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He_rtland: The Violence of Neoliberalism

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Heartland: The Violence of Neoliberalism

by

Hector Sotomayor

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Liberal Arts
Department of Humanities
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Abstract

Perhaps, under the consciousness of today, “neoliberalism” has defined our world during the previous and current centuries more than any other socioeconomic system. But the evolution of this ideology, which initially aimed to enhance, or rather, reinvent capitalism and individual freedom, has, in essence, induced an unrecognized problem. I argue that neoliberalism is the catalyst for much of the hostility in this globalized society where tensions and poverty are casualties of individual and corporate prosperity. Because of this revelation, I argue that neoliberalism inadvertently instills violence that is both unseen and gendered. In order to formulate my argument, I introduce a historical chronology to the ideological origins of neoliberalism and how it manifested its way to its socioeconomic prominence. I then concentrate my attention to neoconservatism, most notably, Reaganism, with the year 1984, which I feel is the official christening of neoliberalism. From that year, I bring forth, three films about the crisis of farming in the 20th century, *Country*, *Places in the Heart*, and *The River*. Through these “farm crisis films,” which centers their themes around pastoral virtues, I argue that the violence conveyed in these films critiques neoliberalism. On the surface, these films demonstrate violence through an invisible and unrecognizable antagonist. But at the heart of this violence is a gendered angle that has much more to do with neoliberalism than with feminist debates. The gendered violence of neoliberalism is, in actuality, linked to the characters’ struggle to maintain some sense of autonomy, but this possibility is always uncertain because of their failure to recognize their inevitable interdependencies.

Introduction:

Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and 1984

*“The concept of ‘neoliberalism’ has, during the past twenty years or so, become quite widespread in some political and academic debates. Several authors have even suggested that neoliberalism is ‘the dominant ideology shaping our world today,’ and that we live in the ‘age of neoliberalism’...”*¹

— Dag Einar Thorsen and Amund Lie

*“Neoliberalism as a potential antidote to threats to the capitalist social order and as a solution to capitalism’s ills had long been lurking in the wings a public policy”*²

— David Harvey

An Age of Antagonisms

Nearly seven years removed from what has been called “The Great Recession,”³ which thus far, is the worst global economic catastrophe⁴ since the previous century’s Great Depression, constant stories of foreclosures, homelessness, poverty, unemployment, broken families, and

¹ Thorsen, Dag Einar. and Amund Lie. “What is Neoliberalism?” p. 1. This article attempts to summarize the historical origins to the term “neoliberalism” and how it has manifested into recent discourse within socioeconomic and political platforms.

² Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press, 2005. p. 19.

³ Hetzel, Robert L. *The Great Recession: Market Failure or Policy Failure?* Cambridge University Press, 2012. Hetzel’s text is an explanatory approach on monetary and market disorders that facilitated the 2008-2009 recession.

⁴ Arestis, Philip., Rogério Sobreira, and José Luis Oreiro. *The Financial Crisis: Origins and Implications*. Palgrave Macmillan 2011. This collaboration of authors offer a global analysis on the causes and effects of the financial collapse stemming from past histories to present reasonings.

suicide have haunted our social consciousness.⁵ These threatening and at times, violent images reinforces that we live in an age of antagonisms. In the wake of this “financial crisis,”⁶ volumes of discourse have emerged to uncover why history has repeated itself. As a result, a collective consciousness across the world have meditated over the relevance of their political, economic, and social orders. In doing so, past and present ideologies, such as the critiques of capitalism and a return to Marxism have reemerged in public discourse. However, at the heart of this debate are the notions of “Neoliberalism” and how it has inherited a villainous role during this age of crisis. When did neoliberalism transcend into economics, especially, the core of American economics? Why has it threaten the livelihood of our society? And most importantly, why does neoliberalism facilitate a culture of violence?

In this thesis, I shall answer these question by returning to 1984, which I argue is the year of neoliberalism’s cementation. Much of this assumption is predicated by the dominance of neoconservatism, lead by the Reagan administration which, I contend, helped dictate the social climate of the 1980s. In the latter part of that year, three self-reflective films about rural America, *Country*, *Place in the Heart*, and *The River*, were released and brought a disturbing micro awareness towards neoliberal economics. The films conveyed the trials and tribulations of the American “farm crisis”⁷ of the 1930s (*Place in the Heart*) and of the early 1980s (*Country* and

⁵ Cushman, Thomas. “The Moral Economy of the Great Recession.” Springer Science-Business Media New York 2015. Published online: 13 January 2015. In this most recent account of The Great Recession of 2008, Cushman critiques the financial chaos foisted by the belligerent depravity of the free market. His arguments cater towards a moral restoration from the “dark forces of capitalism.”

⁶ Arestis, Philip., Rogério Sobreira, and José Luis Oreiro. *The Financial Crisis: Origins and Implications*. Palgrave Macmillan 2011. p. 2.

⁷ Fite, Gilbert C. “The 1980s Farm Crisis.” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Winter, 1986). This article summarizes the history of the farm crisis from the over investments of the 1970s to the fall of land values and global competition and high surplus that dropped domestic prices during the early 1980s.

The River). Both meditative and distressing, the films demonstrate the brutalities, such as foreclosure, poverty, and suicide that capitalism can induce, which I argue are near mimetic representations of the current issues of our time. For me, these illustrations symbolize of what I call social and domestic antagonisms instigated by the “invisible” forces of neoliberalism. I stress the term “invisible” as I argue that there is ambiguity to the antagonists of the violence. Also, this concept of invisibility alludes to Adam Smith’s rhetorical “The Invisible Hand”⁸ --an often overused and at times misunderstood term that suggest that the forces of capitalism, or for the sake of this thesis, the free market⁹ are driven by unseen forces or as Smith described “the hidden hand of the market” fueled by human ambition. As result of these unseen powers, the films’ protagonists inherit anxieties that disable the social fabric of the American family. I argue that many of these violent illustrations are gendered in nature, and thus, the images meditate on the violence between masculine and feminine representation.

Holistically, this thesis shall elaborate on how these films represent tensions that is present in neoliberalism, and within a certain extent, neoconservatism, with Reaganism¹⁰ acting as the facilitator for both. These ideologies, collectively, create an idea of identity linked to autonomy, with independence being a very important rhetorical vehicle. However, on the opposite side of this coveted autonomy, an inevitable form of dependency surfaces within the

⁸ Naveson, Jay. “The Invisible Hand.” *Journal of Business Ethic*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (Sep., 2003), pp. 201-212. Jay Naveson critiques the logic of the “invisible hand” mentioned briefly in Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*.

⁹ The “free market” is an American term that describes the behaviors neoliberalism. Since in most discourses, the term “neoliberalism” has a pejorative connotation, the American alternative offers a positive definition as it emphasizes “freedom” to the vocabulary as in case of other alternative labels such as “free trade” and “free market capitalism.”

¹⁰ Through the course of this thesis, Gil Troy, William J. Palmer, Susan Jeffords, Philip, and Stephan Prince will have their own variations that defines “Reaganism,” and to some extent, “Reaganomics” and its ties to neoliberalism.

environment of these stories which presents itself as something scary and torturous. As the characters in these movies, by and large, live within worlds in which people try to live out some of these neoliberal ideals, the films, in showing the suffering of these characters, problematize the Reaganite vision that present some of the contradictions of neoliberalism, and brings forth, an eventual reality of interdependence, which is neither independence nor dependence. In this way, the films take on a very ambivalent stance towards Reaganism while within a Marxist perspective, they illustrate ideological contradictions of neoliberalist economics and Reaganism and render it into aesthetic form allowing people to engage in those contradictions without demanding political solutions.

In my rhetorical journey, alternate readings of *County*, *Places in the Heart*, and *The River* have offered helpful insight in earlier interpretations, especially the tensions of its characters. Granted, these texts fail to recognize these issues within the paradox of neoliberalism, but much of this has to do with the time of publication, because most of the critical discourse of neoliberalism has only recently discovered its voice. Nevertheless, these alternate readings give valuable input because the problems that they recognize, with regards to the films, have rhetorical characteristics to neoliberalism.

William Adams, in his two articles, “American Gothic: Country, The River, Place in the Heart” and “Natural Virtue: Symbol and Imagination in the American Farm Crisis,” which were published only a year after the release of the films, introduces an immediate reaction to these stories but his content gravitates between American folklore of the farmer and the history of early American politics in regards to the philosophy of liberalism. To his defense, he introduces something I found important in my argument, pointing to the interdependencies of liberalism,

and how it creates problematic consequences to these characters when they strive for autonomy.

He states:

The hankering for the politics of farm and county and for the crystalline struggles of the Spaldings, the Graveys, and the Ivys against the banks, corporations, and politicians, is a radical, populist form of political nostalgia that masks an inability to confront the meaning of our own peculiar forms of life and dependency¹¹

From this point of view, Adams's articles critique these films as narratives for "virtue and independence" and how the existence of such promise finds themselves tangled in the reality of "social circumstances." This is something that Duncan Webster recognizes in his allegorical text, *Looka Yonder: The Imaginary America of Populist Culture*. Published four years after the farm crisis films, Webster incorporates Adams' articles as well as numerous literary critiques, from Frank Norris to John Steinbeck, that demonstrated contradicting awareness in American society, which on the surface harmonizes the ideals of independences and freedom, while underneath this smoothness of the American imagination lies a jaggedness of false truths.

From these literary critiques, I bring forth William J. Palmer's *The Films of the Eighties* and his chapter, "The Feminist Farm Crisis and Other Neoconservative Texts." In this text, Palmer suggests that *Country*, *Place in the Heart*, and *The River* have a unique mixture of feminist and neoconservative ideologies. As a part of this rationale, he considers how domesticity configures into the autonomy of the females characters who, in times of crisis, maintain a sense of composure and responsibility within their domestic order. With this feminist perspective, the struggle for autonomy drifts into the angles of patriarchy. Indeed, this may sound demotic considering how feminism and patriarchy are common foes in feminist theory. I do not

¹¹ Adams, William. "American Gothic: Country, The River, Places in the Heart" *The Antioch Review*, Spring 1985. p. 222.

intend to forbid patriarchal perspectives into this argument because I heavily encourage this topic further in later chapters; however, in terms of understanding individualism or autonomy within the feminine paradox, I bridge my assumptions within the paradoxical relationships of neoliberalism and neoconservatism rather than feminism battling masculine patriarchal forces.

As a fourth option, Susan Jeffords' *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, offers additional input in the context of Reaganism. Even though she does not mention the farm crisis films, she incorporates characteristics that favor the neoliberal language, such as individualism and individual freedom, in her argument. In this regard, she associates individuality as a symbol of masculine strength, thus, the tensions and physical violence that these men endure are representations of resisting and maintaining their sense of the autonomy. With this in place, she parallels masculine autonomy with national identity and argues Reagan is the father of this ideology, citing films such as *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, *RoboCop*, and *Die Hard*, which became icons to Reaganite individualism. This text allows me to construe the masculine stories of these farm crisis films.

With the four previous authors mentioned, I felt it necessary to include *American Cinema of the 1980s: Themes and Variations* as this cohesive supplement to my argument. Edited by Stephen Prince, the text delivers a chronological history that parallels Reaganism and politics with the films that were released each year. In doing so, Prince and his co-authors annotate these films as mimetic works, that culturally speaking, signify the period. Naturally, like most art forms, film reflects the society of its day, but I feel that the Reaganite dominance that this text implies has fundamental truths about the 1980s that differs slightly from Jeffords' mythology. The most blatant of these societal representation is the Cold War theme that hovered over the

decade. Because of this communist fear, many films, both consciously and unconsciously, took on a vigilant stance towards freedom. But this tension was not limited to resisting communism, or more specifically, the Soviet Union; instead, this notion of freedom, —that all too often, Reagan over used— is nothing more than a variation of neoliberalism’s autonomous identity, or to be specific, sense of self. Thus, this idea of an autonomous self, in actuality, expands across other genres, appearing in films like *Trading Places* (comedy), *Aliens* (science fiction), *Rain Man* (drama), and *Field of Dreams* (fantasy).

As a result, the basis of my thesis shall entertain this concept of autonomy and expose its problematic existence in *Country*, *Place in the Heart*, and *The River*. In the first chapter, I argue that the invisible forces of capitalism and neoliberalism both antagonize and imprison social freedoms. This hostility has much to do with private institutions threatening public life, but within this struggle, autonomy is threatened jointly through interdependent contractual relationships between the banks and the families. I further these interdependent struggles in the second chapter in which the wives inherit this autonomy. But in this context, just as in Palmer’s argument, their individuality and the suffering of maintaining, or even coexisting in it, is predicated on the contentiousness of diplomacy within their hierarchal order. Thus, through this suggestive negotiation, an articulation of gendered violence emerges through its narratives and within the aesthetics of these films. I bridge some this gendered antagonism in the third chapter, however, instead of concentrating on masculine and feminine hostility, I portray the violence that these men endure is an internal struggle to maintain a masculine identity that defines itself through self autonomy. But this individuality externalizes itself through a violence of prosperity, that for all intents and purposes, possess a patriarchal paradox. However, before pondering on

these arguments further, a historical anthology that gives context to the stories should first be discussed as it allows me to ground the pieces of this social, economic, and political puzzle.

The Advent of a Neo-Economy

In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, published in 2005, David Harvey argues that the current financial system of the United States, as well as the global spectrum of economic progress, has embraced the doctrine of “Neoliberalism.” He asserts that neoliberalism is “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.”¹² However, these theoretical practices can be traced to the ideals of eighteenth-century liberalism or classical liberalism¹³ introduced by the thinkers of the Age of Enlightenment, most notably British philosopher, John Locke, and the “Father of Economics,” Adam Smith. Their ideologies rejected monarchies, hereditary privileges, state endorsed religion, and divine rights to kingships. Smith’s beliefs dwelled on redefining society under a post-feudalist cloud that incorporate an unrestricted barter system with monetary notes and coinage as means of exchange. Locke added to this ideology by preaching that the rights of men should equally inherit civil liberties such as democratic governments and elections, as well as religious and journalistic freedoms. In addition, both voiced the importance of free trade and the property ownership. These restructured

¹² Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* Oxford University Press 2005. p. 2.

¹³ Thorsen, Dag Einar. and Amund Lie. “What is Neoliberalism?” p. 4.

ideals would eventually replace elder European colonial and feudal systems, and bring about the new age of capitalism.

By the early 20th century, Fordism pushed capitalism into the period of modernity¹⁴ in which technology and mathematical efficiency expedited flows of productions that in turn, supplied unprecedented profits. These efforts correlated with an ambitious stock market accelerated wealth and economic growth until the global market crashed crash of 1929. Though early critics, such as Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, questioned the abusive behaviors of capitalism, it wasn't until the theoretical influence of British economist John Maynard Keynes, that federal interventionism, at least in the U.S., pacified the free market. Keynesian theory¹⁵ and the implementation of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal ushered in the era of the welfare state.¹⁶

From the late 1940s and through the 1950s, Friedrich von Hayek, an Austrian political philosopher, and his American equivalent, Milton Friedman, opposed the post-Depression federal programs that dominated economic politics. According to David Harvey, Hayek believed that campaigning alternative policies against the welfare state should, at least in a generation's time, eradicate such government interventionisms as Marxism and socialism.¹⁷ Both Hayek and Friedman became the co-authors to this reinvented form of classical liberalism, or as it would

¹⁴ Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990. pp. 141-172. Harvey discusses the transitional periods of capitalism in the wake of modernity to postmodernity.

¹⁵ Thorsen, Dag Einar. and Amund Lie. "What is Neoliberalism?" p. 8. Authors recognize Keynesian theory or Keynesianism as a theoretical framework that dominated "economics and economic policy-making in the period between 1945-1970.

¹⁶ Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* Oxford University Press 2005. During the course of my research, no author has articulated the term "welfare state" in all its detail than in Harvey's historical texts. As Harvey suggests that many countries have variations to this form of governmental protectionism in terms of securing employment, wages, health care, and education to its citizens. p.12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 21.

later be labeled “neoliberalism,”¹⁸ which offered a monetarist alternative to macroeconomic policy. By the mid-1970s, they had each been awarded the Nobel Prize in economics (Hayek in 1974 and Friedman in 1976). Eventually, the influence of Friedman and Hayek would carry over to the political figure heads of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and U. S. President Ronald Reagan as they furthered the spirit of neoliberalism through a period of deregulation which shifted their countries from welfare states to a free market economy.

The Neo-Right: The Values of Change

“Conservatism is not an economic theory, though it has economic implications”¹⁹

— Barry Goldwater

Neoconservatism and neoliberalism share similar convictions yet have “two distinct political rationalities.”²⁰ As mentioned earlier, neoliberalism commits to laissez-faire/monetarist economic policies and the individual freedoms that enhances fiscal prosperity, but neoconservatism, which shares these sympathies, crosses over into social, religious, and militant ideologies. Indeed, neoliberalism, under Harvey’s definition, caters to a theoretical approach to economic politics that stretches beyond the neoconservative political spectrum, as witnessed within and through the political practices of anti-liberals such as Deng Xiaoping and Augusto

¹⁸ Neoliberalism, through the context David Harvey, Steven Shaviro, Dag Einar Thorsen, and Amund Lie each have similar fragmentations to where or how the term emerges into the vocabulary of academic discourse. Shaviro’s. “The ‘Bitter Necessity’ of Debt: Neoliberal Finance and the Society of Control” does point to Michael Foucault’s *The Birth of Biopolitics* as the earliest sitings of its usage.

¹⁹ Goldwater, Barry. *The Conscience of the Conservatism*. Victor Publishing Company, Inc. Shepherdsville, Kentucky, 1960. p. 10.

²⁰ Brown, Wendy. “American Nightmare: Neoliberalism, Neoconservatism, and De-Democratization.” *Political Theory*, No.6 (Dec., 2006). p. 690.

Pinochet.²¹ It is, however, important to understand that the philosophical and dogmatic union of neoliberalism and neoconservatism is, for the most part, a Cold War story of leftwing and rightwing politics which emerged during the dominance of Thatcher and Reagan. But this simplified account is only part of the story. A whole cast of individuals participated in this narrative from its thorny beginnings with Barry Goldwater to the later successes of George W. Bush and beyond. The baby boomers, the bible belt, and the Moral Majority also each had their hand in converting their political ties from Roosevelt Democrats, who dominated the politics after the Depression and through the Second World War, into Reaganite Republicans of the 1980s.

The early transitional battles occurred during the 1960s when waves of youthful protest sparked the Civil Rights, and, the Vietnam War opposition movements. This turmoil brought the United States into a dividing line of politics and culture. Racial revolts, the counterculture/hippie movement, and The New Left²² rebelled over separatism, old conservative values and imperialistic powers. Though the motives were to implement a revisionist utopian world filled with social and sexual freedoms,²³ this activism demonstrated the naivety of such visionary romanticisms. As the young baby boomers matured into the 1970s, their fundamental idealism waned.

In response to the counter movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, a rise of conservatism emerged with presidential victories by Republican Richard Nixon. Though his

²¹ Thorsen, Dag Einar. and Amund Lie. "What is Neoliberalism?" p. 12.

²² Tindall, George B. and David E. Shi. *America: A Narrative History* (Brief Second Edition) W.W. Norton & Company, New York-London, 1989. p. 895. The New Left was a pro-Marxist and a Stalinist sympathizing movement that inspired youth revolts across U. S. universities. Later, it became the catalyst to other extremist movements such as black activism and the counterculture movement.

²³ Ibid, p. 899.

administration endured controversy, and was marred by the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, which resulting in his resignation, Nixon did managed to remove the gold standard on August 15, 1971, ending the conversion of U.S. dollars to gold, and thus “ushering the floating exchange rates that we have today.”²⁴ This transition allows capitalism to function in an aggressive and, at times, uncontrolled manner, that, for neoliberalism, would factor into later economic practices and conundrums. For example, a rise of a belligerent credit system would encourage investments and consumerism and in theory, stimulated powerful financial gains; however, it is the ephemerality of such prosperity that is normally overlooked in the context of neoliberal economics. But since Nixon’s emancipation of the market, the financial consequences, which I argue inflicts anxiety and violence in our society, have allowed debt to become a “universal condition”²⁵ which I will discuss in more detail in future chapters. It is significant to recognize in the terms of this neoliberal-neoconservative history, that Nixon’s tenure, regardless of scandal and public betrayal, had an intricate role in manifesting neoliberalism further into its eventual maturation in the decade that followed.

Nixon’s presidential successor, Gerald Ford, was unable to brush away the ghosts of the previous administration, which eventually led to his defeat by the southern Democrat Jimmy Carter. By the end of the 1970s, the U.S. found itself under numerous economic and foreign conundrums. An energy crisis, high inflation, and the Iran Hostage Crisis overwhelmed Carter as he sought another term, and eventually, he would lose to Ronald Reagan in the 1980 election. Though Reagan’s 1980 triumph may be argued as a result of cyclical scandals and failures from

²⁴ Shaviro, Steven. “The ‘Bitter Necessity’ of Debt: Neoliberal Finance and the Society of Control” May 1, 2010. p. 2.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 8

previous administrations, it was during his second tenure that the ideological marriage of neoliberalism and neoconservatism emerges through an unprecedented bond of national unity.

A Brave Neo-World: Optimism, Continuity, and False Fears

The first few years of the Reagan administration were filled with hostilities. The firing of 11,359 striking air-traffic controllers set an aggressive tone of action for the presidency while militaristic activity in Beirut and Grenada, and the threat of all out nuclear war with the Soviet Union demonstrated that the United States had not stepped away from its contentious affairs with foreign entities. But, during this adverse period, it is the assassination attempt of Reagan just weeks after his inauguration that I find most fascinating. It was, of course, a horrific event that could have changed the shape of politics in the 1980s yet the transience of this potential tragedy is quite odd, and seems nearly forgotten in the history books, probably because of how quickly Reagan recovered. Yet, the attempt set the stage for a more sympathetic campaign which brought forth a sense of national unity. An affirmation of this unanimity can be best described when Reagan jokingly states to Joseph Giordano, the doctor who surgically removed the bullet lodged an inch from the president's heart, "I hope you're a Republican" to which Dr. Giordano replies "Mr. President, today we are all Republicans."²⁶

By 1984, an age of conservatism consumed the United States. Ronald Reagan's optimistic re-election campaign lead to one of the most brutish Presidential victories in history. It symbolized a nation transitioning from the turbulent times of the 1960s and 1970s into a country dominated by political continuity. Historian Philip Jenkins mentions this conversion as the fading

²⁶ Troy, Gil. *Reagan Revolution: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2009. p. 63.

idealism of the baby boomers.²⁷ It showed a country wanting to turn away from its self-destructive past and focus on a promising future.

In addition, 1984 was a year of American validation and patriotism. Some of this pride stems from the successful 1984 Los Angeles Summer Olympics,²⁸ which created national heroes out of Carl Lewis and Mary Lou Retton who at the time became new promising symbols to the American image. Considering that African-American and feminine civil liberty movements, at least in American athletics, had sparked controversies during the late 1960s and 1970s including Tommie Smith's symbolic fist gesture in the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City²⁹ and Billy Jean King's "battle of the sexes"³⁰ tennis match against Wimbledon champion Bobby Riggs, the overnight success of Lewis and Retton added to this transitional period in American culture where the social consciousness was inclined to identify with minorities and female figures rather than past patriarchal figures.³¹

²⁷ Jenkins, Philip. *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America*. Oxford University Press 2006. p. 4.

²⁸ Shulman, Bruce J. *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics*. The Free Press, New York, 2001. pp. 240-241. Shulman acknowledges the success of L.A. games revived the national spirit for many Americans. Importantly, these summer games were a "triumph to privatization" as these events were staged with corporate backing versus public funding. The financial success validated Reagan's neoliberal approach to economics. This prosperity aligned with the patriotic vibe prompted by the Olympic games "foreshadowed not only the triumph of Reaganism in November and the impending victory over the communist bloc in the cold war." (Note: My rationale behind introducing the Olympics is to add the iconic nostalgia the L.A. games had brought to the stable. It was boycotted by the Soviet Bloc (14 countries) but many Americans didn't care so much of this formality since they dominated the games in many categories leading with an astounding 83 gold medals and 174 totaled. It was a summer of unity and the games offered that image and holistically, strengthen Reagan's path to victory.)

²⁹ Henderson, Simon. "Nasty Demonstrations by Negroes: The Place of the Smith-Carlos Podium Salute in the Civil Rights Movement," *Bulletin of Latin America Research*, Vol. 29, Newcastle University, March 2010, pp. 78-92. Smith's raised fist gesture during gold medal ceremonies sparked outrage for many American as it seemed inappropriate for its timing. But for Smith, this symbol for black identity demonstrated the disunity in American culture.

³⁰ Shulman, Bruce J. *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics*. The Free Press, New York, 2001. pp. 159-163. This event validated the athleticism female tennis players as competitive equivalents to their male opponents. In spite of all its novelty, King's victory and the spectacle leading up to and during its telecast demonstrated levels of male chauvinism that downplayed its symbolic significance.

³¹ Zirin, Dave. *A People's History of Sports in United States: 250 Years of Politics, Protest, People, and Play*, The New Press, New York, 2008. Zirin examines the history of racial, sexual, and political inequality in American sports.

I argue that this national unity, or what critics have called the Reagan Revolution,³² allowed the policies of neoliberalism to integrate into American society without overwhelming resistance. As a result, the term “Reaganomics”³³ was introduced into the political and fiscal vocabulary of America. This political-economic philosophy orchestrated the neoliberal sympathies of deregulation in the banking and corporate sector which liberated the hands of the free market. These fiscal behaviors continued with aggressive tax-cutting and the dismantling of budgets towards many public institutions (social welfare, medicaid...etc). In spite of rescinding government institutional spending, a rising deficit emerged due to militaristic expenditures. The political logic behind these costs was twofold. On one hand, it sought to overpower cold war enemies, primarily the Soviet Union, in order to demonstrate an aggressive division between the ideologies of capitalism and communism. On the other hand, this campaign against communist politics mirrored the same neoliberal agenda over socialism —like governmental interventionism predicated by the New Deal and Keynesianism. Though these Roosevelt era programs were designed to lower unemployment, build infrastructure, and pacify reckless economic ambition, its fundamental connections to socialism paved a rhetorical path toward demonization by politicians. This permitted another distinction within the political spectrum, offering neoconservatism as no-other ideological alternative because any bias towards governmental, public, or socialized interventionism was closely connected to the communist enemy.

In the years leading up to the year of 1984, a wave of films harking on a dystopian future due to the revived popularity George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, further inspired the

³² Troy, Gil. *Reagan Revolution: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

³³ Jenkins, Philip. *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America*. Oxford University Press 2006. p. 180.

increasingly pervasive fear of the Left. Hollywood films such as *The Road Warrior* (1981) and *Blade Runner* (1982) demonstrates a post-apocalyptic world in the not-so-distant future, while *War Games* (1983) and *The Day After* (1983) illustrated the convincing possibility of nuclear war. This not to say that all these premonitions faded away by 1984; *Red Dawn* and *The Terminator* were released later that year. But it is important to note how the rhetorical consciousness that had been airing through the 1980s was an affiliation with these fears, and how neoconservatives embraced such rhetoric as “Orwell’s Nightmare”³⁴ and used it to solidify their cause. Douglas Kellner writes of such comparisons when he states:

Indeed, from the 1940s to the present, *1984* has been used in the Cold War struggle against communism, and Orwell has been celebrated by many as a critic of the Red Menace. Conservatives thus primarily read *1984* and Orwell’s other popular fantasy *Animal Farm* (1946) as attacks on communism and use the texts to warn people against its evils.³⁵

I find an interesting parallel to the rhetorical aspects of Orwell’s totalitarian vision with the iconic “Big Brother” and Reagan’s inaugural speech. He isolates the roots to America’s problems links through this dependency towards “Big Government.” He states that “in this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problems, government is the problem,”³⁶ and that “Man is not free unless government is limited.”³⁷ This became the preface to Reagan’s deputization of what he deemed as America’s problems, and questions what Gil Troy, author of *The Reagan Revolution*, and arguably neoliberalism, also asks, “do Americans like their

³⁴ Kellner, Douglas. “From 1984 to One-Dimensional Man: Critical Reflections on Orwell and Marcuse.” August 1984. p. 1 <https://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/essays/from1984toonedimensional.pdf>

³⁵ Ibid. p. 2.

³⁶ Troy, Gil. *Reagan Revolution: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2009. p. 21

³⁷ Ibid. p. 21.

government big or small?”³⁸ At this point in history, it is safe to acknowledge that the relevance of Roosevelt’s New Deal programs may have had been criticized. But considering the political turmoil that had haunted the late 1960s and all through the 1970s, Americans of the 1980s wanted change regardless of the ramifications. This led to the acceptance celebration of Reagan’s onslaught towards left leaning politics and its possible Orwellian connection.

To quote Stephen Prince:

With his hostility to government as a provider of social programs for the public, Reagan fulfilled long-standing conservative dreams of rolling back the economic and political reforms of Roosevelt’s New Deal, and toward this end, during his first term, he instituted a program of sizeable tax cuts that favored the wealthy. He affiliated with the Christian Right and its efforts to infuse a religion-based morality into American politics, and he invoked the specter and fear of Soviet expansion, in the process returning the country to the hard-line anti-communism of the 1950s.³⁹

Regardless of the Cold War fears and the false prophecies⁴⁰ expressed in the early part of the decade, by the end of 1984, many Americans believed they lived in a time of optimism. And with this assurance, they embraced, at least on the surface, a sense of unity that had not been prevalent for previous decades. The election slogan “It’s Morning Again in America”⁴¹ affirms such

³⁸ Ibid. p. 20.

³⁹ Prince, Stephen. *American Cinema of the 1980s: Themes and Variations*, Rutgers University Press, 2007. p. 12.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 107. In the chapter introduction to “1984: Movies and Battles of Reaganite conservatism,” Prince brings scholars Rhonda Hammer and Douglas Keller to annotate the films and its connections to Reaganism. In their preface, Hammer and Keller parallel the Orwellian novel to that current year due to its revived popularity. They state, “Ninety-Eighty Four is the title year of George Orwell’s famous novel leading to speculation in the academia and the popular press as to whether Orwell’s prophecies had been correct.”

⁴¹ This slogan was utilized in television ads during Reagan’s 1984 election. The aesthetics illustrated a morning sunrise, with people waking up from their homes and heading to work with smiles on their faces suggesting a peaceful and near utopian fantasy. Also, it hinted that the problems of the past are now behind us and the future shines with promise. This beautification differs from the first few years of the Reagan administration, which were filled with hostilities: assassination attempts, militaristic attacks in Beirut and Grenada, and the fear of nuclear war, all of which hindered the Reagan’s image between 1981-1983. To begin the re-election year with such optimism may have sounded baffling to most critics, but for better or for worse, it worked as it created momentum towards victory.

assumptions suggesting that the days of picket signs and protests have been replaced by a utopian world of picket fences and patriotism.

An Agrarian Myth:⁴² Virtue, Violence, and the War against All

The Reagan campaign busied itself in beautifying both the country and its ideals. *Time Magazine* released a special edition issue of the 1984 republican campaign. On the cover, titled ‘Reagan County,’ it illustrated the standing president below a large mural of hills, rivers, and farmland. William Adams analyzed these aesthetics as a “manipulation of romantic pastoralism” and a “figural representation” of characteristics that the campaign tried to express, “hard work, virtue, and independence.”⁴³ The issue was published at a pivotal moment in the campaign, and attempted to capture the rural vote which, for the most part, gravitated, especially, to the American farmer. Part of the symbolic importance of the cover was to portray the beautification of the country, in order to attract the hearts of many American voters. Secondly, it alluded on the rustic idealism that echoed Jefferson’s sense of moral virtue, who argued that, “those who labor in the earth, are the chosen people of God.”⁴⁴ It also reinforces the mythology of Jefferson’s Agrarian Republic and the belief that the farmers were the ancestors to impassioned and self-dependent American society. Also, this reference to divinity and religion won over pivotal votes

⁴² Brass, Tom. “The Agrarian Myth, the ‘New’ Populism, and the ‘New’ Right” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Jan. 25-31, 1997), pp. PE27-PE42. I’ve borrowed the term “Agrarian Myth” from this article to acknowledge the variants of its meaning through history. However, for Tom Brass, its emphasis entails on international articulations that define Agrarianism through social and political movements of Marxism, Populism and the New Right. My utilization isolates it to Jeffersonian idealism and its misconception to the relationship to neoconservatism.

⁴³ Adams, William. “Natural Virtue: Symbol and Imagination in the American Farm Crisis” *The Georgia Review*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Winter 1985), p. 711.

⁴⁴ Thomas Jefferson, *The Life and Selected Writing of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Adrienne Koch and Williams Peden (New York: The Modern Library, 1944), p. 280.

from the Moral Majority⁴⁵ which, in previous elections, political parties had failed to rally in support. As a result, the campaign successfully sold this grassroots message, and led to Reagan's victory.

In the fall of 1984, the films, *Country*, *Place in the Heart*, and *The River*, complicated Reagan's pastoral utopian vision. They conveyed the current and past struggles of the American farmer instigated by economic, social, and political forces which, for the sake of this thesis were each associated to the powers of neoliberal thought.

Indeed, agrarian narratives are not new, since, throughout history, the economics of agriculture and capitalism have endured their share of conflicts. The 1890s, for example, marked a period of agricultural regressions⁴⁶ where farmers inherited an economical system that favored urbanite entrepreneurialism. This led to the emergence of the short-lived Populist Party⁴⁷ who lent a political voice to the rural majority. These economic imbalances furthered during the 1920s, when farmers endured further misfortunes following a fall of crop demands due to the aftermath of the First World War. Though the 1920s may define itself as an era of prosperity, its nostalgia is only ubiquitous to the dominions of urbanization, industrialism, and investment entrepreneurialism. The decade, however, favored the spheres of agriculture, where farmers continued to struggle into The Great Depression.

⁴⁵ Schulman, Bruce J. *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics*. The Free Press, New York, 2001. p. 216.

⁴⁶ Tindall, George B. and David E. Shi. *America: A Narrative History* (Brief Second Edition) W.W. Norton & Company, New York-London, 1989. p. 895.

⁴⁷ Goodwyn, Lawrence. *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America*. Oxford University Press. New York, 1978. Goodwyn's text offers the rise and fall of populism and the Populist Party, a political movement that defended the rights of the farmer against affluent powers of the industrial U.S.

By the early 1970s a global surge in crop demands fueled a new agricultural expansion. Experts anticipated that rising exports would remain indefinitely and encouraged American farmers to “produce from fence row to fence row,” promising that “they would have to feed the world and that the day of surpluses had ended.”⁴⁸ Naturally, farmers bought into these possibilities and continued to invest in more equipment and land, thus increasing debts. As in recent history, this episodic period of prosperity collapsed because of unforeseen export embargoes and overestimated demands.⁴⁹

Unlike the agrarian crises of the past, the response to the late 70s’ and early 80s’ economic issues did not find a political voice. It is surprising that Jimmy Carter, a farmer himself, did not act on to such issues immediately, but in his defense, his campaign was empowered by global problems that eclipsed those of the American farmer. Still, even after Reagan’s 1980 triumph, while administration embraced rural communities during the electoral campaign they ignored their suffering while in power. This lack of response coincides with the neoliberal paradigm and that meaning, government not assisting with economic woes of others. Within individualism, accountability exist even if players are victims of circumstance. It is here where I argue that the dynamics between dependence and independence develop a conundrum between Jeffersonian and Lockean ideals: the virtue of individual freedoms. Jefferson never predicted how capitalism would alter pastoral life and at same time, threaten it. In addition, farmers’ mode of production faced fiscal anxieties due to the cyclical powers of nature and the

⁴⁸ Fite, Gilbert C. “The 1980s Farm Crisis.” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Winter, 1986), p. 71.

⁴⁹ Lowenberg-BeBoer, James *The Micro-Economic Roots of the Farm Crisis*. Reviewed by: Glenn L Johnston, *Agriculture History*, Vol. 62, No. 2 Publicly Sponsored Agricultural Research in the United States: Past, Present, and Future (Spring, 1988), p. 359.

free market. Also, the ownership of property, which Locke, Smith, and Jefferson defended as a pillar of individual freedom, falters under the context of pastoralism. Indeed, landownership justifies both freedom from feudal paradigms and a valued sense of identity; however, farmers have a rough position adjusting to the exogenous forces of economics especially the boom and bust periods of capitalism. Other factors include unforeseen changes of science, technology, and war that influence overproduction, as in 1890, or raise dramatic short-term demands that could swiftly shift back to surpluses during postwar periods.

The final component to neoliberalism, adopted from the enlightenment thinkers, I argue, is the freedom for markets to compete. This was one of Thomas Hobbes's arguments against classical liberal ideologies. Hobbes, an opponent of Locke, concerned himself with dynamic self-interest as a means to instigate antagonisms to the individual, a process he suggests as "the war of all against all."⁵⁰ Granted, this does not suggest that Hobbes' faith towards authoritative systems which he argues secures shelter, food, and protection from others, stands above other alternatives but it is as equally important to recognize that under Lockean idealism, prosperity is "not" guaranteed to everyone. Perhaps this may sound obvious under the functions of capitalism, which is, after all, a system of competition; however, this quest for prosperity, at least for my argument, are one of the key hostilities that these farm crisis films illustrate as it leads to what Thomas Hobbes feared in the advent of redefining classical liberalism as a philosophy that provokes wars amongst other individual interests. Naturally, for the victors comes the spoils but these rewards are not for the many.

⁵⁰ Shaviro, Steven. "The 'Bitter Necessity' of Debt: Neoliberal Finance and the Society of Control," <http://www.shaviro.com/Othertexts/Debt.pdf>, May 1, 2010. p. 5. Shaviro mentions Thomas Hobbes' issue with market competition as it fuels a violent struggle amongst its players.

These historical factors, be it the rise of liberalism to neoliberalism, or to neoconservatism adopting neoliberal economics as a political agenda, are what dictates these agrarian films into convoluted levels of violence that are both invisible and gendered. But it is equally important to acknowledge how neoconservatism's moral conquest towards family values and how it is paralleled to the virtues of pastoralism adds to this conundrum. Here, as with the invisible antagonisms of capitalism, I argue that family, and the gendered pillars that define it, are threatened by these ideologies, and eventually, crumble internally.

Chapter One: The Invisible Violence

*“The bank isn’t like a man... The bank is something else more than men... Men made it, but they can’t control it... Maybe we can kill banks.”*⁵¹

— John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*

*“For the radical imagination, the struggle of small farmer against the monstrous and blind forces of the market and corporate interests is a vast metaphor, a way of imagining our own political circumstances.”*⁵²

— William Adams

*“Your dad and me were caught in the middle of somethin’ we never saw comin’.”*⁵³

— Jewel Ivey in *Country*

Unseen Forces

Social divisions and uneven development instituted by the antagonisms of what David Harvey recognizes as “creative destruction,”⁵⁴ demonstrate the methodologies of how neoliberalism has channeled its powers through the previous and current centuries. Since such a process has emerged without visible evidence of its evolution, it may be suggested that these

⁵¹ Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*, The Viking Press-James Lloyd, 1939. pp. 45-46. Steinbeck’s novel captures the ambiguity of the capitalist banking system through the simplistic rhetorical devices of its characters.

⁵² Adams, William. “Natural Virtue: Symbol and Imagination in the American Farm Crisis” *The Georgia Review*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Winter 1985). p. 711.

⁵³ Pearce, Richard. *Country*. 122 minutes, Drama, 19 December 1984 (USA), Universal Pictures. The line from this film suggests the unforeseen economic forces that threaten the Ivy family.

⁵⁴ Harvey, David. “Neoliberalism as Creative Destruction.” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 610, (Mar., 2007) pp. 22-44.

antagonisms are represented in non-physical forms such as “institutionalized violence,”⁵⁵ as well as “structural and systematic violence.”⁵⁶ Nevertheless, neoliberalism, also, enforces threats that are apparent but arguably unseen. In this chapter, I have coined the term “invisible violence” to aestheticize the violence of neoliberalism expressed in these 1980s farm crisis films.

Before moving forward, it is necessary to recognize Gilles Deleuze’s “Society of Control,”⁵⁷ which is a response to Michel Foucault’s “disciplinary societies,”⁵⁸ one of the earliest critiques of neoliberalism. Deleuze argues that the hierarchies of capitalism have resonated into neoliberalism, but these hegemonic powers have an invisible presence. The new era of entrepreneurship and free markets influences this invisibility because of the free floating powers suggested by the market. I argue that if one believes in the omniscient power of Adam Smith’s “Invisible Hand,” then there is something to make of an unseen hierarchy or hegemony. Steven Shavrio mentions such a possibility when he states:

So far in our experience, an expansive and predatory capitalism is the only system that has found a way to perpetuate itself by means of its own inequities and crises. No State apparatus, no ‘governmentality,’ no measure of surveillance, and no form of education or propaganda has been able to constrain human freedom as comprehensively -or as invisibly- as the neoliberalism market has done.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Curtin, Dean. and Robert Litke. *Institutional Violence*, Value Inquiry Book Series, Amsterdam-Atlanta, GA 1999. This collection of essays formulates arguments concerning levels of violence be it physical, mental, or other.

⁵⁶ Slocum, David J. *Violence and American Cinema*. Routledge, New York, 2001. p. 2.

⁵⁷ Deleuze, Gilles. “Society of Control,” *L’Autre Journal*, No. 1, May, 1990.

⁵⁸ O’Neill, John. “The Disciplinary Society: From Weber to Foucault.” *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 37, No. 1, March, 1986. pp. 42-60.

⁵⁹ Shavrio, Steven. “The ‘Bitter Necessity’ of Debt: Neoliberal Finance and the Society of Control” May 1, 2010. p. 8.

Part of these invisible constraints are present through the measurements of credit and debt, as well as numerical constructions defined in our credit score system that restricts such freedoms. I argue that if exogenous forces, such as health, unemployment, or death of a provider, can alter one's financial limits, then it is possible that the measurements or the quantitative constructions, which determine an individual's social and economic strengths, could very well be a form of sociological imprisonment. From this outlook, Deleuze coined this issue as part of a surveillance system that brings upon antagonisms and restrictions. For the Ivys in *Country* and the Spaldings in *Places in the Heart*, the banks have surveyed them on a list of delinquent accounts. In *The River*, the entrepreneurial forces that harass the Garveys to buyout their property monitors them through maps. The monitoring of the individual drives, what I call, social antagonism which, in the sections that follow, will define how the forces and threats translate into an invisible violence.

Faceless Consequences

In *Country*, *Places in the Heart*, and *The River*, the farm families, on the brink of poverty, foreclosure, and homelessness, endure the unforeseen forces that instigate these sufferings, yet they fail to establish a concreteness to their antagonist. As a result, what occurs, then, are questions native to the socioeconomic system that they are engaged in, such as, why are their lives under attack, and how do they fight an unrecognized, or in this case, invisible foe? Perhaps, this faceless enemy is the product of a convoluted contractual system that neoliberalism implements, and because of this, these films, have an ambivalence toward their antagonists. Much of this

uncertainty has to do with the naivety of its victims, who fail to comprehend the circumstances that they find themselves in.

From here, I track back to the film *The Grapes of Wrath* (John Ford, 1940).⁶⁰ The Steinbeck story has strong comparisons to these 1980s farm crisis films. And like the tensions conveyed in these later films, *The Grapes of Wrath* best describes these ambiguous threats. In this story, the Joads, a homeless farm family, venture west to California searching for salvation from the dreaded Dust Bowl⁶¹ of Oklahoma. The Joads have fallen victim to two unforeseen forces: nature and capitalism. For the former, the landscapes of the Mid-west were destroyed by aggressive and poor irrigation and plowing techniques that converted the soil into an uncultivable terrain. As for the latter, the financial crisis of 1929⁶² destroyed any hope of recovery from this ecological problem, as it only worsened an already struggling farming economy. In a dramatic scene, families are forced off their land. They fail to understand why these forces are happening, and in turn, resist them by interrogating the representative that is about to foreclose on the farmers' land. These agents -who are only the messengers- attempt to explain the reasons why they must take back the land. In response, the tenants keep penetrating through all the rhetoric:

The Tenants: "You mean get off my own land?"

⁶⁰ Note: In this thesis, both the novel and the film version of *The Grapes of Wrath* will be utilized in multiple ways. My reasoning is that they each express issues differently even though they are the same story. In this case, John Ford adopts Steinbeck's vision in a way that I feel, at least for this specific scene, is unique in the illustration of an ambiguous power that threatens the people in the story.

⁶¹ Burns, Ken. *The Dust Bowl*. Florentine Film, WETA, November 18, 2012. Burns' documentary offers an a detailed historical account on the disastrous environmental impacts from reckless farming methods and The Great Depression thus of which turned the arable land of The Great Plains into a desert wasteland. It forced families into a mass exodus out to the pacific states. The filmmaker recants how Steinbeck captures this migration in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

⁶² Tindall, George B. and David E. Shi. *America: A Narrative History* (Brief Second Edition) W.W. Norton & Company, New York-London, 1989. pp. 697-699.

The Agents: “Now don't go blaming me. It ain't my fault.”

The Tenants: “Whose fault is it?”

The Agents: “You know who owns the land--the Shawnee Land and Cattle Company.”

The Tenants: “Who's the Shawnee Land and Cattle Comp'ny?”

The Agents: “It ain't nobody. It's a company.”

The Tenants: “They got a pres'dent, ain't they?”

The Agents: “But it ain't his fault, because the bank tells him what to do.”

The Tenants: (Angrily) “All right. Where's the bank?”

The Agents: (Fretfully) “Tulsa. But what's the use of picking on him? He ain't anything but the manager, and half crazy himself, trying to keep up with his orders from the east!”

The Tenants: (Bewildered) “Then who do we shoot?”

The Agents: (Stepping on the starter) “Brother, I don't know. If I did I'd tell you. But I just don't know who's to blame!”

The Tenants: (Angrily) “Well, I'm right here to tell you, mister, ain't nobody going to push me off my land! Grampa took up this land seventy years ago. My pa was born here. We was all born on it, and some of us got killed on it, and some died on it. And that's what makes it ours --bein' born on it, and workin' it, and dyin' on it--and not no piece of paper with writin' on it! So just come on and try to push me off!”⁶³

By asking, “Whose fault is it?” the tenants illustrates how far removed they are from understanding this economic system. In multiple ways, they uncover that this is a complex

⁶³ Ford, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*, 129 minutes, March 15, 1940, 20th Century Fox.

situation with complex answers. And through this interrogation, the tenants come to the realization that there is no single party, but instead numerous parties involved. For one, there are the corporations that possess an invested interest in the landowners's property. In addition, they discover that the banks are also engaged in this antagonism, followed by the presidents and managers to these financial institutions. Eventually, the agents, who are following their orders, find themselves lost in this contractual labyrinth of capitalism as they, too, are uncertain of what really controls them. This confusion is part of the ambiguity, and for the sake of my argument, the "invisibility" of these exogenous forces which also threatens the social and physical environments in *Country*, *Places in the Heart*, and *The River*. Like the fallen landowners in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the farmers of these contemporary agrarian tales find themselves lost within this new language of economics, and neoliberalism.

For instance, in *Country*, Gil Ivy and the FHA banking agents also engage in a verbal altercation about who is accountable for the financial problem. Similar to the conflict between Steinbeck's farm tenants and the agents to the Shawnee Land and Cattle Co., there is confusion within the rhetorical agreements. Gil feels that he is a victim of circumstance because farming is a cyclical system. He suggests that there are good years and bad years, but in that in long term they balance out. The agents, however, views the problem through a neoliberal monetary logic, and sees it as an irreversible issue:

Gil: "I don't understand this. Here we been dealin' with you people here for six, seven years. You know what farmin's like. I mean, we may have a couple of rough years, but it always comes back around. You can't look on this thing short term. Hell, it's a way of life!"

Agent: “No Gil, it’s a business. Farming is a business.”⁶⁴

This argument returns again in a later scene:

Gil: “What are you tryin’ to do to us. McMullin? Wasn’t it you who was givin’ all those great speeches here a few years back about how we’re gonna feed the world, we’re gonna expand, plant fence post to fence post, Wasn’t that you? Then here goes the government puttin’ embargoes on foreign sales. Leaves all us poor fools out here in the landscape with all this grain and no place to get a fair price for it.”⁶⁵

At this moment, the players in the free market often become blinded by the myths of economic progress. To recall Adam Smith, who urges that mankind’s freedom to prosperity, is guided by God’s ‘hidden hand’⁶⁶ and because of this faith in pursuing prosperity, Gil and McMullen overlook the gambles. Painfully, Gil discovers, that the entrepreneurial freedoms that neoliberalism fuels, are doomed to failure. Friedman suggest that everyone is accountable and must be “willing to accept the risk associated with participating in free markets.”⁶⁷ And to quote Hayek, there are always “consequences of the choices.”⁶⁸ However, is it fair to allow such freedoms if there are disadvantages between players? Under the rules of neoliberalism, there is justification for such imbalanced freedoms, as Dag Einar Thorsen and Amund Lie suggest through the influence of Ludwig von Mises, those who are always on the losing end of the

⁶⁴ Pearce, Richard. *Country*. 122 minutes, Drama, 19 December 1984 (USA), Universal Pictures.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Naveson, Jay. “The Invisible Hand.” *Journal of Business Ethic*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (Sep., 2003), pp. 201-212.

⁶⁷ Thorsen, Dag Einar. and Amund Lie. “What is Neoliberalism?” p. 15. The section utilizes Milton Friedman’s *Free to Choose* (1980), Friedrich A. Hayek’s *Laws, Legislation and Liberty* (1976), Ludvig von Mises *The Free and Prosperous Commonwealth: An Exposition of the Ideas of Classical Liberation* (1962) as a means to validate ones accountability to their financial losses under the laws of Neoliberalism.

⁶⁸ Ibid

system, and those unable to accept failure, or demand assistance for bailout, are “underdeveloped”⁶⁹ to adopt in such a system that orders accountability.

In the case of Gil, he begs for assistance. He feels betrayed by the system that encourages his entrepreneurial aspirations, or by neoliberal context, his individual freedoms. But the banking system is also looking out for its best interests. It is this dynamic where, under the neoliberal doctrine, entrepreneurial freedoms clashes. On one hand, the banker and the businessman are partners, and if one succeeds so will the other. Yet on the other hand, when one party recognizes flawed returns, they are more likely to divorce themselves from the entrepreneurial relationship. While the loanee might walkaway from failure, the banker (or investor) will not abandon its special interest without maximizing returns. I would argue that this process illustrates plain logic, since both sides are failing to some degree. Yet the banks are demonized to some degree. Perhaps this is because banks are institutions that lacks agency, or some kind of visible, relatable presence while the loanee, be it landowner or businessman, has a physical subsistence that we, as spectators, recognize, and even sympathize with.

In Steinbeck’s novel, for instance, the author eventually describes banks and companies as “monsters.”⁷⁰ But, this personification is associated with the machinery that the corporate interests utilize in order to physically push away the tenant farmers who refuse to abandon their foreclosed land. Indeed, stylistically, Steinbeck is dehumanizing the institutions through a physical presence in order to enhance the antagonism against a living, breathing, individual, thus,

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*, The Viking Press-James Lloyd, 1939. pp. 45-46.

at the same time, providing a soul to its victim; however, in *Country*, *Places in the Heart*, and *The River*, the banks take on an ambiguous unseen entity. The question is why?

Perhaps the invisible antagonism, illustrated in these films, is a response to the blind misunderstanding of individualism or individual freedoms, a significant term that defines neoliberal principles. Here, both the banks and farmers are guilty of this practice. In *Place in the Heart*, Edna's individualism involves earning the top financial prize for "First Harvest," a contest that stimulates progress amongst farmers. But this behavior is no different than the bank agents in *Country* or the ambitious entrepreneur, Joe Wade, in *The River* who desire their own financial gains. Edna's individualism is viewed as triumphant, while the bankers and entrepreneur are demonized for their individualism.

One possibility for Edna's sympathetic portrayal can be seen in how the films represent the indebted farmer as not free, and by portraying this as such, sets in motion two trains of thought. One is interdependency with the bank. In *Place in the Heart*, the relationship with the banks, at least when Edna's husband was alive, was one of stable interdependence, where each party equally relied upon the other. But circumstances beyond their control transformed this symbiotic relationship into a form of dependency. In some way, Edna's story, as with the other farm films, becomes a neoliberal cautionary tale, warning that whenever one embraces interdependent arrangements, a risk of dependency emerges. Because of this change in the relationship, the bank transforms into a villainous force, but I argue, in reality, this invisible threat is simply a faceless consequence of interdependency. At the same time, the films show us, very visibly, the violence and the suffering of their characters. The harm bodies, as I will soon elaborate further with *Place in the Heart*, are a result of being cast into dependency, and the

films aestheticize this agony, presenting it as an injustice. For this reason, the contradictions, and arguably, the ambivalence in the films which supports the neoliberal (or even Reaganite) ideology, arguing that if you place yourself in a position of interdependence, you risk losing your individual freedom. However, by subverting that ideology and recognizing it as an injustice by arguing that these people should not be suffering because of this social compact and what is flawed is the social system that allows that to happen.

Poverty, Punishment, and Prosperity

Indeed, the social compact between the banks and the individual is an arrangement of two autonomous figures. But as David Harvey recognizes, even though neoliberalism argues for this autonomy—also recognized as individual freedom—he suggests that the state of neoliberalism “may be unstable and contradictory.”⁷¹ It embellishes the concept of individual freedom from all walks of life, but there is an instability within its contractual logic that demonstrates an unfavorable imbalance. Harvey writes:

The legal frame work is that of freely negotiated contractual obligations between juridical in the marketplace. The sanctity of contracts and the individual right to freedom of action, expression, and choice must be protected... By extension, the freedom of businesses and corporation (legally regarded as individuals) to operate within this institutional framework of free markets and free trade is regarded as fundamental good.⁷²

From this perspective, Harvey suggests that neoliberal theory, under the context of freedom, “hold[s] that the elimination of poverty (both domestically and worldwide) can best be secured

⁷¹ Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press 2005. p. 64.

⁷² *Ibid.* p. 64.

through free markets and free trade.”⁷³ He then furthers his claim by stating that, in order to guarantee these individual freedoms, “each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being.”⁷⁴ This argument is ideally sensible, but these films illustrate poverty as result of this economic system. For one, freedom has complicated logical implications that differs within every individual or institution. Edna, is a survivalist trying to save her family from poverty but her efforts are humanized while those of the institutions are not. Granted, the individual and financial institutions are equals under the theory of neoliberalism, but it is hard to comprehend any corporation or bank as an individual legally equal to a human individual. And though the institutions are agents of neoliberalism, their sense of agency is still ambiguous, in part because there are multiple agents that define its embodiment. Because of the complicated interdependent relationships that neoliberalism brings forth in its ideological context, the films’ struggle to justify the neoliberal stance for autonomy. Much of this has to do with the practice of borrowing and ignoring the gambles that comes with striving for prosperity.

Country, Place in the Heart and *The River* illustrate the financial system of debt as a necessary evil. Each family has a contractual commitment to honor their debts as well as a dependency to acquire more credit. Though the ‘debt system’ suggested in these films is an accepted economic practice, there is a grave concern over the films’s interpretation of its failures.

According to Steven Shaviro, the embodiment of neoliberalism is engaged by the facilitation of debt, which is a process conditioned into our universal modes of living. Financial liabilities obligate our commitments to the servicing of debt. It has replaced the economic model

⁷³ Ibid. p. 65.

⁷⁴ Ibid. p. 65.

of our previous bartering institution of goods and services into one that Shavrio calls an “extraction of payments for debt” which “has become a major resource for capital accumulation in the world today”⁷⁵ He argues that “The financialization of human life means that markets competition, with its calculus of credit and debt, is forcibly built into all situations, and made into a necessary precondition for all potential actions.”⁷⁶ Such a statement is reactionary to Hayek's’ “bitter necessity”⁷⁷ for man to submit to the rules that he may not wish to undertake yet continues to honor for the sake of preserving competition. And though this contest, which fuels the free market, is boosted by credit allowances, there is a restrictive conundrum that is often unrecognized within the free-floating forces of the financial market. I argue that this so-called ‘financialization,’ predicated by the empowerment of debt, also establishes an internal conflict to the actors of the neoliberal system. In other words, debt functions as a violent prisoner. Granted, Shaviro acknowledges such confinements through Deleuze’s “society of control” by stating “man is no longer a man confined but a man in debt”⁷⁸ but these restrictions, at least for my assessments, have a deeper connotation. Debt drowns the individual into an unforeseen abyss of tragic proportions. It suffocates any hope of liberations and forces a domino effect of destruction.

For one, debt illustrates a vulnerability that is empowered by the hollowness of its assets. Under the loan system, the owner of borrowed capital inherits an aesthetic of emptiness that may

⁷⁵ Shaviro, Steven. “The ‘Bitter Necessity’ of Debt: Neoliberal Finance and the Society of Control” May 1, 2010. p. 8.

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ Ibid

⁷⁸ Deleuze, Gilles. *Negotiations 1972-1990*. Trans. Martin Joughin. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.

be linked to the numerical and literal understanding that debt is defined as a deficit rather than a surplus. Unlike affluent investors who have the ability to withstand the elasticities of capitalism, the average entrepreneur who advocates their individualism walks a thin, anxiety producing line.

As mentioned early, *Places in the Heart* demonstrates how Edna and her family must produce triumphantly to earn top prize. Here, anxieties of desperation channel through the families. As the final hours wither away, so do the characters. Edna, her children and her tenants start to physically and mentally crumble away from their humanity. Their hands blister and bleed while their faces burn under the sun. Before Edna realizes that the goals were met, her family discovers her crawling like an animal desperately gathering any remaining cotton. This physical brutality illustrates the forces of a faceless antagonist. It suggests that the financial institutions, which facilitates neoliberalism, have an invisible power to invoke such anxieties.

Still, Edna's endurance of suffering, and her eventual path to victory differs from the protagonists in *Country* and *The River*. Their story hangs on a jagged edge when they, eventually must submit to foreclosure and face the penalties that come with it. It is here, I argue, that the financial system fails to deliver any empathy to its victims, which is something that these films do recognize. The punishments, as suggested in *Country* and *The River*, are both demoralizing and unforgiving, and are conveyed in a torturous manner. It is the only time that the antagonists have a visible presence. And though they are represented as abiding agents, be it banking officials, law enforcements, and realtors, they are criminalized as a lynch mob. For example, in both films, an auctioneer stages the liquidation of assets in order for the banks to soften the deficits. However, this process is not as simple nor ethical. For here, the auctioneer becomes this grand inquisitor who forces the property owners and their families to march to their death. While

staged in front of an audience, the families are crucified for crimes they had no control over. To me, these moments in the films are disturbing, because the draconian measures feel unjustified. Indeed, there is, though hauntingly as it is conveyed, a civility in this process in which the victims except their fate. Some of this conservatism may link to the pastoral virtue of honor that understands contractual ramifications. Yet, it is hard not to ignore the violence that the auction system services, and how it echoes to other draconian punishments, such as a public stoning or public rape. Every bidding, delivers verbal lacerations to the victims, because they are forced to sell personal items for a fraction of its worth. And for every stripping of capital, it dually strips away the relevance to this neoliberal ideology.

For one, it undermines Locke's liberalist ideals of property ownership as a noble necessity to inherit individual freedoms, because, ideally, any form of privatization secures individuality, which in turn, secures autonomy. But within this autonomy there is a conundrum. Autonomy, disguised as individual freedom, is often misunderstood because it carries a false premonition of prosperity. Perhaps this is the true invisible problem, that there is a blindness to the individual when motivated by the notion prosperity. After all, I argue, that prosperity is nothing more than a beautification of greed, and with this, it brings forth behaviors in individualism that are often misguided in the context of borrowing credit. But this accumulation of debt -which for all intents and purposes, is a negative dynamic- beautifies its rhetoric in the eyes of neoliberalism with positive connotations, such as investment, financial gain, and economic growth, thus, as with all three films, blinding the players to the negative consequences of potential failure. To quote Deleuze:

We are taught that corporations have a soul, which is the most terrifying new in the world. The operation of markets is now the instrument of social control and forms the impudent breed of our masters⁷⁹

By contrast, this is what these farm crisis films demonstrate in the grand context of neoliberalism. It exposes the soullessness of the socioeconomic system where individuals strive for prosperity without recognizing the often unintentional antagonism it inflicts towards others. I parallel these tensions with what Duncan Webster critiques, in regards to these farm crisis film, as the “heartlessness of the credit system.”⁸⁰ In doing such, *Country*, *Places in the Heart*, and *The River* aestheticize the violence of prosperity in the context of autonomy through visibly representing the invisible constraints the debt system implements. And, because of these restrictions, there emerges a notion that individual freedoms have their limits, or in the Deleuzian sense— are “controlled.”⁸¹

⁷⁹ Deleuze, Gilles. “Society of Control,” *L’autre Journal*, No. 1, May, 1990.

⁸⁰ Webster, Duncan. *Looka Yonder: The Imaginary America of Populist Culture*. London; New York: Routledge, 1988. p. 69.

⁸¹ Deleuze, Gilles. “Society of Control,” *L’autre Journal*, no. 1, May, 1990. Deleuze elaborates on Burroughs idea of “control” as this new monster that Foucault fears in “our immediate future.”

Chapter Two:

The Violence of Gender

*“Reagan offered a familiar and reassuring terrain from which to view the immense and troubling changes that our society and culture continue to undergo, changes in economic structures (including, ironically, the continuing collapse of the family farm), but also changes in the role of women, in sexuality, in the power and self-conceptions of American ethnic minorities.”*⁸²

— William Adams

*“In fact, films clustered (as had the farm crisis films in 1984) around clearly defined feminist issues: rape, abortion, adoption and motherhood, divorce rights, gender identity and just plain independence (from men, from sexual and gender stereotypes, from social discrimination).”*⁸³

— William J. Palmer

*“There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there families”*⁸⁴

— Margaret Thatcher

A Violence of Reciprocation

In *Country*, *Places in the Heart*, and *The River*, the violence of neoliberalism, which I have previously suggested is unidentifiable or “invisible,” also assumes a visible presence, that I argue, is gendered in nature. From this possibility, I maintain that this antagonism, influenced by neoliberalism, translates into levels of gendered violence. To be clear, the term “gendered violence” is not solely a representation or alternate definition for domestic violence, nor is it

⁸² Adams, William. “American Gothic: Country, The River, Places in the Heart” *The Antioch Review*, Spring 1985. p. 223

⁸³ Palmer, William J. “The Feminist Farm Crisis and Other Neoconservative Feminist Texts.” *The Films of the Eighties: A Social History*, Souther Illinois University, 1993. p. 255.

⁸⁴ Shaviro, Steven. “The ‘Bitter Necessity’ of Debt: Neoliberal Finance and the Society of Control” May 1, 2010. p. 5. Shaviro critiques former British PM Thatcher’s neoliberal vision in regards to economic competition as a system not predicated by the forces of society nor culture but only by individual self-interest rather than holistic communal action.

solely an alternate allusion of rape or torture against woman. Though all these associations can be defined as gendered violence, the term, for the purpose of this thesis, refers to violent threats, be it physical or implied, that push the positions of gender. For these farm crisis films, these violated positions are illustrated by female protagonists (and arguably, their male counterparts) who inherit unforeseen responsibilities that complicate their social positions. Many of these conundrums stem from the peculiar relationships that neoliberalism and neoconservatism harbor. For neoliberalism, the notion of independence is translated differently between the masculine and feminine representations of the films. However, neoconservatism, when it attempts to foster neoliberalism, finds itself at odds with its own conservative ideology, which is primarily, an unwillingness to recognize its patriarchal angles in regards to family and moral virtues. These dynamics, I argue, forces internal and external conflicts within feminine and masculine relationships.

Neoconservative Feminism, Domesticity, and Capitalist Patriarchy

The gendered violence in *Country*, *Places in the Heart*, and *The River*, I argue, derives from the oscillating social positions of the female characters. As Jewell, Edna, and Mae replace their fallen husbands, they must endure multiple pressures. This is not to say that these characters are violently punished for their inherited responsibility, though, as I will elaborate later, it is, however, their newly discovered independence that forces such violence. In addition, there is an irony between this idea of independence, which owns its roots to Lockean and Jeffersonian conceptions to classic liberalism, and neoconservatism, which holds its faith to the mythology of

agrarian life. Both value freedom, individuality, and virtue, but one cannot escape its patriarchal paradox.

For instance, critics have analyzed Jewell, Edna, and Mae as strong independent characters with conservative sensibilities. William J. Palmer labels this dichotomy as “neoconservative feminism,”⁸⁵ a hybrid of 1970s’ feminist independence and 1980s’ moral revival of the family. Palmer writes:

No political or critical theory has blown more fitfully on the winds of social change than has feminism in its evolution from the radical sixties to the neoconservative eighties. The combination of farm politics and feminism was a logical extension of the feminist politics of the radical sixties and the feminist economics of the urban-anchored, upwardly mobility seventies. In the eighties, in tune with a Reaganite neoconservatism, feminism turned to its grassroots in the American family, a constituency that had been generally ignored in the feminist targeting of both the sixties and the seventies.⁸⁶

He associates this neoconservative notion of how feminism has ignored the rural sectors of American society. While films of the seventies, such as *Annie Hall* (1977), *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (1977), and *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), illustrate feminist topics of sexual liberation and independent identity within urban settings, the eighties farm crisis films introduced rural mothers and homemakers as a new, alternative representative of feminism.

What Palmer fails to recognize is that these farm crisis films and their neoconservative/feminist interpretation possess an unrecognized conundrum. For instance, he states that *Country*, *Place in the Heart*, and *The River* exemplified how “ordinary women”⁸⁷ discover their passage to

⁸⁵ Palmer, William J. “The Feminist Farm Crisis and Other Neoconservative Feminist Texts.” *The Films of the Eighties: A Social History*, Southern Illinois University, 1993. p. 254.

⁸⁶ Ibid. p. 248.

⁸⁷ Ibid. p. 254.

power from the powerless positions that they inherit. Truth be told, this transition is a relevant assessment; however, there is still something socially restrictive about these female protagonists. If, for example, neoconservative feminism is nothing more than a maturation of earlier feminism, I would argue that both Palmer's feminist notion, and the film characters that define it, are regressive representations rather than new extensions of progress. In other words, these inherited positions are forced by obligation or duty, and not by genuine opportunities or freedoms.

Indeed, the 1980s was a revisionist period for many previous sociological ideals, including feminism. Symbolically, these feminine characters are part of this revisionist process; however, I argue that neoconservative feminism is not simply an evolutionary interpretation of feminist ideals, but instead, echoes historical concepts within the cult of domesticity.⁸⁸ Author Nancy F. Cott writes about how the values of womanhood are divided by distinguished responsibilities that tend to empower or reduce the social positions of gender. Cott labels this relationship as a form of "reciprocated humanity."⁸⁹ She describes how "the canon of domesticity encourage people to assimilate such change by linking it to a specific set of sex-roles"⁹⁰ Cott asserts that men and women each share a unique bond that caters to such dynamics. As men endure the economic brutalities of the outside world, women provide the social stability within the inner world of the home. Cott summarizes:

The literature of domesticity thus enlist women in their domestic roles to absorb, palliate and even to redeem the strain of social and economic transformation. In

⁸⁸ Cott, Nancy J. *The Bonds of Womanhood* Yale University Press, 1977, 1997. Cott outlines the "conventions and meanings" of gender through the "discourse of domesticity." Although it is an isolated study on womanhood rather than a unitary examination of the sexes, it does, at least under a social context, establish a definitive understanding on "femininity in relation to masculinity."

⁸⁹ Ibid. p. 67.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

the home, women symbolized and were expected to sustain traditional values and practices of work and family organization.⁹¹

Granted, this duality, which is recognized by both Palmer and Cott, is arguably the center of representation to Jewell, Edna, and Mae. But I attest that individual liberties, though arguably limited, are what threatens their positions. These threats are predicated on the patriarchal angles that these farm wives are unable to escape. Cott mentions that the sustainability of traditional values is the hallmark of womanhood. In all three farm crisis films, illustrations of this behavior is conveyed through the constant emphasis of food. Despite the crumbling of their external and internal worlds, the farm wives continue to honor their domestic duties by cooking, which in turn, reciprocates to a form of stability and strength. Symbolically, this suggestion of control is important because it accentuates the vulnerability of men.

Consider the notion of “traditional values” that Cott mentioned in her text, and what neoconservatism had politicized to seize the Moral Majority —the idea that men work while women stay home. It is an over simplification to suggest that men and women suffer from a hierarchal value system; however, it is important to recognize that these assumptions are at stake here. In particular, Zillah Eisenstein discusses how the positions of capitalism have reinforced patriarchal divisions between men and women.⁹² She does not say that capitalism is a catalyst to patriarchy because she also affirms that history “is” patriarchal and has existed across pre-capitalist society. But it is worth understanding that the husbands of the farm crisis films suffer

⁹¹ Ibid. p. 70.

⁹² Eisenstein, Zillah R. *Capitalism Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*. Monthly Review Press, New York and London, 1973.

from a lack of economic prosperity, which in turn, threatens their hierarchal position and deconstructs their ability to exist.

In contrast, the representation of the farm wives is more a struggle of independence and identity. Indeed, patriarchy embattles their progression, but this oscillation of masculine and feminine social positions possess those hidden interdependencies that I contend are the friction that services the violence of gender. And again, while not intending to ignore domesticity nor conservative feminist assumptions as possible interpretations, it should be remembered that the films focus on economics and capitalism, and thus these violent representations have more to do with neoliberalism than anything else.

A Declaration of Interdependence

Neoliberalism, I argue, by its very nature, opposes dependent social systems or any institutions that nourish such behaviors. The articles of William Adams,⁹³ connect this dilemma of dependency through the historical and theoretical writings of liberalism⁹⁴—forbearer to neoliberalism. Adams claims that liberalism faces many contradictions that hinders its development. At the forefront, is the ideological conflict between independence and dependence

He writes:

⁹³ William Adams's two articles, "American Gothic: Country, The River, Place in the Heart" and "Nature Virtue: Symbol and Imagination in the American Farm Crisis," are social commentaries on the American farm crisis of the early 1980s and the films that indoctrinate it. Holistically, he incorporates history, politics, fantasy, and the ideals of liberalism as a way to interpret its significance to America culture.

⁹⁴Note that Adams's commitment to liberalism, and to a lesser extent, modern liberalism, as opposed to neoliberalism is predicated on the period that his articles were written (1985). For this, the term "neoliberalism" hadn't emerged in discourse until the 1990s and 2000s. Indeed, neoliberalism has expanded from its post-colonial/post-imperial American/British origins to where it stands as this sociopolitical and macroeconomic paradox that we know today; however, its philosophical pillars, and that meaning, the notions of "independence," at least for me, is the single argument that has "not" changed through time.

Yet it is in just this particular formulation that American political thought and experience also captured in extreme form the problem inherent in modern liberalism: the struggle to wrest liberty from dependency, to turn dependent persons into free and autonomous selves.⁹⁵

From here, Adams, in his intimate critique of *County*, *Places in the Heart* and *The River*, suggests that these conflicting applications are what strains its thematic consciousness.

“Independence,” as he says, “is in fact the theme nurtured most carefully in these films,”⁹⁶ but he also chronicles how the distribution of this independence is “brought to agonizing tests.”⁹⁷ This quest for a sense of autonomy that neoliberalism strives for is problematic because the agony in this journey blinds the men and women of these films from their eventual reality of interdependency. This, I argue is the gendered angle. If the men in these films, as with neoliberalism, denounces welfare as a hinderance to individualism and self autonomy, then, this interdependency, which inevitably exists, castrates their masculine authority.

Consider, for example, the policies of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, a fellow neoconservative and an important figurehead in the campaign for neoliberalism. She, as with Reagan, demonized the concepts of welfare interventionism. When Thatcher came into power, she belittled Britain’s current status as the “Nanny State”⁹⁸ hinting at the governmental legal policies that secured labor workers by favoring their economic demands thus castrating entrepreneurial powers. The gendered term is significant here, as it implies a feminine

⁹⁵ Adams, William. “Natural Virtue: Symbol and Imagination in the American Farm Crisis” *The Georgia Review*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Winter 1985). p. 700

⁹⁶ Adams, William. “American Gothic: Country, The River, Places in the Heart” *The Antioch Review*, Spring 1985. p. 219.

⁹⁷ Ibid p. 219.

⁹⁸ Pearce, Robert. “Thatcherism” *New Perspective*, [ISSN 1352-6359] Vol 9, No. 3. p. 1

connotation not only to leftwing policies but to illustrate Britain's inferiority. This is not to assume that Thatcher's criticisms of her country were motivated by degrading it to feminine inferiorities but, she is, for all purposes, viewing her subjects as dependent children seeking maternal dependencies.

It is this rationale that has channeled my thoughts on how the dynamics that define neoliberalism are fleshed out in these farm crisis films. I contend that the ongoing struggle between independence and dependence roots itself in a struggle of gender. Perhaps this sounds premature, but consider, as a starting point, the fundamental arguments of the social order that these farm wives and their husbands face. As mentioned earlier, the men lose their positions within the narrative, while the women inherit their roles. But why do the husbands disappear? Economically speaking, the men's inability to support their families are the assumed arguments, and this may be the case, but what matters more is this idea of interdependency. Consider, for instance, a more dogmatic and arguably a more naive approach to this argument. Independence favors a masculine connotation, as it is recognized in the English language, with "man" and "male" having no dependent prefixes, while "woman" and "female" needing dependent or interdependent clauses. These differences illustrate the gendered hierarchy which has developed in the English language. Again, this, by all means, is not to reduce feminist arguments to premature discourse because after all multiple feminist writings would obliterate such assumptions, most notably Judith Butler, who attested that gender should not be limited to politicization of language, birth, or social and biological assumptions, rather, it can find its identifications through "performativity."⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, Chapman, & Hall Inc, 1990.

But I feel that this path is a necessary evil as it recognizes the symbolic significance to interdependency. In this gendered context, it seems as if the men in these films have issues with this interdependent conundrum. Perhaps, some of the problems are associated with the interdependent relationships between the banks and capitalism, but it can also be argued that this dependency favors a patriarchal problem. By this respect, men must dependently affirm a hierarchal order over their wives and children as a means to recognize their masculine identity. Likewise, this paradox can reverse itself with the women of the films, who, under a conservative context, have no issue in preserving their duties as wives and mothers. As this thesis continues to move forward, we shall see how this interdependency, and the violence associated to it, shall become a declaration of gender.

Of Wives and Men: A Neoliberalization of Women and a Domesticity of Violence

Jewell, Edna, and Mae each inherit responsibilities that not only alter their gendered positions but demonstrates characteristics that favor neoliberal ideals. Unlike the men in these farm crisis films, these female characters recognize their accountability. Deborah Tudor, who wrote about the neoliberalization of gender in Hollywood films, mentions that neoliberal culture expressed in media texts shows how “the individual bears sole responsibility for his or her own personal and professional welfare.”¹⁰⁰ This sense of responsibility is what these farm wives bring to their roles. For example, in the opening of this chapter, I incorporated Margaret Thatcher’s

¹⁰⁰ Tudor, Deborah. “Twenty-first Century Neoliberal Man,” *Neoliberalism and Global Cinema: Capital, Culture, and Marxist Critique*. Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, New York, London, 2011. p. 59. Tudor examines Neoliberalism through masculine and feminine representation in contemporary films and television with emphasis towards *Star Trek* and *Dexter*. She argues that actions of its protagonists gravitate on the ideological behaviors of Neoliberalism in which individualism is at its core.

influence to neoliberal rhetoric as she argues that “freedom and individuality”¹⁰¹ should separate itself from politicized notions of class and society. In fact, as Shaviro suggests, neoliberalism, for the most part, indoctrinates to any individual, thus, is blind to any actors, be it men or women, who wish to perform in it. Tudor furthers this possibility by denouncing the marginalization of feminism and suggest feminine empowerment should be replaced by a neoliberal ideal. She states:

If equal advancement is now open to formerly marginalized groups of women, then feminist critique of institutions and cultural objects becomes unnecessary, and to a degree, shameful and retrogressive. Individuals under neoliberalism and responsible for their own success or failure on the job, and in their personal lives as well.¹⁰²

Ultimately, it is neoliberalism that strengthens the positions of Jewell, Edna, and Mae. However, the dynamics that allow such empowerment places these protagonists into violent, uncompromising positions. Consider Mae, for example. She and her husband Tom must briefly separate from one another in order to salvage their farm, which has been victimized by a previous flood. While Tom journeys off to the city to find work, Mae endures the responsibility of cultivating the crops and raising their children. When Tom returns, Mae resumes her position as wife and mother. However, when heavy rains induces another possible flood, Mae and Tom are, once again, at odds. As Tom drifts into a state of anxiety, he finds himself dependent upon his wife and children, but this dependency is illustrated violently. After an evening of hard labor, their son Lewis is exhausted and falls asleep in the barn. Angered at Lewis, Tom forces him to wake up, but Mae intervenes. She argues, “He’s just a kid, You’re pushing him too hard! He’s

¹⁰¹ Ibid. p. 65.

¹⁰² Ibid. p. 63.

just a kid. What's the matter with you?... You're pushing him too hard!"¹⁰³ Tom, disturbed at Mae's objection to his authority, agitates the situation even further. At one point, both Tom and Mae physically pull at Lewis, literally symbolizing their tug of war over authority. But, Mae wins the battle by freeing her son from her husband's grasp, and after further verbal altercation, she slaps him.

The scene demonstrates what Webster calls "challenging a male sense of pride that is intensified by the myth of the independent farmer." And in a way, this is true if we return to the Jeffersonian notion of individualism in which farmers are the independent captains to their destiny. Tom's aggressiveness implies his own insecurities, but his anger is more about the interdependencies that he can't ignore or abandon. But, on the other side of this interdependency and violence, is Mae's contentious individuality, which involves embracing her domesticity as a protective mother.

In *Place in the Heart*, interdependencies and gendered violence play further into the unusual progression of Edna Spalding, who is suddenly widowed after her husband is killed in the line of duty. Though husbandless, Edna finds her interdependencies through multiple masculine replacements, most notably Moze and Mr. Will, who share a unique bond with her. Moze is an African-American hired farmhand, while Mr. Will is a blind tenant who resides in Edna's home. Both by extension, are castrated figures. This says something about Edna's dependencies to these men because even though they are considered lesser men, she negotiates their inferiority with her own inferior positions as a widow and single mother. Moze's freedoms are limited in the Jim Crowe period of America, and Mr. Will's disability, by default, limits his

¹⁰³ Rydell, Mark. *The River*. 122 minutes, Drama, 19 December 1984 (USA), Universal Pictures.

independence. Edna compromises her relationship with these men as means to gain some sense of autonomous worth. For instance, Moze steals from Edna until he's caught by a local officer. Edna denies to the officer that Moze has stolen anything and covers up for his crime but in return ask that Moze mentor her in farming. Mr. Will is the brother-in-law of the banker that determines the fate of Edna's farm and family. The banker finds his responsibility to Mr. Will a hinderance and feels that as a gesture of good faith, Edna could foster him, and in turn, he will secure her assets until the deadline of payment is met.

The bartering of Mr. Will and the hiring of Moze, I argue, demonstrates how Edna has developed a hierarchal order with the new men in her life; however, I introduce Moze and Mr. Will to demonstrate, not only her peculiar relationships within the ubiety of masculinity, but also to show how these interdependencies bring forth a violence that exists between Edna and a third masculine entity, her son Frank. Like Moze and Mr. Will, Frank's masculine inferiority is present in his adolescence, but even with this limitation, he holds a negotiating power over Edna. For example, when Frank is caught smoking in school, Edna is perplexed by how to best respond to his behavior. She understands that some form of drastic punishment is a proper, or rather, a fatherly response to Frank's action, but she struggles to oblige to it:

Edna: "All right, young man, what would your pa do if he was here?"

Frank: "I reckon he'd give me a whipping."

Edna: "Then I guess that's what we're going to have to do." Edna: "Ah ... Your Pa ... When he did this ... What ... I mean, how.." (uncertain how to ask her son)

Frank: (Understanding what his mother is trying to ask) "Most times I'd grab hold of the table and he'd let me have it."

Edna: “How many times would he..” (Unable to finish her statement)

Frank: “Pa’d be pretty mad over somethin’ like this. I guess it’d be ‘bout ten good licks.”¹⁰⁴

The dialogue in this scene is fascinating, because it illustrates the interdependencies of a mother struggling to adhere to the masculine responsibilities of fatherhood, and a son longing for a masculine replacement. What makes it both unique and disturbing is that both characters seemed to have valued the patriarchal system that preexisted before the death of Mr. Spalding, which affirms some understanding or even acceptance of masculinity as an independent hierarchal signifier. Furthermore, this unwanted responsibility enhances the eerie violence that follows.

While Frank leans over the table preparing for his punishment, Edna hesitates in her action and reflects upon her inherited role. It is Frank, however, who takes action. When he whispers, “I’m ready,”¹⁰⁵ Edna stands and stares at the leather strap struggling to control her emotions. But again, it is Frank who forcefully dictates his fate. With an aggressive tone, he says, “Ma! ...I’m ready.”¹⁰⁶ From here, the scene shifts away from the room to the outside hallway where the camera focuses our attention to Frank’s sister Possum, Mr. Will, and Moze. As they stand and listen to the sounds of the lashings, an uncomfortable discretion registers on and off screen. The unintended nature of the violence is what is so disturbing in this portion of the scene. In general, the slow, yet vigorous penetrating sounds violently demonstrates a confusion and uncertainty within Edna. But again, it can be critiqued as an evolution of her character. The dependency that

¹⁰⁴ Benton, Robert. *Places in the Heart*. 111 minutes, Drama, 21 September 1984 (USA), Delphi II Productions/TriStar Pictures.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

she has on these male figures act as mentors for her and demonstrates her transitioning into an independent figure. Perhaps, the violence illustrated in this scene has nothing to do with gender, independence or neoliberalism, but if there is any possibility to associate such assumptions, then maybe the punishment symbolizes Edna's own growing pains.

In *Country*, Jewell Ivy's evolution, like Edna's, has its agonies, but her sense of agency has its validating moments. In fact, her determination to save her family, her farm and her community rarely regresses. Not surprisingly, her persistence is what pushes the violence in her story. For instance, when her husband, Gil, returns intoxicated, his family refuses to recognize his hierarchal position. This eventually climaxes in a physical altercation with his son, Carlisle. As Jewell runs down to the field and separates the two, she too becomes a causality to Gil's wrath, but she refuses to succumb to his belligerence. With a wooden board, Jewell knocks her estranged husband to the ground. In the process, Gil runs away and Jewell, holding her injured son, returns to the home. It is merited to suggest that this altercation marks as a victory in Jewell's development, but Jewell herself doesn't accept this aphoristic assumption, because she does not view herself as the masculine replacement in her family. At times, she feels Gil's hiatus is transient, and understands that her current position is only temporary.

In the scene that followed, we see this acceptance when she counsels her children on the status of their father. Jewell campaigns for his significance and argues that the unforeseen issues hurting the family have also forced Gil to lose control and hence "lose himself." Jewell's unwillingness to denounce Gil's actions or accept her hierarchal position, I argue, is not an affirmation of weakness; instead, Jewell subsumes her interdependencies as paths to strength and empowerment. A more important distinction of Jewell's interventional behavior is seen when she

rallies the community to resist the auctioneers. She understands that there is weakness in conceding to individuality. Perhaps she recognizes this weakness with men, who, in times of need, are unwilling or too ashamed to accept the dependency of others. Because of this, Jewel understands that the will of an individual pales to the will of many.

In the context of individuality, I find Jewell's refusal to compromise her feminine identity, even within the constructs of interdependency intriguing. No moment displays this more poetically, and violently than in the final climax of *Country*. Jewell tearfully and angrily voices her detest of the legal systems that defend the corporations and not the suffering families or communities. Standing in the dead winter and holding a her crying infant, Jewell, in an emotional state, yells,

Mister! You could take our equipment! Tomorrow, you could come out here and hall off all our stock! But when you come out here to hall us off this land... You better come with something more than just a piece of paper! Cause we are staying! We're staying right here!¹⁰⁷

The scene's thrust of heartfelt anguish, and its articulation of language, demonstrates an overwhelming illustration of visceral violence. But Jewell's empowering defiance represents a resilience that her patriarchal counterparts fail to demonstrate. This haunting image of a mother holding her infant child while refusing to surrender her feminine position while fighting against multiple forces instigated by the current socioeconomic and political climate illustrates the uninvited duality that Jewel must inherit. Also, I argue that this is a defining moment not only for Jewel, but for Edna and Mae. In other words, it defines their neoliberal position on accountability and responsibility, regardless of how it threatens their feminine position.

¹⁰⁷ Pearce, Richard. *Country*. 122 minutes, Drama, 19 December 1984 (USA), Universal Pictures.

Engendered Violence: The Aesthetics of Gender

Up to this point, I have meditated on the violence of gender through neoliberal narratives which host female protagonists that adopt individualism as a means to confront the crisis that threatens their families and social positions. But there are examples of sexualized violence and neoliberalism that I felt were best to reserve until now, and that is, the aesthetics of *Country*, *Place in the Heart*, and *The River*.

Before furthering this notion, it is important to recognize that these sexualized aesthetics may have no links towards neoliberalism. But, these aesthetics do have gendered elements that enable or should I say accent the sexual themes found in these particular scenes, which I argue are influenced by neoliberalism.

For one, through a historical looking glass, the agrarian narrative, or what Duncan Webster interprets as the “the farming narrative,”¹⁰⁸ has utilized sexual personifications in order to humanize or dehumanize characters, settings, or themes. Webster examines the novels of Frank Norris,¹⁰⁹ for example, to expose the gendered illustrations that depicts pastoralism as threatened by the forces of capitalism through sexual personifications. He describes how Norris’s novel depicts farming “as a mystical and sexual union between man and nature, with the land

¹⁰⁸ Webster, Duncan. *Looka Yonder: The Imaginary America of Populist Culture*. London; New York: Routledge, 1988. p 27. Duncan writes heavily about *Country*, *The River*, and *Place in the Heart* in numerous chapters. In “Family Fields: The Farming Narrative,” he associates these contemporary farm narratives to earlier American novels and essays.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. pp. 51. Frank Norris unfinished trilogy, *The Octopus: A Story of California*, *The Pit: A Story of Chicago*, and *The Wolf: A Story of Europe*, exposes the violent entrepreneurial conflicts of farming, distribution, and market demands. Duncan’s analysis of *The Octopus* recognizes the sexualized personification that Norris utilizes to describe the system of cultivating.

seen in terms of fecundity and fertility, and ploughing seen as sexual penetration.”¹¹⁰ This sexually symbolic interpretation has similar applications to Leo Marx’s view on the tensions of industrialization and pastoralism conveyed through American narratives of the 19th century.

Marx writes:

Most important is the sense of the machine as sudden, shocking intruder upon a fantasy of idyllic satisfaction. It invariably is associated with crude, masculine aggressiveness in contrast with the tender, feminine, and submissive attitudes traditionally attached to the landscape.¹¹¹

Marx’s text suggests that the effects of European inspired industrialism had stretched across the newly established United States. Since industrialism became the accelerating force to a rising, efficient, motivated, economic system (later deemed as a capitalism), its symbolic representation, mainly the steam locomotive, violated the American “virgin”¹¹² landscape. Marx argues that the authors of this period, recognized this technological transformation as an uninvited reality. But this is a unique conundrum that I find fascinating and will play an important role in the aesthetics to these farm crisis films. The notion of independence, or at least under politicized lens, American independence, is heavily linked to pastoral virtues. As Adams points at:

To let go of the narrative of farm and independence would have been to challenge one major philosophical component of liberalism itself. The linkage of agrarian imagery and narrative with the classical liberal values of civil and political was hardly casual or superficial. In difference terms, it is exceedingly difficult (as Lincoln’s and Jefferson’s remarks suggest) to picture the liberal goal of independence in the claustrophobic setting of urban, industrial life, rife with

¹¹⁰ Ibid. p. 52.

¹¹¹ Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and Pastoral Ideal in America*. Oxford University Press 2000. p. 29.

¹¹² Ibid. pp. 141-144. Marx incorporates Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land* in arguing the rising changes during the Jeffersonian period of early America. My purpose here is to associate the sexual personifications to pastoralism when recognized with the exogenous threats of capitalism.

inequalities and conflicts, In a world conceptualized in terms of the stark opposition of dependence and independence, the narrative of land and husbandry is a nearly inescapable source of political imagery and thought.¹¹³

The “narrative of the land and husbandry” that Adams’ conveys, for me and my assessments to these farm crisis films and with neoliberalism, has much to do with identity. For one, the ownership of property, which catered to the ideals of liberalism, I argue, has reinterpreted itself within neoliberal arguments of privatization rights. We see this in all three films with the entrepreneurial aspects of farming, but when this ownership is threatened, it castrates a sense of autonomous identity. Historically, these threats have been compared through differences of an industrialized and technological world versus a rural one. I fell that this is the gendered angle to my argument, and what I mean, is that the pursuit of capitalistic prosperity, ever since the industrial revolution, has been the masculine aggressor that leads to the expansionism that accompanies prosperity.

Again, take Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. The novel personifies technology as monstrous beings that threaten the livelihood of the suffering tenant farmer. Funded by the entrepreneurial institutions (businesses, banks, etc), the machines —represented as tractors— rob the farmers of employment opportunities, replacing human labor with dehumanized mechanization. The tractors become a critical symbol of capitalism acting as an abusive mechanism that extracts commodities in order to expedite profits. And like Webster’s critique on Norris, the tractors are also dually symbolic to the masculine personification associated to

¹¹³ Adams, William. “Natural Virtue: Symbol and Imagination in the American Farm Crisis” *The Georgia Review*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Winter 1985). p. 705

husbandry.¹¹⁴ But Steinbeck does not limit these aesthetics to embody the modes of production, instead he repositions them to engage in physical hostility against the farmers themselves. When droughts and economic hardship induces states of austerity, the banks employ these tractors to seize and salvage soiled investments. In doing so, the tractors are described as “monsters” to signify their menacing presence. And unlike the invisible ambiguity of the antagonist described in the previous chapter, the association of “banks as monsters” offers a visible subsistence. This physical identity allows Steinbeck to personify the aesthetics into a metaphorical suggestion of gendered violence. He writes:

And pulled behind the disks, the harrows combing with iron teeth so that the little clods broke up and the earth lay smooth. Behind the harrow, the long seeders -- twelve curved iron penes erected in the foundry, orgasms set by gears, raping methodically, raping without passion.¹¹⁵

In this illustration, the monsters oust the farmers off the land. As the tractors advance and demolish homes, they erase any remnants of previous owners past, thus eradicating their identity. But in order to enhance this brutality, Steinbeck personifies this atrocity as rape.

I parallel these aesthetics of gendered violence to a scene in *The River* when Mae is trapped under tractor. To preface, Mae has taken on the manly duties after her husband sought work at a distant steel mill. When their farm tractor malfunctions, she attempts to fix it. While

¹¹⁴ Webster, Duncan. *Looka Yonder: The Imaginary America of Populist Culture*. London; New York: Routledge, 1988. p 33. Duncan analyzes Ralph Waldo Emerson’s critiques farming through its gendered linguistics such as “husbandry and the husband.” Part of Emerson’s arguments is that husbandry is one of man’s “oldest and universal professions.”

¹¹⁵ Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*, The Viking Press-James Lloyd, 1939. p. 49. Steinbeck describes the mechanizing of labor that replaced much of the work force in many farming sectors. As result, it becomes one of many reasons why jobs were lost aside from the economic collapse, and environmental issues such as draught and an unsustainable farming methods. The term ‘raping’ has numerous representations as it may suggest that capitalism, under masculine personifications, institutes reckless economic behavior that disrespects pastoral virtues which here, is associated through feminine contexts.

lying on the dirt under the tractor's metallic frame, Mae reaches over to adjust the broken parts with her husband's tools. Her persistence stimulates the movement between the roller chain and sprocket and eventually, forces her arm between the components. Stuck in a metallic vice, Mae tries to pull away but her aggression tightens the grip, which cuts through her skin causing excessive bleeding. Using her teeth and her one free hand, she braces her arm with a cloth to control the bleeding. When a delivery truck arrives at the driveway, a desperate Mae calls for help but because the driver is far from the fields, he's unable to hear her and eventually, drives away. Left for dead, a bull emerges out of the corn fields. It was released by a previous flood, but now it has returned. Mae's survival instincts affords her to arouse the bull through rubbing its neck and gently speaking to it. In an anxious state, Mae verbally negotiates with the bull by requesting it to move the tractor. In a faint, repetitious voice, she whispers "Help me move it. Move it. Move it. Move this thing." Desperate, she warns the bull "I'm going to have to hit you." And in an explosion of horrific anger she kicks at it and yells "Hit it! Hit it!" Again, it agitates the animal but not enough to lunge at her. Sweating and drenched in blood, Mae painfully pulls off her boots and then throws it at the animal's head, demanding "Hit me!" The disturbed bull digs its legs into the dirt, threatening to dash at the machine. In her last attempt, Mae angrily slings a wrench at the animal's head while, with a terrifying voice, she screams "Hit me!" This triggers the bull, which rams into the tractor multiple times. With every penetrating blow, Mae's body is also rattled. Each collision drags her body in the dirt where she continuously moans in agony until her arm is freed from the tractor.

At this point, the chronological moments of the scene have many connections to the aesthetics of gender and violence but first, the cinematic apparatus first needs to be recognized.

For one, understanding the scene's cinematic element is an important platform, because it complements the gendered violence suggested, even if it has no relevance to neoliberalism. This leads me to Laura Mulvey's inspiring text "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," which laid the foundation on the hegemonic viewing position in cinema that favors a masculine spectator. This develops into an array of dualities that push the divide of gendered subjectivity within the visuals and narratives in film. Linda Williams, a later contemporary to Mulvey, summarizes:

Laura Mulvey argued that the mainstream, classical cinematic narrative constructs an Oedipal subject of desire engaged in the twin perversions of voyeurism and fetishism in order to master the potentially fragmenting and castrating threats of the body the woman in the film. In this formulation, perverse forms of visual pleasure, especially sadistic mastery and voyeurism, are, in effect, normalized by the vision of classical cinema.¹¹⁶

David Slocum, in his text on cinematic violence, elaborates how "violence for Mulvey is grounded in sexual difference manifested both in film narratives the viewing process."¹¹⁷ This, I argue, is what accentuates the violence illustrated in Mae's struggles. On one hand, she oscillates from her narrative position as a protagonist, resisting a world of masculine hostilities that antagonize her wellbeing, while on the other hand, how we view her struggles distinguishes a balance within the dynamics of voyeuristic and sadistic perception. In other words, the spectatorial quality of the narrative, especially in this scene, is what drives the gendered divide. Consider the uneasiness of a spectator, who is assumed masculine, in watching Mae suffer, while the way in which the camera hangs over Mae offers a voyeuristic element that disciplines our perceptions to the violence and creates an almost shameful quality to the aesthetics. The

¹¹⁶ Williams, Linda. *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, New Brunswick, New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 1995. p. 2.

¹¹⁷ Slocum, David J. *Violence and America Cinema*, London; New York, Routledge, 2001. p. 15

hegemony of the camera forces us to focus on Mae's suffering as if we are witnesses of a violent crime.

Indeed, the camera, to quote Carol J. Clover's critique on Christian Metz's "The Imaginary Signifier," is an assaultive mechanism by which "the cinematic spectator is necessarily a voyeur, and voyeurism, with its drive to mastery, is by nature sadistic."¹¹⁸ To add to this notion, Mulvey, which Clover also compliments in his argument, identifies cinematic dualities that view women as this male gazer who entertains "a sadistic-voyeuristic look whereby the gazer salves his unpleasure at female lack by seeing the woman punished, and a fetishistic-scopophilic look, whereby the gazer slaves his unpleasure by fetishizing the female body in whole or part."¹¹⁹

This sets the stage for Mae's unfortunate and torturous struggle. As she attempts to honor responsibility to inherited duties, her demise is suggested as a punishment for stepping beyond a forbidden place. Again, if neoliberalism allows her to embrace individualism as means to own accountability and responsibility, it is unfortunate how she, as with Jewel and Edna, continuously runs into hostilities that hinder her progression. Mae's only crime was to attempt to fix a mechanical issue, but instead, her "lack" of understanding gendered boundaries, has resulted in the viewer being objectified on screen to what Mulvey calls, "seeing a women punished."

This violent demise brings forth a greater elaboration within the context of Mulvey's sadistic and voyeuristic gaze that translates into Mae's assumed punishment, which is the placement (or displacement) of autonomous position, which again, is important to the

¹¹⁸ Clover, Carol J. *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1992. pp. 206-209.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

conundrums of neoliberalism in terms of advocating individuality. Following Clover, whose understanding of Metz and Mulvey has only centered these gendered applications within the violence of the horror genre, has allowed me to incorporate my own critique of Mae's violent struggle and its relationship to neoliberalism. According to Clover, the violence that asserts itself within the constructs of horror narratives suggests that females inherit a masculine and feminine duality of "victim-hero." She mentions how this displacement of gender, expressed in "abject terror," has "identificatory buffers." She writes "Angry displays of force may belong to the male, but crying, cowering, screaming, fainting, trembling, begging for mercy belong to the female. Abject terror, in short, is gendered feminine."¹²⁰ By adopting Clover's victim-hero in my critique, I illustrate Mae's internal struggles through this form of active and passive gendered representation. For instance, the "femaleness of the victim," as Clover puts it, is relevant with Mae because she, too, expresses her agonies and desperation in feminine mannerisms but oscillates between these sexual tropes when she attempts to take control of her fate. Here, we see Mae aggressively negotiate with the nomadic bull by kicking and throwing at it while demanding the beast to ram into the tractor as means to puller her away from the trap she is in. This aggression displays confidence, but also accents a masculine light over her heroics.

Note, reading this violence in the context of Clover, the other side of this tension, conveyed in Mae's struggle, is not limited to Mulvey's masculine sadist perspective of the torturer, but one that is objectified through the sympathies of the tortured. To read Clover accurately is also to emphasize the way the spectator also identifies the person who is suffering so by this aspect, the film is offering an opportunity to again critique the source of her suffering but also emphasize an

¹²⁰ Ibid. p 51.

alternative to suffering, which we see with the bull freeing her from the machinery. By this observation, there is an interdependency implied in her suffering both as a victim and in her heroics.

Because of this interdependent struggle, Mae's victim-hero representation has much to do with dependency versus individuality that caters to the ideological arguments of neoliberalism. Mae, as with Jewel and Edna, divorces her passivity of the feminine by abandoning her patriarchal dependency. If neoliberalism, to reiterate, is a philosophy of independency that frees individuals to enact on their capable capacities, it is fascinating to witness how, throughout the course of *Country*, *Places in the Heart*, and *The River*, the masculine figures are unable to adapt to these intuitions.

Again, this is not to not to assume that all the females figures are victorious because their triumphs come with a demoralizing compromise. As uttered earlier, Mae develops her confidence by controlling the outcome of her fate, but again, I argue her efforts are disturbing to watch. Yes, Mae independently put herself in this trapped position and, just as importantly, brought herself out of it, but it came with a contradicting and debilitating angle. Mae's submission to the bull reinstitute a form of masculine dependency. It is a degrading moment in which Mae must concede to the animal's affection by cresting its side. Eventually, this affection elevates to begging and leaving her at the bull's mercy. As she finally stimulates the animal's aggression, its penetration against the machine's metallic frame reinforces the incision in her arm. It transpires into a metaphorical rape that I feel has legitimate consequences to gender and neoliberalism.

These gendered implications may seem tenuous, and one may argue that it is as an over simplification to assume the bull as this ubiquitous symbol of masculinity, but there are too many signifiers to ignore such a connection. When one considers how the literary devices, such as narrative personification, can incorporate gendered imagery, or how the cinematic apparatus can be argued as “an active/passive heterosexual division of labor,”¹²¹ then the interpretation of the bull as this gendered innuendo should be accepted as well. Indeed, Mae lying on the dirt impaled by the tractor may offer a visible personification of the female body as a virtuous figure that associates feminine qualities to pristine pastoral imagery with the machine as the antagonist against virtue, but I see it as a more complex portrayal of Mae’s struggle with neoliberalism

Because of this neoliberal angle, it is important to elaborate the violence within the context of dehumanization, because it implies another imbalance within the social order of gender. If neoliberalism advocates individual responsibility, a characteristic that the men are unable to grasp, we discover that the individual efforts of Mae, Jewell, and Edna, are fighting against a lesser hierarchal order. In other words, Mae’s struggle with bull and the tractor, I argue, illustrates a greater inferiority, which states that she not only unequal to the patriarchal social order, but, at times, must be reduced to battle with the extensions or alternatives of masculinity.

We see this disturbances with the Jewell as she, too, combats against these masculine extensions. For instance, in one of the most bizarre moments of *Country*, Jewell verbally, and eventually, physically, defends her family and neighbor from a mob of repossessors out to reclaim livestock that is on her land. First, she argues and negotiates with the banker, who infringes on her demands. Against her wishes, the men bulldoze their way onto the property by

¹²¹ Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16.3, Autumn, 1975, pp. 6-18.

penetrating through one of the wooden fences. This violation intensifies the brutality of capitalistic aggression where, like Steinbeck's fallen farmers, Jewell and her family are powerless to maintain their sense of autonomy. However, in one last attempt to save the livestock, Jewell desperately storms across the field as a way to distract a herding collie and fluster the sheep. As she aggressively runs and yells with her arms waving in the air, it creates a disturbing dichotomy of both resistance and helplessness. In a momentary lapse of despair, Jewell continues to run back and forth competing with the canine. This unexpected, and rather odd, rivalry between a woman and a dog, or more fittingly a shepherd and a sheepdog, speaks on Jewell's position as protector of her stock but as it unfolds, the animal defeats the woman. This reduction of Jewell's humanity enhances further through the men's hierarchical position over the collie, as it reaffirms her inferiority. In her defeat, she stands in the middle of the field out of breath and out of solutions. Exhausted, she stops and stares at the men penetrating the sheep with phallic rods in order to drive the herd to the trailer.

Perhaps, our observation of Jewell can be viewed as a tragic one, but her efforts demonstrate an individual will that the men fail to equal. As she runs across the field defending the stock, the men stand and stare. It is a disturbing moment, but also speaks to the lack of survivalism, a key characteristic of neoliberalism, that these men fail to possess which Jewell was able to bring forth, and that was not willing to surrender, no matter how degrading the circumstances.

From here, I return to Mae and her efforts to survive. The scene portrays a significant paradox between gendered violence and neoliberalism. The bull, for example, owns this masculine archetype but also, has this ironic connection to economic prosperity. In the global

free market, we personify success through image of the bull and what is called “bull market,” thus, we associate prosperity, and to certain degree, individuality with masculinity. In this context, capitalism and neoliberalism have an inglorious brutality. Mae’s failed attempt to fix the plow in order to cultivate her farm demonstrates this struggle for prosperity. However, when the struggle worsens, Mae must compete by all extremities. The scene, thus, manifests itself from a tale of prosperity into survivalism. Because of this, the compromises that Mae succumbs illustrates the interdependent battle for her autonomy.

Chapter Three:

The Violence of Men

*“Reagan strongly enforced traditional values such as the legacy of individualism, developing a distorted sense of self-empowerment and self-importance, which prompts a defensive attitude toward any kind of criticism.”*¹²²

-- Warren Buckland

*“The depiction of the indefatigable, muscular, and invincible masculine body became the linchpin of the Reagan imaginary; this hardened male form became the emblem not only for the Reagan presidency but for its ideologies and economies as well.”*¹²³

-- Susan Jeffords

No Country For Men

Unlike the female protagonists of *Country*, *Places in the Heart*, and *The River*, the men suffer immensely. They are unable to function from the economic pressures that threaten their social positions. Their violent demises, though different by circumstances, are owed to a neoliberal paradox that teeters on identity linked to individuality, or rather, an autonomous self. And, as in the previous chapter on gender, these violent struggles stems from a denial of dependency. It is within these obstructions that an emergence of interdependency translates into an internal war of strength and weakness, thus engendering a masculine violence.

¹²² Buckland, Warren. “1982: Movies and Other Worlds,” *American Cinema of the 1980s: Themes and Variations*, edited by Stephen Prince, Rutgers University Press, 2007. pp. 63-64.

¹²³ Jeffords, Susan. *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1994. p. 25.

In *Places in the Heart*, Mr. Will embraces neoliberal individualistic aspirations in spite of his blindness. His unique sense of empowerment is seen through his entrepreneurial efforts, in which he constructs baskets, brooms, and chairs and sells them for profit. Confident and condescending, Mr. Will's brashness and ability to produce goods and services complement a sense of independence and individuality. But these characteristics are tested when Edna's children accidentally damage one of his vinyl records. Enraged, Mr. Will barges into the kitchen not knowing that Edna is bathing. Overwhelmed, Edna hovers over to the edge of the tub to cover her nakedness. She understands that Mr. Will cannot see her, but, possibly, because of his male presence, she hides from him. As he emotionally rambles about her disorderly children, he moves closer towards her, and eventually bumps into the bathtub. At this moment, there ensues an uncomfortable silence. For a brief moment, the sexual tension, which suffocates the room's environment, alludes to Mr. Will's masculine vulnerability, that is, his lack of sexual authority due to his blindness. This is not to say that the scene would have unfolded differently if Mr. Will was able to see, but considering Edna, who is widowed, longs for a masculine signifier, one must question the ambiguous silence that permeates the moment. Perhaps, it is this juxtaposition of a naked woman and a blind man that serves as a peculiar measurement of inferiority. Admittedly, this may be the case, because dependency that both Edna and Mr. Will inherit due to their positions indicates inferiority. Even with all the hallmarks of neoliberalism -independency, accountability, and responsibility- Mr. Will cannot overcome his sexual dependency to Edna.

While Mr. Will is unable to implicate a masculine and authoritative identity, Moze suffers from a different inferiority complex. As an African-American drifter and former sharecropper, Moze is by default viewed as a lesser individual. Even as a man, the social order, at least in the

1930s, places him not only below white men, but also white women. In fact, the housing arrangement recognizes this hierarchy through living the conditions with Mr. Will privileged to a private room, while Moze must reside amongst the animals in the barn. Regardless of these misfortunes, Moze's early story is illustrated as a rising triumph. First, he becomes a farming mentor, a masculine substitution to Edna, and then a fatherly voice to her children, especially with Frank, with whom he develops a special bond. Then, he guides Edna through the economics and science of raising cotton, and leads her to victory at a harvesting contest in which the financial prize salvages the farm. His individualism, which, I argue, eclipses all of the masculine figures discussed in this chapter, embraces neoliberal thought, but his unfortunate tragedy is represented through his striving and maintaining of entrepreneurial independence, especially in a world of social prejudices.

Moze and Edna, two castrated figures of the patriarchy, triumphantly achieve their aspirations, and exercise individual freedoms to pursue economic prosperity. However, when the white competitors, who are already in competition with their equals, discover that an inferior competitor has defeated their chances for prosperity, the patriarchs respond with violence. Moze is punished for his success, whereas Edna is forgiven because of her social superiority. Eventually, the Ku Klux Klan hunts down and attacks Moze. These men rage against him, beating him into the dirt. This brutality is not entirely about racism, but about how prosperity is threatened. In a climactic moment, Mr. Will heroically attempts to save Moze. With a pistol in hand, he shoots in the audible direction of the intruders, but drains his bullets. Once the Klan feel they have the upper the hand, they continue to beat Moze to near death. It is not until Mr. Will recognizes the voices of the masked men that they halt this atrocity. Out of fear, the Klan

abandon their antagonism; however, they vow that they will return. Once they leave, Moze breakdown in tears. Mr. Will walks over and embraces Moze. It is at this moment that we witness an image of two inadequate men who fail to grasp their masculinity no matter how hard they follow their neoliberal path. And though it may sound obvious to assume that a blind man and black man may continuously struggle to overcome the physical or sociological barriers that hinder their masculine significance, it is important to note that Mr. Will and Moze are not alone in their depreciation as we will recognize with the following fallen white patriarchs, Gil, Arlon, and Tom.

In *Country*. Gil, too, is unable to cope with the interdependent forces that have deconstructed his independent position. These forces include the banking agents, which threat his own sense of individuality, and eventually envelops his own family, who no longer view him as a hierarchal figure. Deflated and discontent over the bank's policies, Gil bickers with an old lender as he states, "I remember when this bank used to loan money on the 'man' not the numbers."¹²⁴ This idea of the 'man,' which is now looked upon as an inferior entity, eats away at Gil's patriarchal identity, and eventually leads him into a state of alcoholism. His regression, I argue, is part of his inability to adapt to the applications of neoliberalism. The values of men have been replaced by the numerical values of the credit system. These quantitative values echo back to the Deleuzian theory of "controlled society,"¹²⁵ which under the context of neoliberalism, evaluates the economic capacity of the individual, thus, limiting, or in fact hindering, one's potential of prosperity. This economic surveillance, which monitors the wealth of its players, imprisons Gil's

¹²⁴ Pearce, Richard. *Country*. 122 minutes, Drama, 19 December 1984 (USA), Universal Pictures.

¹²⁵ Deleuze, Gilles. "Society of Control," *L'autre Journal*, no. 1, May, 1990.

sense of masculinity, or in Webster's words, "the economy has undermined these masculine virtues of independence."¹²⁶ For instance, when Gil attempts to sell his grain, the local distributor can only cut him a partial payment. The distributor explains that Gil is on a list of delinquent debtors, and so a large portion of the payment must be garnished for his creditors. Though overwhelmed and angered, it is not the financial dependence on institutions that infuriates Gil's emotions, but instead this documented entrapment that illustrates his limited independence. In detest, Gil states, "What list? ...I've never been on no list... What do they think I am? A thief or something? ...I've never been in no damn list in my whole life."¹²⁷ This, by and large, fuels Gil's belligerence as he tries to break away from the social imprisonments of neoliberalism.

This economic surveillance, I argue, reiterates on what Deleuze calls "Man is no longer enclosed, but man in debt."¹²⁸ It demonstrates the current status of capitalism that has been reinvented within ideological confines of neoliberalism; a suffocating power of the financial institutions that drowns away the autonomous identity of the individual. Deleuze concludes by stating that capitalism has induced an extremity of poverty in which even the poor are "too poor for debt" or "too numerous for confinement." What Gil, and arguably all of the characters of the farm crisis films, wish to regain is their sense of control, but again, these struggles are contentious.

For example, at a bar, Gil drunkenly harasses the banker that earlier refused to compromise on an alternative solution to his delinquent loans. The banker reminds Gil that he is

¹²⁶ Webster, Duncan. *Looka Yonder: The Imaginary America of Populist Culture*. London; New York: Routledge, 1988. p. 71.

¹²⁷ Pearce, Richard. *Country*. 122 minutes, Drama, 19 December 1984 (USA), Universal Pictures.

¹²⁸ Deleuze, Gilles. "Society of Control," *L'autre Journal*, no. 1, May, 1990.

solely accountable for the problem, because he accepted the loans. This enrages Gil and leads to a physical altercation. The banker yells at him, exploiting Gil's vulnerability by commenting on how he cannot provide for himself nor his family. He states:

You know what really got you? Is that you have been sitting on the most productive farmland in the country for a hundred years. And you can't make a living on it. I didn't do that to you, my friend. You did it to yourself. You not a farmer. You're a drunk looking for a fight¹²⁹

It is hard to ignore the agrarian connection to Jeffersonian independence, and its historical relevance within the American imagination, and its ties to neoliberalism. This connection allows me to merge neoliberalism and its masculine angles to Webster's assumptions towards the farmer as this "privileged symbol of the masculine in American culture" and "a representative of pioneer virtues of independence and strength."¹³⁰ I feel that this is what troubles Gil. As he loses his farm and his family, he also loses the virtues of his masculine identity and its link to autonomy. The atrophy of his autonomous identity, as mentioned in the previous chapter, stems from his lack of control, which he expresses through physical abuse toward his son and wife. It is here that the symbol of "independence and strength" is questioned. In other words, Gil, in this interdependent dynamic, depends on his family's dependence in order to attest his masculine/patriarchal order. When Jewel and her children move on from Gil's absence into alcoholism, they castrate his identity.

From here, this quest for identity, I argue, is what pushes the men into a vulnerable state of abandonment. No example is as tragically and significantly represented as the suicide of Arlon

¹²⁹ Pearce, Richard. *Country*. 122 minutes, Drama, 19 December 1984 (USA), Universal Pictures.

¹³⁰ Webster, Duncan. *Looka Yonder: The Imaginary America of Populist Culture*. London; New York: Routledge, 1988. p. 70.

Brewer. An earlier foreclosure victim in *Country*, Arlon's slow disintegration is suggested as a subtext to the story that parallels to the Ivys's narrative. Unlike Gil Ivy, however, Arlon does give into the dependency of others even if these requests fail him. We see this first with the lenders who deny Arlon's appeal for austerity and then with the Ivys during their inability to protect his livestock. Desperation eats away at Arlon, and eventually effects his already mentally challenged son, who during the dispossession of their sheep falls into a physical altercation with the repossessioners. As result, the authorities are forced to apprehend the young man. With his son taken away, and the loss of his land and livestock, Arlon's sense of being is defeated. In an attempt to save Arlon, his wife, Louis Brewer, reaches out to the Ivys for help, but because of Gil's own demons, Jewell is pressured to act alone. Jewel arrives to discover Arlon sitting in silence with a loaded rifle on his lap. He stares at the walls while holding the family cat. Arlon states that "Nothin' makes much sense anymore" in which Jewel replies "We belong here!" She discusses the long history of Arlon's family and the land they once claimed, and the importance of maintaining the sense of local identity. Even with all her noble efforts, Jewell is unable to save Arlon as he eventually releases the cat and tragically inflicts with a gunshot to himself.

Arlon's final moments speaks about the significance of property in establishing an autonomous identity, which aligns with how neoliberalism views autonomous individuality through private ownership. Granted, I previously recognizes the significance of autonomy and property within the fallen families exploited at the local auctions, and Steinbeck's nomadic tenant farmers, but again, how it is expressed is also important because of the gendered angle. The way in which Arlon's standoff is suggested conveys this possibility. The letting go of his cat, a domestic symbol of the home, demonstrates his inability to maintain what is rightfully his. The

winter, act as a metaphor for death, and the snow that blankets the farmland hints that the property is dead to him, as is his sense of autonomous self. Finally, we are left with the haunting image of a man and his gun, an American archetype¹³¹ of masculinity, unable to protect his land, his family and eventually himself.

For Gil and Arlon, these films, as Webster concurs, “hint at the economic base of masculine virtues.”¹³² He questions that “if men aren’t supposed to cry, aren’t supposed to be powerless, what happens when the bills come in and you can’t pay.”¹³³ The foreclosures, the auctioning of capital, and the loss of land are not only symbols of a flawed capitalist system, but also represent a physical antagonism that drives men into physical self-destruction. For instances, *The Farm Crisis*, a 2007 documentary about the economic and social tragedies of Iowa in the 1980s, mentions that “murders and suicides pointed to the hardships facing many.”¹³⁴ As women were stable figures during these tragic periods, many men fell into darker paths of self-destruction, most notably alcohol abuse and domestic violence.

According to Webster, the socioeconomic anxieties and the rise of suicides were part of a “crisis of conservatism.”¹³⁵ Considering how rural sectors felt betrayed by the lack of political support, especially with Republicans and Ronald Reagan, it brought a deception to conservatism that either verbally supported the farmer, an agrarian symbol of American virtue, or defied it by

¹³¹ Ibid. pp. 85-114.

¹³² Ibid. p. 71.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Smith, Harry. *The Farm Crisis*. Iowa Public Television, 2007. The program examines the economic and personal disasters that tormented Iowa and most mid-western farms in the 1980s. Featuring interviews of politicians, economists, artists, and the victims of the crisis. Narrated by Harry Smith and funded by Humanities Iowa and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

¹³⁵ Webster, Duncan. *Looka Yonder: The Imaginary America of Populist Culture*. London; New York: Routledge, 1988. p. 71.

adopting the neoliberal doctrine against governmental interventionism, a fiscal philosophy that Reagan refused to contradict. To quote the former U.S. President:

We're doing a great deal to help famers but I have pleaded and warned repeatedly that just as your families don't have a blank check for whatever your needs may be neither can government, and that means taxpayers bailing out every farmer hopelessly in debt or every bank...¹³⁶

Perhaps, under the notions of neoconservatism and neoliberalism, it is this blatant lack of diplomacy and lack of humility that destroys Arlon. It is a dual system that politically covets individual freedoms, however, economically, is unforgiving of victims of circumstance.

Hard Bodies, Soft Souls: A Violence of Strength of Weakness

Masculinity and violence, in regards to these farm crisis films owes some of its influence to Reaganism and how films, at least by the mid 1980s, became cinematic manifestations of Reaganomics.¹³⁷ Susan Jeffords and her text, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* make great strides in developing these connections to masculine violence and up to a point, these specific films, contextually, follow these cinematic manifestations. But these farm films also move further to undermine this Reagan ideology, and to a greater extent, undermine neoliberalism through complex contradictions of both the union and the labor system.

¹³⁶ Smith, Harry. *The Farm Crisis*. Iowa Public Television, 2007. This quote is taken from live footage of Ronald Reagan's response to the national economic crisis facing farm families of the midwest.

¹³⁷ Jenkins, Philip. *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America*. Oxford University Press 2006. pp. 180-183. Reaganomics, according to Jenkins, was Reagan's economic philosophy, which, like neoliberalism, favored deunionization and deregulation. When it came to tax cuts, Reagan definitely preached and achieved those policies more than any other president at that time; however, paralleled with these tax reductions, he ballooned government deficits, primarily with military spending. In a way, Reaganomics brought an odd duality where it values freeing Americans from taxes but equally concerned itself in preserving this freedom through the deficits of its national security.

For instance, in *The River*, Tom Garvey embarks on a hero's journey.¹³⁸ Like Moze, Gil, and Arlon, Tom runs away from the economic troubles that threaten his family; however, his abandonment is not an attempt to escape responsibility, but instead, an attempt to utilize his human capital¹³⁹ as an alternate means to raise finances, and save his land. For this reason, he accepts scab work at a far off steel mill, compromising his rural world for an urbanized life within the confines of a rustic decaying factory which William Adams describes as “a subterranean world” and “an infernal region where human beings are beaten down and finally consumed in grime and darkness.”¹⁴⁰ This is a penal setting of desperate and castrated men, many, of whom are former farmers, surrendering their independence for dependency, which in this case is a life of hard labor. The hostility overpowers and eventually suffocates any hope, which these men need to cope within these tough situations. Tom finds himself in a primitive world with primitive values: eat, sleep, and survive. In a Darwinian sense of the term, Tom's survivalism is tested every day and night.

¹³⁸ Campbell, Joseph. *A Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton University Press, 1949. I parallel Tom's story to Campbell's monomyth in which the hero, through the course of mythology and history, follows a formulaic narrative pattern where he disappears on a sentimental journey that eventually, leads through paths of struggle and suffering only to return with a new sense of self.

¹³⁹ Cotoi, Călin. “Neoliberalism: A Foucauldian Perspective” University of Bucharest, *International Review of Social Research*, Vol 1, Issue 2, June 2011. pp. 115-116. For all intents and purpose, “Human Capital” may sound out of place within the association of labor power or the work force, which in those regards, have linguistic roots to Marxist theory that oversees labor as this form of commodity, however, my implementation of it, has more to do with my own revisionist interpretation of “labor” under the context of neoliberalism. Human capital, through the eyes of Foucault, is an expansion of “homo economicus,” or “economic man,” an early model of the individual as this economic actor that is both rational and self-indulgent. Cotoi makes all these connections but importantly, argues that human capital, as this individual entrepreneurial agent, is a “radical alternative” to the Marxist notions of labour. Indeed, counter arguments will find problems in regards to how wages hinder this individuality because of the dependency it caters to the worker. But again, I view this differently within this conflict of the unions vs the agents because I see it as a battle of human capital for the sake of individual interests.

¹⁴⁰ Adams, William. “American Gothic: Country, The River, Places in the Heart” *The Antioch Review*, Spring 1985. p. 218.

But I argue that this moment in *The River*, where the men are embattled, is the nature of neoliberalism capitalism, especially in the years surrounding 1984, which for the most part, ushered in a new period of deregulated markets, rising globalization and declining unions. Here, in this changing world of competitive markets, the freedom to exploit human capital is defined by strength and identity. This compliments Susan Jeffords' critique on Reagan and how the films released during his administration were mimetic to "reviving strength and individualism."¹⁴¹ In her text, she argues that the aesthetics of strength, illustrated by the image of the body, as either muscular or armored, was a cultural cinematic trend of the 1980s. But this impenetrable figure was also a reflection to its politics of its time. "The body" as Jeffords' puts it, stood "as the emblem of the Reagan philosophies, politics, and economies." It demonstrated not only an invincibility to the American masculine imagination, but as envelopment to "strength, labor, and determination."¹⁴²

In the spirit Jeffords' arguments, this competitiveness and determination that drives prosperity, as well as the mobilization of human capital, is measured by relentless strength and will. As a result, a physical battle between striking unions and replacement workers emerge. This clash occurs in multiple scenes, starting with the steel mill company escorting the new laborers to the factory gates in which the unions stands in their way. Unaware of the circumstances, this new work force is overwhelmed with the reality that they are robbing the livelihood of others. We see this in Tom's reaction when the strikers torment his arrival with debris and insults.

¹⁴¹ Jeffords, Susan. *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1994. p. 105.

¹⁴² Ibid. pp. 24-25.

Midway through the film, these rivalries intensify during a physical altercation. When a younger farmer, who wishes to return to his pregnant wife, escapes the mill, he is caught and gang beaten by a handful of strikers. In attempt to save his life, Tom and two replacement workers climb over the fence and brawl with the strikers. The blood driven violence reaches its climax when Truck, an African-American overseer of the replacements, reaches his breaking point. Enraged, either at the union or the expendable system that harbors this desperation, Truck strangles one of the union workers to near death. Tom restrains Truck begging him, “Truck! Truck! Stop! No! Stop! You’re killing him! Stop! Let’s go!” After Tom successfully pacifies Truck’s rage, they return to their incarcerated confines. At this moment, the exhausted men fall to the ground, breathing heavy, covered in bruises, blood, and broken teeth. This altercation creates an interesting argument over the reality of labor economics and masculinity, pointing out the expendable nature of skilled labor in this transitional phase of neoliberalism.

David Harvey’s suggests that the turbulent relationships between neoliberalism and the distribution of commodified labor power, faces social hostilities that contradictorily, castrates a man’s individuality. He writes:

For the alleged commodity ‘labour power’ cannot be shoved about, used indiscriminately, or even left unused, without affecting also the human individual who happens to be the bearer of this peculiar commodity. In disposing of man’s labour power the system would, incidentally, dispose of the physical, psychological, and moral entity ‘man’ attached to that tag. Robbed of the protective covering of cultural institutions, human beings would perish from the effects of social exposure; they would die as victims of acute social dislocation through vice, perversion, crime and starvation.¹⁴³

¹⁴³ Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press, 2005. p 167.

Indeed, Steven Shaviro notes that “the antagonism between capital and labor has, of course, haunted capitalism since the very beginning.”¹⁴⁴ But there is something distinctive about how the conflicting relationship of labor and capitalism is registered in *The River* and how I see it within Jeffords’ view of neoconservative politics and its influence on economics and association to masculinity. But before furthering on this distinction, it is relevant to elaborate more on Jeffords’s understanding of Reagan, who after all, was and is an icon to neoliberalism.

First, she prefaces how Reagan had inherited a country filled with ideological conundrums, including a crisis of national identity and socioeconomics. This is all relevant considering that, up until 1980, the U.S. had lost faith in nearly all its facets: government, culture, and capitalism. Again, as mentioned previously in this thesis, these areas were assuaged by reducing governmental powers that had been instituted during Roosevelt’s New Deal policies. But, at the heart of this identity crisis, I argue, is still an economic problem. To quote Rupert Wilkinson, who Jeffords introduces in her text, “the idea was growing that America had entered a period of fundamental decline, reversing its history. This prompted new worries about the people’s vigor and ambition, industriousness and will.”¹⁴⁵

From here, the economic uncertainties, that Wilkinson acknowledges, by my assessment, have much to do with the struggles of the unions powers of the day. Initially, and arguably understandable, the rise of unionization powers during Roosevelt’s tenure,¹⁴⁶ pacified the entrepreneurial belligerence that, historically, abused labor commodities and in theory, protected

¹⁴⁴ Shaviro, Steven. “The ‘Bitter Necessity’ of Debt: Neoliberal Finance and the Society of Control” May 1, 2010. p. 5.

¹⁴⁵ Jeffords, Susan. *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1994. p. 3.

¹⁴⁶ Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press, 2005. p. 52.

the rights of the worker. But, by the 1970s, in the wake of social and economic changes, which stemmed from racial and gender integration into the work force and escalation of high inflation influenced by global oil hikes, the unions were crumbling internally and externally.¹⁴⁷ Race and gender, as well as wages and seniority, which ideally, were noble efforts to strengthen diversity in the work place and secure jobs and income, were at odds. Discrimination embattled the unions from within, while, in the public-eye, striking for higher wages, in a time of global economic strife, demonized the institutions. As a result, a push for “good labor markets” versus “bad labor markets”¹⁴⁸ legislation reform, which eventually translated, in the rhetorical consciousness of neoliberalism, as “right to work” laws, or new non-unionized labor rights.

In this context, I parallel the revisionist labor market of “right to work” that neoliberalism valued and neoconservative lobbied for, back to Jefford, who states that Reagan, either intentional or inadvertently, paved the way for “economic alterations”¹⁴⁹ during his administration. Martin Anderson,¹⁵⁰ Reagan’s economic policy advisor, acknowledged the former U.S. President for reviving America’s greatness through the “the strength of its economy” and “the freedom of the people.” This rhetorical “freedom,” as I call it, is, in essence, the inspiration that ushered in a new wave of labor markets that allow individuals to work as free agents rather than unionized groups. With this ideology, the aesthetics of strength embraced by the hard body concept demonstrates individuality and more importantly, a lack of dependency on

¹⁴⁷ Cowie, Jefferson R. *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*. The New Press, New York, London, 2010.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Jeffords, Susan. *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1994. p. 14

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 3

institutions. For this, the will of the individual, in theory, should be rewarded for its efforts, and not complicated by preexisting legalities such as seniority or wage protectionism. Nor should an individual's will be limited to a holistic body of workers, who may have inferior laborers within its pack but are allowed to earn equal pay, even if they lack efficiency. Harvey prefaces that "individual freedoms," be they of the "market" or "of trade, [are] a cardinal feature of neoliberal thinking." In a way, he suggest that this is "common sense" according to neoliberal values and the workforce.

For this reason, I return to Truck, who is incorporating his right to work. But, I interpret his story within the context of Jeffords' "hard body" critique, in which he illustrates his value through physical strength. Before the violent brawl, I previously mentioned, Truck physically and verbally demonstrates his value to his workmates. Impressing Tom and the others, Truck playfully lifts a 100 pound barrel over his head and then smashes it on the ground. He states, "You mothers are staring at 205 pounds of USDA prime nigger!" This is both a fascinating and disturbing moment because Truck compares himself to a capitalistic commodity while also incorporating derogatory language to describe himself. Naturally, a metaphorical parallelism to slavery and labor might be the logical narrative reading to such comments, but this scene also says something about what has happened to the labor market and neoliberalism. Jeffery Cowie, in his text *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and The Last Days of the Working Class*, contends that some of the key internal conflicts, which lead to the eventual demise of the labor powers of the 1970s, were forced integration policies such as affirmative action. These policies threatened a white working-class, who, before the 1960s, had conventionally monopolized the labor industry. Cowie, as with Jeffords, and to some degree, Harvey, views integration as a weakness, because it

besieged the white working class who “lived under conditions of chronic economic insecurity and felt excluded from many of benefits that were being distributed through affirmative action and other state programs.”¹⁵¹ As Harvey suggested, “the problem was not capitalism and the neoliberalization of culture, but the ‘liberals’ who had used excessive state power to provide for special groups (blacks, women, environmentalists, etc.).”¹⁵² Harvey centers his patriarchal argument through the neoconservative movement that had embraced neoliberalism, and had made great strides to “divert attention from capitalism and corporate power”¹⁵³ and turn the economics problems into a civil, or even social issues. For this purpose, Jeffords affords her masculine argument, or even limits it, to a white patriarchal hero. This is what makes Truck’s character so unique, and maybe to a degree, Moze. Their sense of neoliberalism faces a patriarchal enemy that ironically, allies itself to neoliberal ideology.

Take, for instance, how Jeffords portrays the 1970s as a period of inferiority when films, culture, and politics¹⁵⁴ illustrated soft vulnerable figures. She associates the term, “soft body” to laziness and the “hard body” as a testament of “strength, labor, and determination,” and then follows these statements by saying “in this system of thought marked by race and gender, the soft body invariably belonged to a female and/or a person of color, whereas the hard body was like Reagan’s own, male and white.”¹⁵⁵ Regardless of the racial angle, Truck is everything that the

¹⁵¹ Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press, 2005. p. 50.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Jeffords, Susan. *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1994. p. 25. Jeffords argues that the men of the 1970s, specifically, former U.S. President, Jimmy Carter, were one of many masculine figures that had a “soft” feminine and passive representation, thus made them weaker individuals.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

Reagan image embellishes, something that Tom fails to represent. In the brawl scene, where the replacement workers are losing the bloody altercation with the labor union, it is not until Truck jumps over the fence and indulges in the fight that the free agents are saved and all four of the union workers are defeated. His triumph says something about the power of the union against the power of the individual. While the common interpretation of the unions is understood as a symbol of strength, this strength is never really tested, instead, it is only suggested.

Consider, for example, the scene's final moments when the replacement workers have been relieved from their duties. The unions and owners have settled their disputes, but as part of the arrangement, the free agents must walk out of the factory unsecured. As the gates open, Tom, Truck and the other non-unionized laborers must march to their death while an angered mob, holding clubs, pipes, and sticks, preparing to unleash their wrath, stand and wait for the replacements to pass. But what unfolds is a unique reciprocation of strength. The unions are portrayed as a cowardly group that solicit fear. Granted, the nature of a labor strike is more a gesture or a bluff rather than a true testament of strength. And perhaps, this is what enhances the substance of the replacement workers. Since the free agents must walk through this hostile path, unarmed and defenseless, it only exposes the vulnerability of the union. Because of this, the unions's strength is only measured by their numbers and weapons, while by contrast, the strength of the agents are measure by their will.

Whereas neoliberalism lobbies for the "right to work" as means to reinforce a free market, it also leaves the individual expendable and weakens the laborer. Tom, Truck and the rest of the non-unionized workers are willing to exile themselves into horrendous conditions. Here, the men battle through the heat of melted metal. Their bodies are covered in oil, sweat, and

blood. In one scene, an accident burns most of man's body, but he is quickly replaced by the next worker. Men are expendable yet they continue to accept such circumstances.

This perpetuation says something about how the labor system, at least in *The River* and in the argument of neoliberalism, is reverting back to a pre-unionized system where the expendability of the workers devalues their sense of humanity. Granted, through the eyes of neoliberalism, the concept of individual freedom, where men engage in independent entrepreneurial decision, fails to acknowledge how easily this freedom is compromised. This is not to say that the unions do not own such conundrums because they do, or any system of trade; however, with trade, there is an exchange in value that can cripple the individual even if this transaction is measured in desperation. For instance, if famine or death is the opportunity cost¹⁵⁶ to acquire something barely livable, then, I argue, that the return, be it pennies, food, or housing, is still a problematic gain. In the case of the replacement workers, they are trading their services for income, but it can be argued, through desperation, they are trading something more, including their lack of autonomous self. In other words, Tom and the free agents are reduced to commodities and capital. This deprivation is eventually fleshed out within an industrial underworld where the labor of men are mechanized and dehumanized.

Within the discourse of capitalism, Karl Marx critiqued this problem as labor alienation, which was later personified by Erich Fromm as the "alienated man." Leo Marx articulates these two concepts in *The Machine in the Garden* when he writes:

Although it is morally neutral, the machine in a capitalist setting helps to transform the worker into a commodity for sale on the labor market. His work takes on a mechanical, meaningless character. It bears little or no relation to his

¹⁵⁶ Mankiw, Gregory N. *The Principles of Microeconomics*, Harvard University, Hartford College Publishers. New York, 2001, p. 6.

own purpose. The result is the typical psychic set of industrial man which Marx calls alienation. In Erich Fromm's words, the alienated man is one of whom 'the world (nature, others, and he himself) remain alien... They stand above and against him as objects, even though they may be objects of his creation. Alienation is essentially experiencing the world and oneself passively, receptively, as the subject separated from the object.'¹⁵⁷

The meaninglessness, that Leo Marx suggests, demonstrates a lack of agency that capitalism robs from the laborer. Some of this "lack" is predicated on the worker's imprisoned dependency to the system, but it is also how the individual is transformed into a machine. I incorporate this to what Thomas Carlyle called the "mechanical in head and heart"¹⁵⁸ which, in this world of labor induced economics, demonstrates the dehumanization of the self in which men are identified merely as objects.

However, within the metamorphosis of man and machine, be it commodity or capital, an internal conflict of the 'social' and 'natural' self¹⁵⁹ emerges. In *The River*, for example, a young deer walks into the factory in the midst of the men's daily routines. As the men take notice of the wandering doe, they each abandon their duties to fetch the young animal. One by one, each worker enthusiastically participates in the chase; however, this enthusiasm quickly turns to desperation. The men act as a mob of hungry predators almost cannibalistic in their representation. This violent illustration of poverty and hunger demonstrates how capitalism, or any socioeconomic system, is not too far removed from humanity's primitive past. It can be

¹⁵⁷ Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. Oxford University Press, London, Oxford, New York, 1964. p. 177.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 176.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. pp. 176-177

argued that these laborers have regressed¹⁶⁰ into their ancestral, hunter gatherer form. This transition resurrects their masculine identity that had been lost in the confines of alienation. The deer, as this object of prey, becomes ubiquitous to masculinity because of its natural order in regards to survivalism.

But, implicit as it may seem, this primitiveness or early homo sapien that I am suggesting is not much different from neoliberalism's homo economicus, where the individual, be it an investor, banker, owner, or laborer, owe his/her roots. This is not to say that homo economicus¹⁶¹ or economic man and survivalism is limited to men. In particular, we see this diversity of economic individualism with Edna and her family barely surviving to make the harvest deadline, or when Jewel and the other farm families unite and protest against auctioneers. The labor market is also not limited to men¹⁶² but still, it is hard not to associate masculinity with labor and capitalism because of its patriarchal history, and in this case, the relationship of man and animal reinforces this possibility.

Aside of this masculine affirmation, the lost deer also presents a lost humility. When the men finally surround the yearling, the animal stops and urinates in front of them. The men, then, shift into a long reflective gaze. Gaping at the animal while it gapes back at them. This emotionally changes the men. It seems as if the labor workers have discover a humanized connection with the deer, and now understand the animal's innocence. Because of this sentimentality, they guide and release the animal back into the wild.

¹⁶⁰ Note, the terms "regressed" and "primitive" associated to "hunter gather" is not to dismiss or diminish those socio systems because they do exist well into the twenty-first century. My intent, however, is to parallel humanity's earliest survivalist systems with current states of capitalist society and show that the neoliberal context of individuality have similar lineages to earlier forms of survivalism.

¹⁶¹ Shaviro, Steven. "The 'Bitter Necessity' of Debt: Neoliberal Finance and the Society of Control" May 1, 2010.

¹⁶² Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press, 2005.

At that moment, the men rejoice in their solace, but I think their actions speak to their weakness and how this vulnerability affects their place within neoliberalism. Namely, what I argue is that neoliberalism, and to an equal degree, capitalism, have a soullessness to their survivalist ideology. Any sympathies for its partners or competitors may hinder one's prosperity, and those who fail to harbor apathy will suffer or die in the system. To quote Harvey's view on neoliberalism's ruthlessness:

The anarchy of the market, of competition, and of unbridled individualism (individual hopes, desires, anxieties, and fears; choices of lifestyle and of sexual habits and orientation; modes of self-expression and behaviors towards others) generates a situation that becomes increasingly ungovernable. It may even lead to a breakdown of all bonds of solidarity and a condition verging on social anarchy and nihilism.¹⁶³

But I think this justifies the intentions of the unions as this protectoral force which attempts to reinstitute a soul into a soulless system. However, to instill a sense of humility, which capitalism and neoliberalism fail to recognize, only pacifies the aggressive spirit of individualism, and under the light of "right to work," an allowance of such sensitivities can only develop into a cloud of weakness.

A Never-Ending War

The deer returning to its environment foreshadows Tom's journey home. But, upon his return, he must battle against two threats: another rising flood, and a greedy entrepreneur, Joe Wade. As the rains continue, Tom, Mae, and their neighboring farmers are desperate to salvage their land. Joe Wade, sees this as an opportunity for land values to diminish so he could force

¹⁶³ Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press, 2005. p. 82

owners to sell under pressure. However, when the farmers swiftly build a levee to withstand the rising waters, they defeat Joe Wade's plan. In response, Joe, feeding off of the desperation of others, hires a militia of homeless people to destroy the levee. This develops into the films climax and more importantly, the barebones of neoliberalist notion of "wars against all."

Shaviro, annotates Foucault's interpretation of neoliberalism as a system that engenders its axiom towards free rivalry. He quotes Foucault, saying "competition and only competition, can ensure economic rationality."¹⁶⁴ With this logic, Shaviro reciprocates Thomas Hobbes's ideas which favored the "authoritarian State as the one and only entity capable of founding civil society, by ending the otherwise incessant war of all against all"¹⁶⁵ Hobbes's rationale was a response to the preceding thoughts of liberalism as this alternate to feudalism and imperialism. For Hobbes, it voices at this idea of the social contract¹⁶⁶ that we, in society, compromise ourselves in order to secure our livelihood. But, for Shaviro this idea is an interesting reciprocation, because it embraces these antagonisms as an essential force to capitalism and of course, neoliberalism. He writes:

But 20th- and 21st-century neoliberalism inverts this whole tradition. For neoliberalism, the legitimate role of the State is precisely to destroy civil society, and instead to incite a war of all against all, in the form of unfettered economic competition. Where Hobbes sees the war of all against all as a primordial condition that we need to escape from, neoliberalism sees the war of all against all as a desirable state that does not arise spontaneously, but needs to be actively engendered."¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Shaviro, Steven. "The 'Bitter Necessity' of Debt: Neoliberal Finance and the Society of Control" May 1, 2010. p. 5

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Williams, Garrath. "Thomas Hobbes: Moral and Political Philosophy," Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/hobmoral/#SH5a>

¹⁶⁷ Shaviro, Steven. "The 'Bitter Necessity' of Debt: Neoliberal Finance and the Society of Control" May 1, 2010. p. 5

After examining this perspective, I return to the climax in which the farmers and the homeless mob are about to battle against one another in the midst of a storm. Like the unions and the replacement workers, this altercation adds an interesting juxtaposition between landlords and the landless. But, right before the battle ignites, Tom pulls his rifle out and fires a warning shot at Joe Wade. In response, one of Wade's men throws dynamite at the levee and blows a hole into the barrier. In shock and in sadness, Tom, and everyone else, pause and stare at the uncontrollable flow of water. At this moment, Tom drops his gun and slowly walks over to the damage. He grabs a sand bag, and while resisting the brutal current of the river, he vigorously plugs at the barrier. But his efforts are disturbing because, by himself, we feel that he cannot win this battle on his own. Moved by his individual efforts, everyone understands his persistence, as it suggests that accountability and responsibility is something that is admirable even if these obstacles were inherited from a bias system. But his actions also brings forth the idea of dependency, which threatens neoliberalism. For Tom and all who witness his efforts, understand that he cannot win this battle on his own. This conundrum is answered when both the farmers and the homeless unite to help Tom.

Just as with the lost deer, a sense of humility has emerged from Tom's individual will, and inspires everyone to assist him in his efforts. Once the barrier is nearly secured, Joe Wade walks over with a sand bag and plugs the final leak of the levee, thus conceding his defeat. Then, he pauses and smiles at Tom and everyone and says "Sooner or later, there will be too much rain. Or too much drought. Or too much corn... I'll wait."¹⁶⁸ Wade's words summarizes the eventual

¹⁶⁸ Rydell, Mark. *The River*. 122 minutes, Drama, 19 December 1984 (USA), Universal Pictures.

reality of neoliberalism, both past and present, the cyclical game of capitalism. While Joe's surrender is a short-term victory for Tom and the other farmers, these victories are only "ephemeral"¹⁶⁹ in the grand narrative of neoliberalism, because the pursuit of prosperity is constant. And, because of this perpetual process, this violence that neoliberal indoctrinates, which Harvey labels as the "chaos of individual interest,"¹⁷⁰ is, arguably, nothing but a never-ending war.

¹⁶⁹ Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press, 2005. pp. 85

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 82.

Conclusion:

The Violence for Autonomy

The Heartland: Reaganism and the Farmer

To return to the final scene of *The River*, Tom Garvey's efforts to seal the damaged levee speaks volumes about the neoliberal logic of autonomy and the violence necessary to maintain individualism. It supports the ideological ramifications of Reaganism because Tom's individual will is so well articulated. With every effort to seal the levee's hole, Tom nearly drowns. But this struggle is important because he never asks for assistance. This, I argue, is one of the great arguments to the welfare system, or any type of interdependency. It is this fear of total dependency when attempting to maintain employment and reduce poverty. When both the farmers and the homeless unite to salvage the levee, its statement towards eventual dependency, I argue, differs from what welfare offers in the wake of economic austerity. This type of dependency is something that should never be demanded or taken for granted but instead, should be earned to some respect.

In addition, *The River*, as with *Country* and *Place in the Heart*, shows that Reaganism, within the shadow of neoliberalism, fail to justify full autonomy as a means to validate individual freedom without acknowledging that there will always be some form of interdependency, or even full dependency. This is where Jeffords arguments tries to bring forth in the context of Reaganism, but fails, because her text only isolates it to the mythology of the action hero. What

her texts misunderstands is that a real world, with ideal problems exists, and that the Reagan manifestation of individualism should not be limited to impenetrable super beings, because the struggle is not so much an exogenous threat, but rather an internal struggles between independence and dependency.

Of equal importance, the problematization of neoliberalism and Reaganism is not limited to Tom's story, because in the same way, interdependencies find their way into the story of Jewell Ivey, when she rallies the community, and Edna Spalding, who needs her family and tenants to support her path for prosperity.

The greater question is why farming films? Why are they used to portray the detriments of a neoliberal system? And Why are they used to highlight the inconsistencies of neoliberalism and neoconservatism?

By the mid 1980s, Americans needed a way to represent, themselves and, the contradictions and tensions that neoliberalism and Reaganism brought to the surface of American society. To certain degree, agrarian stories were useful vehicles to examine these ideological questions. For one, William Adams and Duncan Webster suggest, in their critiques of these specific films, that is the farmer has inherited a historical nostalgia in American fables and folklore. Thus, to return to what Palmar also mentions, we see these films as retellings of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Naturally, these are validated comparisons because the earliest tragedy of neoliberal behavior can be argued to be associated to The Crash of 1929, which was follow by The Great Depression of the 1930s. From this perspective, Steinbeck's novel is the most significant critique of capitalism's failure and the suffering it inflicted during this era of austerity.

But also I take on what Adams emphasizes that the farmer symbolically means in the earliest histories of American society. The farmer, by and large, is the free, independent, autonomous figure who acts as both entrepreneur and laborer. And because of this ideal, the American heartland are connected to American values. Reagan was very keen in recognizing these connections, and heavily incorporated them in his 1984 presidential campaign. By invoking this conservatism, or in this case, neoconservatism, the cultural legacy of the farmer, Americanism and traditional family values, became compatible figures to Reaganism, both as symbols of virtue, and individuality.

The Hurland: Gendered Violence and the Natural Order

Country, *Places in the Heart*, and *The River* use farming as a means to expose the imperfect shortcomings of neoliberalism. Parts of these deficiencies reflects a natural order that is cyclical and unpredictable. The most notable are the natural forces of nature that *The River* centers its story on. Actually, all three films have moments in which the forces of nature, such as tornados, drought, and floods act on these unpredictable powers and in an unrecognized way, becoming the true facilitators to the tensions of these films. However, it is neoliberalism, or at least the abiding financial institution that fail, or possibly, refuses to recognize these unpredictabilities. Hence, neoliberalism pretends that neoliberal economics perfectly map natural causes. Whether it is survival of the fittest or the economical reflection of a natural order, farming displays these conundrums.

But these natural forces are not just limited to the inclement conditions that hinder prosperity. The context of the natural order, also dictates place of men and women, and family

life, as well with the cycle of rain and drought and other elements of chance, non of which fit well into neoliberalism. These films about farming illustrate all of these imperfect mappings. For instance, the ephemerality of the financial boom and bust system are always short lived and can never hold onto to the belief of autonomy as a means for prosperity when, in reality, its connotation of freedom can never escape interdependencies and exogenous forces.

Because of this perplexity, autonomy can never facilitate neoliberal idealism, because it cannot withstand these natural powers. Thus, the violence that these films convey is an attempt to overlook or even escape these limitations. In the end, I argue that these constraints bring forth a gendered violence that makes the invisible hurts visible.

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