, and feedback. As Deleuze writes, this is a capitalism fit for a "higher order" of production. I want to intentionally play on the words "higher word", with their invocations of a religiosity, faith, and hierarchy, because much of our theoretical work of late has been specifically developed to help us understand the ways in which such a "higher order" has been very successful in affectively reconfiguring and reformatting bodies and environments for its own purposes. We talk often of the modulation, pre-emption, extraction, and subsumption of elements once thought to be "immaterial" or spiritual, if you will, the some-"things" that lacked a full instantiation in the material world. I do understand that I am twisting Deleuze's words here a bit (what he meant in the Postscript was a form of production that we now think as flexible production, production on demand, or JIT production), but my thinking here is that very notion of

a higher order, a form of production considered progress in itself, has been very good at making us pray toward the light and at replacing the audial sensations of the church bell/factory clock with the blinding temporality of the speed of light itself. This blinding speed of light is related to what Marx called “circulation time,” or the annihilation of space through time, and it is this black hole of capital, this higher order of production and the ways in which we have theorized its metaphysics, which I want to argue, have become the *Via Negativa* to a Capital that transcends thought. What I mean here is that this form of theorizing has really left us with a capital beyond reproach, a capital reinstated in and through the effects of what it is not—it is not a wage, it is not found in commodities, it is not ultimately a substance humans have access or rights to...

In such a rapture of the higher order of the light, there has been a tendency to look away from concepts such as “foundations” or “limits” or quaint theories of units such as the “household”, but in Angela Mitropoulos’ work *Contract and Contagion* we find those concepts as the heart of her reading of the collapse of the time of work into that of life. For Mitropoulos, it is through the performativity and probabilistic terms of “the contract” (and not simply the contract of liberal sociality, but a contract as a terms of agreement to the “right” genealogical transfer of wealth) that we should visualize the flights of capital. This broadened notion of the contract is a necessary term for fully grasping what is being brought into being on the heels of “the datalogical turn.”

For Mitropoulos, it is the contract, which she links to the oath, the promise, the covenant, the bargain, and even faith in general, that “transforms contingency into necessity.” Contracts’ “ensuing contractualism” has been “amplified as an ontological precept.” Here, contract is fundamentally a precept that transforms life into a game (and I don’t mean simply game-ified, but obviously we could talk about what gameification means for our sense of what is implied in contractual relations. Liberal contracts have tended to evoke their authority from the notion of autonomous and rational subjects—this is not exactly the same subject being invoked when you’re prompted to like every picture of a cat on the internet or have your attention directed to tiny little numbers in the corner of screen to see who faved your post, although those Facebook numbers are micro-contracts. One’s you haven’t signed up for exactly.) For Mitropoulos, it is not just that contracts transform life into contingency; it is that they transform life into a game that must be played out of necessity. Taking up Pascal’s wager Mitropoulos writes,

the materiality of contractualism is that of a performativity installed by its presumption of the inexorable necessity of contingency; a presumption established by what I refer to here as the Pascalian premise that one must ‘play the game’ necessarily, that this is the only game available. This invalidates all idealist explanations of contract, including those which echo contractualism’s voluntarism in their understanding of (revolutionary) subjectivity. Performativity is the temporality of contract, and the temporal continuity of capitalism is uncertain.

In other words, one has no choice but to gamble. God either exists or God does not exist. Both may be possible/virtual, but only one will be real/actual and it is via the wager that one must, out of necessity, come to understand God with and through contingency. It is through such wagering that the contract—as a form of measurable risk—comes into being. Measurable

risk—measure and risk as entangled in speculation— became, we might say, the Via Affirmativa of early and industrializing capital.

This transmutation of contingency into measure sits not only at the heart the contract, but is as Mitropoulos writes, “crucial to the legitimized forms of subjectivity and relation that have accompanied the rise and expansion of capitalism across the world.” Yet, in addition to the historical project of situating an authorial, egalitarian, liberal, willful, and autonomous subject as a universal subject, contract is also interested in something that looks much more like geometric, matrixial, spatializing, and impersonal. Contract does not solely care about “subject formation”, but also the development of positions that compose a matrix— so that the matrix is made to be an engine of production and circulation. It is interested in the creation of an infrastructure of contracts, or points of contact that reconfigure a “divine” order in the face of contingency.

The production of such a divine order is what Mitropoulos will link back to Oikonomia or the economics of the household, whereby bodies are parsed both spatially and socially into those who may enter into contract and those who may not. While contract becomes increasingly a narrow domain of human relations, Oikonomia is the intentional distribution and classification of bodies—humans, animal, mineral— to ensure the “proper” (i.e. moral, economic, and political) functioning of the household, which functions like molar node within the larger matrix. Given that contingency has been installed as the game that must be played, contract then comes to enforces a chain of being predicated on forms of naturalized servitude and obligation to the game. These are forms of naturalized servitude that are simultaneously built into the architecture of the household, as well as made invisible. As [Anne Boyer](#) has written in regard to the Greek household it, probably looked like this:

In the front of the household were the women’s rooms—the gynaikonitis. Behind these were the common areas and the living quarters for the men—the andronitis. It was there one could find the libraries. The men’s area, along with the household, was also wherever was outside of the household—that is, the free man’s area was the oikos and the polis and was the world. The oikos was always at least a double space, and doubly perceived, just as what is outside of it was always a singular territory on which slaves and women trespassed. The singular nature of the outside was enforced by violence or the threat of it. The free men’s home was the women’s factory; also—for women and slaves—their factory was a home on its knees.

This is not simply a division of labor, but as Boyer writes, “God made of women an indoor body, and made of men an outdoor one. And this scheme—what becomes, in future iterations, public and private, of production and reproduction, of waged work and unpaid servitude—is the order agreed upon to attend to the risk posed by those who make the oikos.”

This is the order that we believe has given way as Fordism morphed into Post-Fordism and as the walls of these architectures have been smoothed by the flows of endlessly circulated, derivative, financialized capital. Yet, what Mitropoulos’ work points us toward is the persistence of the contract. Walls may crumble, but the foundations of contract re-instantiate, if not

proliferate, in the wake of capital's discovery of new terrains. The gynaikonitis with its function to parse and delineate the labor of the household into a hierarchy of care work—from the wifely householding of management to the slave-like labor of “being ready to hand”—does not simply evaporate, but rather finds new instantiations among the flights of capital and new instantiations within its very infrastructure. Following Mitropoulos, we can argue that while certain forms of disciplinary seemingly come to an end, there is no shift to control without a proliferating matrix of contract whose function is to re-impose the very meaning—or rather, the very ontological necessity, of measure. It is through the persistent re-imposition of measure that a logic of the Oikos is never lost, ensuring—despite new configurations of capital—the genealogical transfer of wealth and the fundamentally dispossessing relations of servitude.

Let me shift a gear here ever so slightly and enter Alicia Florrick. Alicia is “The Good Wife”, who many of you know from the TV show of the same name. She is the white fantasy superhero and upper middle class working mother and ruthless lawyer who has successfully exploded onto the job market after years of raising her children and who is not only capable of leaning in after all those years, but of taking command of her own law firm and running for political office. Alicia is a “good wife” not solely because she has stood beside her philandering politician husband, but because as a white, upper-class mother and lawyer, she is nonetheless responsible for the utmost of feminized and invisible labor—that of (re)producing the very conditions of sociality. Her “womanly” or “wife-ish” goodness is predicated on her ability to transform what are essentially, in the show, a series of shitty experiences and shitty conditions, into conditions of possibility and potential. Alicia works endlessly, tirelessly (Does she ever sleep?) to find new avenues of possibility and configurations of the law in order to create a very specific form of “liberal” order and organization, believing as she does in the “power of rules” (in distinction to her religious daughter, a necessary trope used to highlight the fundamentally “moral” underpinning of secular order.)

While the show is incredibly popular, no doubt because viewers desire to identify with Alicia's capacity for labor and domination, to me the show is less about a real or even possible human figure than it is about a “good wife” and the social function that such a wife plays. In Oikonomic logic, a good wife is essential to the maintenance of contract because she is what metabolizes the worlds of inner and outer, simultaneously managing the inner domestic world of care within while parsing or keeping distinct its contagion from the outer world of contract. That Alicia is white, heternormative, upper middle class, as well as upwardly mobile and legally powerful is essential to aligning her with the power of contract, yet her work is fundamentally that of parsing contagions to the system. Prison bodies and prison as a site of the “general population” haunt the show as though we are meant to forget that Alicia's labor and its value are predicated on the existence of space beyond contract—a space of being removed from visibility. The figure of the good wife therefore not only operates as a shared boundary, but reproduces the distinctions between contractable relations and invisible, obligated labor or what I will call metabolization. Our increasing digitized, datafied, networked, and surveilled world is fully populated by such good wives. We call them interfaces. But they should also be seen as a proliferation of contracts, which are rewriting the nature of who and what may participate.

I would like to argue that good wives—or interfaces—and their necessary shadow world of obligated labor are useful frameworks for understanding the paradox I mentioned when I first

began: how and why has digital abundance been ushered on the heels of massive income inequality and political dispossession? In the logic of the Oikos, the good wife of the interface stands in both contradistinction and harmony with the metabolizing labor of the system she manages, which is comprised of those specifically removed from “the labor” relation— domestic workers, care workers, prisoner laborers—those who must be “present” yet without recognition. The interface stands in both contradistinction and harmony with the algorithm that is made to be present and made to adapt. I want to argue that the “marriage” of the proliferation of interfaces and with the ubiquitous, and adaptive computation of digital algorithms is an Oikonomic infrastructure. It is a proliferation of contracts meant to insure that the “contagion” of the algorithm, which I explore in a moment, remain “black boxed” or removed from visibility, while nonetheless ensuring that such contagious invisible work shore up the power of contract and its ability to redirect capital along genealogical lines. While Piketty doesn’t use the language of the Oikos, we might read the arrival of his work as a confirmation that we are in a moment re-establishing such a “household logic”—an expansion of capital that comes with quite a new foundation of the transfer of wealth.

While the good wife or interface is a boundary, which borrowing from Celia Lury, that marks a frame for the simultaneous capture and redeployment of data, it is the digital algorithm that undergirds or makes possible the interfaces’ ontological authority to “measure.” However, algorithms, if we follow Luciana Parisi are not simply executing a string of code, not simply providing the interface with a “measure” of an existing world. Rather, algorithms are, as Luciana Parisi writes in her work on contagious architecture, performing entities that are “not simply representations of data, but are occasions of experience insofar as they prehend information in their own way.” Here Parisi is ascribing to the algorithm a Whiteheadian ontology of process, which sees the algorithm as its own spatio-temporal entity capable of grasping, including, or excluding data. Prehension implies not so much a choice, but a relation of allure by which all entities (not only algorithms) call one another into being, or come into being as events or what Whitehead calls “occasions of experience.” For Parisi, via Whitehead, the algorithm is no longer simply a tool to accomplish a task, but an “actuality, defined by an automated prehension of data in the computational processing of probability.”

Much like the good wife of the Greek household, who must manage and organize—but is nonetheless dependent on— the contagious (and therefore made to be invisible) domestic labor of servants and slave, the good wife of the interface manages and organizes the prehensive capacities of the algorithm, which are then misrecognized as simply “doing their job” or executing their code in a divine order of being. However, if we follow Parisi, prehension does not simply imply the direct “reproduction of that which is prehend”, rather prehension should be understood itself be understood as a “contagion.” Writing, “infinite amounts of data irreversibly enter and determine the function of algorithmic procedures. It follows that contagion describes the immanence of randomness in programming.” This contagion, for Parisi, means that “algorithmic prehensions are quantifications of infinite qualities that produce new qualities.” Rather than simply “doing their job”, as it were, algorithms are fundamentally generative. They are, for Parisi, producing not only new digital spaces, but also programmed architectural forms and urban infrastructures that “expose us to new mode of living, but new modes of thinking.” Algorithms are metabolizing a world of infinite and incomputable data that is then mistaken by the interfaces as a “measure” of that world—a measure that can not only stand in for contract,

but can give rise to a proliferation of micro contracts that populate the circulations of sociality.

Control then, if we can return to that idea, has come not simply about as an undulation or a demise of discipline, but through an architecture of metabolization and measure that has never disavowed the function of contract. It is, in fact, an architecture quite successful at re-writing the very terms of contract arrangements. Algorithmic architectures may no longer seek to maintain the walls of the household, but they are nonetheless in the rapid production of an Oikos all the same.