

# The Haunting of Flat Texts

Reading Contemporary Liberal Discourses for the Elision of Human Labour

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Master of Research Practice, 2020

Thesis submitted for fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Victoria University, Australia  
Institute of Sustainable Industries and Liveable Cities

January 2025

## Abstract

This thesis contends that contemporary liberal discourses elide a rich and multi-faceted concept of human labour. Such a concept accounts for the myriad processes necessary to reproduce and sustain human life, and for how our collective labour – despite its historical variability – always brings into being both the world and the possibility of comprehending it. Employing a reading method informed by Jacques Derrida’s notion of *hauntology*, I will analyse the online discourse produced by two “activist-influencers” – Jordan Peterson and Clementine Ford – who defined liberalism’s reactionary and progressive boundaries in the very recent past: from March 31 to September 30 2020, or the first pandemic half-year.

Hauntology enables the researcher to read for *absence* as well as presence. Engaging with a centuries-long genealogy of liberal discourse, from Locke, Smith and Mill to Hayek, Rawls and Nussbaum, I will trace historical patterns of structural absence that continue to constrain and flatten the concept of labour that liberal discourses can express. To this end, my methodology involves first setting out and then locating six markers of labour’s elision that recur across liberalism’s variegated terrain.

Ford’s and Peterson’s Instagram posts comprise my dataset, and each instance of micro-discourse analysed will contain at least one of the six markers. A hauntological heuristic combined with straightforward close reading can locate temporal, ontological, epistemic and political possibilities that dominant discourses close down. This approach fosters a sensitivity to the poetics, aesthetics and affective particularities of my data, as well as an attunement to the dialectical relationship between immediacy and mediation that defines online discourse.

My contentions obtain empirical validity via a rigorous analysis that traces the consistent elision of labour in Ford’s and Peterson’s discourse, and by extension liberal discourse as a totality. Indeed, I will claim that it is only by eliding labour’s conceptual plurality and political possibility that contemporary liberal discourses proceed and proliferate.

In our current conjuncture, the concept “labour” expands in tandem with the diversification and fragmentation of labour processes that humans concretely undertake, whether waged or unwaged, online or offline, or conceived as work or leisure. The elision of a rich concept of labour – and especially of *carework*, the labour of care – by six markers that reinforce the *status quo* has significant implications for liberal discourses’ ability to account for our current social conditions. These discourses struggle to imagine a future in which the majority of human beings achieve collective emancipation from the intersecting economic, environmental and epidemiological crises that haunt the present.



## Declaration of Authenticity

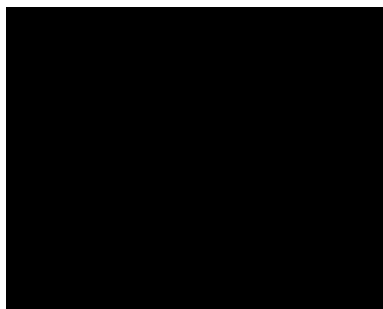
“I, Paddy Gordon, declare that the PhD thesis entitled *The Haunting of Flat Texts: Reading Contemporary Liberal Discourses for the Elision of Human Labour* is no more than 80,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work”.

“I have conducted my research in alignment with the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research and Victoria University’s Higher Degree by Research Policy and Procedures”.

## Ethics Declaration

“All research procedures reported in the thesis were approved by the Low Risk Review Panel, application HRE22-131”.

Signature:



Date: 13 January 2025

## Acknowledgements and Dedications

Histories should, I believe, be written responsibly.  
*Patrick Wolfe, Traces of History*

I want to acknowledge that I share the late Australian historian's belief. Although Wolfe wrote the words above in 2016, they have a resonance that is ironically transhistorical. My thesis is not a work of history *per se*, however the scholarly disciplines and theoretical frameworks that combine to structure it – broadly, cultural studies and critical discourse analysis underpinned by Marxist political-economy and philosophy – have been profoundly affected by two world-historical events that frame the concrete process of its composition. These are the Covid-19 pandemic and Israel's genocide of the Palestinian people. Both events are catastrophes that have fundamentally reshaped – and are still reshaping – how billions of human beings understand ourselves, our relations to each other and our world. It would be irresponsible not to situate my project in the unfolding historical period that it is a product of. In the midst of this period the liberal discourses still hegemonic throughout the Global North (and much of the Global South) have struggled to meaningfully address or make sense of the above-mentioned catastrophes. Although “it is surely only against a certain concept of what is historically dominant or hegemonic that the full value of the exceptional...the ‘residual or ‘emergent’—can be assessed” (Jameson 2008, p. 483), the hegemony liberalism has long enjoyed seems fragile and precarious, even weak.

This thesis will focus on liberal discourse produced in the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic, yet both events have further revealed liberal discourses' structuration by contradictions and elisions. Indeed, liberalism as both discursive ecology and political program seems more likely to accelerate the uneven but definite trend towards ethnonationalism, “illiberal democracy” and outright fascism throughout the “international community” than to posit a unifying counter-imaginary. Against these tendencies, I want to acknowledge at the outset my absolute solidarity with the Palestinian people and their struggle for liberation. As the long-oppressed victims of the Zionist project, whose racist settler-colonialism has proceeded from foundational ethnic-cleansing to illegal occupation, apartheid and now live-streamed genocide, and whose present-day barbarism knows no bounds, the steadfastness and forbearance of Palestinians – and Palestinians in Gaza in particular – is beyond my comprehension. More than 44,000 people have been killed in Gaza whilst I sit at my desk writing this thesis, yet that Palestine continues to resist fills me with awe, tempering rage, grief and helplessness with hope. Indeed, the promise of a free Palestine is a promise of “a politics of the future that strives towards what Marx calls *the conscious completion of old work*: the actualization of the radical past through its repetition and fulfilment in the here and now” (Ware 2024, p. xii).  
From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.

The most profound thanks are due to my supervisors, Professor Tom Clark and Associate Professor Natalie Kon-Yu.

Tom supervised my Masters; indeed, he graciously agreed to meet me sight unseen after a friend connected us some years ago, and from day one helped me adapt to the life of a research student and academic. He continues to inspire and educate me with every interaction. Tom, your generosity, intellectual acuity and devotion to teaching and research in the humanities has helped me more than you could possibly know. I hope, one day, to be able to extend the same generosity you instilled in me towards others. At a time when it feels like the world is falling apart, you've always maintained a comradely equilibrium, as well as a scrupulously fair, open and brilliant mind.

Natalie, your guidance, support and critical insight, and the absolute integrity of feminist scholarship and praxis you embody, is similarly inspirational. Like Tom, you have taught me, challenged me, made me think more deeply and inspired me more than you can know. The care of which we have often spoken is exemplified in your treatment of others, most definitely including myself, and again, I hope one day I can share with others the example of radical care you have set. The bar is high, but you always encourage me to aim for it. I could not have asked for better supervisors.

Sincere thanks are also due to the academics and VU staff who sat on panels, answered my questions, and supported me throughout my research, especially Dianne Hall, Maggie Nolan, Julie Stephens, Julianne Van Loon, Deborah Zion, Rose Lucas, fellow members of the JLLC editorial board and the VUNTEU Palestine Action Group.

Enormous thanks are due to Victoria University for the stipend that enabled me to actually research and write this, and whose administration staff were uniformly supportive and helpful. I was also able to travel to Accra, Ghana to present material from my thesis as part of FILLM's 29<sup>th</sup> Congress thanks to generous support from the Secomb Conference and Travel Fund. I want to express my profound gratitude to VU for these opportunities.

My mother, Linda Gordon, applied her finely-honed editing skills and spent hours of her time proof-reading this thesis. My deepest love and gratitude are due to her, my father Terry and my brother Dominic, whose first book was recently published and whose writing invigorates and delights me, and makes me laugh. Thanks fam for your boundless love and support, as well as our vibrant and passionate conversations.

Shae, my soulmate, love of my life, you were with me almost all of the way, and at every moment of doubt you reassured me, listened to me rant, put up with my obsessions and distractibility, and always gave me everything you could to help me. I never doubted your belief in me, and I hope you know that I believe in you absolutely. I love you.

Finally, for Ella, my daughter: I don't know what the world you'll grow up into will look like, but whatever it is you'll fill it with joy. I love you to the end of the universe and back. And Jess – I literally couldn't have done this without you. My sincerest thanks old mate. We're doing a bloody good job.

\* \* \* \* \*

Material drawn from this thesis was published in the *Journal of Language, Literature and Culture*, 2022.

Gordon, P 2022, 'The Haunting of Flat Texts: Liberal Discourse and the Elision of Labour', *Journal of Language, Literature and Culture*, vol. 69 no. 2-3, pp. 90-106.

A further article with material drawn from this thesis will be published in *Historical Materialism* in 2025.

I am grateful to the editorial boards and anonymous reviewers who significantly strengthened the work I submitted.

All errors are my own.

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## Introduction

On January 25 2020, the first Australian case of “novel coronavirus” was confirmed by health authorities in Victoria. This event seemed relatively innocuous at the time; it occurred during a summer where bushfires raged out of control across the state, darkening the skies with ash and filling the air with toxins. Foreshadowing what was to come during the pandemic, much of the population wore masks outside as Melbourne’s air quality was temporarily the worst in the world. The year began with Trump in the last year of his scandalous presidency—in May, the murder of George Floyd by a police officer sparked the largest protest movement in the history of the United States. Floyd repeated “I can’t breathe” at least 16 times as his killer knelt on his neck. The incessant but usually unobserved labour of the respiratory system – breathing – was suddenly in question across an array of interconnected arenas. The very materiality of drawing breath – and the tangible and eminently reasonable fear of not being able to – animated political struggles and counter struggles both at home and abroad. As Melbourne shivered and suffered through a bleak, locked-down pandemic winter, albeit more or less perilously across class, race and gender lines, the simple act of wearing a mask or not functioned as an instant metonymic gauge of whether individuals were prioritising the collective or themselves.

To begin with an emphasis on the most fundamental process of sustaining human life seems appropriate in times where the very conditions for humanity to endure are under threat. To comprehensively elucidate the compounding catastrophes of our present would obscure the aim of this project, which is to demonstrate that a rich concept of labour is elided in contemporary liberal discourses. But the survival, let alone the potential flourishing, of each individual human life – and of the interdependent social relations whose totality constitutes human civilisation at any particular conjuncture – has never been a more pertinent question, even as it remains a question as old as any notion of civilisation itself. What do we need to do so we can continue to breathe? How can humans act with agency – or direct our labour – against a range of forces that seem intent on stifling and suffocating our capacity for collective flourishing?

*The Care Collective* (Chatzidakis et al. 2020, p. 18 - 19, italics mine) describe the daunting opposition that we face, yet they also point to a solution that lies always-already available, as human as the drawing of breath:

As we live through the ascendancy of far-right populism and the uncertainty of a post-pandemic world, *the idea of care* has been so diminished that it tends to mean care exclusively for and about “people like us”...Prioritising and working towards a sense of universal care – and making this common sense – is necessary for the cultivation of a caring politics, fulfilling lives, and a sustainable world.

The labour of care is indispensable, whether subjects elevate the survival of themselves and/or their chosen group over others or struggle for the survival of all via cultivating universal care. Considering the urgency of this struggle, where might we locate the latter subject discursively? What discourses are useful for them in the dialectic between subjectification and discursive production? Beginning with the discursive field still broadly hegemonic today, can an account of human labour that includes working towards “a sense of universal care” be developed from within *liberal* discourses? What are the implications for care that flow from liberalism’s discursive hegemony, and what alternatives are open to those who seek to breathe new life into the struggle for life itself?



## In the Beginning

In the domain of Enlightenment philosophy, conscious subjectivity was expected to reduce chaos to rational order. But today all attempts to govern chaos seem doomed to fail...chaos is the measure of the excessive density of the infosphere in relation to the psychosphere.

*Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, The Second Coming*

Liberalism is the Enlightenment philosophy *par excellence*. Despite the many variants it has spawned, and although we live in times where for better and for worse the Enlightenment's rationality has been broadly contested, the subject positioned by liberal discourses remains notionally the subject of democratic polities at an ontological level. Coterminously, liberal discourses are still dominant throughout the political and media mainstream, although Samuel Moyn points out that contemporary liberal discourses are shaped by contradictions that developed during the Cold War, as liberalism's hegemony was concretely challenged by what it is now common to call "actually existing socialism". For Moyn (2023, p. 165) during the Cold War a strain of liberalism emerged that was

...ambivalent about the Enlightenment, with a ban on perfectionism, scapegoating bids for progress as terroristic, and treating the West as a refuge for freedom across civilizational lines of race and wealth while harshly disciplining the self.

Although even conservative scholars of the Enlightenment acknowledge that "few things are more common in the scholarly literature than expressions such as 'Enlightenment liberalism'" (Garrard 1997, p. 281), we can see at the outset that "liberal discourse" is a field riven with paradoxes and elisions. At least in part, these structural features might explain how in our current conjuncture a constellation of anti-Enlightenment forces have increasingly attained discursive prominence – across both traditional and social media – in turn dragging politics to the right across the globe.

Marxism, which like liberalism is far from a homogenous tradition, is also a product of the Enlightenment; in very general terms, Marxism can be conceived as an advance on certain of its tendencies as it simultaneously functions as an immanent critique of

much that is valorised in Enlightenment philosophy. Demarcating Marxism's epistemological boundaries, Michel Foucault (1994, p. 262) positioned it as an advance on the Enlightenment that was then surpassed: "Marxism exists in nineteenth-century thought like a fish in water: that is, it is unable to breathe anywhere else". In doing so, he was correct only in the narrowest empirical sense. Ironically, history has proceeded so that it is Foucault's analogy, rather than Marxism, that appears ensnared in time. Whilst liberalism remains precariously hegemonic throughout much of the world, it draws breath with difficulty and suffocates in its own exhalations; overall it exudes what Nietzsche (2008, p. 28) called "bad air". In contrast, Marxism's ostensible inability "to breathe" reveals Foucault's diagnosis as erroneous both temporally and ontologically. Social reproduction theory, for example, is a vibrant arena of contemporary thought that represents an indispensable extension of Marxism; likewise, different strains of Marxist philosophy and political-economy remain essential for both comprehending and changing the world. At the most fundamental level – the level of ontology, of human *being* – the world as it *is* is sustained by human labour; equally, only human labour can fundamentally change it.

This thesis contends that a rich and multi-faceted concept of human labour is elided in liberal discourses. Building upon social reproduction theory, itself an extension of Marx's labour theory of value, I intend to demonstrate that the ontological concept of labour that Marx developed can and indeed *must* be further extended by properly considering *carework*, or the labour of care. Theoretically combining multiple accounts of what human labour can do and *be* – and how it constitutes and reconstitutes subjects – opens up possibilities for challenging the *status quo* that are both radical and essential in the face of intersecting ecological, economic and epidemiological crises. Contra Foucault, labour as understood by Marx does not merely statically "exist" in time but actively *makes* it: more precisely, human beings collectively reinforce certain temporalities – and make other temporalities possible – by our collective labour. This remains one of Marx's most important insights, even if a concept of labour adequate to our own historical period must encompass not only "productive" but also "reproductive" and "caring" labour alongside many other kinds of purposive human activity, including the "leisure" time so many of us spend online. In this thesis I will read online liberal discourses, both progressive and reactionary, in

order to examine the concept of labour that contemporary liberalism articulates, drawing on the social media content of two exemplars of liberalism in the very recent past. From this analysis I contend that contemporary liberal discourses produce a flat concept of human labour – and of carework – even as they are always haunted by richer concepts. Liberal discourse is a “differentiated totality” (Varela 2021) that nonetheless has historically been – and continues to be – structured by labour’s elision.

### Periodising Contemporary Liberalism

The crisis of contemporary liberalism long precedes the re-election of Donald Trump. Hegemonic since 1989, albeit in the guise of its unevenly dispersed and much contested “neo” mutation (or strain),<sup>1</sup> there is much to criticise in the institutions and traditions upon which the post-World War II Atlanticist liberal consensus was established, yet for many years they possessed an ideological heft appropriate to broad common sense. Liberalism’s inability to address a world historical moment defined by the kinds of economic inequality that were meant to have been consigned to the dustbin of history – long-term stagnant productivity growth, increasing monopolisation, the reliance of capital’s platform-mediated vanguard on rent extraction and the steady supplanting of wage-labour by piece-work – seems like a small matter next to its impotence in the face of climate collapse, plague and genocide.<sup>2</sup> Liberalism appears to be in a decadent phase, with liberal institutions and discourses either unwilling or unable to maintain their position as ideological guarantors of the rights of liberal subjects, nor the common sense inevitability of a totalising liberal order. To lift the discursive veil is to encounter a void.

Even so, voids have histories. As a scholar, my ultimate concern is with human subjectivity. I aim to shed light, however halting, on how culturally dominant or

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<sup>1</sup> “Neoliberalism” is a term so often deployed that it is at risk of being emptied of meaning. See my Master’s thesis for an analysis of neoliberalism as a project fundamentally aimed at making certain subjectivities and processes of subjectification possible and others impossible (Gordon 2020).

<sup>2</sup> *The Economist*, which for a century and a half has functioned as the organ *par excellence* for the distillation, circulation and formation of elite liberal opinion, recently worried that “the world’s rules-based order is cracking” (2024). As Alexander Zevin (2019, p. 5; 15) has pointed out, this publication “has shaped the very world its readers inhabit...What the history of *The Economist* reveals is the *dominant* stream of liberalism”.

hegemonic forms of subjectivity have historically been – and are contemporaneously being – shaped and reshaped, recognising of course that no universal conception of “the subject” is ever really possible, stable or desirable. Stuart Hall (2011, p. 727) wrote that “hegemony is a tricky concept and provokes muddled thinking”, and in diagnosing what is hegemonic, let alone sweeping subjective changes, one must tread very carefully indeed. I believe that a relatively safe path to follow in theorising the formation, transformation and dissolution of different forms of human subjectivity is to analyse how human subjects are constructed within, across and against certain bodies of discourse. Any discursive field is always-already in the process of transformation or becoming, just as any subject is. Discourses and their internal and intertextual development indicate how different subjects understand (and misunderstand) their own mode of being, whether as individuals or as a class; as belonging to a raced or gendered social collectivity or at the level of a civilisational totality. These discourses must always be situated within the historical and material conditions from which they emerge and circulate, just as we must be aware of the dialectical logic that is always-already at play in the co-constitution of subjectivities and discourses. The structural antagonism inherent to discourses produced by groups with different aims in a capitalist society should also be noted. During the period of history that ranges from the onset of the pandemic to the present – from 2020 to 2024 – we have witnessed a genuinely global contestation of certain hegemonic notions of subjectivity, as this thesis makes plain.

The global nature of this upheaval must be emphasised, and is due in significant part to the historically unprecedented ubiquity of social media. Joao Cachopo (2022, p. 25) writes that “Covid-19 has been the first trauma to be experienced by humanity in every part of the planet simultaneously”. The discourses in which particular subjects are immersed profoundly affected their perception and reception of what the Covid-19 pandemic was, let alone their material experience of it. Another significant factor in reception and perception are our pre-existing subject positions, with their defining yet fluid entanglements of class, race, gender, sexuality, religion, national identification et.al. Subjectivity is always a process of becoming, of *subjectification*; in addition, as we are social beings, subjectification is always to varying degrees a *collective* process. We undoubtedly witnessed an upsurge in “mutual aid” in both discourse and practice during the pandemic, cutting against the grain of forty years

of neoliberal hegemony; did concomitant conceptions of the liberal subject as an atomised, self-actualising and independent individual shift in tandem? The post-Cold War “rules based international order”, grounded upon liberal principles of formal human equality and human rights, steady teleological progress towards a more advanced civilisation and the power of markets to ensure rational actions at both individual and state level was profoundly destabilised by the pandemic. Despite its hegemony, such a notion was always haunted by other possible pasts, futures and presents, and thus other modes of *being*. Beginning from and always returning to this ontological level, this thesis will examine how human labour – which brings both ourselves as subjects and the social and natural worlds we inhabit into being – is conceptualised in liberal discourses. When *richly* developed, labour’s world and subject-making qualities are accounted for, as is the capacity of these always-already *caring* subjects to collectively make a better world through labour of many different kinds—not merely waged and “productive” or unwaged and “reproductive”.

### Preliminary Definitions

How then *is* human labour elided in liberal discourses? First, some definitions are in order. As a political ideology, liberalism is a contested, evolving and yet nevertheless distinct set of notions about how people are and how best to organise the world they live in. We can find no definitive definition of liberalism – especially once we consider its neoliberal variant – anymore than we can find a definitive account of any political ideology or program. Throughout this thesis, I will draw on many different accounts of liberalism, putting liberal thinkers in dialogue with each other and their critics, and relating historical liberal texts to those produced on social media in the very recent past. We must begin somewhere though, and John Locke’s account of an ideal liberal society is as good a place as any. For Locke (2016 [1689], p. 13), there should be:

Freedom of Men [sic] *under Government*...to have a standing Rule to live by, common to every one of that Society, and made by the legislative Power erected in it; a Liberty to follow my own Will in all things, where the Rule

prescribes not; and not to be subject to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary Will of another Man.

Isaiah Berlin (2017 [1958], p. 34) echoes Locke in his most famous account of liberalism: “You lack political liberty or freedom only if you are prevented from attaining a goal by human beings”.<sup>3</sup> The essentially negative nature of the freedom so venerated by liberals emerges clearly here, with a concomitant suspicion of collectivity and the “Other” or others, let alone the possibility that practices of radical care might (re)structure relations between human beings. Moyn (2023, p. 5) concurs that liberal discourses since the Cold War tend to conclude that “human nature [is] dark and aggressive, requiring self-management”: this strain of the liberal tradition is what neoliberals successfully revived. Indeed, Friedrich Hayek’s (2006 [1960], p. 54) genealogy of liberalism in *The Constitution of Liberty* underscores the “greatest difference” between the

...rationalist tradition<sup>4</sup> [which] assumes that man [sic] was originally endowed with both the intellectual and the moral attributes that allowed him to fashion civilisation deliberately...[and] the evolutionists<sup>5</sup> [who] made it clear that civilisation was the accumulated hard-earned result of trial and error.

No matter how and by what means liberalism has evolved, Locke’s (2016 [1689], p. 43) conviction that “the chief End” of civil society is “the Preservation of Property” remains liberalism’s *sine qua non*. This liberal lodestar and the fundamental individualism and negative freedom it enshrines has profound ramifications for how *human labour* – which for Locke is what gives individuals the right to secure their property from the common wealth – can be conceived across the variegated terrain of liberal discourse. Human labour will be defined in *Chapter One*, although this definition will necessarily be tentative: whether a definition *can* be fixed for such a diverse, quotidian, concrete, abstract and ontologically-constitutive set of practices is

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<sup>3</sup> We should note in passing that both Locke and Berlin’s definitions can be extended or contracted – regarding (or disregarding) class formations and raced or gendered collective subjects – as a “liberal” state decrees.

<sup>4</sup> I.e. Rousseau and Mill.

<sup>5</sup> I.e. Locke and Smith.

doubtful. Moyn (2023, p. 17) tacitly acknowledges the difficulties in defining both liberalism and labour by invoking subjectivism – “the prime criterion for being a liberal is being called one, by oneself or others” – yet in commencing from the *individual* subject themselves, he also exposes the ideological core of liberal subjectification. These preliminary definitions of liberalism – whether as ideology or political program – are obviously ideals rather than empirical descriptions of the reality of social relations in liberal societies; here the structuration of liberal discourse by elisions comes into focus.

The Macquarie Dictionary (1998, p. 359) defines “elision” as simply “the omission of a vowel, consonant or syllable in writing or punctuation”—to elide is “to omit (a vowel, consonant or syllable) in pronunciation”. The Oxford English Dictionary’s definition (1989, p. 140) is more expansive: here, to elide is “to annul, do away with, quash, rebut”, “to strike out, suppress, pass over in silence” but also “to omit”. This second definition is most salient for this project: to posit a discursive elision is to suggest that the discourse (or discursive tradition) in question cannot adequately name, describe, express or adumbrate a particular concept or process; that such a concept or process is beyond or outside the epistemic horizon circumscribed by the norms and conventions that structure that same discourse, even as these same norms and conventions arise and evolve from the intertwining of discourse and material reality. Neither discourses nor what they describe and analyse are prior to the other: they exist in a relentless dialectic that defines the discursive horizons that in turn determine what can be thought within them, as well as what the subjects that produce and are represented by particular discourses can do, be or become. To contend that a discourse or discursive tradition is *structured* by elisions is to insist that what that discourse cannot name is nevertheless something *real*, a series of processes or acts that human beings practice and embody as part of the material conditions of their lives: as Derrida (2001, p. 12) reminds us, “Being has always already begun”. To elide a rich concept of labour is, fundamentally, to deny humans the capacity to meaningfully act upon and change the world: via this elision, liberal discourses rule out the possibility of meaningful, let alone radical, change to the *status quo*. This thesis will set out six recurring markers by which liberal discourses, both historically and contemporaneously, elide human labour as a rich and multifaceted concept that can shape subjects and their world.

Setting out these markers of labour's elision forms the methodological component of my thesis. Before devising a methodology, the immense field of "liberal discourse" must be condensed, so that data can be gathered that is analytically useful. To this end, I have selected two online "activist-influencers" who are representative of contemporary liberal discourse: they defined the progressive and reactionary poles of the liberal radical centre during the "first-pandemic half year", from April to September 2020, and their interpretation of world events on their Instagram accounts during this time revealed much about liberalism's past and present, as well as its possible futures. The Australian feminist Clementine Ford and the Canadian psychology professor cum reactionary public intellectual Jordan Peterson produced the discourse that I will analyse; it is ultimately from a close reading of their Instagram content that my claim that liberal discourses elide a rich concept of human labour will obtain empirical validity.

Gathering and analysing data from a social media platform seems logical for several reasons. First, social media is used by billions of individuals. Although global access is uneven, with those in the Global North generally enjoying less restrictions and more consistency, social media is one of the most prominent arenas wherein contemporary contestations for hegemony are observable: anyone with an internet connection has the opportunity to contribute, albeit asymmetrically, to the formation and evolution of discursive tendencies. Second, social media is at the vanguard of both the free flow *and* the hyper-commodification of information. Even as monopolistic tech companies attempt to extract value from our every keystroke, the capacity to share information, contest official narratives and organise radical counter-hegemonic projects that can contribute to social and subjective change remain a key feature of social media platforms. Finally, despite its aura of decadence and decline, for the moment liberalism's hegemony prevails: it is the ideology that underpins the *status quo* throughout most of the world. As such, prominent social media actors may not explicitly identify as liberals even though their online discourse can be situated within the liberal tradition. This thesis's contention that labour is elided in liberal discourses will be more convincing if we can trace this elision across the terrain where the most up-to-date iterations of liberal thought appear.



## Thesis Summary

In *Chapter One* I contrast ancient and modern definitions of human labour, exploring their different political resonances before proceeding more specifically to an examination of the labour of social reproduction and care. This involves a thorough engagement with social reproduction theory: the project of denaturalising (and potentially abolishing) the family, the analysis and attack on the “separate spheres” model of masculinised production and feminised reproduction, and contestation over the categories of value that reproductive labour do or do not produce for capital. Although there are vigorous contemporary debates regarding the “value” of reproductive labour, as well as where – or if – the boundaries of “social reproduction” as theoretical framework and domain of praxis can be drawn, social reproduction theory must be understood as an essential feminist advance on Marx’s labour theory of value. Properly considering social reproduction is crucial if we are to establish a concept of labour that is both rich *and* attuned to our present conditions. This is especially true of *carework*, which has a transhistorical character and thus contains a non-commodifiable kernel that abounds with radical possibility. I argue throughout this thesis that carework is more than a mere subcategory of reproductive labour; it is therefore especially relevant to labour’s conceptual enrichment. In advancing this concept we can simultaneously trace the spectral emergence of liberal discourses’ tendency to elide what human labour can do and be.

A definition of liberalism is advanced at the beginning of *Chapter Two*, alongside my rationale for using liberal discourse produced on social media as a data source. Like “liberalism” and “human labour”, social media is both ubiquitous – if not quite universal – as well as specific to each individual subject: our experience and understanding of social media is inflected by more factors than there is space to recount. In this chapter, I describe social media as a constellation of platforms which form a “digital ecosystem”; throughout this space of discursive production, reception, reaction and circulation, liberal activist-influencers like Jordan Peterson and Clementine Ford address their publics as leaders – or as heads of “armies of followers” – and produce themselves as “flat characters”. The discourse they produce and the characters they portray are simultaneously authorised as embodying epistemic verity via the logic of social media, as followers receive a

constant stream of intertwined political and personal posts, videos, reels, podcasts and product endorsements. Each figure's distinct communication style – their characteristic terms, tropes, phrases, metaphors, modes of address and recurring images – allows them to respond to both the epochal and the mundane with an immediately familiar poetics; to do so a character *must* be flat. They must also inhabit a fundamentally individualist subject position.

*Chapter Two* contains a preliminary analysis of Ford and Peterson's respective poetics – drawn from both books and Instagram posts – as well as some biographical detail. There exist commonalities between the two that might not appear obvious to someone only passingly familiar with them. Yet as the “radical centre” exists, and continues to hold – although very precariously – there must surely be connections between liberalism's extremes. The “hero's journey”, where self-actualisation occurs via political revelation, is critical here. Both Ford and Peterson model hero's journeys for their followers; this unites them as online characters or personas *and* as producers of liberal discourse.<sup>6</sup> A further unifying factor is the structuration of both character and discourse by the logic of the commodity: Marx's (2004, p. 141 - 142) insight that “the first commodity's value character emerges...through its own relation to the second commodity” needs merely to be transposed to our current conditions, where activist-influencers on social media embody the simultaneous commodification of the self and its cultural production. This self-commodification corresponds to the elision of labour for which *Chapter Three* sets out a reading method.

The method I employ to read Jordan Peterson and Clementine Ford's Instagram content is relatively simple. Equally informed by Derrida's notion of *hauntology* and a

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<sup>6</sup> Barbour et. al (2017, p. 2), perform an astute analysis of how the field of persona studies applies to social media: “Persona *work* on Instagram”, (italics mine) “constitutes, in many cases, significant labour: decisions are made and remade around sharing different types of images, along with the use of hashtags, framing, timing, filters, captions, or tags. Abidin...describes this as ‘visibility labour’”, which is ‘the work individuals do when they self-posture and curate their self-presentations so as to be noticeable and positively prominent’ to their audiences or micro-publics, and notes that the labour itself becomes invisible in the persona creation process. This distributed visibility labour forms the basis of persona work, where users and their micro-publics, in conjunction with the platform and the algorithms that drive it, are continually iterating on the persona that is produced”. They also point to how on Instagram the “the iterative, emergent nature of persona work, both in digitally networked spaces, and through our embodied selves” (2017, p. 8) is particularly prominent and thus ripe for theoretical investigation.

straight-forward discourse analysis based on close reading, in *Chapter Three* I draw on a range of historical liberal texts in order to trace how labour is elided throughout this tradition. From Hobbes to Hayek we find a narrow notion of the subject – and of processes of subjectification – precisely because human labour is conceptually emaciated: liberals leave labour underdeveloped and flat, much as their discourses also absent carework. Yet absence can nonetheless be revelatory. *Hauntology* refers to how the being of what *is* – as well as what was and what might still come to be – contains a trace or spectral presence of the other historical possibilities it has ostensibly vanquished in order to appear ontologically inevitable. A reading method informed by hauntology is particularly appropriate for locating structural absence in liberal discourses; witness Derrida (2006 [1994], p. 78) in *Spectres of Marx*:

*On the one hand*, the gospel of politico-economical liberalism needs the event of the good news that consists in what has *putatively* actually happened...in particular, the supposed death of Marxism and the supposed realization of the State of liberal democracy...It cannot do without the recourse to the event...*on the other hand*, actual history and so many other realities that have an empirical appearance contradict this advent of the perfect liberal democracy.

Processes of liberal subjectification are likewise vulnerable to actual history and the contradictions that structure the “event of the good news”. Liberalism has never managed to banish its ghosts.

Human labour is richly defined in this chapter; we then turn to the articulation of six markers of labour’s elision. Two of these relate to time, two to nature, and two to care: static, teleological, ahistorical and individualist accounts of these quotidian notions and practices are foundational for and consistent throughout the liberal tradition. Examples from Ford’s and Peterson’s books – which incidentally are riddled with stylistic conventions that are native to social media – are combined with readings of canonical liberal texts to demonstrate exactly how each marker can be employed to read liberal discourses for the elision of labour. Fundamentally, to locate consistent or structural absences involves a process of very close reading that is attuned to the haunting of what is read by that which is ostensibly “dead” within it:

“The spectre *appears* to present itself...but it is not present...this non-presence of the spectre demands that one take its times and its history into consideration” (Derrida 2006 [1994], p. 126). From here, we move to the thesis’s empirical chapter.

By necessity, *Chapter Four* is the longest in this thesis. Here, the method of hauntological close reading is applied to a number of Instagram posts composed by Ford and Peterson: a representative summary of the radical centre of contemporary liberal discourse during the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic. Each post is read for the “presence of absence” – the six markers of labour’s elision – and two Appendices that commence on page 252 contain each post that is analysed. There is also a one-page *List of Markers* immediately following the *Conclusion* for easy reference. Most posts contain a number of markers, and to spell out each instance of the elision of labour in detail across sixty-eight posts is not feasible. Instead, I take a fluid scholarly approach and read Ford and Peterson’s respective discourses as they unfold chronologically; sometimes commonalities appear, and sometimes profound differences in form, content and function are evident in response to both world events and personal struggles. Throughout, as throughout the thesis as a whole, a dialogue is maintained between Ford and Peterson and various representatives and opponents of the liberal tradition. Although *Chapter Four* covers a large and diverse theoretical terrain, where the political and the personal are fundamentally entangled, we always return to concrete evidence of the elision of labour in the discourses these activist-influencers and flat characters produce, using the six markers as a guide.

Both Peterson and Ford undertake hero’s journeys during *Chapter Four*. The idealism that propels these lofty discursive currents is brought down to earth in *Chapter Five*, which concludes the thesis with a reflection on some of the political ramifications of the elision of labour in the production, reception and dissemination of contemporary liberal discourses, and the potential such discourses hold to underpin emancipatory movements and support subjectification against the *status quo*. Literally underpinning the content that users of social media platforms engage with is a “complex mesh of cables” on the ocean floor: the simple fact that material infrastructure carries digital information is stressed in *Chapter Five*, and from highlighting this materiality I proceed to hypothesising how online content might be theorised according to classical Marxist categories of labour and value. A vital

corollary of these speculations, which open up avenues for further research, is whether we can conceive of the “labour of following” – engaging, commenting, sharing and circulating social media content – as a form of variable capital, living labour that brings to life the “dead labour” (or constant capital) entombed in, for example, an Instagram post. Such labour, despite its animating qualities, would be *decommodified*; although it *may* ultimately generate value, this is obviously not reaped by the follower perusing Instagram.

By contrast, I posit that in our current conditions caring labour tends towards commodification, even though it is often unwaged: both Ford and Peterson propose hierarchies of caring relations that are structured by the commodity form, whether care is conceived as a commodity in short supply and high demand or as an ontologically individualising practice that is centred on the self. From this theoretical speculation flows the possibility that a final concrete elision of labour can be located in the act of following an activist-influencer. Do we who spend so much ostensible “leisure time” within various digital ecosystems perhaps misidentify this “leisure”; is it instead a form of labour? Again, this is not a definitive conclusion but rather a postulation that future research might flesh out. That the labour of following an activist-influencer like Peterson or Ford is also labour that tends to be elided would be a crowning irony so apt that one must be cautious in asserting it too strongly. At the very least, it seems appropriate that this possibility emerges – at my project’s conclusion – from a consideration of discourse’s multi-layered materiality; a spectre hovering over the final chapter that recalls the coterminous ghostliness of discursive elisions at the same time as the dialectic between “the discursive” and “the material” is insisted upon. And, of course, it is human labour that propels this dialectic.

## Chapter One: Labour Relations and Relational Labour

In the beginning was the deed...

*Johann Goethe, Faust*

*Sigmund Freud, Totem and Taboo*

It is impossible to conceive of human being without conceiving of human labour.

Denoting an almost infinite array of activities and processes that in turn form our social relations, labour also propels the dialectic of recognition that constitutes human subjects: it brings us into being and grounds our subjectification.

This chapter sets out an (inevitably partial) account of what human labour *is*, and why it must be conceptually expanded in our historical moment. Proceeding from Marx's labour theory of value to an overview of social reproduction theory, labour's contemporary complexities are stressed: an emphasis on carework, or the labour of care, is posited as a theoretical advance that develops from lacunae in social reproduction theory, much as social reproduction theory developed from lacunae in 20<sup>th</sup> century Marxism.

There exists perhaps no more salient example of the relationship between the universal and the particular than human labour, if indeed we can conceive of any activity undertaken by any human that – even if unconsciously – does not involve some kind of action directed towards some kind of end. Herbert Marcuse (1972, p. 70) claimed that civilisation itself is “first of all progress in *work*—that is, work for the procurement and augmentation of the necessities of life”, and we do tend to think of many of these activities and actions as work rather than labour: work is certainly more quotidian and arguably more universal a term. More recently, Isabella Bakker (2007, p. 548) described how:

[W]ork broadly mediates relations between social and natural orders and combines the theoretical and practical activity of human beings. By contrast, labour is a particular aspect of work, which, under capitalism, is characterised by the alienation of the labourer and the appropriation of surplus labour by capital through the institution of wage labour.

Jason Read (2024, p. 40) offers an even more substantial definition, whereby “work refers to a physical act of transformation, an anthropological act of meeting needs, an ethical act (in Hegel’s sense) of shaping and forming character, and the institution of selling wage labour”. Throughout this thesis I will use “labour” instead of “work”, however – with the significant exception of the concept of “carework” which is developed later in this chapter – both for theoretical coherence and to emphasise a certain fidelity to the Marxist tradition, where “labour” tends to be employed to describe purposive human activity. We can of course locate numerous conceptual distinctions between “work” and “labour”; one with a very different political resonance to Bakker and Read is evident when Hannah Arendt (1988, p. 80) writes:

[E]very European language, ancient and modern, contains two etymologically unrelated words for what we have come to think of as the same activity, and retains them in the face of their persistent synonymous usage...the word “labour”, understood as a noun, never designates the finished product, the result of labouring...whereas the product itself is invariably derived from the word for work.

Arendt advances a genealogical account of the conceptual development of “labour”, arguing that there existed a “contempt for labour in ancient theory” that has been supplanted by “its glorification in modern theory” (Arendt 1988, p. 93). This glorification begins at the very foundations of liberal discourse:

The sudden, spectacular rise of labour from the lowest, most despised position to the highest rank, as the most esteemed of all human activities, began when Locke discovered that labour is the source of all property. It followed its course when Adam Smith asserted that labour was the source of all wealth and found its climax in Marx's "system of labour", where labour became the source of all productivity and the expression of the very humanity of man [sic] (Arendt 1988, p. 101).

Although Arendt might not agree, the passage above reveals *par excellence* the elision of a rich concept of labour in liberal discourses: the structuration of liberal discourses by flat concepts of labour is implicit in her analysis, and such flat

concepts appear consistently throughout the history of liberalism. It is only once we conceive of labour as “the very humanity of man” that we can develop a concept of it rich enough to account for its ontological primacy as well as its historical specificity, let alone its emancipatory potential. Marx made historically significant progress here; the contemporary resonance of his account of labour becomes richer when we consider the labour of social reproduction and care – which Arendt, Bakker, Marcuse and Read would term “work” – as equally ontologically fundamental.

### Labour, Value and Reproduction

Over 300 years before the birth of Christ, Aristotle concluded that “the originating cause of actions is a man [sic]...and...the actions are for the sake of something else” (Aristotle 2004 [1953], p. 59). This ancient passage is notable for a couple of reasons. First, the notion of “the originating cause of actions” presupposes an ontological root that, as Marx would concur, is man [sic] himself. We act – upon the world, upon ourselves, upon others and *with others* – because we *are*, and we are because we act. Second, these actions have a purpose: they are “for the sake of something *e/se*”. The “else” here implies change and transformation, and alludes to how human action – let us substitute human labour as a broader yet functionally synonymous term – is the primary means by which we humans make things other than what they are. From day to day, this might mean turning vegetables and meat into a meal to feed our family, repairing an appliance (or paying someone else to do so), or emotionally and physically supporting a child or an elder so they feel clean, comfortable and cared for. All of these activities or labour processes necessitate prior processes of labour: the vegetables planted, grown, picked and transported and the animals raised, killed and butchered so that our own labour can combine them to sustain ourselves in order to continue to labour to sustain ourselves, and so on *ad infinitum*. Reproducing and caring for human beings in order to sustain their lives can likewise be conceived as a chain of interrelated labour processes extending backwards and forwards in time in a manner that is ultimately beyond the capacity of humans to concretely grasp. We must think in abstract, even metaphysical terms, to come to grips with the multiplicity, interconnection and relentless temporal motion of



the collective labour that is necessary for us and our world to continue to survive, and ideally to flourish.

The example I have yet to discuss – that of paying someone for their labour – implies a similar chain of perpetually recurring and interconnected labour practices. In this case though, the mediation of the market allows us to situate such labour practices in a historically specific temporality that breaks our transhistorical labour chains; here we find *labour-power* exchanged for a *wage*. The temporal rupture that forces us to reconsider what labour *is* and to expand our conception of its social role can most simply be described as the (contingent) emergence of a capitalist mode of production. While the simple examples elucidated above become complex when we consider them outside of their quotidian practice – as an interconnected multitude of actions that in their totality constitute our relations to each other and thus “civilisation” as a constantly changing socio-natural structure that our labour both reinforces and undermines – at the root of this complexity is a simple reality: labour is ontologically-constitutive for us as human beings and for the world we make as it makes us in turn. The origin of all action, work or purposive activity is human beings themselves, and these actions, work processes and activities themselves change human beings. They also change how things materially are, how they appear – or disappear – and how they are represented in different discourses. Accordingly, human labour is a force of immense and world shaping power. It sets history in motion and continues to propel it, and brings into being each individual human being for the duration of their being.

Labour cannot be conceptually fixed once and for all: it is both transhistorical and historically specific, and as dynamic as the beings from which it springs. For our purposes, a definition of labour must encompass the total of waged, unwaged, and “other-waged” labour-processes that are concretely carried out across the entire social body, reflecting labour as “an ontological category that captures...a richly differentiated, historical and contradictory totality” (Ferguson 2016, p. 39). At the outset, we must conceive of *productive labour* – where the worker’s capacity to labour is exchanged for a wage – and *reproductive labour* – the typically unwaged domestic and caring labour that enables the worker to sustain themselves and their household – as always-already entangled moments of a dialectical process,

historically specific to capitalism, that produces both the worker and their world as well as commodities that have *value*. As capital accumulation processes expand spatially via neo-colonialism and the outsourcing of productive and reproductive labour to the Global South, and temporally via the commodification of data and platform-mediated capitalism's "inbuilt tendencies to move towards extracting rents" (Srnicek 2017, p. 126), we must surely conclude that the realms of production and reproduction are evermore blurred and overlapping: their intertwining has been compounded by the acceleration of commodification that is neoliberalism's hallmark.<sup>7</sup> Winders and Smith (2018, p. 14) conclude that we should "shift...the theoretical and analytical focus to the interface or nexus *between* two spheres or domains that merge, overlap and pull apart in historically specific dynamics". Informal economies and household micro-production; platform capitalism, the gig economy and micro-work: slavery and coerced labour:<sup>8</sup> all these forms of "other" (and otherising), partially visible labour concretely exist and often intertwine. In proposing a concept of labour that can account for the interrelation of this multiplicity, we must be attuned to the ever-evolving variety and often-opaque entanglement of labour-processes that take place "on the ground" across different cultural milieus and regional topographies. Further, as Tithi Bhattacharya (2017, p. 89) describes:

[T]he concrete allocation of the total labour of society is socially organised in gendered and racialized ways...The wage-labour relation suffuses the spaces of nonwaged everyday life...the working class...must be perceived as everyone...who has in their lifetime participated in the totality of reproduction of society—irrespective of whether that labour has been paid for by capital or remains unpaid.

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<sup>7</sup> By contrast, liberal discourses tend to artificially demarcate these "separate spheres". See "Public and Private: The Separate Spheres Model" in this chapter and "Marker Four: Demarcation of the spheres of production and reproduction" in *Chapter Three*.

<sup>8</sup> There is considerable debate about how accurate measurements of global slavery are, and to do justice to the many criticisms of the figure cited below is beyond the scope of this project. However, in 2016, the *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage* report estimated that "on any given day...40 million people were victims of modern slavery". Women and girls accounted for 71% of the victims. Additionally, an enormous amount of coerced labour takes place in prisons and carceral institutions.

Capitalist development is uneven, in short, and relies on billions of subjects enacting an almost infinite array of labour-processes: some of these reproduce capitalist subjects, and some produce surplus-value for capital. Some build online reputations that can be monetised, whilst some serve merely to establish a meagre germ of subjectivity in order to allow for recognition to occur at all. Some are processes of platform-mediated digital piece-work, and some are platform-mediated processes of rent extraction. We can see here the potential political resonance of a rich and multifaceted concept of human labour, even as such a concept is always in motion, evolving and developing according to the labour of those whose actions the concept “labour” describes.

In advancing this preliminary definition, it matters less where in the above mentioned labour-chains that certain categories of *value* arise or are valorised, and more that we can see that the inner logic of a capitalist mode of production tends towards extracting value out of, and thus depleting, *every process* of human sustenance, whether this be carework, wage-labour, domestic labour or the increasing amount of “leisure” time many individuals spend in digital realms: “In its search for markets, capitalism is driven to penetrate every nook and cranny of social existence” (Ehrenreich 1997, p. 65 - 71). As Susan Ferguson (2016, p. 49) describes, “an exclusive focus on any particular form of labour...risks occluding the wider picture”. To be human is to labour: further, as I will argue throughout this thesis, to labour is always-already also to *care*. Caring is “*a species activity*” (Tronto 2020, p. 103), just as “the science of man [sic] itself is a product of man’s self-formation through practical activity” (Marx 1963, p. 189). As capital continues to colonise more and more spheres of human existence, it is clear that it needs labour of *every kind* at *every point* in *every labour process* in order to sustain it, even as it hollows out and destroys the human beings, households, communities, workplaces and ecosystems from which it extracts use, exchange and surplus-value. Marx of course described this process in *Capital*: “capitalist production...develops technology, and the combining together of various processes into a social whole, only by sapping the original sources of all wealth, the soil and the labourer” (2013, p. 353).

## Social Reproduction Theory

Social reproduction theory is an important advance on both Marxism and second-wave feminism. If for Marx “to be radical is to grasp things by the root...the root is man [sic] himself” (Marx 1963, p. 52), for Marxist feminists “beneath the serious social, psychological, and ideological phenomena of women’s oppression lies a material root” which “Marxism has never adequately analysed” (Vogel 2013, p. 31). From this lacuna in Marx’s work proceeded the analysis of feminised and non-commodified domestic and caring labour: social reproduction theory.<sup>9</sup> If the root is human beings themselves, why then was Marx – and much of the Marxist tradition – unable to adequately explain humans’ stubborn rootedness within social relations structured by forces other than capital, remembering that capital *is* a social relation of value-producing labour? And what of the material necessity of myriad *unwaged* labour-processes, historically performed by women and not completely subsumed by capital, that feminists still struggle to bring to the surface and build coalitions around? Second-wave feminists Barrett and McIntosh (2015 [1982], p. 107 - 108) alluded to this problem – “the absence of any sustained exploration of subjectivity is a major difficulty in any attempt to work with both feminist and Marxist categories” – and in so doing lead us back to the way subjectivities are understood by Marx as the product of our inherent sociality, as “life creating life” (1963, p. 127).

Social reproduction theory goes beyond this insight to ask exactly *how* life materially creates and (re)produces life at a quotidian level, and what social forces combine to structure the practices that reproducing lives involves. How and to what degree are daily practices of housework, carework and other domestic labour structured by and indispensable to the ongoing operation of capitalism, and what can these processes of often invisible or elided labour tell us about the production and reproduction of a

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<sup>9</sup> There are Marxist feminists who reject the label “social reproduction theorist”, however for the sake of convenience I will refer to the thinkers associated with *Wages for Housework*, such as Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, as well as other Marxist feminists from the 1970s and early 1980s – such as Lise Vogel, Maria Mies and even Shulamith Firestone – as the “first wave of social reproduction theorists”. The centring of domestic labour in their analyses of capitalist production and social relations was ground-breaking, and many contemporary theorists have built upon and extended the body of work produced during this period: Nancy Fraser, Susan Ferguson, David McNally, Alessandra Mezzadri, Paula Varela, Tithi Bhattacharya, *The Care Collective* et. al. There are many varied positions and tendencies within this broad category.

capitalist mode of production that has been patriarchal from the outset?<sup>10</sup> What can they tell us about the production of subjectivities and discourses, including subjectivities that may coalesce into formations that can challenge the manifold oppressions that subjects of capitalism experience, and discourses that purport to support such formations? Immediately we can see how social reproduction theory opens up a new terrain of struggle; what we might call, following Silvia Federici, “point zero”: the realm of reproduction, as distinct from the realm of production where wage-labour is exchanged.<sup>11</sup> The “invisible” labour that maintains and renews capitalist subjects, both those who sell their labour-power in the market and those – children, the sick, the elderly, those with disabilities, the unemployed, the incarcerated – who do not or cannot, is essential for the reproduction of capitalist social relations and capital accumulation processes, and thus the totality they constitute. Social reproduction theory compels us to

...abandon not just the framework of discrete spheres of production and reproduction, but also – because reproduction is linked within capitalism to production – we need to revise the common sense perception that capital relinquishes all power over the worker when she leaves the workplace (Bhattacharya 2017, p. 76).

The incessant extraction of surplus-value that is both the ground and result of capital accumulation<sup>12</sup> gives the capital-labour relation (which is simultaneously an individual capitalist-wage labourer relationship and a totalising and antagonistic class division) a reified appearance which we commonly encounter as a commodity’s exchange value. What, though, of the relation between parent/s and child, wife and husband, life-partner and life-partner, or other kin or community-based caring relationships? Do caring relationships, so necessary to materially replenish and thus reproduce the workers who produce surplus-value, also produce value of any kind?

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<sup>10</sup> Federici’s analysis in *Caliban and the Witch* reveals how the formation of a “world proletariat” required “the subjugation of women to the reproduction of the work-force...it required the destruction of the power of women” (2014, p. 63).

<sup>11</sup> These realms are not and have never been neatly separable, though, as we will discuss shortly.

<sup>12</sup> Marx often emphasises the dialectical character of processes of capital accumulation and circulation: “every element appears as a point of departure, transit and return to the starting point” (1913, p. 114).

Although we must remember that “social reproduction and care are not synonyms” (Mezzadri 2019, p. 37), caring relationships sit very near the heart of social reproduction theory. Contemporaneously, the analysis of caring relationships and carework constitute a theoretical advance for social reproduction theory as they simultaneously ground it in the dialectical complexities of the reproduction of labour-power, and thus ultimately of capital. Whether domestic labour and carework produce just use-value or *both* use and exchange value was a formative debate for social reproduction theorists, and whilst many now consider it “solved” – “domestic labour produces use-value not exchange-value, and does not, therefore, directly produce surplus-value” (Ferguson & McNally 2013, p. xx) – the question remains open to some degree. Regardless of theoretical contestation, however, *all* subjects of capitalism enact, experience and embody reproductive labour. Whether within “natural” kin-based networks or outside them, the processes of social reproduction ground the inherent sociality of the human being, and highlight our collective need for each other’s labour – and care – to continue to survive.

### The Family and Familism

The family is integral to social reproduction analyses because it remains the default location where social reproduction takes place. Whilst the nuclear family can be analysed as a specific historical product of a capitalist mode of production rather than a timeless natural order – Engels arguably inaugurates social reproduction theory by doing exactly this in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* – caring relationships between biologically and culturally related human beings cannot so easily be construed as merely rooted in a similar historical specificity. Indeed, whilst the nuclear family may be a convenient hypostatization of certain idealised masculine and feminine subjectivities that were engendered by the particular conditions of the rising European bourgeoisie at the dawn of the industrial era, at the same time “familism is not a ruling-class or patriarchal ideology repressively foisted on an unwilling population” (Barrett & McIntosh 2015 [1982], p. 30). Barrett and McIntosh’s claim is too sweeping – ideology, as Hall notes, is “always contradictory” (2011, p. 713) – yet the family’s function as a site of both care and oppression, a haven in a heartless world and ground zero for a lifetime of

structural violence, renders analyses of it inherently complex: it is terrain on which we must tread carefully. The family *works*, in short, both by providing care and as the ideologically-logical location of care, and as the primary site of the production and reproduction of the commodity that is “the *sine qua non* of capitalist production”: the labour-power embodied in the worker who sells it (Marx 2013, p. 400).

One of the singular achievements of social reproduction theory, therefore, has been to consider the family *historically*, as opposed to its ahistorical, immutable and “natural” situation in much bourgeois social science. This process probably begins with Engels:

[T]he first opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male. Monogamous marriage...is the cellular form of civilized society in which the nature of the oppositions and contradictions fully active in that society can be studied (2010, p. 96).

Whilst the biological analogy between patriarchal sexual and familial relations and the class struggle between capital and labour is suspiciously neat, an investigation as to the precise situation of what is generally understood as the “nuclear family” throughout the history of different modes of production is beyond the scope of this research project. What is pertinent is that the family inaugurates an idea of the “natural” that serves throughout different historical periods to renew and bolster liberal capitalism as it enters periodical crises, or encounters barriers to on-going accumulation. Melinda Cooper, in her indispensable study *Family Values*, poses a question that is germane to familism’s longevity and ideological “naturalness” when she inquires as to whether capital is “compelled, *in the last instance*, to reinstate the family as the elementary form of private wealth accumulation” (2017, p. 16, italics mine). If Cooper’s claim is accurate, the family plays a unique role in the constitution and reconstitution of a capitalist social order. Following Cooper further, the family stands as a necessary bulwark against capital’s creative destruction, and thus its “periodic reinvention” (Cooper 2017, p. 17) confirms its function as a site of resolution for one of capitalism’s most significant contradictions. Capital tends

towards “accumulation for accumulation’s sake” (Harvey 2018, p. xxvii), however its drive to turn limits into barriers only to then tear these down (Marx 2005, p. 650) – to continually expand processes of commodification – would if fully realised make the project of further accumulation impossible via societal collapse and environmental destruction. Indeed, “capital, left to itself, tends to destroy life, not to produce and reproduce it” (Cammack 2020, p. 87). As such, familism is both ideologically and materially necessary to preserve the living labour without which capital accumulation cannot proceed. Cooper demonstrates that throughout the history of capitalism, familism has performed a vital safe-guarding function over and over again. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, discourses of familism served to “obscure and sentimentalize the existence of women’s unpaid labour in the home at precisely the historical moment when the boundaries between the labour market and the private family were being established” (Cooper 2017, p. 22 - 23).

Many social reproduction theorists and socialist feminists have attacked the contention that the family is a fundamentally natural structure that has persisted, with variations, throughout different societies, historical periods and modes of production. Lise Vogel (2013, p. 150) claims that “the family, however defined, is not a timeless universal of human society”, while Shulamith Firestone (2015, p. 67) emphasises that “the modern nuclear family is only a recent development”.<sup>13</sup> Nancy Fraser agrees with Cooper that “‘the family’ in its modern restricted form” emerged at least in part as a solution to crises created by capital’s accumulative drive (2016, p. 105). By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it had become clear that the working classes in the Global North needed some form of protection against capital’s rapacious expansionary tendencies, and Fraser (2016, p. 105) is one of many who argues that this was achieved by “stabiliz[ing] social reproduction by limiting the exploitation of women and children in factory labour”. As such, “liberal competitive capitalism elaborated a new gender imaginary centred on separate spheres” (Fraser 2016, p. 106). We will consider the separate spheres model in more detail shortly. It seems

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<sup>13</sup> Kirstin Munro emphasises the historically specific nature of the family by using the term “household” instead. This usage is intended “to reflect both the relatively recent emergence of the idea of ‘the family’ as a family of related people living together in a dwelling, as well as to highlight the multitude of other kinship and living arrangements that have existed historically and continue to exist” (Munro 2019, p. 454). I use both terms in this chapter, with “family” referring to the “traditional nuclear family” and “household” to both this unit and its many existing variations.



clear, however, that the ideology of familism has been historically useful as a means of stabilising the inherent destabilising tendencies of capitalism, as has “the family’s” malleable constitution. Ideology and material reality exist in a dialectical relationship – the vulgar Marxist notion of material base absolutely determining ideological super-structure must be thoroughly rejected – and “on the ground”, the ways in which families have functioned to reproduce themselves, and in microcosm larger social formations, would in all eras show many degrees of divergence from dominant ideals. To what extent was the strict patriarchal “seen and not heard” Victorian family structure a reality, and to what extent have literary representations fostered this imaginary? Similarly, in our current historical moment, where same-sex marriage is legal in much of the Global North, to what extent do such unions represent the liberation of non-normative lifestyles from an oppressive hetero-familism as opposed to the need for “queer wealth holders” to “secure some form of legal right to bequeath their assets” (Cooper 2017, p. 163)? These questions reveal a dialectical structure to familism, wherein what is “natural” about the family shifts and mutates according to a complex range of prevailing social, cultural and economic conditions, whilst “the family” itself retains an unsublated core of ideological legitimacy that propels both conservative attempts at limiting and progressive projects of expanding its scope.

By contrast, we can trace throughout liberal and neoliberal thought a naturalisation of the family. Locke (2016 [1689], p. 39) describes how “the *first* society was between Man and Wife, which gave beginning to that between Parents and Children; to which, in time, Master and Servant came to be added”, and here we can see a congruence with Engels’ analysis above, although with a very different political resonance. More recently, Nobel Prize winning economist Gary Becker devoted a considerable portion of his output to analysis of the family, treating it basically as a microcosm of the economy. For Becker (1998, p. 3 - 4),

...even if a husband and wife are intrinsically identical, they gain from a division of labour between market and household activities, with one of them specializing more in market activities and the other more in household activities...women have specialized in household activities, have invested little

in market human capital, and have allocated most of their energy to the household.

Becker's "neutral" analyses constitute in part what Wendy Brown (2016, p. 31) has identified as one of the hallmarks of neoliberalism, the "widespread economization of heretofore noneconomic domains, activities, and subjects", however treating the family as a strictly economic institution is at times aligned with the approach of pioneering Marxist feminists like Federici,<sup>14</sup> who cites Becker to highlight that:

[W]hat goes under the name of 'homemaking' is (to use Gary Becker's expression) a "productive consumption" process...yet, as Becker points out, the productive consumption that takes place in the home has had a "bandit-like existence in economic thought" (Federici 2012, p. 41 - 42).<sup>15</sup>

A significant difference between the neoliberal analysis of Becker and that of even the most economistic social reproduction theory, however, is that Becker never questions the family's role as "point zero" in the production or reproduction process: instead, the family's economism is an *a priori* given that has eluded scholarly attention precisely because of the family's naturalness as an institution. As a consequence, as Munro (2019, p. 461) has pointed out, he "does not look beyond the single household to system-level processes that determine the levels of prices, wages, or state inputs into household production". These factors are discussed as they apply to each household, but each household operates as an atomised micro-corporation within a society composed of the same. For Becker, the family "remains

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<sup>14</sup> Federici rejects the label "social reproduction theorist" (see n8): "Social reproduction theorists have included a wide range of promoters of capitalist development. Thus, as an analytic category 'social reproduction' cannot be adopted as a form of a political identification, as it is done by feminists describing themselves as 'social reproduction theorists'" (Federici 2019, p. 55).

<sup>15</sup> We should recall here Marx's discussion in the Introduction to the *Grundrisse*, wherein "not only is production immediately consumption and consumption immediately production...but also, each of them, apart from being immediately the other, and apart from mediating the other, in addition to this creates the other in completing itself, and creates itself as the other" (Marx 2005, p. 93). The influence of Hegel seems clear here, and Marx's dialectical account of "productive consumption" is far richer than Becker's. Becker provides an implicit critique of the "separate spheres" model – "the integration of production and consumption is at odds with the tendency of economists to separate them sharply" – however ultimately the concept of "productive consumption" is merely used to show that "a household is truly a 'small factory': it combines capital goods, raw materials and labour to clean, feed, procreate and otherwise provide useful commodities" (Becker 1965, p. 496).

the most influential of all institutions” (1998, p. 19), and its role at what we might denote the “invisible centre” of social and economic life is precisely a “natural”, transhistorical situation. Becker’s depoliticising and ahistorical analyses serve to naturalise the bourgeois nuclear family and a gendered division of labour, and thus the on-going oppression of women (and children), at the same time as he reveals that the family is indeed a vital site within capitalist production relations. His analyses overlap with those of Federici at some points, and we can diagnose in both cases an economism that explains what appears at first a strange theoretical synchrony, although Federici’s oeuvre contains many works that consider the dialectical intertwining of capitalism and patriarchy, thus transcending a vulgar economism and questioning the “natural order” of familial relations. Compare Becker (1998, p. 44), who claims that:

The biological differences between men and women in the production and care of children, and the specialized investments in market and household skills that reinforce the biological differences, explain why the institution of marriage has been important in all societies.

Ultimately, then, Becker’s work on the family stands as a paradigmatic example of the persistence of pre-given ideas of “the natural” in liberal thought: something “merely there” that “could not be conceived of as having been created” (Lukacs 2021, p. 185). The institutions of marriage and the family can be economised, but they cannot be historicised, and thus the social role of reproductive labour remains fundamentally uninterrogated: it has economic value, but this is significant only because the whole of society can and should be modelled on the market. The “natural” position of the family here serves to reify the division of labour between productive and reproductive spheres, and thus to elide a concept of labour that might account for how, in day-to-day life, the realms of production and reproduction intertwine to the point where they cannot be prised apart.

Whilst the sheer number of social reproduction theorists who insist on the family’s historical specificity gives significant weight to their collective claims, the ultimate question of the family’s historical positionality is not settled, and cannot be settled here. Rather, what must be insisted upon is that the family is a site of contestation,

not a stable formation; either theoretically or as it actually exists. Most pertinent for us, however, is Engels' initial achievement in shining a light – however fleeting and feeble – on the previously hidden abode of *reproduction*, where the woman who is “shut out from social productive labour and restricted to private domestic labour” works, in subordination to the man, to renew the current and raise the next generation of wage-labourers, or indeed capitalists (Engels 2010, p. 199). It is from here, the ostensibly private domestic sphere, that the question of social reproduction can be seriously addressed, although we must bear in mind Barrett and McIntosh's warning (2015 [1982], p. 90) that the distinction between public and private “should be an object of analysis, not a conceptual tool”. The achievements of the first wave of social reproduction theorists were manifold, however particularly crucial was to call into question – in addition to the family's naturalness – the likewise “natural” existence of two “separate spheres” in which labour is performed: the realm of “production”, fuelled by wage-labour, and the “merely” reproductive realm, which involves labour of many other kinds, even though affective labour, carework, domestic work and even coerced labour are by no means absent from the realm of production. Labour is a unique commodity in that it is capable of generating more value than it embodies: only with living labour do we have the possibility of reaping surplus-value. This surplus-value creating labour is profoundly “unnatural”—indeed, it is alienated, and sunders the subjects who perform it from the products of their labours, which are commodities whose exchange value conceals the exploitation inherent in their production. It is not so easy to similarly dismiss processes of caring and domestic labour, however, and the labour-processes of social reproduction, although inevitably imbricated within larger processes of capital-accumulation, ideally have a caring function that is presumed absent in wage-labour markets: “capital does not ‘care’” (Cammack 2020, p. 102).

Whilst it is surely “natural” to care for others – despite reservations from some thinkers,<sup>16</sup> a biological and/or cultural kernel of “care” is difficult to entirely theorise

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<sup>16</sup> See for instance Deleuze and Guattari, for whom “the essence or nature of desire” is an “abstract subjective essence—libido or sexuality”, yet “the wide open spaces glimpsed for a moment” via the abstraction of subjective relationality and the deterritorialization of desire revert immediately to “a familialist reduction, in place of the drift of desire” (2009, p. 270). See also Foucault: “Life is the root of all existence...there is being only because there is life, and in that fundamental movement that dooms them to death, the scattered beings, stable for an instant, are formed, halt, hold life immobile...The

away – the labour that engenders this care is always shaped by the social and material conditions under which it is carried out. What precisely about carework and reproductive labour is *specific* to capitalism, then, and how can we probe such labours' entanglement with other labour-processes that capitalism compels us to undertake? Here, we must turn to an analysis of the alleged naturalness of reproductive labour's separation from wage-labour. Indeed, we might begin by asking why housework and carework have historically been invisible and thus unwaged, unless performed by hired domestic labourers. To what extent does such labour's caring function – as well as its role in maintaining and ordering the household as a site where care is given – ensure its ongoing discursive elision and its historical under-theorisation? How did the model of separate spheres of masculinised production and feminised reproduction arise?

### Public and Private: The “Separate Spheres” Model

In 1975, Federici described how “behind every factory, behind every school, behind every office or mine there is the *hidden work* of millions of women who have consumed their life, their labour, producing the labour power that works in those factories, offices or mines” (2012, p. 31, italics mine). Federici has since been criticised for centring a certain kind of feminised subject in her analyses, and for focussing on housework to the marginalisation of other reproduction processes.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the formative text of the Wages for Housework movement, Mariarosa Dalla Costa's and Selma James's *Women and the Subversion of the Community*, proceeds explicitly from the assumption that “all women are housewives and even those who work outside the home continue to be housewives” (Dalla Costa & James

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experience of life is thus posited as the most general law of beings...But this ontology discloses not so much what gives beings their foundation as what bears them for an instant towards a precarious form and yet is already sapping them from within in order to destroy them” (1994, p. 278).

<sup>17</sup> Federici does discuss processes of carework, however she tends to assume that these are as compelled and experientially oppressive as cleaning and cooking, which leads at times to a loss of nuance as well as justifiable accusations of economic reductionism. Many of the newer generation of social reproduction theorists would question the equivalence Federici draws between “endless cleaning, always being emotionally available, fucking at command” (2012, p. 21), although the historical conditions in which she was writing must be taken into account. Between the pre-neoliberal/late-Fordist 1970s, and the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in which social reproduction theory has seen a revival, there have been significant changes in the material conditions and social formations under which domestic and caring labour take place.

1997, p. 40)—Angela Davis (2019, p. 214) retorts that “in the United States, women of colour...have been receiving wages for housework for untold decades”.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, Federici’s visceral, powerful articles remain indispensable for contesting the “separate spheres” model. By emphasising that “housework is work”, she and other contributors to the *Wages for Housework* movement were able to “expose...the enormous amount of unpaid labour that goes on unchallenged and unseen in this society” (Federici 2012, p. 56). Further, in demanding wages for housework, Federici and her comrades highlighted how the unpaid nature of household labour helped engender its invisibility: “housework was transformed into a natural attribute...because it was destined to be unwaged” (Federici 2012, p. 16). They thus situated the oppressions experienced in the realm of reproduction in a capitalist patriarchy, whilst maintaining that “the oppression of women...did not begin with capitalism. What began with capitalism was the more intense exploitation of women” (Dalla Costa & James 1997, p. 41). It should be noted in passing that the concept of “woman” is not always consistently historicised or exhaustively interrogated by some early social reproduction theorists, and as such some of their claims regarding women’s social positionality would be considered overly rigid and even biologically determinist today.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, these thinkers and activists laid the groundwork for future advances in social reproduction theory by highlighting how “ideologies of separate spheres were reinforced by notions that men’s and women’s roles were biologically rather than culturally assigned” (Mohandesi & Teitelman 2017, p. 44).

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<sup>18</sup> To her credit, Federici (2012, p. 31) highlights that “American capital was built on slave labour as well as waged labour”.

<sup>19</sup> Maria Mies, for example, is usually rigorously historical – she notes that “maleness and femaleness are not biological givens, but rather the results of a long historical process” – but at times she does lapse into something very close to biological determinism, via unverifiable assertions that “women *necessarily* were responsible for the production of the daily sustenance...male bodily productivity cannot *appear* as such without the mediation of external means, of *tools*, whereas women’s productivity can...Without tools there is no MAN” (Mies 2014, p. 53 - 57). This sentiment reifies an idea of “woman” as embodying the “natural”, and as *naturally* caring, providing and nurturing, acting on the world primarily to share and preserve it. Women’s “natural being” is therefore inherently antithetical to the logic of capital accumulation. It is men’s inability to bear and nurture children, and their dependence on women to gather food for the whole community – which Mies claims is “the first truly *productive* relation to nature” (2014, p. 55) – that leads them to use tools in order to hunt. Men’s foremost productive activity is to control and subjugate their environment, thus initiating the violence of patriarchy, and eventually of capitalism.

Throughout social reproduction literature, therefore, the model of “separate spheres” has been ground zero for investigation and indeed defetishisation. As we have seen, at first social reproduction theorists sought to reveal the “invisible” nature of housework and carework by highlighting such work’s essential yet unwaged nature: they could thus contest its assumed position *outside* of capitalist production relations. Revealing reproductive labour’s invisibility led to a sustained attack on the separate spheres model, and Federici (2012, p. 8 - 9) describes how she and other social reproduction theorists attempted to:

[U]nmask the process of naturalization this work had undergone because of its unwaged condition...we recognized that capitalism requires unwaged reproductive labour in order to contain the cost of labour power...we also...demanded that women be paid for the work we already do.

In demanding “wages for housework”, productive and reproductive labour become thinkable as moments of a dialectical totality in constant motion, not flat and distinct processes that reify an immutable gender order, as per Becker. The separate spheres model remains prominent, however, and as the model is inextricably intertwined with practices and discourses of familism it has an undeniable grounding in material reality for many subjects of capitalism. Indeed, in many discourses the model retains the ideological power and “common sense” legitimacy that necessitated the development of social reproduction theory in the first place—witness Jordan Peterson’s claim that “the people who hold that our culture is an oppressive patriarchy, they don’t want to admit that the current hierarchy might be predicated on competence” (Bowles 2018).

Figure 1.1



clementine\_ford FNB: men with kids repartnering quickly after separation

This was the first question in last night's #FridayNightBites and it resonated with a LOT of viewers. I've received countless messages from women in similar situations – the worst I heard was regarding a man who repartnered THREE WEEKS after his wife died, because he needed someone to care for his four children while at work. Dude, hire a fucking nanny.

Yes, I know there are outliers. Yes, I know women can repartner quickly too after separation. But STATISTICALLY speaking, men are much more likely to do so, and to do it more immediately.

Why then does the separate spheres model endure? Is it mainly because conservative discourses overtly – and many liberal discourses covertly – continue to reify it, thus necessitating its constant contestation? Jordan Peterson's popularity is powerful evidence of the endurance – or perhaps even a resurgence – of traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, and thus of an ideal of separate masculinised and feminised spheres: witness his claim that "I don't know if I've seen a single

woman who I didn't think had a psychological problem who hadn't seriously flipped in their attitude towards the balance of family and career by the time they were 30" (Peterson 2020). The material ability of wealthy households to outsource reproductive labour has facilitated "exploitative transnational care chains where women from the Global South migrate to the Global North to find jobs as care workers, often leaving their own children to be looked after by others" (Chatzidakis et al. 2020, p. 25 - 26).<sup>20</sup> Additionally, many ostensibly radical feminists reify the model via discursive elisions. In *Figure 1.1* above, Clementine Ford's demand that the man "hire a fucking nanny" implicitly genders the reproductive sphere she intends to critique men for not participating in, and in doing so also exemplifies how liberal feminists "completely fail to think through the ways in which women's work is

<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that almost all households, not only wealthy ones, outsource various forms of reproductive labour, whether by simply ordering fast-food or take-away meals because of time pressure, taking clothes to the laundromat, or paying for a babysitter, cleaner or dog walker. Reproductive labour has always been outsourced to various degrees, and undoubtedly within the myriad lived iterations of the separate spheres model "many middle-class women are able to pursue their interests because of paid domestic labour" (Gimenez 2019, p. 45). There is also clear evidence of what Nancy Fraser calls a "care gap" – which The Care Collective allude to above – where an overwhelmingly female migrant labour force moves from poorer to richer regions to take on the tasks of social reproduction that relatively time-poor middle-class women and their households are unable to perform. As Fraser describes, "it is racialized, often rural women from poor regions who take on the reproductive and caring labour previously performed by more privileged women. But to do this, the migrants must transfer their own familial and community responsibilities to other, still poorer caregivers, who must in turn do the same—and on and on, in ever longer 'global care chains'. Far from filling the care gap, the net effect is to displace it—from richer to poorer families, from the Global North to the Global South" (2016, p. 114).



racialized” (Ferguson 2020, p. 60). Hiring domestic labourers surely reduces the burden of reproductive labour for wealthy women, men and households in the Global North, but outsourcing carework to lowly-paid domestic labourers (overwhelmingly working-class women and/or women from the Global South) invisibilises how the “always-on” nature of 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism compels those who can afford it to maintain the household as a regenerative space of “self-care” where the labour performed is minimised; this allows for more time to be spent performing micro-valuable leisure-labour on social media platforms, generating data from which value can be extracted. Outsourcing reproductive labour continues to reinforce the model of separate spheres, in short, except now it is hired workers, still overwhelmingly feminised, performing the work of social reproduction.

Catherine Rottenberg describes how “*reproduction and care work continue to haunt and thwart liberal feminism’s conception of emancipation, dependent as it is on the public-private divide*”, and in hiring careworkers, there is the potential for “new and intensified forms of racialized and classed gender exploitation” to occur (2017, p. 343 - 344, italics mine). Rottenberg reveals a structural contradiction of liberal feminism here, in that “equality” for (some) women in the Global North is increasingly dependent on the subjugation of women in the Global South. In chastising the recently widowed male for repartnering instead of hiring a domestic worker in *Figure 1.1*, Ford highlights how the model of separate spheres maintains a decisive hold on liberal feminist political imaginaries.

We can see that a germ of ideological common sense continues to position the household as a site of respite from the compulsions of wage-labour, and thus as a “labour-free” place. Although both liberal and radical feminist struggles have achieved some measure of progress in addressing and balancing the gendered division of domestic labour, the relentless quotidian necessity of social reproduction still propels its discursive elision. Furthermore, the separate spheres model should not be understood as rigidly one-sided in its oppressive nature: nor does it oppress all women equally. We will do well here to recall Fredric Jameson’s (2000, p. 226) advice to maintain the “austere dialectical imperative...to think the cultural evolution of capitalism dialectically, as catastrophe and progress all together”. Laslett and Brenner (1989, p. 390) have shown that “working-class women...used a version of

separate spheres ideology to challenge their husband's power", and Angela Davis adds a vital dimension to such analyses by emphasising the racialised character of the model:

As the ideology of femininity – a by-product of industrialization – was popularized and disseminated, *white women* came to be seen as inhabitants of a sphere totally severed from the realm of productive work... "Woman" became synonymous with "mother" and "housewife"... But *among Black female slaves, this vocabulary was nowhere to be found* (2019, p. 9, italics mine).

Davis's work points to capitalism's dependence not only on waged and unwaged but on *unfree* labour. Davis also forces us to consider that processes of social reproduction do not occur merely within the family or the household. As Marxist feminist Martha Gimenez (2019, p. 302) describes, "the family is only one of the forms that the mode of reproduction takes... The agents of reproduction are not only parents... but also teachers, scientists, managers, supervisors". This chapter began with the family as the "default location" of social reproduction, but a number of non-familial institutions also serve as agents of reproduction. For our analysis to be both appropriately rigorous and potentially emancipatory, we must ask how broad the scope of "social reproduction" as a concept should be.

Lise Vogel occupies an important position in the development of social reproduction theory, and her landmark text *Marxism and the Oppression of Women* (1983), challenges and extends many of the claims and strategic imperatives of the *Wages for Housework* movement. Vogel consolidates our understanding of what social reproduction is. Rather than merely highlighting that "housework is work", she shows us that "domestic labour has... a highly contradictory role within capitalist social reproduction" (2013, p. 163). Whilst the private household where domestic labour takes place is "a haven for its members against the onslaughts of capitalist accumulation", each household is "simultaneously a concentrated locus of patriarchal relations" (2013, p. 178). As such, "in a given class-society, the circumstances and outcomes of the processes of reproduction of labour-power are essentially indeterminate or contingent" (2013, p. 149). Capital and patriarchy cannot

be considered independently of each other: they are structurally interwoven, and although how they materially affect individual subjects will inevitably vary, there is no “outside” to structuration by such forces, either individually or societally. Women’s oppression can appear “to be solely an oppression by men”, however “it is responsibility for the domestic labour necessary to capitalist social reproduction...that materially underpins...women’s oppression and inequality” (Vogel 2013, p. 177). There is nothing “natural” about capitalism or patriarchy, however to demand that historically feminised reproductive labour be recognised via the wage as equivalent to masculinised productive labour is to risk essentialising the very set of relations the demand for “wages for housework” was raised in struggle against. As Ferguson (2020, p. 98) describes, “the campaign’s revolutionary impulse of refusal translated poorly on the ground”. Socialist feminist Kathi Weeks (2015, p. 6) concurs: “In naming housework as women’s work there was the risk of strengthening the association between gender and housework” Although it is clear that the complexities of reproductive labour need more than simple remuneration in order to attack their oppressive function, campaigning for wages for housework *did* raise many women’s consciousness of “the sex class system”, while the radical aim of “the seizure of control of reproduction” (Firestone 2015, p. 11) generated militancy via “counterplanning from the kitchen” (Federici 2012, p. 28). A richer concept of labour is necessary for contemporary theoretical analyses and political programs, however, and Vogel arms us with some potent analytical tools in developing Federici’s critique of reproductive labour’s elided nature:

Confinement to a world that is walled off from capitalist production seems to be woman’s time-honoured natural setting. A series of correlated opposites embodies the seemingly universal division of life into two spheres of experience: private and public, domestic and social, family and work, women and men...*this ideology of separate spheres has a force* that is extremely difficult to transcend (2013, p. 160 - 161, italics mine).

The reproduction of the worker and their household is also the reproduction of the possibility of the capital-labour relation, and thus ultimately of capitalist social

formations. While these are dominated and structured by the ceaseless drive for accumulation via the extraction of surplus-value, in different geographical and historical locations “there is abundant opportunity, within limits, for a good deal of cultural, institutional, political, moral and ideological variation” (Harvey 2018, p. 26). We must reiterate, therefore, that like the family, social reproduction is both theoretically and in practice a contested terrain. Whilst we can agree with Fraser that “in general...capitalist societies separate social reproduction from economic production, associating the first with women, and obscuring its importance and value” (2016, p. 102), we must remember that social reproduction is understood and experienced differently across classes, faiths and nation-states. At this point, it will be useful to recall Marx’s concept of abstract labour. Although every individual wage-labourer undertakes a labour-process that they uniquely experience, the production of commodities as the end to which all labour-power is directed “put[s] out of sight both the useful character of the various kinds of labour embodied in [commodities], and the concrete forms of that labour; there is nothing left but what is common to them all; all are reduced to one and the same sort of labour, human labour in the abstract” (Marx 2013, p. 13). To understand concrete *reproductive* labour-processes as human labour in the abstract, we must account for the many instances where such labour produces only *non*-commodified use-values – from words of comfort to physical contact to merely a gaze of recognition – despite the increasing commodification of domestic and caring labour. Following Gayatri Spivak (1995, p. 67), such commodification presupposes an increasing “socialisation of reproductive labour”, whereby “the reproductive body of woman has now been ‘socialised’—computed into average abstract labour”. As “labour quantities” are “the essence of value” (Mandel 1976, p. 42), the reproductive labour – and specifically the *caring* labour – that produces often intangible but nonetheless materially experienced use-values leaves a residue of uncommodified labour within what Marx (2013, p. 20) called “the total labour power of society”—an inherently contradictory element that forms a germ of resistance.

## The Nature of Care

In positing a totalising account of labour, some Marxists question whether the field of “social reproduction theory” is necessary at all, beyond adding some contemporary complexity to an account of the gendered division of labour:

To distinguish “social reproduction” from “production”, or to separate it out from the social production process as a whole, is to construe as fixed boundaries that are fluid, and to single out as exceptional what are fundamental and constitutive aspects of the social production process... So when writers on “social reproduction” go beyond its definition as “the activities associated with the maintenance and reproduction of people’s” lives on a daily and intergenerational basis”; *whether to include such concepts as “affect” and “care”*...they produce too rigid a concept (Cammack 2020, p. 101 - 102, italics mine).

Cammack makes his case eloquently, however surely the caring function of social reproduction is a significant part of what distinguishes it as a series of labour-processes. Cooper (2017, p. 24) notes that “the history of economic formations cannot be prized apart from the operations of gender, race and sexuality without obscuring the politics of wealth and income distribution itself”, and the history of capitalism as an economic formation is indelibly bound up with the history of feminised reproductive labour. Cammack’s (2020, p. 102) claim that “Marx’s concept of societal reproduction” is sufficient to analytically account for social reproduction as a whole overlooks the fact that Marx sought to analyse capital as a social relation – and capitalism as a social formation<sup>21</sup> – so that the exploitation inherent in it could ultimately be overcome. We might refute arguments like Cammack’s, therefore, by asking exactly *why* we need the concept of social reproduction. The answer is surely that in developing the political collectivity necessary to challenge an increasingly ecocidal capitalism, we need to continue the historical materialist work of “grasping things by the root”. Just as “labour” as a concept must be expanded to account for

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<sup>21</sup> It is worth noting here Ernest Mandel’s (2015, p. 132 n.49) distinction between “a mode of production and a socioeconomic formation”: a social formation is “a concrete type of society within which a mode of production holds a dominant position”.

the contemporary fragmentation and proliferation of labour-processes, the ontological structure underpinning human labour – both in our current moment and transhistorically as the process by which subjects come to embody their own and recognise others’ subjectivity – must be unearthed as the ideal and “natural” relation of human to human and of humans to their world, the concrete abstraction that is the ground and result of the dialectical development of a theory of reproductive labour. This relationship – and ontological structure – is one of care.

*The Care Manifesto* (2020, p. 27) acknowledges at the outset that “the very concept ‘care’ overflows with paradoxes and ambivalence”. To conceive of “care” as both ground and result of human labour – as both originary ontological underpinning and as representing the most advanced development of human relationality – is to conceive it dialectically; it is also to value carework as the labour-process which is *most valuable* for the reproduction of human life. M.E. O’Brien (2022, p. 235 - 236) defines care as “a material relationship, a set of forms of labour...There is no firm conceptual line separating care labour from other forms of labour...it cannot be fully extracted or defined apart from the totality of capitalist social relations”. Just as for capital, “every element appears as a point of departure, transit and return to the starting point” (Marx 1913, p. 114), we can posit a similar structure or position for care in theorising social reproduction. As an ontological relation at the root of social reproduction, care *is* point of departure, transit and return: it is inherent in the dialectic that makes any human labour possible under capitalism, whether “productive” or “reproductive”, waged or unwaged. To reiterate, to consider “care” as both ground and result of human labour – a fundamental ontological entanglement that also represents the most advanced potential development of human relationality – is precisely to consider it dialectically; “where there is relation there has to be care” (de la Bellacasa 2012, p. 204). The “dual nature of care as relation and labour” is further emphasised by Eileen Boris (2015), and constitutes both a political and theoretical imperative: “To name care as work...cries out for an alternative economic theory that recognizes the economic value of the human connections and practices about which we care most deeply”. Care describes a mode of human relationality that is an ideal towards which we can collectively strive at the same time as it is unceasingly embodied and enacted across every social arena. Care here serves as an umbrella term for a quotidian set of processes *and* an emancipatory horizon: a

series of repeated acts that enable both the sustaining of life (which is also potentially labour-power for capital) and the thinking of more caring ways of being. Care has a common and totalising ambit that when grasped contains profound political and theoretical potential. As Boris Groys (2022, p. 8, italics mine) describes:

[T]he work of care, including self-care, is always hard work...*Everybody knows that...* The work of care and self-care is unproductive, remains forever unfinished, and, thus, can be only deeply frustrating. However, *it is the most basic and necessary work. Everything else depends on it.*

Following Groys, we can see that care is nothing if not ontological—everybody knows it, everybody does it, and everything else depends on it. The duality that structures care’s concrete being can only be thought, however, by taking account of its dialectical nature: “relations of thinking and knowing require care”, just as care comprises “those *doings* needed to create, hold together and sustain life’s essential heterogeneity” (de la Bellacasa 2012, p. 198). The material processes of sustaining ourselves and others are indissociable from conceptually grasping the need to do so, even as the thinking and enacting of such relations and doings propel new possibilities and processes for their being.

Reproductive labour, like labour of any variety, can be performed with or without “care” understood as affective warmth or rich emotional attention. However, care’s ontological status and dialectical intertwining with labour is what sets it apart from the affectively-inflected domestic labour that is commonly understood under the banner of “social reproduction theory”. The labour processes that are always-already undertaken in recognising the other are suffused with care. Via this recognition – recall the famous passage in Hegel’s *Phenomenology* (2003, p. 106), where each subject “recognise[s] themselves as mutually recognising one another” – we constitute ourselves as subjects as we labour to sustain the other in order to sustain the self and the (historically-variable) society/community. These labour processes – from the micro-affective to the totally embodied to those constitutive of specific communities and their potential flourishing – constitute *carework*. Care as noun and care as verb are separable only at a semantic level. As “carework” describes a *perpetuum mobile* ontological relation and not only a set of labour processes it is not inherently commodified; by contrast, “social reproduction” describes the intertwining

of reproductive with productive labour to reproduce a society of commodity producers and the producers of the commodities themselves. Social reproduction as a concept is unthinkable without capitalism, and thus care as a concept immanent to social reproduction is unthinkable likewise. However, in a paradox that can be resolved by attention to dialectical motion, care as synonymous with carework precedes the formal subsumption of reproductive labour by capital for the reproduction of the bearers of labour-power and a society where labour-power is exchanged for a wage. Under the specific historical conditions of capitalism care can of course be commodified, yet because its concrete practice continues to propel the dialectic that is the ontological ground of human recognition, some residue of the labour of care will always remain free from commodification. Following this potentiality, care is a moment of *negation* in the dialectic of recognition, an irreducible condition of its motion: the root of social reproduction is care itself. We might in conclusion recall Becker's reflections on familial love, and thus contrast the resources offered by the liberal tradition and the Marxist tradition to account for our need for each other's care to survive and thrive.



## Chapter Two: The Radical Centre—Progressive and Reactionary Liberal Activist-Influencers

To locate elisions of a rich and multifaceted concept of labour it is first necessary to locate bodies of discourse to read. This thesis's contention is that liberal discourses can *only* proceed by eliding labour as a “concept in motion”: that is, as a concept able to account dialectically for the intertwining of waged and non-waged labour processes, as well as for the ever-proliferating forms that human labour contemporaneously assumes. This of course includes the historically unwaged and invisibilised labour of social reproduction, and especially of carework. To claim that a discursive tradition proceeds and develops by setting conditions for what can concretely come to be – and what can be understood – is also to make an ontological claim; to posit a fundamental discursive structure, or in this case a structure of absence. As such, it is clear that we must turn to liberal discourses. The term “liberal” is fluid and indeterminate, and is used to describe a multitude of different political positions. It can be a label with which subjects and groups earnestly identify, or a term of abuse or derision. Regardless, liberalism as an ideology and a programmatic political tendency remains grounded in “the free market”, individual free choice, responsibility and entrepreneurship (which does not mean that liberals cannot advocate for a strong and generous welfare state), as well as notions of cultural cosmopolitanism, the free movement of capital (and to a lesser extent labour) across national borders and an ever-evolving tradition of inherent individual rights that tends towards a Western-centric and ahistorical understanding of politics, history, and the social. Both Clementine Ford and Jordan Peterson are captured by this definition of liberalism. Respectively embodying a feminism that is progressive yet individualist and a reactionary patriarchy that claims universality, they exist at opposite extremes of the liberal mainstream.

Liberal discourse, like all political discourse, is most fruitful for the researcher when it aims at social change. Underpinning ontological structures and overarching epistemological frameworks are more clearly visible when discourses put forward political strategies and emancipatory programs. For the activists under consideration here, ostensibly emancipatory political discourses intersect with discourses of individuated emancipation whose material end is self-actualisation grounded in

deeper political awareness.<sup>22</sup> All discourses are “political” to varying degrees, yet when they are produced to highlight that things (and people) are not as they should be, offering a vision of a different world and perhaps even detailing how to arrive there: this is when we are best able to grasp discourses by their root. Put simply, when such conditions are in play the “truth” the discourse is trying to express is revealed. Following Fraser (2020, p. 82), we see that

...leading publics often have a heavy hand in defining what is “political” in the discursive sense...Smaller, counter-hegemonic publics, by contrast, generally lack the power to politicize issues in this way...What must be grasped here are the processes by which some matters break out of zones of discursive privacy...so as to become foci of generalized contestation.

Liberalism, even at its most radical poles, remains the ideological core of Fraser’s “leading publics”; despite numerous discourses and ideologies contesting for hegemony at the time of writing it remains the strongest force, although its “common sense” legitimacy may well be maintained less by mass conviction than by a stagnant media, political and institutional establishment.<sup>23</sup> As such, this thesis will examine discourse produced by liberal activists, recalling the broad definition of liberalism outlined above as well as Locke and Berlin’s definitions in the *Introduction*. We might call the discursive arena in which such activists operate the “radical centre”. The radical centre accommodates and assimilates a variety of ideological currents, enfolding progressive and reactionary discourses as its boundaries expand and contract; by definition, however, political programs that issue from it remain overdetermined by a liberal rationality. In this way, hegemonic ideologies can appear as radical modes of comprehending the world, even as the possibilities they offer for changing it ensure the endurance of the *status quo*.

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<sup>22</sup> Akane Kanai notes how “the language of self-actualization, personal growth and feminism are increasingly entangled in feminist identities” (2020, p. 31).

<sup>23</sup> Detailed examination of Israel’s live-streamed genocide in Gaza falls outside the scope of this thesis, but wide-spread support for the monstrous actions of the Zionist regime amongst the liberal political and media establishment in the Global North have further eroded liberalism’s legitimacy.

Within the radical centre we can find a number of tensions, and with a general acceleration in the speed of communication and information flows comes an acceleration of the entangled material and discursive practices by which specific matters become “foci of generalized contestation”. Particularly applicable here is the progressive feminist tendency represented by Clementine Ford and the reactionary patriarchal tendency represented by Jordan Peterson. At opposite poles of the radical centre, the discourse produced by these liberal activists reveals “the historically and culturally specific ensembles of discursive resources available to members of a given social collectivity in pressing claims against one another” (Fraser 2020, p. 76). Both Peterson and Ford would claim that the *other’s* broad political project is hegemonic: social media’s tendency towards polarisation ensures each could mount a case, yet ultimately the difference between them is more one of style than substance. Early in her first book *Fight Like A Girl*, Ford (2018b, p. 23) states that to identify as female is “to feel subjugated and alone, to know that the words you say, the ideas you have and the gifts you can contribute are all considered null and void unless you offer them in a way that maintains the status quo”. Peterson, by contrast, argues about “the myth of male dominance”, posting on his Instagram page that “a huge proportion of people who are seriously disaffected are men. Most people in prison are men...People who do worse in school are men. It’s like, where’s the dominance here, precisely?” (jordan.b.peterson 2022a). These opposing claims highlight the tensions that liberal discourse can accommodate, and underscore the logic of selecting Peterson and Ford as exemplars of contrasting yet related liberal tendencies.

In selecting two representatives of contemporary liberal activist discourse, the primary focus will be on social media content produced in the recent past: what I call the “first pandemic half-year”, from April to September 2020. This was a period of undisputed global crisis in which terms like “mutual aid” and “care” saw a dramatic increase in use and visibility, although in practice these terms represented an immense variety of labour practices. Was there a corresponding extension or expansion of the concept of labour deployed by producers of liberal discourse during the first pandemic half-year? This can only be suggested more or less tentatively within this project: examining prominent individuals as representatives of dominant discourses – note that comments in response to posts will not form part of my

dataset – implies the acceptance of a kind of cultural distillation that in turn prohibits sweeping claims about the present. Further, it is impossible to say with certainty whether the community-scale practices described by terms like “mutual aid” have continued to proliferate or have rather returned to a more or less neoliberal norm, or even perhaps to something else entirely. Might a decisive shift go unreported because we lack the capacity to name it? A rigorous discourse analysis can shed some light on these questions by tracking trends that either align with or diverge from historical tendencies, but it must be reiterated that any such light will be far from radiant; liberal discourse as a field is constantly in flux, and the actors and tendencies that constituted the online radical centre in 2020 may not be those who constitute it today.

Regardless, a crisis is surely revelatory with regards to *structural absence*. If a discursive tradition struggles to name or describe what has come to the surface – what has come to *be* – then claims that the tradition proceeds by eliding it are surely strengthened. Zooming in, the arena where we are most likely to see whether discursive tendencies have changed (or not) is social media. Social media responds in real time to events as they occur, even as it sets out parameters which influence how subjects engage with and shape future events: numerous feedback loops are created between what happens online and what happens offline. Although “classical liberal” discourse has historically proceeded with human labour’s multivalent potentialities structurally absent (as we will see in the following chapters), to trace contemporary instances of such absence discourse produced for consumption and dissemination via social media will be most fruitful, both in quantitative and qualitative terms. Did the first pandemic half-year produce a rupture in liberal discourse’s pattern of elisions, as we might expect? Do the representatives of liberal activist discourse studied here diverge from their characteristic “flatness” and bend their character arcs and discursive tendencies in response to increasing socio-cultural complexity?

## Social Media as Discursive Space

Social media is indisputably an arena where our social relations are expressed, contested and defined. Sprawling across multiple platforms and entangling billions of unique human users, the term “social media” perhaps does not do full justice to the digital ecosystem in which so many of us spend so much of our time. Social, yes, in that it is a system that facilitates and mediates interactions between different groups and individuals, comprising “websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking” (2021). But social media is also *infra-social* – an underpinning that is always-already present and that always-already mediates our sociality. Think of dating apps, for example, where users first interact by viewing a profile that might express a very different subjectivity from the actual human agent who created it, even as the profile and the “ideal subject” it presents form an ineluctable part of that individual’s self-conception and ongoing process of subjectification. Such profiles shape the recognition of their creator by “the other” as the abstract sum of all social actors,<sup>24</sup> and yet also by numerous concrete individual others on the platform. How individuals then communicate, or establish some kind of social bond, is from the outset anchored in profiles already mediated and constructed via each subject’s experience as a subject *on* and *of* social media.

Social media is also *extra-social*. It constitutes in its totality the abstract sum of all the thoughts, feelings, interlocutions, interactions and reactions that are expressed on the aforementioned “websites and applications”. It is the ineffable epistemic mass that congeals from this multitude of fragmented yet interwoven micro-communications, an overhanging and overdetermining cultural omniscience that is simultaneously the vanguard of value extraction and the aether into which both the vital and the trivial constantly escape, and from which so much – both of real and of no consequence – constantly rains down. As a whole, it constitutes a totality that is

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<sup>24</sup> Here tropes can and do proliferate. The shaping of romantic life by digital platforms, and the subsequent memeification of repeated patterns of behaviour, physical appearance, communication styles and even sexual identifications, has generated a deeply felt and collectively understood taxonomy that is both rich and shallow. Everyone is an avatar at some level, and perhaps the collectively felt taxonomies that have emerged via the often absurd logic of our communications infrastructure are gestures towards a kind of collectivity that, paradoxically, might only be possible to think within the isolation and echo chambers that are typical of social media.

an amorphous unity of the diverse: both immaterial and resolutely “real”, ephemeral and enduring, an agglomeration where recreation and labour and apathy and intense politicisation occur simultaneously and exist coterminously. As Paulo Gerbaudo (2012, p. 5) describes:

[S]ocial media have been chiefly responsible for the construction of a *choreography of assembly* as a process of symbolic construction of public space which facilitates and guides the physical *assembling* of a highly dispersed and individualised consistency.

To critically read social media is necessarily to parse a vast amount of information, however it is also to encounter almost infinite repetition: the relentless unfolding of comment threads, the memes whose recognition signals in- or out-sider positionality, the clichés and tropes that shape almost every substantial public conversation and define the contours of what is expressible therein. Radical expressions of emancipatory possibility are expressed and disseminated, yet remain at a deep level imprisoned within networks engineered by and for capital, as “communication functions symptomatically to produce its own negation” (Dean 2005, p. 58). Meanwhile, the most reactionary and indeed fascist tendencies overflow from points of tension with algorithmic acceptability.

As a space for political organising, social media hosts a multitude of activist ecosystems, from the far-right’s encrypted messaging channels, hysterical Facebook groups, unhinged conspiratorial podcasts and YouTube channels to the cliquey, ultra-sensitive and often vicious X/Twitter threads and Instagram pages where certain kinds of left-wing politics are enacted. Emma Dabiri (2021, p. 11) contends that “empty, meaningless, performative gestures” are “the substance (or lack thereof) of online activism more generally...We seem to have replaced *doing anything* with *saying something*, in a space where the word ‘conversation’ has achieved an obscenely inflated importance as a substitute for action”. There is much that rings true in Dabiri’s analysis, particularly as it applies to progressive liberals or those on the left, however it is undeniable that far-right online discourse has encouraged and supported “IRL” (in real life) political violence on numerous occasions. The real world

actions of neo-Nazis, incels, Q-Anon cultists and the like demonstrate that the consequences of online activism can be far from empty, meaningless gestures.

For us, in reading for consistent elisions of a rich and multifaceted concept of labour, the vastness of information alluded to above must be distilled into a data-set that is both large enough to demonstrate this thesis's propositions and small enough to be manageable as a set of data that must be read closely. These parameters are another reason to focus on discourse produced during the first half-year of the Covid-19 pandemic, which was a period of time in the recent past that is bounded and shaped by transformative events whose full societal repercussions will likely not be clear for some time yet. Similarly, the need to work with a large but manageable amount of data provides another justification for selecting Clementine Ford and Jordan Peterson as producers of the discourse I will analyse. As avatars of two different but related kinds of contemporary liberal activism, and of online or social media activism in particular, the disparity between the "reach" of each must be acknowledged. Whilst Ford is surely Australia's best known feminist, and perhaps even our best known "political radical" (she is certainly the *bête noire* of online Australian misogyny and men's rights activists), Peterson was almost certainly the most famous "public intellectual" in the English-speaking world in 2020.<sup>25</sup> This disproportion between their audience reach may seem both incongruous and potentially injurious to this research project, however the (covert) similarities between the two make them uniquely representative of the variegated terrain of contemporary liberalism: evidence of structural elisions will be more convincing if locatable at opposite ends of the same broad field. Further, if their popularity is considered in relative terms (i.e. Ford's Instagram followers per the population of Australia, and Peterson's per worldwide native English speakers) we see that their online followings do correspond.<sup>26</sup> The myriad differences between their political views are obvious to anyone passingly familiar with both figures, and will emerge in greater detail as this

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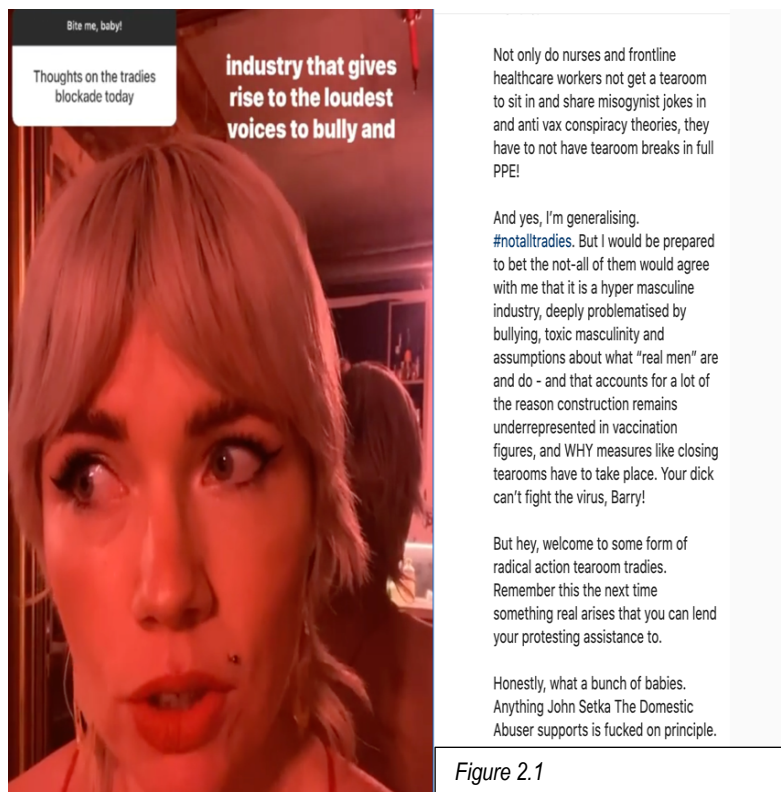
<sup>25</sup> The tagline on the front cover of Peterson's 2021 book *Beyond Order: Twelve More Rules for Life* read "The most influential public intellectual in the Western world right now". His most recent book *We Who Wrestle With God* did not feature endorsements on either the front or back cover.

<sup>26</sup> As at 15 December 2021, Ford had 193,000 Instagram followers, and the Australian population was roughly 25,690,000. Peterson had 2,700,000 Instagram followers, out of a world of native English speakers (the "Anglosphere") of about 360,000,000 (Lyons 2021). Dividing these numbers by each other gives almost exactly the same ratio: 133.11 in Ford's case, 133.33 in Peterson's.

thesis progresses, so it will be useful here to outline some commonalities between these two (in)famous provocateurs, “public intellectuals” and social media titans. Whilst the content they produce for social media, and for Instagram in particular, is what I will work with in order to answer this thesis’s research questions, I will also consider their various books – as well as articles, interviews, podcasts and videos – in order to trace consistent stylistic traits. Close attention to the poetics and aesthetics of Ford’s and Peterson’s discourses – consistently deployed metaphors, tropes, terms, phrases, affective modes and images – will ensure that continuities and shifts can be identified. The variance or lack thereof in their communication styles across different mediums will likewise be examined, which might provide insights into how the discursive tradition they are both part of is developing in an era where the effects of near ubiquitous social media use on our subjectivities and the social body are still very much uncertain. As mentioned, however, the main body of data that will be considered is from the first pandemic half-year, where some evolution in the thinking of labour as a concept, in addition to the development of Ford and Peterson’s social media personas, might reasonably be expected.



To commence with the most obvious commonalities, both figures are hugely popular as well as hugely divisive. Both combine activism, self-help and monetised or branded content in the online discourse they produce. Both figures also embrace an antagonistic mode of relating to the those members of the public – or of “publics” in Fraser’s sense – not on their side, and in both cases this seems predicated



simultaneously on sincere political belief and a savvy understanding of the logic of the social media platforms on which they operate: content that is antagonistic, divisive or “controversial” is far more likely to be viewed, commented on and shared. In September 2021, Ford commented on a strike that took place amongst construction workers in Melbourne, partly prompted

by a state government directive that they wear PPE (personal protective equipment) on site, including during their breaks. Ford responded by taunting them (see *Figure 2.1*). Here we can observe a typically strident and divisive example of Ford’s “take-no-prisoners” rhetoric, designed to appeal to her followers and to inflame those already antagonistic or uncommitted with regards to her positionality. What should be noted also, however, is the complete elision of the often radical history of Australian organised labour: “welcome to some form of radical action tearoom tradies. Remember this the next time something real arises that you can lend your protesting assistance to”. From the many radical actions taken by the Builder’s Labourers Federation to the CFMEU’s recent campaign to ban the fashionable engineered stone that releases deadly silica dust when cut, Ford’s condescension seems predicated on ignorance. This micro-discursive moment proceeds via

sweeping claims that clearly divide up those addressed by the discourse as “on my side” or “my enemy” – “I would be prepared to bet the not-all of them would agree with me”; “Anything John Setka The Domestic Abuser supports is fucked on principle”.<sup>27</sup> We also find explicitly gendered humour – “Your dick can’t fight the virus, Barry!” – and historical and political inexactitude. This style – angry but tempered with humour, clearly signalling and positioning an in-group for whom the humour will resonate and an out-group for whom the anger is intended, and deploying a kind of liberal elitism that has a long discursive history – is typical of the social media discourse Ford produces. The combination of “red meat” for followers and “bait” for antagonists guarantees clicks and comments, although perhaps the price paid for staying on top of events as they unfold is a degree of disconnection from the broader political traditions that formed Ford’s political consciousness.<sup>28</sup> As a steady stream of events are discursively mediated by Ford as “Clementine Ford”, these same events often appear to occur in isolation, and oppressive structures like “patriarchy” or “capitalism” in which discourses of resistance might be grounded lose much of their specific content.

Peterson belongs to the moderate strain of a discursive tendency that contains outright fascist and neo-Nazi content at its extremes. This doesn’t remove Peterson from the radical centre – anymore than the fact that many socialists and anarchists engage with Ford removes her from it – but rather demonstrates how figures such as Peterson and Ford can act as gatekeepers to more radical discourses and ideas, even as they delineate the boundaries of right and left liberalism.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, Peterson has claimed that “I’ve had thousands of letters from people who were tempted by the blandishments of the radical right, who’ve moved towards the reasonable centre as a

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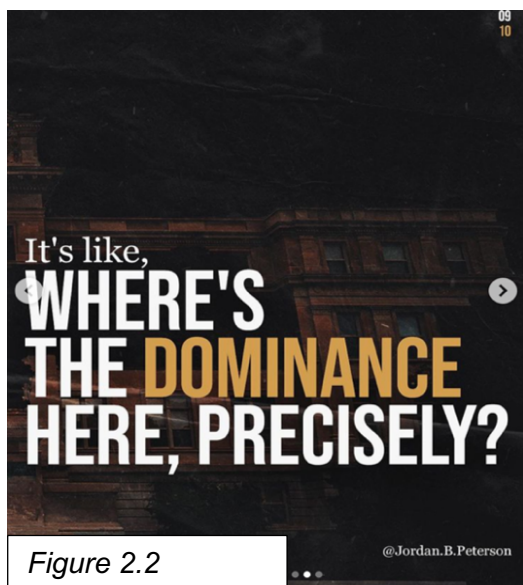
<sup>27</sup> It is worth noting the capitalisation here: it functions as an epithet, a phrase that annuls the possibility of attributing depth to her adversary (my thanks are due to Tom Clark for pointing this out). Instead she defines Setka as a member of a particularly heinous opposition group: he can never be associated with anything “not fucked”.

<sup>28</sup> These traditions are “the Left” or “progressivism”. Ford writes eloquently about her emerging feminist consciousness in the early chapters of *Fight Like a Girl*.

<sup>29</sup> I am unequivocally *not* invoking “horseshoe theory” in comparing Ford and Peterson’s positionalities. Horseshoe theory – where the far left and far right meet – is beloved of the liberal pundit class precisely because it allows them to substitute moral for political positions. The “balance” and “fairness” ostensibly invoked by horseshoe theory are spurious, and it remains a pseudo-intellectual and analytically useless concept.

consequence of watching my videos” (Sanneh 2018). Despite this claim, Alan Finlayson (2021, p. 173) has noted that:

Jordan Peterson, a mainstream figure from the “Intellectual Dark Web”, is connected with fringe participants like Richard Spencer through the appearances each made, discussing IQ, on the YouTube channel run by “Sargon of Akkad”, a Swindon-based UKIP member. Peterson and Spencer are not politically indistinguishable, but the medium brings them into the same discursive universe...literally putting them on the same page of algorithmically generated viewing recommendations.



Likewise, Tanner Mirrlees (2018, p. 62) notes that “Peterson is not a fascist”, yet his consistent use of meaningless but heavily loaded terms like cultural Marxism “when ranting against ‘political correctness’ and ‘social justice’...appeals to reactionaries worldwide...he may be helping the alt-right bring its conspiracy theory of hate into the mainstream”. Indeed, *Figure 2.2* repeats a number of incel and men’s rights activist talking points. We can also observe the brittleness of

Peterson’s humour here, despite its vital role in his discursive armoury. The “precisely” in “It’s like, where’s the dominance, precisely?” is at once a joke about the stupidity and ideological blindness of feminists/social justice warriors/the woke mob and a discursive indicator that Peterson has “won” by exactly revealing a truth concealed by those allied against him (and by extension his overwhelmingly male followers). As opposed to Ford’s earthy and profane “big sister common sense”, Peterson closes his Instagram story with what is obviously intended to be a *coup de grâce*: in speaking the painful but eternal truth he confirms his domination of his opponent and soaks up the applause of the adoring crowd. The most generous reading of this piece of micro-discourse would conclude that Peterson has been very

selective with the examples he has used to indicate that patriarchy and male dominance are myths.<sup>30</sup>

Peterson's beliefs became more extreme over the course of the pandemic. As of February 2023, he regularly posted and shared anti-vaccine and climate denialist content on X/Twitter; his angry and hyperbolic language suggests that he is genuinely enraged about the mainstream position on such issues. His recent political rhetoric (especially since joining *The Daily Wire* in 2022), in combination with universal archetypes and mythology grounding ahistorical and unvarying biological truths, masculine and feminine gender roles and "natural" hierarchies indicate how he might function as a gateway to far-right ideology. Although Peterson's discourse alone is likely not sufficient to "red pill" his followers,<sup>31</sup> it contributes to a discursive ecology where:

[T]he red pill inoculates individuals from infection by liberalism.<sup>32</sup> It's taking is part of a hero's journey across the gap separating conventional thinking from ideas which, because they are "edgy", beyond the boundaries, are proof of the free, independent, spirit articulating them. Thus the red pill trope sanctions unconventional, profane speech, and [is] proof of true insight (Finlayson 2021, p. 179).

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<sup>30</sup> The full text, spread across eight slides, reads: "Jordan Peterson: In what sense is our society male dominated? Helen Lewis: 'The fact that the vast majority of wealth is owned by men, the vast majority of capital is owned by men, women do more unpaid labour...[You're talking about] A tiny proportion of men. A huge proportion of people who are seriously disaffected are men. Most people in prison are men. Most people who are on the street are men. Most victims of violent crime are men. Most people who commit suicide are men. Most people who die in wars are men. People who do worse in school are men. It's like, where's the dominance here, precisely?' (jordan.b.peterson 2022a)

<sup>31</sup> See Finlayson, who describes how:

"Taking the red pill" or being "red pill" names an experience of political-cultural awakening, the revelation that the new class (in media, government and education) is propagating falsehoods in which they do not themselves believe: the universality of humanity, natural equality, progress. Shared stories of taking the red pill are conversion narratives about the struggle to open the mind, of finding the courage to go beyond the boundaries of conventional thought and discourse, accepting that the natural facts of inequality are the basis for true political reasoning (Finlayson 2021, p. 179).

<sup>32</sup> Note that Finlayson is using "liberalism" as it is typically understood in the United States: as synonymous with progressivism/the soft left rather than an alignment with Locke, Smith or Hayek.

We will return to the hero's journey theme shortly, however it is worth noting that Ford also frames herself as journeying across the gap separating conventional from "radical" thinking. "Red-pilled" individuals are her opponents rather than her supporters, and yet many of the techniques identified by Rebecca Lewis in her study of "red-pilled" anti-social justice "political influencers" can also be detected in Ford's discourse. Political influencers – I will substitute the term "activist-influencers" to encompass both progressive and reactionary extremes of the radical centre – use "influencer marketing techniques to impart ideological ideas to their audiences", among these "ideological testimonials, political self-branding...and the strategic use of controversy" (Lewis 2018, p. 5 - 6). Such individuals invariably operate across a number of social media platforms: positioned "at the intersection of ideological disagreements and personal conflict", they often target "individuals and treat...them as proxies for progressive ideology" (2018, p. 24). Further, such influencers "recount ideological testimonials that frame ideology in terms of personal growth and self-betterment" (Lewis 2018, p. 25), which aligns with social media's highly polarised discursive tendency, wherein "information consumption is less about factually correct or incorrect information than it is about rallying around a collective *social identity*" (Lewis 2018, p. 20). Lewis's study is specifically about those on the political right, but we can find Ford employing all of these strategies.

Relatedly, in Peterson as in Ford's discourse we find a poetics that oscillates between anger and humour, with the former increasingly prominent and almost always directed towards "others" or the enemy. Like Ford, Peterson both mercilessly attacks and genuinely fears those not on his side. As a woman, however, Ford obviously has very sound reasons to be afraid of men: women are regularly murdered by their partners or ex-partners, and rates of sexual violence remain devastatingly high.<sup>33</sup> It is possible to understand Peterson's antipathy towards feminism as proceeding from his signature hybrid of Jung, behaviourism, free market economics and social conservatism, but he has given little attention to the breadth

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<sup>33</sup> "One woman was killed every eleven days...by an intimate partner on average in 2022–23...Over 1 in 5 (22% or 2.2 million) women have experienced sexual violence since the age of 15". See the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's recent report for up-to-date Australian figures. (*Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence* 2024).

and depth of political thought of those he regards as not on his side.<sup>34</sup> By contrast, Ford has certainly explored the ways in which patriarchy harms men: this disparity is perhaps a function of their respective political positions at the extremes of right and left liberalism, however Peterson enjoyed a lengthy if unremarkable academic career before finding celebrity in his 50s. While Ford's casual elision of radical labour struggles in *Figure 2.1* is glaring, Peterson's hostility towards ideas and thinkers it is clear he hasn't seriously engaged with is perhaps more egregious. An elitism that we can trace throughout the history of liberal thought grounds Peterson's tendency to dismiss out of hand ideas he considers suspect, and as with Ford this elitism – in combination with the extreme velocity that is social media's temporal structure – produces a constant stream of micro-discourse that can only locate connections between events by evoking “terrible” abstractions. For Peterson it is cultural Marxists, feminists and social justice warriors who constitute the forces of tyranny and oppression, but again these forces have no concrete content: Peterson at times uses terms so loosely and interchangeably that his entire rhetorical repertoire could be boiled down to a list of signifiers for “good” and a list of signifiers for “evil”. Indeed, the labels “good” or “not good” are descriptors Peterson employs across circumstances both banal and momentous: “We can die. That’s not good, and we don’t feel good about it. If we did, we would seek death, and then we would die” (2018a, p. 101). Peterson sticks doggedly to this dualistic mode of thinking, positing an “underlying fundamentally bipartisan conceptual subdivision...the structure of the brain itself at a gross morphological level appears to reflect this duality. This, to me, indicates the fundamental, beyond-the-metaphorical reality of this symbolically feminine/masculine divide” (2018a, p. 47 - 48). His frequent invocations of transhistorical archetypes like (masculine) order and (feminine) chaos logically follow, however the fixedness of thought grounded in context-less archetypes forecloses any possibility or indeed desirability of addressing unequal social relations. Indeed, Peterson at times deploys what are effectively just-so stories to explain phenomena like poverty and ecological destruction:

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<sup>34</sup> See Haider's pertinent critique: “We do not need to produce a myth of the pure and uncorrupted writings of Derrida...rather, we simply need to recognize, as Derrida both insisted and practiced in his own work, that the ‘deconstruction’ of a metaphysics of presence requires close reading. This begins at least with something Peterson has not done: actually opening the book” (Haider 2018).

It's winner-take-all in the lobster world, just as it is in human societies, where the top 1 percent have as much loot as the bottom 50 percent—and where the richest eighty-five people have as much as the bottom three and a half billion. That same brutal principle of unequal distribution applies outside the financial domain—indeed, anywhere that creative production is required (Peterson 2018a, p. 26).

Combining social Darwinism and Friedmanite-neoliberalism, Peterson (2018a, p. 93) also claims that “it's also not for the best that all human corruption is uncritically laid at society's feet...If society is corrupt, but not the individuals within it, then where did the corruption originate? How is it propagated?”. The lack of any social or historical context is particularly stark here, yet once again we can find an inverse logic operating in Ford's (2018b, p. 10) discourse: “Pretty much everything we value is decided for us by an external source that wants either to control us or make money from us, and very often wants both of these things together”.

Here, all human agency disappears as omniscient and omnipresent abstractions always-already determine in advance how we will think and behave. It is difficult to imagine genuine emancipation from such utterly totalising and all-powerful systems, and indeed Ford (2018b, p. 15) soon confirms this: “it doesn't matter how much you want to riot against a system that's inherently predisposed to hate you, actually resisting its influence is a different matter entirely”. Although a willingness to engage with the complex and intersecting structures and forces that exploit and oppress so many is obviously to be applauded, without advancing any kind of thesis as to how patriarchy or capitalism function we are again left with concepts so vague they can signify almost anything. Patriarchy and capitalism are deployed as umbrella terms for an assemblage of practices that range from quotidian micro-aggressions to horrific sexual violence: from human trafficking and sex slavery to inadequate consumer choice. It is true that all of the above can be broadly explained by the existence of “patriarchy” or “capitalism” or an intersection thereof, but we are never shown *how* or *why* these systems exist and control us. Without acknowledging that systems can only function as systems because they are administered and upheld by other human beings – who may also at times resist such systems, and thus might share your interests – critique slides inexorably towards moralism: as a result, anger tends to be

directed towards avatars of those systems (i.e. other individuals) rather than towards the systems themselves. This is partly a function of social media's tendency to act as an "*emotional conduit*...through which organisers have condensed individual sentiments of indignation, anger, pride and a sense of shared victimhood" (Gerbaudo 2012, p. 14); as a corollary, the identification of *systemic* vulnerabilities falls by the wayside. Here we are back in Peterson's lobster tank, and just as Peterson's lobsters reveal that ancient natural hierarchies are "just-so", Ford's just-so stories about social injustice ground and thus instantly abstract the oppressions that her discourse is ostensibly produced to contest.

### Textual Nodes, Flat Characters and The Hero's Journey

In addition to a deep understanding of the logic of social media, both Ford and Peterson have written several books, with these texts acknowledged by critics and journalists as contributing in important ways to how a large number of people understand the contemporary world and their position in it.<sup>35</sup> As both figures achieved fame online before publishing popular books (although Peterson wrote a dense, obscure academic text several years before becoming famous), we can understand their printed works as "already mediatised object[s]...node[s] in a post-digital media network comprising multiple platforms, each with their own affordances" (Weber & Davis 2020, p. 952). Although books define, consolidate and extend Ford and Peterson's discursive ecologies, they are merely one site or node in a constellation of activist discourse inherently mediated through the characters established via the constant output of online content: "social media platforms impart

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<sup>35</sup> A selection of reviews and interviews that demonstrates this proposition is below:

On Peterson: Kelefa Sanneh in *The New Yorker*

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/03/05/jordan-petersons-gospel-of-masculinity>; Tim Lott in *The Guardian UK* <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2018/jan/21/jordan-peterson-self-help-author-12-steps-interview>; Nellie Bowles in *The New York Times*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/18/style/jordan-peterson-12-rules-for-life.html>.

On Ford: Elle Hunt and Brigid Delaney in *The Guardian Australia*

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/nov/01/clementine-ford-pivots-to-love-for-how-long-can-you-be-the-provocative-feminist-voice>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/australia-books-blog/2016/sep/28/clementine-ford-theres-something-really-toxic-with-the-way-men-bond-in-australia>;

Michelle Smith in *The Conversation* <https://theconversation.com/clementine-ford-reveals-the-fragility-behind-toxic-masculinity-in-boys-will-be-boys-103760>; Former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard thanking Ford by name (Clementine) after Ford introduced her before she delivered her famous "Blue Ties Speech" on June 11 2013

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUtOzIz-AZo>.



the habitus of voice-honing and property-maintaining, a literary weigh-station between micro-memoir and book contract” (Kornbluth 2023, p. 99). Their followers’ engagement with, response to and reproduction of their online and offline texts and ideas are integral elements in the flow of information that establishes Ford and Peterson as avatars of contemporary political tendencies. As Peterson (2018a, p. 167) has noted – ironically, in a manner that could be understood as “postmodern” – “You don’t form a comprehensive, objective record. You can’t. You don’t know enough. You just can’t perceive enough...What exactly should be included in the story? Where exactly is the border between events”? In a different context but in a similar vein, Ford (2017) has posited that “surely the one thing we can all say for certain is that we can never really know anyone at all”.

As apprehending any narrative or object of discourse in its totality is impossible, narrative sites and nodes of information multiply, as does the necessity for activist-influencers to address their publics across multiple platforms: X/Twitter posts, Instagram posts, stories and reels, books, interviews, speaking tours, articles, podcasts etc. An argument could be made that the lack of totalising knowledge to which Ford and Peterson refer is simply the result of the epistemic horizon under which they live, and that societies in previous historical periods shared similar understandings of how access to knowledge is mediated: this was certainly true for the thinkers of the post-structuralist turn against which Peterson rails (Foucault and Derrida are the primary targets of his ire. See footnote 34 above). However, there is also something *particular* about the way Peterson and Ford’s discourse is explicitly produced for dissemination as relentless micro-iterations of an overarching narrative about how the world works, what is wrong with it and many of those who inhabit it, and how it should be. In short, social media – where “communication and organisation become almost indistinguishable” (Gerbaudo 2012, p. 135) – creates conditions where activist-influencers like Peterson and Ford are able to construct personas or characters that are synonymous with the discourse they produce. Even more, this epistemic embodiment instantly authorises their discourse as a kind of truth, with validity always-already conferred by the social media ecologies through which their discourse flows. We could understand this as the result of sincere political conviction and the power of their respective messages, or as a cynical exercise in self-branding, where creating controversy and enmity is a marketing

strategy *par excellence* and affecting serious political change a more distant priority—the simultaneous presence of both possibilities is likely closest to the truth. Beyond the individual avatars under consideration here, such contradictions reveal that contemporary social media discourse is ontologically structured by the platforms which host it: perhaps especially in the case of liberal activist-influencers. There is no reason more traditional written or “offline” texts should not evince a similar structuration.

More straight-forwardly, the use of a common emoji – the “smiley” : ) – in the introduction to Peterson’s *Twelve Rules for Life* (p. 17) demonstrates how his books function to consolidate and legitimise his social media output at the same time as they are enmeshed in a nexus of discursive sites. The idea for *Twelve Rules for Life* came from “upvoted” contributions Peterson made to the question and answer platform Quora, and he was motivated to publish it after he had amassed a significant YouTube audience for his lectures. As an unsympathetic reviewer commented, “it seems reasonable to surmise that it was the author’s vast online following — rather than his credentials within his scholarly milieu — that recommended him for publication” (Barekat 2018). Weber and Davis (2020, p. 952) have noted how Ford’s *Fight Like A Girl* uses “the language and modes of address of social media to frame its arguments”. A passage like “We’ll raise approximately zero eyebrows at Japanese sex robots or the thought of sending a bunch of humans to Mars in a box, but NO UNDERARM HAIR PLEASE, IT’S UNNATURAL” (Ford 2018b, p. 13) could certainly function as a tweet. Similarly, addressing the reader by repeating the phrase “We need” and the word “To” (Ford 2018b, p. 44) at the start of successive sentences that deal with social justice issues is a stylistic trope very much evident in progressive social media discourse.<sup>36</sup> The above examples highlight the complex function of more traditional written texts in consolidating Ford and Peterson’s overarching discourses in addition to their personal narrative arcs. The discursive ecology through which both characters address their publics and attempt to shape hegemonic narratives are necessarily composed of multiple sites: in

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<sup>36</sup> The full passage reads: “We need to stop passing on the toxic messages that have travelled down from generation to generation and start creating a new paradigm of what it means to be good. Of what it means to be different. To be diverse. To be valuable. We need to tell our children that they are everything they need to be. We need to tell our girls that their bodies exist for them to use, not for others to look at” (Ford 2018b, p. 44).

practice, social media posts are micro literary excerpts and books extended social media commentary. Ford and Peterson's followers must flit from social media post to traditional written text to interview to article in order to gain an (always incomplete) picture of the world these characters are "showing you the truth of". Simultaneously, the characters "Clementine Ford" and "Jordan Peterson" emerge, embodying a "right way" to live and dispensing "fatherly" – "stand up straight" – or "sisterly" – since 2020, Ford has hosted the podcast "Clementine Ford's Big Sister Hotline" – advice, in the long tradition of self-help discourse. Such discourse is fundamentally about how to understand yourself and consciously shape your development and individuation; how you relate to the world and find meaning in it by actualising a self that is not yet all it could be. As Peterson (2018a, p. 49) tells his readers, "place one foot in what you have mastered and understood and the other in what you are currently exploring and mastering. Then you have positioned yourself where the terror of existence is under control and you are secure, but where you are also alert and engaged. That is where there is something new to master and some way that you can be improved". Deeply entangled with such processes of authorially-epitomised self-actualisation are the authors' respective politics; the powerful individuation narratives that exist in their books and throughout their social media content see Ford and Peterson outlining and spear-heading self-evidently necessary political ideologies at the head of "armies of followers". It is no coincidence that both *Twelve Rules for Life* and *Beyond Order* – and *Fight Like a Girl* and *Boys Will Be Boys* – are heavily autobiographical, drawing extensively on the authors' histories for anecdotes that introduce and circumscribe the political ideas they wish to convey. Their books are thus vital: at the same time, they are merely an extension of the online discourse produced by personas whose verity and validity are constructed and reified on social media platforms, in dialectical relation with those who follow them there.

Beneath these similarities – via which many celebrities or public figures could be compared and found in some sort of congruence – there are connections between Ford and Peterson that are more subtle and perhaps more meaningful, though it is likely that both would be appalled by this notion. Regardless, throughout the rest of this thesis the data analysed will concretely demonstrate exactly how this is the case. Initially, we can examine their language, both online and in print. Ford and

Peterson's poetics – their broad discursive style, achieved via consistently deployed metaphors, tropes, terms and phrases – reveal numerous consistencies with careful reading. Even more, in their framing of themselves and their personal and intellectual journeys we can find deep connections between the two: particularly significant is a consistent discursive method of enlightening others by demonstrating how they themselves have struggled to illuminate (and to a degree conquer) a dark world. Here the narrative of the “hero's journey” is paramount. Both Ford and Peterson are (naturally) the heroes of their respective discourses, and as heroes they are able to blend activism and self-help in a way that speaks both to individuals *qua* individuals (and their individual development) and to the broader political climate; both the movements in which they situate their discourse and the movements against which they commit themselves and their followers to struggle.

Social media heroes are unlike many other heroes, however. As opposed to characters that develop and change on their journeys, social media heroes need to remain the same, so that multiple distinct situations are consistently reflected through already established character parameters that define situations according to the hero's persona, rather than the hero being shaped by their situation *vis a vis* the historical unfolding of events. Social media heroes are therefore what E.M Forster termed “flat characters”. In his study of flat characters *The Supporting Cast*, David Galef (1993, p. 1) notes that “minor characters, if fashioned right...have a singular aspect: their remarkable persistence in the reader's memory”. This is not to suggest that the personas or beliefs that have elevated Peterson and Ford to their current status are trivial or inconsequential. Rather, their flatness arises from the inherent repetitiveness of their discourses: the application of a consistent framing across the many issues they address, the many platforms on which they appear and despite the many different functions – activism, marketing and self-help are the primary and intertwining triad – that their discourses serve. As Galef (1993, p. 2) describes, “the essence of a flat character...is in its limitations: a flat character may be summed up in an epithet”. Ford and Peterson are perhaps not quite *that* flat, yet they tend to impress themselves on both their own publics and on “other” or oppositional publics in a manner conducive to reductionism, a quality precisely pertinent to their flatness: “a flat character is predictable: transfer this character to a new location and she will act as before” (Galef 1993, p. 2). In order to maintain their arcs throughout almost

daily social media updates, and across frequent speaking engagements, articles, profiles and interviews, both Ford and Peterson must flatten out any features that might diverge from what is already established as “true” within the epistemic horizon of their discourse, and indeed of the discourse of their opponents.<sup>37</sup> Via this flattening, which is entirely congruent with the ontological structure of social media, they are able to project the *same* character – and thus this character’s strength and resolution, its heroism and its truth – regardless of the form or function of any particular discursive iteration. We *know* who Ford and Peterson are, and these characters – the heroes who have made and continue to make the *essential* journey through a dark world on which they can uniquely shed light for their followers – remain consistent despite the events they encounter or propel, and despite the crises they may become embroiled in. As archetypal flat characters, they have turned themselves “into symbols for the[ir] overarching theme” (Galef 1993, p. 1).

The knowledge that both followers and opponents share about Ford and Peterson is indisputably the product of expert self-branding and a deep understanding of the logic and power of social media. As critic Pankaj Mishra (2018) describes, “packaged for people brought up on *BuzzFeed* listicles, Peterson’s brand of intellectual populism has risen with stunning velocity; and it is boosted, like the political populisms of our time, by predominantly male and frenzied followers, who seem ever-ready to pummel his critics on social media”. Similarly, “while Ford is operating in public spaces, her work is distinctly personal... This personal lens is a key feature of the content of *Fight Like a Girl*, but the personal is a mediating force—Ford, as public figure, frames the way that the book is read” (Weber & Davis 2020, p. 945). Indeed, there is a simultaneity about the production of content and persona for both Ford and Peterson that recalls Marshall McLuhan’s famous dictum about the medium being the message, or indeed how Baudrillard, building on McLuhan, claimed that “information devours its own content... all contents of meaning are absorbed in the only dominant form of the medium” (1994, p. 79). Simply, Peterson and Ford are created and recreated as “Peterson” and “Ford” in the act of producing

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<sup>37</sup> We should note that Ford consciously framed her 2021 book *How We Love* as an attempt to show a different side of herself, however the necessity of a marketing pivot confirmed how “flat” a character she had developed. Further, “another side” does not necessarily imply a more rounded character – it can just as easily involve the thickening of an existing layer.

any content at all, and precisely because they are utterly indissociable from the particularity of the content they produce, their flatness as characters is absolutely necessary. In this, they represent the paradigmatic shift of the neoliberal subject “from a working self to a self as work in the form of a brand” (Hearn 2012, p. 27). But lest we wander too far into a Baudrillardian (1994, p. 82) “implosion of *the medium and of the real* in a sort of hyperreal nebula” (the consequences of what Peterson in particular has to say can be only too real), we should recall that it was not from a vacuum that either Peterson or Ford arrived as liberal social media activist-influencers. They both have a history and are shaped by history, and both aligned themselves with certain social movements and/or moments in order to build an activist brand and amass an army of followers. Now these followers can be influenced to act, just as they can be marketed to. Here, we are safely back in the “mist enveloped regions” (2013, p. 47) that Marx identified in his discussion of commodities and their fetishism.

Clementine Ford and Jordan Peterson are commodities; they are produced as such both by their own labour *and* via the recognition – the micro-labour or “leisure labour-time” – of others. And just like commodities for Marx, in this recognition they are recognised as:

[T]he results of the process of development ready to hand...The characters that stamp products as commodities, and whose establishment is a necessary preliminary to the circulation of commodities, have already acquired the stability of natural, self-understood forms of social life...man [sic] seeks to decipher, not their historical character, for in his eyes they are immutable, but their meaning (Marx 2013, p. 50).

To apply Marx’s analysis to Ford and Peterson is to stretch it a little but not too much: recall the proliferating varieties of contemporary labour we examined in *Chapter One*. For in the production of themselves as themselves both characters engage in a process of reification: the simultaneous simplification and embodiment of complex issues at which they excel – “Stand up straight with your shoulders back”; “Leave your husband!” – is analogous to how commodities present as straightforward “things” with knowable, common sense functions and yet conceal the complex array of social relations that make their presence and emergence possible.

Without certain strains of liberal discourse or the affordance of social media platforms neither “Clementine Ford” nor “Jordan Peterson” could *be*, yet by superimposing their characters upon certain discursive tendencies they indelibly shape the reception and transmission of these same tendencies. A simultaneous commodification of “idea” and “character” thus occurs: they are what they say, and what they say is expressed in unadulterated form in what they are.

At the heart of both discourses is the heroic individual striving to improve the world by improving themselves, leading an army of self-affirming followers in their wake. On Ford and Peterson’s respective hero’s journeys, we return again and again to fundamentally internal, self-centring and individualist understandings of culture and the social, as well as processes of personal, historical and political change. This is understandable in part due to both figures’ position as social media activist-influencers, and indeed neither is historically unique in making grandiose claims like “the soul of the individual eternally hungers for the heroism of genuine Being” (Peterson 2018a, p. 20). Indeed, we notice in both cases the evocation of a coming-to-be, a quasi-spiritual maturity and fullness of self whose possibility and desirability is opened to their followers in the act of following. Such feelings, states and attainments are available to all – after all, they are packaged and presented as commodities – yet access to this commodified assemblage of political and personal qualities requires alignment with a brand of epistemic verity, a discourse legitimised by its author and an author legitimised by their discourse. Each subject must individually “do the work” of developing themselves in harmony with the ideals they share with these authors, however. Again, this is of course not *unique*: many artists – and indeed many activists – foreground their own being and experience in offering, whether overtly or covertly, some kind of access to something beyond the quotidian. What is particular about the discourses that Peterson and Ford produce and embody is ultimately their reduction to the individual. Peterson (2018a, p. 19) speaks of a quasi-mystical dream over which he pondered for months, before realising that it was telling him what “the great stories of the past continually insist upon: the centre is occupied by the individual”. Less overtly, yet still retaining a pseudo-mystical reverence, we find Ford (2015) claiming “You have to do the work. Because that’s what women do. We do the work. We Make It Happen. We are Champions. We are Heroes. We are Warriors”. Ford’s language alludes more obviously to collectivity

than Peterson's, but again the hero's journey is evoked and is fundamental to the discourse's meaning. Feminism is a hero's quest, undertaken by an army of feminist warriors—armies have commanders, but *warriors* are those who are individually destined to fight. As Tony McKenna (2021, p. 127) has noted in investigating similar discursive trends:

[T]he “warrior woman” in question is every woman, the generic woman – the woman who is abstracted from any socio-historical content. A transcendental template of womanhood per se...bereft of any concrete socio-historical determinations, there is only ever the question of whether you are confident enough, whether you are committed enough, whether you are brave enough.

In deploying the metaphors above, Ford subtly but surely moves feminist politics into the realm of the individual: to reiterate, “while Ford is operating in public spaces, her work is distinctly personal...the personal is a mediating force” which “frames the way [her] book [and indeed all of her discourse] is read” (Weber & Davis 2020, p. 944 - 945). Ford (2018b, p. 11) describes how

...as individuals, we have a vast and magnificent range of identity expressions, hopes, passions, beliefs and fears. The terrain of possibilities that exist inside our hearts is immense – and yet, so often the experience of *being* a woman is one that is suffocating and heartbreaking.

This fundamentally individualist ontology positions the feminist hero's journey as one that is necessarily, even tragically, undertaken alone, just as the subject addressed by Peterson's discourse is the heroic individual engaged in the eternal battle between chaos and order. We might question, however, if only feminist *activists* – those who have the resources and material means to consistently engage in “doing the work” in the online realms where Ford's followers congregate – can be heroes. Do domestic labourers, or feminised subjects whose primary responsibilities are carework and social reproduction, have the same opportunities to become warriors, the same capacity to undergo a transcendent feminist individuation?



Heroes and flat characters alike are discursively constructed so as to stand outside the world of quotidian labour, social reproduction and care. Of course, heroes may be labouring against enormous odds, but their work is always-already in aid of the transformation and actualisation of the self. Similarly, while classic flat characters are likely to be in unglamorous employment, and among their ranks we would doubtless find many performing carework and reproductive labour, their flatness serves to perpetuate and reinforce the discursive invisibilisation of these feminised labour practices. In framing themselves as heroes *and* flat characters, Ford and Peterson tend to elide labour as a rich, multifaceted and dialectical concept. This tendency stems from a shared commitment to a political tradition – and attendant modes of discourse – that can only proceed by eliding the ontological yet profoundly *historical* human capacity to make and enrich the world by our labour. Also denied is the possibility of applying such labour *collectively* in pursuit of a radical transformation of our social relations. In urging their followers to transform the world by following unique paths of self-transformation, Ford's and Peterson's discourses evince related patterns of structural absence. Indeed, they are haunted by what they do not articulate, which the following chapter makes clear. There, I outline how Derrida's concept of *hauntology* informs the reading method which will ultimately be applied to the discourses Ford and Peterson produced during the first pandemic half-year.

## Chapter Three: Hauntological Reading—Time, Nature, Care and Liberal Discourse

First suggestion: haunting is historical...

*Jacques Derrida, Spectres of Marx*

Before we turn to the Instagram discourse produced by Clementine Ford and Jordan Peterson during the first pandemic half-year, we must outline the method of reading we will employ to analyse its politics and poetics. This method is informed by Jacques Derrida's concept of *hauntology*, and yet despite the immanent complexities of Derrida's concept, the method itself is fairly straightforward. In this chapter, I will first outline exactly how hauntology might inform a reading method. We are reading for the elision of a rich, multi-faceted and mutable concept of human labour. If our hypothesis that liberal discourses tend to posit a thin, flat and static concept of labour holds, then liberal accounts of labour should evince a Derridean haunting as they blur, occlude, obscure, limit and halt. How do we trace an emaciated account of labour – an absent presence – across contemporary liberalism's array of discursive arenas?

Bearing this question in mind, this chapter will set out six markers of labour's elision, with each marker supported by examples drawn from Ford's and Peterson's books. The markers are established in detail below and listed for reference on page 238. Selecting "offline" texts to establish each marker reinforces a convergence between the online and the offline that legitimises the discourses of activist-influencers, as well as legitimising activist-influencers as producers of certain brands of discourse. The interpenetration of the online and the offline unite progressive feminist and reactionary patriarchal tendencies in contemporary liberalism; the structuration of offline texts by online tropes is discernible at opposite ends of the radical centre. By the chapter's conclusion, we will be ready to pivot to the empirical component of this thesis: reading Ford's and Peterson's Instagram content to locate consistent instances – the six markers – of labour's elision. While reading online discourses can productively deny text its customary privilege, for this project Instagram posts are the most appropriate object of analysis. Posts offer the potential to combine long videos, audio, photos and slideshows alongside reams of text; they endure long after

“stories” have vanished and are much more versatile than “reels”.<sup>38</sup> Each individual post or iteration of micro-discourse selected will be analysed for evidence that points to the elision of a rich concept of human labour.

### Hauntological Reading?

How might hauntology inform a reading method? Hauntology is a capacious, supple and dialectical concept, and as such it has wide applicability. Of particular relevance is how hauntology “challenges the confines of what is understood as ‘natural’” and “resists our categories of time and knowledge” (Loevlie 2013, p. 347; p. 342). Even more, hauntology is “better described in terms of absence than presence” (Loevlie 2013, p. 339). In reading for the elision (or structural absence) of a rich concept of labour, hauntology – whose “[un]stable...ontology” conveys that “to live is to be haunted” (Loevlie 2013, p. 337) – is an ideal basis for the articulation of a method. But how might we define a rich and multifaceted concept of labour? Such a concept:

- a) accounts for labour both as taking specific historical forms under capitalism *and* as ontologically primary for human beings and human *being*;
- b) recognises that “productive” and “reproductive” labour are always-already intertwined, and:
- c) acknowledges that care – and thus carework, the labour of care – is always-already part of the dialectic of recognition that sets any labour process in motion.

In reading for the elision of labour as described above, what we could deem the “haunting of flat texts” – the liberal tradition’s propulsion by a discursive flattening – seems a logical place to start. Is the elision of labour *structural* for liberal discourse as a totality, and thus for the liberal political tradition? Are liberal texts therefore haunted by what they elide? What political strategies, poetic and aesthetic conventions, ontological claims, epistemic frames and affective modes indicate structural absence? And finally, but by no means least significantly, what do

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<sup>38</sup> Instagram stories typically consist of videos and photos and last only 24 hours. Reels are videos that are a maximum of 90 seconds long, which limits their usefulness as a data source.

consistent elisions and/or discursive hauntings reveal about the emancipatory possibilities of movements informed by liberalism, or the contemporary radical centre?

To answer these questions, the method of reading developed must be *close* as well as hauntological. Hauntological close reading entails examining content, form and function at both macro and micro levels. If content, form and function are understood dialectically, however, the fundamentally intertwining nature of this triad of meaning can be grasped even as we look specifically at its constituent elements. At the level of content, for example, repeated terms, phrases and “affective atmospheres” (Berlant 2011, p. 15) might indicate labour’s elision, whilst formally certain aesthetic devices might operate similarly. It is surely reasonable to hypothesise that the function of each particular iteration of discourse – and of both bodies of discourse overall – is to instigate political and personal change, or self-actualisation via ideological alignment. Posts are therefore couched in terms that are intended to resonate both affectively and logically with the discourse’s receiver: to “reorganize...the relation of affect and feeling to knowledge about living” (Berlant 2008, p. 5).

The receivers of Ford’s and Peterson’s discourses constitute discrete blocs of Fraser’s “leading publics” (see *Chapter Two*), however the consistent use of aesthetic, affective and argumentative tropes aims at condensing these blocs into what Berlant (2011, p. 78) calls “*intimate* publics”. In following each author across multiple discursive sites, an intimacy is generated that prepares the ground for an ideal mode of receptivity to arise, whereby the self-production of the author as a commodity is echoed by a reception which, in a paradox typical of liberalism, is “fundamentally shaped in transactions of feeling, not capital” (Berlant 2011, p. 33). This is not to suggest that we will witness the production of a mass false consciousness. Rather, it is to posit that a method of hauntological close reading can locate discursive strategies whose very instrumentalisation radically limits what Ford and Peterson – and by extension liberal discourses more broadly – can express. Ford and Peterson’s discourses taken in isolation are not sufficient to prove that liberalism proceeds by eliding a rich concept of human labour. Instead, their enmeshment within the liberal tradition allows us to trace continuities between online

and offline and historical and contemporary liberal discourses, and examine liberalism's characteristic structural absences.

### Reading with Hauntology

Hauntology is a concept born without embodiment. “Not present, itself, in flesh and blood” (Derrida 2006 [1994], p. 126), it points to and emerges from the in-between. Outlined and developed by Derrida in *Spectres of Marx* (1993), it is crucial to bear in mind that in French “hantologie” is a pun on “ontologie”—an English rendering of the portmanteau as “haunt”-“ology” is useful to draw out the theoretical potentialities latent in Derrida’s formulation. A haunting implies ghosts, of course, which in turn imply liminality or absent presence. Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality, with being: what *is*, but also what *isn’t*, or isn’t *yet*. Hauntology certainly complicates any simple binary between presence and absence: what isn’t might still come to be, and what is may not be as solid as it seems, or even at risk of melting into air. Describing how the being of what *is* is haunted by the (coming into) being of other possibilities – “‘I am’ would mean ‘I am haunted’” (Derrida 2006 [1994], p. 166) – hauntology is an archetypally Derridean concept, “resum[ing] the work formerly done by concepts such as the trace or *difference*” (Fisher 2012, p. 19). It is also profoundly historical, however: a conceptual possibility that arose in response to the world-changing events that occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s, where Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” thesis appeared as hegemonic common sense after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

In *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida set out (in part) to address the legacy and future of the Marxist tradition at a moment where it appeared to have run out of steam both intellectually and politically. Indeed, with capitalist liberal democracy triumphant at the end of the Cold War, the historical and dialectical movement so fundamental to Marxist understandings of history and society appeared to have been arrested. In the act of halting the multiple and contingent possibilities inherent to thought and action grounded in the Marxist tradition, Derrida (2006 [1994], p. 38) located in dominant liberal discourses “a silence...about Marx’s injunction not just to decipher but to act and to make the deciphering [the interpretation] into a transformation that ‘changes the world’”. Against liberalism’s “ongoing neutralization” (2006 [1994], p. 38) of the

revolutionary potential inherent in the work of Marx and many thinkers and activists inspired by him, Derrida unpicks the triumphant flattening exemplified by Fukuyama and reveals how it condenses political and discursive fields.

We can find similar critiques on the right of politics. Long before Fukuyama proclaimed the “end of history”, Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt (2008 [1932], p. 69) described liberalism’s often unsuccessful tendency to occlude, elide and evade; to narrow the scope of political contestation and present a particular set of social relations and institutional structurations as an inevitable historical destination: “liberalism...has failed to elude the political. Its neutralizations and depoliticizations...are, to be sure, of political significance”. Liberal discourses often posit a linear teleology and a unidirectional history, evoking a seemingly inevitable progression towards greater prosperity and freedom with world-making certitude. This was particularly evident during the period of liberalism’s most secure hegemony (the early to mid-1990s), when Derrida wrote *Spectres of Marx*. At the very moment where discourses of “there is no alternative” to liberal capitalism were most ascendant, Derrida, like Schmitt before him, presciently highlighted how an “ultimate event” remains able to “exceed, *at each moment*, the final term of a *phusis*,<sup>39</sup> such as work, the production, and the *telos* of any history” (Derrida 2006 [1994], p. 45). Under the umbrella of such an event – which remains an abstract universal that different social movements and political forces contest to fill with content – the heterogeneity, multiplicity and potentiality that liberalism’s hegemony closes down still threaten to surface, rupturing discourses and the material reality they represent and setting in motion divergent temporalities and other possible futures.

In short, liberal discourses are only able to posit a notion of liberal capitalism as the end of history by a series of elisions that necessarily haunt the texts that contain them. As Mishra (2020, p. 87) describes, “contradictions and elisions haunted the rhetoric of liberalism from the beginning”. Fukuyama’s reading of Hegel in *The End of History and the Last Man* is instructive here. In claiming that “economic interpretations of history are always incomplete and unsatisfying, because man is not

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<sup>39</sup> “*Phusis* is the ancient Greek word for ‘nature’, cognate with the verb ‘to grow’ (*phuein*); as in English, it can be used both for the natural world as a whole and for the ‘nature’ (i.e., the essential or intrinsic characteristics) of any particular thing, which it has ‘by nature’” (Barney 2005).

simply an economic animal” (1992, p. xvi), Fukuyama gestures beyond the horizon his own discursive tradition has imposed. However, shortly afterwards he describes how

...democratic revolutions abolished the distinction between master and slave by making the former slaves their own masters...The inherently unequal recognition of slaves and masters is replaced by universal and reciprocal recognition, where every citizen recognises the dignity and humanity of every other citizen (1992, p. xvii - xviii).

Setting aside the persistence of actual human slavery in the United States and the colonised world far beyond the revolutions (American and French) he is discussing, we find in Fukuyama’s teleology an elision of exploited labour’s role – in both paid and unpaid guises – as the economic engine of liberal democracy. Grand claims about “universal and reciprocal recognition” and “the dignity and humanity of every other citizen” elide inequality, exploitation and appropriation, whose quotidian persistence haunts Fukuyama’s account. This elision is starkly evident when Fukuyama’s liberal reading of Hegel leads him to posit “the desire for recognition as the motor of history” (1992, p. xix). In “moving beyond the economic”, Fukuyama occludes the fundamental social antagonisms that result from human labour’s productive and value-generating and reproductive and replenishing functions in liberal societies. The historically variable ways in which labour’s multiple embodiments and manifestations congeal into social forces that propel historical development and change whilst simultaneously setting in motion struggles against the very same inequalities our labour helps establish and sustain is another discursive lacuna. As Moishe Postone (2006, p. 165) points out, “people in capitalism constitute their social relations and their history by means of labour...they also are controlled by what they have constituted”. As long as humans continue to labour, history will likewise continue, although such history need not be capitalist. A hauntological approach is uniquely qualified to locate the one-sidedness typical of liberal discourses and exemplified by Fukuyama. Because hauntology relates to temporality – and always to *other* possible temporalities: different pasts, presents and futures – it is an excellent method to analyse liberal discourses, wherein “time” tends to be understood in a reified and linear manner. Liberal discourses posit a

teleological and non-dialectical movement or progression towards social, cultural and political-economic ends, understanding “the historical development of production as a linear technological development” (Postone 2006, p. 199). These accounts vary according to discursive strain, but generally we find an “inevitable” movement of history towards a more enlightened “civilisation”, with the freedom, prosperity and rights of humans blooming in turn.<sup>40</sup> Witness John Stuart Mill’s (2008 [1871], p. 66 - 67) claim that:

Of the features which characterize this progressive economical movement of civilized nations, that which first excites attention, through its intimate connexion with the phenomena of Production, is...the unlimited growth of man’s power over nature...a continual increase of the security of person and property...has always hitherto characterized, and will assuredly continue to characterize, the progress of civilized society.

Fukuyama similarly contends that “modern natural science establishes a uniform horizon of economic production possibilities...*the logic* of modern natural science would seem to *dictate* a universal evolution in the direction of capitalism” (1992, p. xiv - xv, italics mine). As liberalism flattens historical possibility and hypostatizes its own teleology, we find consistent reifications of history and time,<sup>41</sup> as well as of “nature” and certain ideas of “the natural”, which in turn sets up a binary with “society”.<sup>42</sup> Even more, we find an elision of human labour as the *ontological ground of historical possibility*: crucially for us, the labour of care as a series of reciprocal processes in which human beings’ interdependence and relationality are embodied is also elided. The care for each other that underpins the myriad forms human labour takes throughout history is liberalism’s discursive elision *par excellence*, and articulating the concept of “carework” – which involves “caring *more* and in ways that

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<sup>40</sup> For more pessimistic strains of liberalism, history’s overarching trajectory towards an ideal civilisation is not seen as inevitable. Achieving “progress” can thus involve a range of reactionary measures, from highly regressive taxation to the suppression of basic democratic freedoms.

<sup>41</sup> Jason Moore (2015, p. 170) describes how liberalism substitutes “highly linear notions of time and space for historical-geographical change”.

<sup>42</sup> The colonial project and the construction of the “savage” in opposition to the civilised European subject remains pivotal to liberal imaginaries and the distinction they draw between “nature” and “society”. See particularly Moore’s “Introduction” to *Capitalism in the Web of Life*.



remain experimental and extensive by current standards” (Chatzidakis et al. 2020, p. 41) – is on one level simply an overdue theoretical acknowledgement of this. Although we can of course speak of specific varieties of carework that exist under capitalism – like labour itself, the labour of care is both transhistorical and historically specific – regardless of the economic system under which it takes place, the reciprocal relations and labour-processes that comprise carework “are all activities that take time” (Dowling 2021, p. 137). Indeed, whatever its discursive position or what form it takes, whether considered ontologically or as the measure of value under capitalism, labour is always a relation of the human subject to time. Similarly, and always proceeding with dialectical motion, human history and society is:

[B]orn of a relation... This double *socius*, binds *on the one hand* men [sic] to each other. It associates them insofar as they have been for all times interested in time... the time or the duration of labour, and this in all cultures and at all stages of techno-economic development. This *socius*, then, binds “men” who are first of all experiences of time (Derrida 2006 [1994], p. 193).

In *The Accumulation of Capital*, Rosa Luxemburg (2016 [1912], p. 262 ; p. 265) described how capitalist societies remain dependent upon non-capitalist social relations in order for capital accumulation to continue:

[E]ven in its full maturity, capitalism depends in all of its relations on the simultaneous existence of noncapitalist strata... The accumulation process of capital is tied to noncapitalist forms of production... capital is characterized by a powerful drive to conquer these territories... Capitalism requires noncapitalist forms of production for its existence and further development.

In the clash between capitalist and pre- or noncapitalist realms we find coexisting temporalities, ontologies and epistemologies that can be very different. Indeed, in their conjunction they are likely to produce conflict at intra and inter-subjective as well as social levels. What *is* is experienced as a certain flow of time and relation to “nature” and to others, yet different flows and relations exist coterminously and structure “reality” in different ways, despite liberal capitalism’s always contested (and

as of 2024 unravelling) hegemony. With a discourse analysis informed by hauntology, the liberal notion of a unidirectional and universal experience of time begins to dissolve, and the multiplicity of meanings and temporal possibilities that haunt the “truth” of the present moment, as well as the past and future, are unveiled.

Hopefully it is now clearer why hauntological close reading will be the method applied. Hauntology informs a materialist discourse analysis that is dialectical rather than merely critical in approach: it is only by the simultaneous abstract and concrete motion of the dialectic that we are able to capture the nonlinearity that arises via the clash and coexistence of concurrently present yet divergent temporalities, ontologies and epistemologies. The possibility of absent meanings and temporalities that hauntology evokes is especially pertinent when it comes to human labour, which operates *ontologically* – as a subject and world making process – *epistemologically* – as producing horizons of understanding in the concrete process of its undertaking, both individually and collectively – and *temporally*, as a measure of time. Indeed, using hauntology to inform a reading method immediately relates that method to time. We have also seen that labour itself is a measure of time, and, even more, that human beings are ontologically “experiences of time” (Derrida 2006 [1994], p. 193). As such, the first two markers of labour’s elision relate to the representation of *time* in liberal discourse.

#### Marker One: Time as strictly linear, unidirectional and experienced in common

The temporal multiplicity that Derrida describes via the concept of hauntology is occluded throughout the liberal tradition. We find this in pessimistic accounts like Hayek’s – or even Hobbes’s, if we permit ourselves to situate him at the origin – as well as in the generally optimistic projections of say Mill or Smith. Regardless of discursive tenor, however, for liberals time’s multitudinousness is quite literally unthinkable, outside the realm of epistemic possibility. On a temporally modest or quotidian scale, liberal discourse tends towards an understanding of time that is uniform and unidirectional. The teleological goals of liberal progress – individual freedom, human rights, free competition in a global free market etc. – are supported by an epistemic framework wherein the possibility that different individuals or communities experience time in different ways depending on their social position or

cultural location is denied. As E.P Thompson (1967, p. 60) outlines, in the (increasingly rare) communities where “social intercourse and labour are intermingled...there is no great sense of conflict between labour and ‘passing the time of day’”. The corollary, which is especially relevant to liberal conceptions of temporal linearity, is that “to men [sic] accustomed to labour timed by the clock, this attitude to labour appears to be wasteful and lacking in urgency” (1967, p. 60). “Time is money”, after all; again, Thompson shows us how “the employer must use the time of his [sic] labourer, and see it is not wasted...Time is now currency: it is not passed but spent” (1967, p. 61). If we broadly accept the labour theory of value – and that human beings both make time by their labour and are at an ontological level “experiences of time”, as per Marx and Derrida above – then we can also broadly agree with the hegemonic common sense of the sentiment “time is money”, which Thompson traces as emerging in concert with capitalist social relations.

By contrast, the intermingling of social intercourse and labour are far more “typical” of reproductive labour processes, and this inherent entanglement doubtless underpins the historical invisibilisation of these labour processes under capitalism. As Thompson (1967, p. 79, italics mine) describes

*...one part of the work, with the children and in the home, disclosed itself as necessary and inevitable, rather than as an external imposition. This remains true to this day...the rhythms of women’s work in the home are not wholly attuned to the measurement of the clock...The mother of young children...has not yet altogether moved out of the conventions of “pre-industrial” society.*

A conception of a day-to-day experience of time that is not strictly linear or uniform – where “work” and “leisure” can blur to a degree – is “permitted” outside of the realm of productive wage labour. As reproductive labour is not conceived of as contributing to capitalist profits, the work discipline imposed on reproductive labourers often manifests discursively as an absence, rather than as injunctions not to “waste time” or to “spend time” productively—precisely the lack of recognition of housework and carework as value-producing labour that the *Wages for Housework* theorists highlighted. A boundary separates reproductive from productive and time-disciplined labour in liberal discourses; although in practice this boundary is porous,

reproductive labour and carework are in a dual sense “timeless”. First, they are processes of labour that never “end”, as they begin immediately upon awakening and cease only with sleep: one’s time is both all one’s own and never one’s own at once. Second, they are labour processes which are not *necessarily* abstracted into uniform units—the hours and minutes whose equal division are wage-labour’s measure and common sense foundation. The time of reproductive and caring labour, therefore, is to a degree opposed to “abstract clock time”; such time “is fundamentally tied to the market” (Martineau 2017, p. 219), and from each equal unit of “abstract clock time” a variable but definite portion of labour is extracted to yield surplus-value. Historically feminised labour’s timelessness means that delineating it into common social units so as to structure the work-day and discipline the work-force is not inherent to its undertaking. The structuration of the work-day by “labour timed by the clock” (Thompson 1967, p. 60) brings us back into the realm of the accumulation of capital, where “the time during which the labourer works, is the time during which the capitalist consumes the labour power he [sic] has purchased of him” (Marx 2013, p. 162).

Reproductive labour and carework have a kind of shadow discursive existence outside of strictly linear capitalist time. Consequently, we can locate a contradiction at the very heart of liberal discourses. The flow of time over the course of a 24-hour day is understood as manifesting in much the same way for all subjects, especially since the advent of industrial capitalism. Indeed, “the determination of value by labour time is inseparable from capitalism” (Postone & Reinicke 1974, p. 145), even though those of us who are “productive” spend time wisely and those of us who are “idle” do not. Time-based clichés abound – the majority are variations on the theme “we all have the same 24 hours in the day” – and in eliding how in fact we all have very different amounts of time in the day that *actually belong to us*, such clichés are evidence of how liberal common sense has come to structure how time is understood. This liberal understanding of time structures both the uniformity of hours in the day and the unidirectional linearity of historical progress, yet it “did not...become the dominant form of time overnight” (Martineau 2017, p. 218). Instead, a number of social changes, from the proliferation of clocks to the increasing population of cities, “propagated and forged a temporal infrastructure over a protracted process of diffusion from the fourteenth century on” (Martineau 2017, p.

218), to the point where the understanding of time as uniform and experienced in common by all has become common sense, even though all of us also *know* as common sense that the subjective felt experience of time has enormous variability from hour to hour, day to day and year to year. The common sense of temporal uniformity is continually reinforced by liberal discourses. Indeed, as “the individual” is the subject of liberalism *par excellence*, the discursive profusion of radical differences in the subjective experience and *feel* of time’s flow would be destabilising to a social body made up of competitive individuals struggling to achieve their aims within the same shared units of time. There is a profound irony in how liberalism requires a totalising collective conception of time to function: despite liberal discourses’ fundamental individualism, liberal time – in addition to being strictly linear – is always experienced in common by all subjects.

How does this emaciated concept of time manifest discursively? We can trace it on both macro and micro scales – as either the movement of history<sup>43</sup> or as the flow of hours in a day – but regardless, in liberal discourses an elision of labour in all its richness can be discerned whenever time is conceived as strictly linear and experienced in much the same way by subjects regardless of social or cultural positionality. In describing ideal human functioning on a day to day level, Jordan Peterson urges against any pattern of behaviour that might encourage the subject to drift from temporal normativity, framing the process of subjectification as inherently one of adaption to a linear, unidirectional and common experience of time. In so doing, his discourse points to – and then conceals – the temporal multiplicity and fragmentation that actually exists; the below passage is haunted in a concrete sense by other temporal possibilities, and Peterson (2018a, p. 37) urges his readers to banish these ghosts in order to thrive as competitive individuals:

Every system must play its role properly, and at exactly the right time, or noise and chaos ensue. It is for this reason that routine is so necessary. The acts of life we repeat every day need to be automatized. They must be turned into stable and reliable habits, so they lose their complexity and gain predictability and simplicity....To stand up straight with your shoulders back is to accept the

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<sup>43</sup> This grand historical movement is often called “progress”: see the next section for an explication.

terrible responsibility of life, with eyes wide open. It means deciding to voluntarily transform the chaos of potential into the realities of habitable order. It means adopting the burden of self-conscious vulnerability, and accepting the end of the unconscious paradise of childhood, where finitude and mortality are only dimly comprehended. It means willingly undertaking the sacrifices necessary to generate a productive and meaningful reality.

Submission to a temporality reified by liberal discourse is essential for successful subjectification: the elision of temporal complexity in Peterson's account resonates with Mill's (2008 [1871], p. 264) paternalistic concern with what might result if "the law, by a misplaced indulgence, protects idleness or prodigality from their natural consequences". The passage also highlights Peterson's affective tendency towards po-faced pessimism as well as his consistent deployment of terms and tropes that speak to a primordial and irreducible Manichean framework— Peterson uses "terrible" as an adjective almost 100 times in *Twelve Rules for Life*, and repeated terms like "sacrifice/sacrifices/sacrificed" (114 uses) "evil/evils" (91 uses, not including quotations from others sources) and "burden" (26 uses) can be understood as an attempt to imbue his discourse with a gravitas that bestows a quasi-scholarly absolute truth. In line with the stark, absolute and ultimately biologically-determined divide he posits between good and evil, we find on one side "noise", "chaos" and "complexity", and on the other "routine", "predictability", "simplicity" and "habitable order". Life can only be faced on its own terms by accepting terrible responsibilities and burdens: inculcating the rigidity and temporal obedience that protects us against the terror of chaos is essential for individuation. Entrapment in the eternal present of childhood remains a possibility, however as a possibility it is utterly and absolutely wrong: a "reality" that is meaningless and unproductive awaits those who do not sever such temporal ties. Likewise, to engage or dally with quotidian complexity is to risk the loss of time entirely. Also lost is the possibility of awakening an authentic self by grasping the truth of right and wrong ways of being, which are inextricably bound up with submission to common and unidirectional time.

Peterson's relentless deployment of (ironically) timeless and oppositional archetypes radically limits the "realities" his discourse can address. How much of our time is indeed "ours" is uninterrogated, for example. Rather, our own individual responsibility

for the systems and habits we cultivate determine how meaningful our lives will be—as a corollary, the “evil” that many children in the Global South endure as they spend much of their childhood producing value for others slips beneath the discursive horizon. The guarantor of a meaningful and productive reality is the individual, however in informing his readers of the terrible stakes at play in managing quotidian time Peterson implicitly posits a Big Other or superegoic figure who is qualified to pass judgement on how the individual in question adapts to necessary social norms. The character “Jordan Peterson” seems the most obvious candidate for this role, however in adopting what we might denote a “stern father as Big Other” persona that sits in judgement on the individual he occludes how the transformation of chaos into order can only ever be a collective process. The dialectical intertwining of our labour-processes and social relations direct time’s flow(s), and thus much of the noise and chaos to which we must adjust arises from our dependence on and vulnerability to others. Judith Butler (2006, p. 149 - 150) describes how “vulnerability...impressionability and dependence...can become resources, if we do not ‘resolve’ them too quickly”, and yet Peterson immediately annuls this possibility in demanding that the individual “stand up straight with their shoulders back”. The expanded subjective possibilities that Butler outlines dissolve in Peterson’s discourse as he extols us to “shoulder the burden of Being and take the heroic path”, so that we “each adopt as much responsibility as possible for individual life, society and the world” (2018a, p. 19). Our vulnerability – which exists precisely because we are dependent on others, and others’ labour and care – can only be resolved by the heroic striving of the individual. The possibility that “affective atmospheres are shared, not solitary” also dissolves with Peterson’s radically limited conception of vulnerability: so too does any notion that “affective responses...exemplify shared *historical* time” (Berlant 2011, p. 15). For Peterson, the affective terror that the comprehension of vulnerability produces is only ever experienced alone, despite the necessity of our submission to a common linear temporality: affective and logical paradoxes combine to produce a discourse structured by absence.

The “unconscious paradise of childhood” Peterson describes is also a time of extreme vulnerability, where the risk of mortality inheres precisely due to our lack of “responsible” comprehension of the world and our dependence on others. What is notable, whether we submit to Peterson’s temporality or not, is how this primordial

and life-long dependence on each other is always-already elided. The paths we take from the unconscious paradise of childhood and through the terrible realities of life are at all times contingent on the labour we and others perform and the care we give and receive, but Peterson presents “real life” and (false) “paradise” as two straightforwardly opposed and discrete realms that individuals decide to inhabit or not: the responsibility that we take on by renouncing temporal deviance generates a peculiarly atomised reality. Peterson’s language evokes frailty and danger even if we routinise our habits and accept common and unidirectional time, yet nowhere in the passage above is there a sense of how time’s flow can take radically different forms – blissful, expansive, terrible, contracted or mundane – depending on who we are connected to and what our mutual responsibilities and possibilities are. That life’s terribleness might be alleviated somewhat by the playful passing of time, or by spending idle time with others that we care about, is ruled out also. A paradox is inevitable: the common sense of linear, unidirectional and collective time reifies the individualism necessary to produce responsible capitalist subjects. In eliding labour’s conceptual richness – to return to Mill, the natural consequences of idleness or state indulgence in the form of welfare are surely a reduction in opportunities for capital accumulation and thus the increased productivity and ultimate betterment of the individual – temporal uniformity and linearity are discursively disseminated in the guise of a moral imperative.

#### Marker Two: A teleological conception of time’s motion (history)

Labour makes time in a very real sense, as we have seen above. As we have also seen, in liberal discourses “time” is reified and linear, much like “nature” is given—something “just there”. A concept of labour that grasps it as quite literally making as well as merely taking time is tendentially occluded in liberal discourses, where time is not something we can shape by acting with agency but rather something that happens to us. Hayek (2006 [1960], p. 51) alludes to this when claiming that the liberal tradition’s “essentially valid” foundation explains “the origin of institutions, not in contrivance or design, but in the survival of the successful”. Hayek’s work is useful to ground Marker Two of labour’s elision; throughout we find a number of variations on similar temporal themes. Of particular relevance is his contention that:



In one sense, civilization is progress and progress is civilization...though the growth of income depends in part on the accumulation of capital, more probably depends on our learning to use our resources more effectively for new purposes...the fact that the people of the West are today so far ahead of the others in wealth...is mainly the result of their more effective utilization of knowledge (2006 [1960], p. 36; p. 42).

There is much that can be gleaned from the above passage, however most notable is the concept of “progress” that emerges. When liberals refer to temporality on a grand historical scale, time moves inevitably towards more advanced socio-cultural development, more widespread economic prosperity and greater individual freedom: it is common sense that society be organised in alignment with this natural tendency. As John Rawls opines, “ideally the rules should be set up so that men are led by their predominant interests to act in ways which further socially desirable ends” (1999, p. 48). Such an understanding of time’s motion is deeply intertwined with a particular idea of progress, and this conceptual entanglement arises at root from the anti-dialectical approach to history that is common to liberal discourses. A thinker like Hayek is actually an exception to some degree, as he attests to the unpredictability of social development as well as to humans’ inability to rationally construct such processes. Instead, he posits that “institutions and morals...*evolved* by a process of cumulative growth...it is only within this framework that human reason has grown and can successfully operate” (Hayek 2006 [1960], p. 51, italics mine). In claiming that “our habits and skills, our emotional attitudes, our tools, our institutions—all are...adaptions to past experience which have grown up by selective elimination of less suitable conduct” (2006 [1960], p. 24), there is space for variance and divergence from a strictly unidirectional conception of the progression of time on a historical scale. However, Hayek still posits an inevitable result – totalitarianism – if liberal principles are not a social lodestar. His understanding of historical development may be more sophisticated than many others who produce liberal discourse, as the coexistence of different cultural notions of time’s motion are acknowledged, but a negative teleology nonetheless emerges throughout his work. The “road to serfdom” involves reifying a conception of history that proceeds with

terrible inevitability unless certain political and economic tendencies are checked, as the opening paragraph of his most famous work contends:

When the course of civilization takes an unexpected turn—when, instead of the continuous progress which we have come to expect, we find ourselves threatened by evils...we naturally blame anything but ourselves...Have not all our efforts and hopes been diverted toward greater freedom, justice and prosperity? (Hayek 2007 [1944], p. 65)

Things may go awry, however the “continuous progress” we should expect does not stall of its own accord: the “modern trend toward socialism” (Hayek 2007 [1944], p. 67) is largely responsible for arresting the rightful motion of history, and for Hayek the primary objective for producers of liberal discourse and liberal subjects is to get our civilisation back on track. Forty years of neoliberal hegemony attest to the power of Hayek’s vision, even if some might dispute that greater freedom, justice and prosperity have been the result. Ultimately, however, the temporal logic underpinning Hayek’s pessimism is merely a reversal of Adam Smith’s (1999, p. 508; p. 515) assurance that “commerce and manufactures gradually introduced order and good government, and with them, the liberty and security of individuals...the commerce and manufactures of cities, instead of being the effect, have been the cause and occasion of the improvement and cultivation of the country”. Both accounts elide the exploitation of labour, environmental devastation and colonial plunder that are absolutely necessary for a liberal capitalist social order to emerge and thrive.

Similarly, when notions of inevitable progress (which as we have seen can be negative) and a deterministic teleology structure understandings of history, the possibility for human subjects to labour and care themselves into new sets of social relations are denied. We can see this discursive tendency in the work of Clementine Ford when she discusses “the purpose of women in history” (Ford 2018b, p. 83). Whilst Ford’s critique of women’s stereotypical historical role as housewives and mothers has some salience, we find precisely a teleological and unidirectional account of historical progress when she writes that:

All of these expectations can be traced right back through the purpose of women in history. While men are busy exercising their right to run the world, women are expected to stay busy providing them with comfortable homes...The thrill of supporting a man with our bodies, our children and our unpaid labour is not only supposed to make us happy but is offered as some kind of vital ingredient in the world's evolution (Ford 2018b, p. 83).

Although the historical invisibility of reproductive and caring labour is acknowledged, there is no consideration of the historical emergence, complexity or contingency of feminised labour processes, nor any sense that there has ever been any struggle or contestation as regards social expectations about feminised labour. The ironic deployment of the term "thrill" underlines the ahistorical and teleological tendencies of Ford's discourse. A thrill connotes an electrifying shock of excitement, a "sudden feeling of excitement and pleasure" (2022), and Ford's use of the term is intended to counter the enduring myth of the happy housewife with the drudgery that is women's real life affective experience as carers, parents, domestic labourers and on-demand sexual partners. "Thrill" alludes ironically to the collective aesthetic salience of utopian patriarchal suburbia – epitomised by 1950s middle America – and popular feminist rejections of the same, which Ford's followers recognise particularly in her catchphrase "leave your husband".

Ford extends this ironic mode into a totalising affective and political critique: the "thrill" of each faked orgasm, cleaned kitchen, cooked meal and cared-for child subsides into a general background contentment at being in and knowing one's place. Women accepting *en masse* a kind of affective dissonance is necessary for patriarchy to continue to structure the world and its evolution. Ford's use of "thrill" – fading to "make us happy" – constrains the "world" her discourse can address, however. In ironically outlining an image of stultifying suburban boredom, where subordinated women are grateful for the crumbs they receive from the patriarchal table and thrilled to administer the domestic kingdom whilst their husbands run the world, Ford merely opposes one idyllic illusion to its opposite; there, rebellious women who refuse to know their place set out without husbands and children – and without doing the dishes, although Ford does market cleaning products – to have their turn at "running the world". The teleological thrust of history towards greater

progress under the aegis of liberal capitalism isn't at all checked: Ford's irony simply posits a reversal of its subjects, showing that women need and deserve more thrills than are available at home. They too have a *right* to run the world. The evocation of rights situates Ford's discourse squarely within the liberal terrain that her ironic anger is ostensibly mobilised to destroy—we should recall here Ford's contributions to the liberal feminist activist group "Destroy the Joint" (Caro 2013, p. 189 - 198), and how her discourse often evokes metaphorical destruction, "tearing the whole façade down and taking control of the rules ourselves" (Ford 2018b). Far from abolishing the structures that uphold patriarchal capitalism, however, discourses that centre on reversals of subject positions – on who possesses rights and administers rules – treat rights themselves as

...free-floating, disconnected from the structures of contemporary capitalism, unmoored from the historical conditions and defeats that brought them into being. [They] obscure...the fact that not all figures of the human and of community are equally capable of "signifying within the text of human rights" (Whyte 2019, p. 31).

Similarly, the affective mode of ironic anger that Ford consistently deploys in order to upend the existing order seeks to bind the receivers of her discourse together in a "shared atmosphere" that "releases to view a poetics, a theory-in-practice of how a world works" (Berlant 2011, p. 16). But merely reversing the false "thrill" of domestic drudgery for the real thrills available to those who have the right to run the world both fails to address the material root of women's subordination – either historically or in the present – and hypostatizes a notion of liberal progress. History's teleological motion should rightly arc towards women taking over the system: not "destroying the joint" but running it.

The elision of a rich concept of labour in Ford's work is inextricably intertwined with a unidirectional conception of time that produces determinist historical motion and flattens the complexity of feminised labour processes, and thus also the patriarchal oppression she aims to address. For Hayek, "the enjoyment of personal success will be given to large numbers only in a society that, as a whole, progresses fairly rapidly": for Ford, the opportunity for women to meaningfully direct the course of

history emerges only by progressing to a stage where their prescribed enjoyment of unpaid caring labour ceases to be a “vital ingredient in the world’s evolution”. For both Ford *and* Hayek, such movement can of course be negative or diverted from its goal, but in general it tends towards greater rights and freedoms as long as certain social forces (socialism, patriarchy) are constantly contested and thus not determining history. For women to achieve emancipation from patriarchy, for example, reproductive labour and carework must be surpassed or radically reduced rather than collectivised or radically revalued. “Progress” demands – and indeed social evolution should ultimately guarantee – the annihilation of these “natural” and demeaning feminised labour practices: as Ford notes, “referencing patriarchy fell out of favour for a few years... Thankfully, it’s back” (Ford 2018b).

Ford (2018b, p. 16) goes on to describe how “part of patriarchy’s *modus operandi* has always been to keep women tethered to a constructed idea of femininity”, however she enacts precisely the same move in the passage from *Fight Like a Girl* quoted above. In seeking to outline how “the purpose of women in history” has been subordinated to patriarchal and capitalist imperatives – “capitalist goals” are also “the essentialist goals of keeping all members of a community dissatisfied” (2018b, p. 16) – Ford reifies an idea of teleological civilisational progress that culminates in women rising to positions where they too have opportunities to run the world; where women can abandon (although to whom is not specified) the dreary burdens of reproductive labour and take their rightful place as drivers of “that continuous advance that our unequal society fosters” (Hayek 2006 [1960], p. 42). In constructing this feminist subject, Ford’s concept of historical motion is exactly aligned with Hayek’s: it merely tends towards a different ideological outcome. For both, we find that in the teleological thrust of time’s motion, “humans are either completely subsumed by...objective forces or presumed to be somehow exempt from their determinative power” (Weeks 2018, p. 94). Witness Ford’s description of patriarchy as “a system that oppresses everybody” that is “continuously unseen even by those oppressed by it” (Ford 2018a, p. 1), or Hayek’s contention that socialism is so pernicious and pervasive that “many men [sic] who believe themselves to be determined opponents of that system of thought become in fact effective spreaders of its ideas” (Hayek 1949, p. 422).

Men “exercising their right to run the world”, or “patriarchy”, serves a similar function for Ford that “socialism” does for Hayek—a consistently deployed but ultimately abstract evil that individuals committed to freedom, justice and progress must expose and attack at every turn. Ford is writing for a general audience, but this does not explain the devaluation – and thus the elision – of reproductive and caring labour in the passage above. Indeed, in making her point about feminine subjugation Ford simultaneously denies and derides the vital role played by such labour in making subjects and history: feminised labour has not and *should not* be valued precisely because it has historically produced feminised subjects. An underlying ontological essentialism that is coterminous with a teleological understanding of history shifts Ford’s discourse subtly but surely onto the terrain of her enemy, and thus contesting women’s subordination comes at the cost of both reifying gender norms and individualising feminist struggle: historical progress can only be explained by eliding the richness and political potential of historically feminised labour-processes. Instead of challenging her readers to value such work or understand it as a site of resistance, Ford instead demands that women are given the right to administer a structurally sexist neoliberal capitalist system. Here, Ford’s analysis is similar to the feminist systems theories Kathi Weeks (2018, p. 88 - 91) has critiqued:

The “system” is credited with a kind of monolithic force that seems to guarantee its ability to recover from potential challenges to its power...women are only its passive victims. As a result of this emphasis on the agency of the system rather than on the subjects...[these theories are] unable to find anything of value—any potential alternatives—in women’s domestic labour.

The distinction Weeks identifies above can be understood as a paradox that is structural to many different iterations of liberal discourse. In Ford and Hayek’s case, we find that humans cannot but submit to institutions and forces that have inexorably evolved from nature—yet at the same time they must transcend these institutions and forces in order for history to proceed on its rightful course. For Ford, although women have been disadvantaged by history thus far, they nevertheless have a *purpose* within it that is predetermined (by “patriarchy” and its overcoming). Since we have reached an appropriate stage of historical development, as evidenced by the prominence of Ford and similar feminist activist-influencers, this purpose can be

redetermined (by an abstract “feminism” and by individual “feminists”). That in neither the past nor the present do we find women positioned as subjects with the agency to determine their historical role evinces *par excellence* the teleological conception of history that is a marker of the discursive elision of labour.

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Certain ideas of nature are fundamental to liberalism. From Hobbes’s “warre...of every man [sic] against every man” (1968 [1651], p. 185) to Locke’s “state of perfect freedom” (2016 [1689], p. 4); from Hayek’s valorisation of institutional evolution to Becker’s economised articulation of an immutable gender order, the liberal tradition consistently refers to and relies upon a concept of nature that is always-already present and ontologically given, something “just there” that is the absolute inverse of “civilisation”. Framed as both terrible and essential, constructions of nature vary between different liberal discourses, however throughout the tradition the conjunction of two distinct and opposing understandings of nature can consistently be discerned. This duality can be traced via a genealogical reading of liberal texts, wherein there exists an unspoiled “nature” – a place of ideal social relations from which social institutions inexorably evolve, and whose laws should continue to guide the progress of civilisation – as well as a “nature” that is a place of savagery and brutality in which our instinctive and ontologically-constitutive selfishness poses a constant threat to person and property, and from which our laws and institutions (precariously) protect us. At the heart of this contradiction is the elision of a rich concept of labour: after all, “labour is, first of all, a process between man [sic] and nature...he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature” (Marx 2004, p. 283). Equally, “all life is actively, creatively, incessantly engaged in environment-making” (Moore 2015, p. 65). Liberal discourses tend to view “nature” as static and “civilisation” as dynamic, however, which broadly corresponds to the boundary between the spheres of (civilising) production and (natural) reproduction; political projects of either maintaining or overcoming this boundary tend not to consider the conditions of its emergence or its historical specificity. Its *naturalness*, in short, is taken as given. When considering nature and the natural, liberal discourses again tend towards a flatness that annuls human labour’s potentialities: the second two markers of the discursive elision of labour, therefore, relate to liberal notions of nature.

### Marker Three: Nature as an ahistorical given, something “just there”

Liberal discourses consistently deny humans the capacity to determine the development of their histories and societies. Each individual's potential development and “freedom” is elevated over the collective, but the power free individuals ideally have to shape their lives is curiously abstract, derived as it is from “the separate actions of many men [sic] who did not know that they were doing” (Hayek 1958, p. 232). These separate actions occurred – and continue to occur – “as the result of adaptive evolution” (Hayek 1958, p. 232) against a background state of nature—freedom itself, liberalism's *sine qua non*, is indeed “not a state of nature but an artifact of civilisation” (Hayek 1958, p. 229). In short, it is from “nature” conceived as an irreducible origin that civilisation and the civilised free individual emerged. As a result, in liberal discourses insights into the historically variable nature of what “nature” actually is – and the extent to which constructions of nature are dependent on the thoughts and actions of humans themselves – either go unrecognised or are under-theorised. A contradiction at the heart of liberal conceptions of nature contributes to the elision of labour in liberal discourses, and this contradiction is evident from a very early stage of liberalism's discursive development.

In Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, we find “that State all Men [sic] are naturally in, and that is, a State of perfect Freedom” where there is “equality of Men by Nature” (Locke 2016 [1689], p. 4). We also find, however, that “Want of a common judge with Authority, puts all Men [sic] in a state of Nature” (2016 [1689], p. 12); at any moment we might slide back into that realm of conflict and violent competition that is our natural social tendency. Any “natural” freedom and equality of human beings, and the possibility of a society that is structurally free and equal, is always-already undermined by the “nature” of human beings as part of “nature”—“man [sic] [is] by nature lazy and indolent, improvident and wasteful (Hayek 1958, p. 234). The need to protect each individual's property from the inevitable designs of others logically follows. Attaining and preserving individual freedom, therefore, necessitates institutions and codes of behaviour that establish and maintain hierarchies and discipline those who stray from them and their grounding in natural laws. Hayek (2006 [1960], p. 54 - 55) expresses the paradox most eloquently:



It was not “natural liberty” in any literal sense, but the institutions evolved to secure “life, liberty and property”...that had successfully channelled individual efforts to socially beneficial aims...it is probably true that a successful society will always in a large measure be a tradition-bound society.<sup>44</sup>

This passage expresses *par excellence* the paradoxical conceptions of nature that propel liberal discourse. One reified and ahistorical understanding of nature – as something that exists essentially and unchangeably, disclosing inherent social truths if its laws and precepts are followed in moral codes and institutional designs – is coterminous with another, a site of brutal inequality from which civilised humanity has been fortunate to escape and “secure life, liberty and property”. From this state, only that which is strong can survive, or indeed has survived. As such, customs, traditions and institutions find their justification in their long evolution from and continuity with an earlier state of social relations that were nevertheless necessary to overcome. Simultaneously, any further social, cultural or historical development must be constantly surveyed for signs of deviation from nature’s eternal ontological truths, a grounding which enabled the historical flourishing, cultural prominence and discursive dissemination of these same customs, traditions and institutions. “Nature” sets immutable laws which must be followed for civilisation to develop; witness Hayek’s (2006 [1960], p. 130; p. 133) description of how:

A kind of delimitation of individual spheres by rules appears even in animal societies...a sphere belonging to each individual is determined...by the

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<sup>44</sup> Compare Jordan Peterson (2018, p. 94): “we have learned to live together and organize our complex societies slowly and incrementally, over vast stretches of time, and we do not understand with sufficient exactitude why what we are doing works”. Peterson is often very close to a Hayekian epistemology, and Hayek’s famous account of the nature of knowledge in *The Use of Knowledge in Society* has a very Petersonian resonance: “the knowledge of the circumstances of which we must make use never exists in concentrated or integrated form, but solely as the dispersed bits of incomplete and frequently contradictory knowledge which all the separate individuals possess. The economic problem of society...is a problem of the utilization of knowledge not given to anyone in its totality” (Hayek 1945, p. 519 - 520). Likewise, Peterson’s reflections on hierarchy and the evolution of institutions aligns very closely with Hayek: “variance in ability...necessarily engenders a hierarchical structure—based ideally on genuine competence in relation to the goal. Such a hierarchy is in its essence a socially constructed tool that must be employed for the effective accomplishment of necessary and worthwhile tasks...It is a social institution that makes progress and peace possible at the same time” (Peterson 2021, p. 11).

observation of a rule...from the delimitation of a private sphere by rules, a right like that of private property will emerge”.

At the same time, “nature” is at constant risk of re-emerging and/or reimposing its brutality on “civilisation”—if, for example, the private property of individuals is impinged upon by an unexpected evolution of “natural” institutions or laws.

Jordan Peterson exemplifies liberalism’s paradoxical conceptions of nature. It is not by accident but by design that *Twelve Rules for Life* commences with an account of human society’s commonalities with “nature”: at the same time, Peterson claims that human civilisation develops via “natural selection”. Further, the book’s arguments are anchored by examples drawn from the natural sciences. What “nature” is exactly Peterson does not define – even in the subsection “The Nature of Nature” – although he assures us that it is “hell-bent on our destruction” and not to be “conceptualized ...romantically” (2018a, p. 29 - 30). Peterson argues vehemently for nature’s deterministic function, predictably aligning his discourse with Hobbesian and Hayekian notions of nature as terrible and truthful respectively. In affirming that “the order within the chaos and order of Being is all the more ‘natural’ the longer it has lasted...All that matters, from a Darwinian perspective, is permanence” (2018a, p. 30), Peterson’s discourse epitomises both the absolute verity of “nature” and the paradoxical conjunction of the two kinds of “nature” outlined above. For Peterson, as for liberals *en masse*, there is a precarious but absolute boundary between nature and society. Terror and civilisation are absolutely unpliable, and the eruption of nature’s raw reality is allied to the rightful grounding of the latter in the former. Indeed, Hayek (1958, p. 233) points out “how delicate this artificial structure of civilization [is] which rest[s] on man's [sic] more primitive and ferocious instincts being tamed”.

Allusions to the hard yet permeable boundary between nature and society – and the constant risk of transgressing it – can be found throughout the history of liberal discourse. Whether we refer to Mill’s (2008 [1871], p. 72) optimistic certainty that “as civilization spreads...security of property and person becomes established” or Hobbes’s (1968 [1651], p. 215) assurance that “The Laws of Nature are Immutable and Eternal...he [sic] that endeavoureth their performance, fulfilleth them; and he

that fulfilleth the Law, is Just”, liberal discourses express *par excellence* a conception of nature whose opposite is a particular conception of (Western) civilisation or society. Nature is Janus-faced, and its givenness in liberal discourses elides its positionality in these same discourses as a paradoxical binary whose oppositions never come into relation. Peterson (2018a, p. 97 - 98) emphasises how:

Violence, after all, is no mystery. It's peace that's the mystery. Violence is the default. It's easy. It's peace that is difficult: learned, inculcated, *earned*...Children hit first because aggression is innate, although more dominant in some individuals and less in others, and, second, because aggression facilitates desire. It's foolish to assume that such behaviour must be learned. A snake does not have to be taught to strike. It's in the nature of the beast.

A purer distillation of the “terrible” half of liberalism’s discursive paradox regarding nature would be difficult to find. The foolishness of social constructionists who understand human behaviour as structurally yet asymmetrically influenced by social conditions are dangerously ignorant of the veritable power and terror that determine society’s foundation and evolution. Aggression, violence, dominance and ruthless competition are at once the foundation of civilisation and the drivers of civilisational progress. Those who understand this are far better prepared to undertake the heroic journey of life than those who are ignorant of “the nature of the beast”. Peterson frequently deploys the “beast” or “bestly” as a trope as he propels his discourse to an ever-purpler pitch, eventually summoning “the great predatory beast against which mankind [sic] has struggled since the dawn of time” (2018a, p. 192). Ignorant social constructionists, by contrast:

[A]ssume...that aggression is a learned behaviour, and can therefore simply not be taught...Aggression is there at the beginning. There are ancient biological circuits...that underlie defensive and predatory aggression...If the brain is a tree...aggression is there in the very trunk...Aggression underlies the drive to be outstanding, to compete, to win (Peterson 2018a, p. 213 - 214).

Peterson's poetics again evoke the gruelling individual work necessary to tame the beast within and adapt to a world peopled by innately aggressive individuals. This notion of nature is redolent of ancient truths, and thus alternative ways of embodying or even thinking the natural cannot legitimately be taught, and perhaps should not even be thought. Indeed, Peterson refutes the legitimacy of numerous theoretical traditions in the social sciences with one dramatic gesture,<sup>45</sup> emphasising as he does so his discourse's Manichean affective tendencies.

Consistent deployment of social Darwinist tropes posit a lifeworld that is inherently harsh and competitive. The conflation of a certain understanding of nature with truth is starkly evident in Peterson's metaphorical tree, where man's natural aggression – it is worth noting that Peterson almost always uses “he” or “his” as exemplary pronouns – inheres in the “very trunk”, affecting every branch and leaf and thus all possible evolution and development. A tree-trunk is immutable and effectively mute, yet like the primordial brain-stem it can nevertheless “speak” to those who have adapted the ability to listen. These actualised subjects are able to grasp intellectually the terrible truth they already instinctively know; not only is violence “no mystery”, but successfully sublimated violent drives produce outstanding individuals. Such individuals realise that we naturally live in constant danger, and as they adapt and learn to conduct themselves in harmony with this truth they adapt likewise to the natural laws that govern society, freeing themselves from the delusion that we might be able to shape our world so that peace or cooperation rather than violence and competition ultimately determine our ontological background. The relentless absolutism of Peterson's discourse relies heavily on the repetition of terms and tropes that distinguish “reality” – which is terrible, violent, a burden, unjust, inequalitarian and unchanging – from its opposite, an idealised realm divorced from nature and its constraints wherein misguided social constructionists and deconstructionists foolishly insist on levelling natural hierarchies and universal laws. In positing that humans' peacefulness in social relations can and should be cultivated – with greater egalitarianism a corollary – social constructionists implicitly dispute the biologically-determinist Darwinian ethos that Peterson (2018a, p. 221)

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<sup>45</sup> It is worth noting, however, that “Peterson's fantasy of neo-Marxist wolves in postmodern sheep's clothing has little bearing on actual debates in 20th-century political theory” (Haider, 2018).

expounds: “there is something that approximates a universal human ethic, that’s built deeply into our biological and social structures, and that was constructed in no small part because of Darwinian mechanisms”. Peterson further attempts to reveal his opponents’ blindness to an ontological violence that is both structural and irreducible—in declaring that “men have to toughen up. Men demand it, and women want it”, Peterson’s straight talking masculinity is expressed in contrast to the waffling verbiage of effete “post-modern neo-Marxists”, whose “ideology” boils down to the fallacious claim that “*society must be altered, or bias eliminated, until all outcomes are equitable*” (Peterson 2018a, p. 212). Peterson’s terms, tropes and metaphors, as well as the affective modes that inhere in his discourse, ground civilisation in the eternal truths of nature, whose rules and codes alone are really *real*.

Peterson’s output continues a liberal discursive tradition wherein the historical variance in how humans relate to and thus understand nature cannot be properly accounted for. Concomitantly, nature appears as static and unchanging, something merely given to us that is “just there”. Although Peterson (2018a, p. 29) insists that nature is “static and dynamic, at the same time”, he also insists that nature’s “dominance hierarchy, however social or cultural it might appear, has been around for some half a billion years. It’s permanent. It’s real” (2018a, p. 30). Liberalism’s “nature paradox” emerges again at the conclusion of the above passage; Peterson’s short declarative sentences function to establish a formal common sense that belies the metaphysical speculation that is its content. In understanding nature thus, Peterson’s discourse aligns with liberalism’s broader discursive tendency towards an ahistorical flattening, which we can also observe in Hayek’s evocation of the “rules” and “rights” that inexorably evolve from evolutionary processes. Although nature does alter itself via processes of evolutionary selection, what nature actually is – note that Peterson only defines what nature is *not* – does not and cannot change. Consequently, the power of agential human labour to act upon and alter the world that nature gives to us at the same time as it acts upon and alters us is elided. By contrast, a dialectical account of nature underscores that “capitalism makes nature [and] [n]ature makes capitalism” (Moore 2015, p. 18). Nature is neither an absolute origin – a transcendental signified – nor a guarantor of ontological verity. It is only via a dialectical and therefore historical understanding of nature that we can grasp the

full complexity of our interrelations with it. As eco-socialist Jason Moore argues (2015, p. 12), “nature is not ‘just there’. It is historical”. For liberals, by contrast, “nature” is accepted as a pre-theoretical given that inevitably generates certain social relations, regardless of how these are understood. As such, throughout the history of liberal discourses “what was ‘natural’ became a crucible of legitimation” (Moore 2015, p. 11): further, “the boundary setting between what was, and what was not, ‘natural’ was...often deeply racist and patriarchal” (2015, p. 17). Depending on the strain of liberalism in question, nature propagates either ideal or unequal social relations: whether to be valorised or torn down, the origins of the waged, caring and reproductive labour that constitutes and sustains such relations is understood ahistorically, as emerging from an immutable “nature” that cannot be grasped except as an irreducible origin. Ground zero for “civilisation”, nature in its pure state is inaccessible except as an ideal, however its truth – and even more, the truth of the *power* of what springs from it – are beyond contestation. Following Derrida (1998, p. 92), however, we know that ontological foundations and “myths of origin” are not so straight-forward—we have in practice and in discourse a “complicity of origins” wherein “what is lost...is therefore the myth of the simplicity of origin”. Regardless, liberal discourses proceed relentlessly from nature understood as an ahistorical and foundational site of unchangeable discursive truth: we can theorise *from* nature, but not before or beyond it. Nature is an epistemic horizon whose self-evident common sense must be adhered to, despite the political intent of the discourse in question. Whenever such an understanding of nature is present, we are also certain to find a discursive elision of labour.

#### Marker Four: Demarcation of the spheres of production and reproduction

As we saw in *Chapter One*, the spheres of “production” and “reproduction” cannot be neatly prised apart. Despite this, a tendency to artificially demarcate them is present in many traditions, including variants of Marxism. The theoretical impetus to delineate productive from reproductive labour speaks to a need to classify and simplify the complex and ever-evolving totality that is our collective *habitus*: both “natural” and “social”, as we have also seen, this *habitus* emerges and is defined by our interactions with it and its effects upon us, however a flat or one-sided understanding of our quotidian lifeworld follows from liberal discourses’ classifying

and simplifying tendency. The taxonomic thrust of liberal discourses conceals an inability to theorise our habitus and the processes and relations that shape it in terms of motion, of flux and flow: to think from a standpoint that acknowledges that “everything that humans do is a flow of flows” (Moore 2015, p. 7). Whether in reactionary or progressive variants, a hallmark of liberalism is an impulse to locate, define and fix in place – as static categories – what are better understood as dynamic processes.

Liberal feminist scholar Asha Bhandary (2019, p. 5) exemplifies this taxonomic impulse when she distinguishes “‘material caregiving’, which is the labour of caregiving” from “caring in the affective sense”. There are certainly differences between the material practices of care that are carried out as part of waged carework, for example, and the more nebulous or abstract “care” whose presence or absence is part of the (often subconscious) affective aura that enshrouds every human interaction – and every labour process – to almost infinitely varying extents. This latter, more affective and subjective sense of care is likely impossible to consistently quantify; there is therefore a certain logic in distinguishing material practices of carework – or care as verb – from highly personal felt experiences of care (or its lack) as noun. In seeking taxonomic reliability and repeatability, however, Bhandary rules out the possibility of conceiving of care in a dialectical fashion. In demarcating the material – which is assumed to be objective – from the subjective or affective dimensions of care, there is an underpinning reification and universalisation of objectivity. From this fixed concept – whose fixing ensures that *as objective* its content should be more or less consistent and self-evident – we can devise political programs that aim for a more just distribution of and remuneration for care, as Bhandary (2019, p. 8) exemplifies by asking “When a person is entitled to care, from whom are they entitled to receive it?”, but any reciprocal action of the subjective upon the objective, let alone a capacious concept of carework, is annulled at the outset. Again we can observe that liberal discourses need to fix certain concepts in place to proceed, and also how more fluid, dynamic or mobile concepts have limited applicability within liberal epistemologies. Care is at once material, affective, subjective and objective: its practice, embodiment and the “truth” of the experience of it cannot be confined to particular arenas nor absolutely contained by theoretical categories. Care is a dynamic process, a flow: the subjective reality of care traverses

theoretical boundaries and in doing so reveals that the spheres of production and reproduction are always-already intertwined.

By contrast, liberal discourses tend to be structured by the arresting of any movement that isn't linear or unidirectional. A logical result is an inability to elucidate richer and more supple concepts and categories that would acknowledge the dialectical intertwining of practices and theories that resist taxonomic fixity. Crucially, we see in this tendency another marker of the elision of labour in liberal discourse. A flat concept of labour is haunted at the outset by the possibility of multifaceted and dialectical understandings, where production and reproduction are moments of a dialectical process and constantly *in process* as they produce and reproduce a totality that is both "natural" and "social", rather than a space of mere opposition between the two. However, the "separate spheres" of production and reproduction are not – and should not be theorised as – merely oppositional realms that can be brought into relation. Neither is ontologically possible without the other, and each reacts upon and changes the other as their places and meanings shift, intertwine, collapse and arise anew. Moore (2015, p. 3) highlights this process in describing how "humans make environments and environments make humans—and human organization". We can see here an alignment with the dialectical development of social reproduction theory we have already traced, the most sophisticated iterations of which are likewise able to account for the co-constitutive and coterminous creation of human being – and human beings – by labour that is simultaneously productive and reproductive. Liberal discourses tend towards a demarcation of these spheres: witness how Martha Nussbaum (2021, p. 11, *italics mine*) implicitly establishes this when describing how "women have very often been...valued primarily for their contribution as reproducers and care-givers, rather than as *sources of agency and worth* in their own right". The "separate spheres" model that underpins such analyses appears "natural", or more precisely as a set of naturally distinct social domains. This "naturalness" can be valorised or deplored depending on the strain of liberal discourse in question, yet whether expressed as Peterson's "hierarchy" or Ford's "patriarchy", an ontological divide between "the natural" and "the social" reifies a particular set of labour practices and gender relations. The complexity and multiplicity of the labour practices that sustain human beings and their dynamic social relations are ill-captured by liberal taxonomies.



In pointing to the existence of the sphere of reproduction, Ford (2018a, p. 62) draws attention to how “one of the cornerstones of patriarchy is its oppression of women via the enforcement of reproductive and domestic labour”. Ford is certainly correct in her assessment, however she goes on to assert that:

My theory is that “instinctive” child rearing and domestic management live in the minuscule realm of things women are allowed to boast about being good at, because it suits the patriarchal order for us to aspire to greatness within this unpaid and grossly underappreciated skillset. Men may be best at running the world, but women are best at running the house—or at least that is what we are supposed to satisfy ourselves with (2018a, p. 55 - 56).

Here is a clear demarcation of the spheres of production and reproduction: Ford alludes to the patriarchal naturalisation of social orders by enclosing the word “instinctive” in scare quotes, yet her discourse remains constrained by the very same reification she alerts her readers to. The “minuscule” realm of things women are “allowed” to boast about being good at has no imbrication or intersection with the realm (of production) in which men run the world. The domestic arena, where women are supposed to be satisfied, is implicitly defined and delineated as marginal and distinct in its very minuscule-ness. Rather than “recognising and embracing our *interdependencies*” (Chatzidakis et al. 2020, p. 5), as *The Care Manifesto* urges, Ford highlights only a series of one-sided dependencies: of women on the approval of an abstract oppressive structure, of men on the essential and underappreciated realm wherein women may aspire to greatness, and of society on certain constructions of what is natural. “Nature” and “Society” – or “Nature/Society—with a capital ‘N’ and a capital ‘S’ (Moore 2015, p. 4) – as a rigid binary ultimately underpins Ford’s discourse and its demarcation of productive and reproductive labour—that she points out the artificiality of what is deemed natural and calls for its overcoming does not mean that she unmoors her discourse from a grounding in these same hypostasised categories.

Ford expands on the social construction of reproductive labour as women’s work across a number of texts, writing in *Fight Like a Girl* that “capitalism plays a helping hand...by positioning the domestic sphere as something women are uniquely

capable of controlling” (Ford 2018b). In all cases, however, we find the spheres of production and reproduction artificially demarcated, even as reproduction’s artificiality as a feminised domain is acknowledged. As it is never specified exactly *how* capitalism and/or patriarchy “play a helping hand” in confining women and their ambitions and capabilities to the realm of reproduction, the realm itself can only be expressed as absolutely opposed to its opposite. Reproduction’s binary, the never-explored but self-evidently dominant sphere that is men’s “natural” domain and where women have to fight to establish “the reality...that women are human beings with just as many aspirations as men” (Ford 2018b) is where the most interesting and rewarding business of life takes place. Fraser (2022, p. 69 - 70) points out that in liberal discourses “women are supposed to be the equal of men in every sphere, deserving of equal opportunities to realise their talents, including—perhaps especially—in the sphere of production. Reproduction, by contrast, appears as a backwards residue, an obstacle that must be sloughed off...en route to liberation”. Ford agrees that women’s *value* is rarely recognised in the sphere of production, and that this denies individuals opportunities for economic advancement and meaningful participation as productive subjects in a market economy: “a woman’s life only finds meaning when it becomes defined by another person’s. Her value increases once she becomes a wife” (Ford 2018b).

There are contemporary feminists writing in a popular idiom who explore the ways in which productive and reproductive labour are intertwined; some also question how feminist discourses might be directed away from merely rebalancing power within existing systems of oppression and exploitation. Jessa Crispin (2017, p. 34) urges feminists to consider how:

We’ve been cut off...from family and intergenerational connections, from communities and a sense of belonging. We saw these things as unpaid labour we were forced to do, rather than something worth preserving. It is true that we were forced into these roles, but it’s also true that these things have value and should be maintained...How do we begin to value giving as much as we value taking?...How do we think of our place in society, beyond being an individual or part of a couple or nuclear family?

Questions and reflections like these fall outside of the individualising thrust of Ford's discourse—the tacit acceptance of a rigid boundary between production and reproduction means that her capacity to explore such notions and their ramifications is severely attenuated. Instead, Ford's ostensibly emancipatory discourse ends up doing precisely what she urges her followers not to do: Ford (2015) ultimately cannot “resist the urge to simply replicate the same power dynamics that underpin our oppression in the first place”. Demarcating the spheres of production and reproduction undoubtedly replicates oppressive power dynamics, yet Ford's discourse is nonetheless structured by this marker of labour's elision.

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Labour is not a lack in liberal discourse. Hopefully, the theoretical logic of this thesis has developed so that the consistent articulation of a “flat” concept of labour is discernible instead. A corollary is the structural absence of a concept of labour that can account for the production of surplus-value for capital as well as the renewal and replenishment of life. The inherent entanglement of these labour processes is flattened in liberal accounts: certain notions of time and nature serve as liberalism's ground, and these notions in turn have generated repeated patterns of elisions throughout the history of liberal discourse. The ontological foundations on which vast and history-making discursive edifices have been constructed are ultimately premised upon the halting of dialectical motion, and certain essential ideas – of linear time and already-given nature – must be fixed in place so that liberal discourses can spring from them. Depending on whether a reactionary or progressive strain of liberalism is articulated, nature and time serve as a basis from which to legitimise or criticise existing social relations, however their role and position as foundation cannot be drawn into question – quite literally cannot be *thought* – from within a liberal discursive horizon. Epistemic horizons constrain conceptual development, yet they can only circumscribe the ontological foundations which reflect them—these same horizons in turn reflect back precisely the “truths” of their condition of possibility. Horizons *can* shift – when their relation to the grounds over which they arc is co-constitutive and circumfluent – yet liberal horizons and grounds structure each other in mutual immobility. If instead we follow Hegel (and

Derrida), we find that it is neither possible nor desirable to locate definitive origins in which to ground discursive truths:

[T]he whole of science is in itself a circle in which the first becomes also the last, and the last also first...the beginning of philosophy is the ever present and self-preserving foundation of all subsequent developments, remaining everywhere immanent in its further determinations. In this advance the beginning thus loses the one-sidedness that it has when determined as something immediate and abstract; it becomes mediated, and the line of scientific forward movement consequently turns *into a circle* (Hegel 2015, p. 49).

This thesis has also argued that liberal discourses are unable to conceive of labour as a rich and multifaceted concept due to their tendency to posit a rigid boundary between “productive” and “reproductive” labour, in addition to an inability to theorise care as always-already part of the dialectic of recognition which propels labour processes. This is not to claim that care is the absolute origin from which all theoretical developments should follow: the missing foundation that will stabilise a categorical model of labour that becomes ever more additive the more thoroughly and intricately it is constructed. Rather, the task of analyses informed by historical materialism is to look for conceptual roots: to get closer to the flows and relations between processes whose dynamic motion produces the world in its totality at each moment in history as well as the conditions for us to understand it. Grasping “care” as an ontological relation that grounds human labour processes can deepen our understanding of our current material conditions and how we might change them. If liberal discourses are unable to account for “care” and its relation to “labour”, then their ability to explain why things are the way they are is restricted, narrowed, constrained and flattened. Accordingly, the final two markers relate to *care* and *carework*.

### Marker Five: Labour abstracted from its underpinning in care

The history of liberal discourse is also the history of certain accounts of human labour's function. Although this thesis situates itself within the historical materialist tradition, for which the labour theory of value is fundamental, it must be remembered that in his radical re-conception of the role played by (exploited) human labour in a capitalist mode of production, Marx was drawing on the work of many thinkers that are generally accepted as belonging to the liberal tradition, Adam Smith and David Ricardo among the most significant. Further explication of the labour theory of value and the many debates over its validity and how best to interpret and apply it need not detain us here, although it is worth recalling Diane Elson's (2015, p. 128) seminal argument that labour is

...a fluidity, a potential, which in any society has to be socially "fixed" or objectified in the production of particular goods, by particular people in particular ways. Human beings are not pre-programmed biologically to perform particular tasks...human labour is fluid, requiring determination, in all states of society.

Elson is alluding to labour's status as both ontologically primary and as an historically variable set of processes that shape the world and are shaped in turn by this shaping. Whether in capitalist, pre-capitalist or noncapitalist societies, human labour processes take definite forms according to the needs and wants of humans themselves—these needs and wants are always transforming both society *and* the human beings whose labour is the fundamental condition for society's constitution and evolution, leading to particular social relations and modes of comprehending the world depending on whose needs and wants are dominant. Although labour in the Marxist tradition has been conceptually enriched in recent decades by the development of social reproduction theory, the labour theory of value from which such advances arise is also present in a variety of guises throughout the liberal tradition, although an analogous process of conceptual development is conspicuously absent, even in liberal feminist discourses that highlight "the invisibility

of caregiving arrangements” (Bhandary 2019, p. 4).<sup>46</sup> Might this be because analysing what kinds of labour are performed by whom reveals with singular starkness the prevailing social relations via which particular societies are organised and stratified – the *status quo*, in other words – during particular historical periods? If liberal discourses are structured by the elision of labour, the political consequences that follow are surely instrumental to these same discourses’ programmatic function.

This thesis contends that carework – the labour of care, whether remunerated or not, and regardless of the prevailing mode of production – represents a significant advance for theory and practice grounded in the notion that labour is ontologically-constitutive for humans and their world. That we *must* labour in order to continue to give and receive care highlights both care and labour’s entanglement and transhistorical necessity, yet it seems likely that liberal discourses elide a rich concept of care along with labour. Whilst some liberal feminists acknowledge that “many liberal theorists continue to ignore or give only cursory attention to care” (Bhandary 2019, p. 4), care is nevertheless construed as a process undertaken by and for individuals as individuals, as evidenced by Bhandary’s (2019, p. 3 ; p. 13)

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<sup>46</sup> As Will Davies (2016, p. 55) notes, with the “marginalist revolution” of the 1870s, “the centrifugal point of capitalism...shifted”. The movement from a labour theory of value to a theory of value premised on a commodity’s utility – which Joan Robinson memorably describes as “a metaphysical concept of impregnable circularity; *utility* is the quality in commodities that makes individuals want to buy them, and the fact that individuals want to buy commodities show they have *utility*” (1983, p. 48) – is the formulation that sets neoclassical and neoliberal economics apart from classical liberal and Marxian economics. Davies (2016, p. 55) explains how “from Adam Smith through to Karl Marx, the factory and the labourer were deemed to dictate the price things were sold for in the market. From 1870 onwards, all of this changed. Now it would be the inner wants of the consumer where the all-important question of value would be established”. It doesn’t seem a stretch, therefore, to conflate liberal feminism’s fundamental individualism with its grounding in a tradition that posits value as existing primarily *subjectively*: in the minds – or as the “inner wants” – of consumers. The labour theory of value has been present in liberal discourses mostly as an object of critique since the latter part of the 19th century: Milton Friedman’s misreading of Marx in *Capitalism and Freedom* is a particularly egregious example. Friedman writes that: “the Marxist argument is invalid” because “labour is ‘exploited’ only if labour is entitled to what it produces. If one accepts instead the socialist premise, ‘to each according to his need, from each according to his ability’...it is necessary to compare what labour produces, not with what it gets but with its ‘ability’, and to compare what labour gets, not with what it produces but with its ‘need’” (Friedman 2002, p. 167). A more specious and superficial argument would be difficult to find, even on the notoriously arid terrain of popular neoclassical economic theory. The political normativity of arguments like Friedman’s might go some way to explaining liberal feminism’s tendency to downplay the domestic sphere and reproductive labour as a site of radical political potential.

elegant yet additive account of care's necessity for our subjectification, which is synonymous with individuation:

The first element is human vulnerability, which results in dependence on others...The second element is the drive towards independence and a life governed by one's own commitments and values...to become independent, we must receive care...We need to be cared for if we are to survive long enough to benefit significantly from freedom from attack by others. In order to have negative freedoms, we must receive positive action from another person.

If the labour theory of value is our theme, then in liberal discourses we can find many variations upon it. Smith (1999, p. 139 - 140) declares that "labour...is the only universal, as well as the only accurate measure of value, or the only standard by which we can compare the values of different commodities at all times, and at all places". Ricardo (2004, p. 23 - 24) likewise outlines labour's value-producing quality: "commodities never vary in value unless a greater or less quantity of labour be bestowed on their production". An example of labour as producing value is present even in Hobbes; he describes in his *Leviathan* how "a mans [sic] Labour also, is a commodity exchangeable for benefit, as well as any other thing" (Hobbes 1968 [1651], p. 295). It is notable, however, that Hobbes is at pains to mention "how little they [i.e. men (*sic*)] value other men" (1968, p. 235). Theoretically adjacent to the germ of a labour theory of value is an elision of the collective care that is necessary for human beings to sustain their lives and their societies. Hobbes's pessimism regarding human motivations and societal tendencies can in part be explained by the political violence and civil strife that endured throughout his lifetime, as "fear and he were born twins into the world" (Sorell 1996, p. 208). Nonetheless, as political liberalism emerges – even if Hobbes's position at the tradition's inception is contestable<sup>47</sup> – we find care undervalued, and labour abstracted from an

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<sup>47</sup> Martha Nussbaum explicitly denotes Hobbes a "liberal theorist", and she goes on to confirm that he "come[s] close to imagining the human individual as having no natural love for others" (Nussbaum 2021, p. 7). By contrast, J. Judd Owen describes how "Hobbes's status as a liberal thinker has long been controversial...While many have considered Hobbes's political thought the very antithesis of

underpinning in care. The corollary is twofold: that the value created by human labour obtains in domains other than those that involve carework and social reproduction, and that care as an ontological relation is absent from the foundations upon which liberal discourse is constructed. Instead, Hobbes's "science of politics...sets out a rational strategy for individuals placed in the dangerous and anxiety-ridden state of nature...whose goal is assumed to be self-preservation and whose means of survival are minimal" (Sorell 1996, p. 213). Similarly, when Hobbes (1968, p. 339) declares that "by necessity of Nature they chose that which appeareth best for themselves", we find lacking any concept of collective or capacious care: we can easily see how the valorisation of competition and individualism follow.

Born during the latter half of Hobbes's life, John Locke unquestionably produced liberal discourse. Locke expert Mark Goldie (2016, p. vii, *italics mine*) observed that "the Cold War had been about whether John Locke or Karl Marx was right...[which] attests to Locke's eminence as *the* philosopher of liberalism". As with Hobbes, we find in Locke an explicit acknowledgement that labour produces value. Locke connects human labour unequivocally to private property; as such, despite labour's function in his discourse as ontologically-constitutive for individuals and their society, at the outset a concept of labour grounded in a notion of care for others and "the other" is a structural absence. As we have seen,<sup>48</sup> Locke explicitly demarcates the spheres of production and reproduction in positing the patriarchal family as the natural form of society in molecular form: "these two Powers, *Political* and *Paternal*, are so perfectly distinct and separate" (2016 [1689], p. 36). Here, we find a domain of "natural" care and reproduction from which "natural" social relations flow, and a domain of production in which the labour of care is conspicuously and structurally absent, as Locke establishes one of liberalism's archetypal discursive motifs. A concept of labour that accounts dialectically for the interrelation of these spheres, let alone the anchoring of any set of relations outside of the familial in care, is beyond the epistemic horizon of Locke's discourse. Labour – and inherently the labour of

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liberalism, a number of scholars [Judd cites Leo Strauss and C. B. McPherson as especially significant] have argued that Hobbes was a sort of precursor, if not the founder, of liberalism" (2005, p. 131).

<sup>48</sup> See *Chapter One*, especially the sub-section "The Family and Familism", for an explication of a Lockean account of familial relations and their socially-determinative ends.



*individuals* (and their families) who compete with each other to extract what becomes theirs from the abstract commons of nature – is the precondition of a society based on private property. From this understanding flows liberal discourses' valorisation of competition, individualism, the free market and free trade, as well as the occlusion of labour's multivalent richness and its grounding in care. Locke's own work (2016 [1689], p. 15; p. 17) is exemplary:

...every Man [sic] has a *Property* in his own *Person*...The *Labour* of his Body, and the *Work* of his Hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the State that Nature hath provided, and left it in, he hath mixed his *Labour* with, and joyned to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his *Property*...it hath by this *Labour* something annexed to it, that excludes the common Right of other Men...The *Labour* that was mine, removing them out of that common State they were in, hath *fixed* my *Property* in them...whoever has employ'd so much *Labour*...has thereby removed her from the State of Nature, wherein she was common, and hath *begun a Property*.

The above passage reveals a deeply individualised and thus emaciated concept of labour at liberal discourse's foundations. Care for the self and the family is possible under this epistemic horizon – one is reminded of Thatcher's remark about there being "no such thing as society", only "individual men and women and... families" – but there is no capacity for care to be considered outside of certain limited and always-already prescribed domains. The immense theoretical and practical possibilities regarding human recognition and relationality that flow from the simple but profound ontological shift that considerations of care initiate – that human labour might be grounded in collective care, or that care might even influence how traditionally productive labour practices are performed – are denied by a discourse that is then haunted by absence.

Contemporaneously, this haunting is clear in Ford's discourse. Discussing "gender reveal" parties in *Boys Will Be Boys*, we can see an alignment with a Lockean notion of labour determining private property as well as an abstraction of labour's underpinning in care. While Ford (2018a, p. 16, italics mine) elucidates how "the

concept of the gender reveal party” is “a manifestation of capitalist ideals” and upbraids individuals who hold such parties – “seriously, how many parties are people entitled to throw to celebrate *something that basically only impacts their own life?*” – what remains unexamined is the liberal-capitalist norm that *private* ownership of the result of one’s labour, including the labour of carrying a child, is the ideal result and natural condition of such labour’s undertaking.<sup>49</sup> Although Ford critiques the asymmetrical social relations that gender reveal parties perpetuate and express, a consideration of how individualising the reproductive and caring labour necessary to raise children might enact a process whereby a patriarchal-capitalist or Lockean logic – “The *Labour* that was mine...hath *fixed* my *Property* in them” – comes to gender children is nowhere to be found. The emancipation of women from either heteronormative child-raising or the unequal division of domestic labour are not posited as genuine possibilities in Ford’s discourse: the collective labour grounded in capacious care that might enable emancipation is stifled as soon as it surfaces.

Ford (2018a, p. 29 - 30) implicitly criticises heteronormative caring practices in the passage quoted above, and goes on to declare that:

Despite what we may all believe about our unique perspectives and approach to child rearing, most people respond without question to the social conditioning that codifies gender...Resisting social conditioning for children—even for people who count themselves as progressive—has so far only seemed to focus on how we can protect little girls from the evils of loving princesses, fairies and pink. Girls gravitating towards trucks and “gender-neutral clothing”...is often seen as cause for subtle boasting.

While Ford’s argument has some salience, the tendency to attribute absolute and ahistorical agency to abstract oppressive forces appears again. Additionally, the quip about “subtle boasting” and the complaint about parents-to-be “celebrat[ing] something that...only impacts their own life” reinforce a framework where care is

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<sup>49</sup> There is an interesting contradiction here. Obviously, the vast majority of labour under capitalism does not result directly and immediately in private property for that same labourer. The labour of child-bearing is an exception, however a radical concept of care problematises the notion of parental “ownership”.

abstracted from any process of labour that isn't deeply and structurally individualised and competitive. Indeed, Berlin's (2017, p. 35) contention that "a frontier must be drawn between the area of private life and that of public authority" is echoed in Ford's discourse, which separates our private "unique perspectives" from an authoritative "social conditioning". Although Ford wants private life to reflect a different public authority than it does currently, whenever she addresses the labour of care a frontier fortified by liberal norms is implicit. This is part of what Angela McRobbie (2013, p. 139) has identified as "a widely disseminated discourse, which celebrates choice and the privatisation of childcare...consolidat[ing] a kind of hermetic ideal of family life". It is odd to see an ostensibly radical feminist ignore the collectivised and feminised processes of social reproduction that intertwine to bring a child into the world – let alone how they might be radically expanded – regardless of how gender is assigned or understood. Instead, Ford (2018a, p. 17) advises her readers that "the baby chilling out in the human hot tub doesn't know or care about the effort being put into deciding what kind of clothes they're going to be gifted". Ford's focus on gendered consumption choices elides the patriarchal-capitalist ideology that informs assigning private ownership to the results of the self-evidently "private" labour of social reproduction, with the abstracting of such labour from any concept of care that isn't flat as a corollary.

Ford (2018a, p. 46) expresses a similar sentiment when she claims that "women who choose to live romantically with men are acting against their own economic interests". The notion that the economic interests of men and women who choose to cohabitate are intrinsically opposed establishes a thoroughly (neo)liberal lens through which the (always-already separate) domains of "the economic", "the domestic" and that of "love or care" are viewed by Ford.<sup>50</sup> Here, the liberal notion that labour is a fundamentally individual process that produces inherently private property is reinforced by Ford's discourse. Likewise, her discourse elides how the labour of care – including even the most normative, hetero-familial caring practices – might be conceived as a series of fundamentally *collective* processes. Elided also is how theorising and practicing more radical versions of care could disrupt heteronormative

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<sup>50</sup> We should recall here Gary Becker's notion of the family as a micro-corporation, where the husband specialises in productive and the wife in reproductive labour in order to raise their progeny's human capital as high as possible.

familism and reconcile men's and women's interests by challenging patriarchal-capitalist norms:

The gendered conditions of domestic labour are still too deeply entrenched to be anything but a burden for most women living in hetero partnerships...Until we can confidently say the patriarchy has been destroyed, women who enjoy sex with men are much better off living alone and inviting them into our houses as guests occasionally. #truefact" (Ford 2018a, p. 41).

Ford's insistence on the irreconcilability of women's and men's economic interests – and the throwaway account cited above of how bearing and raising children only influences the lives of those *directly* involved – abstract labour in all its richness from its underpinning in care.

Finally, a concept of care that extends beyond an atomised account of the locations of care and carework and their potential to structure labour processes and social relations is also a discursive lack:

Some of you reading this may have hosted your own version of these [gender reveal] parties...individual participation in these rituals enforces a larger pattern of collective gender stereotyping that ultimately proves harmful to everyone. You are not a bad person (probably), but you are doing a bad thing" (Ford 2018a, p. 15).

Upbraiding individuals for participating in rituals that reinforce patriarchy mobilises an affect of shame in an attempt to instil the individual behavioural changes that Ford claims will lead to structural change. When viewed through this lens, all of one's actions can be understood as either contributing to "patriarchy" or rebelling against it. Such an affective mode remains profoundly individualist, however, substituting a moral for a systemic critique and enacting an "antipolitical" tendency "to personify oppression in the figure of individuals and to reify it in particular acts and utterances" (Brown 2001, p. 21). This antipolitical affective register structures Ford's argument: by individualising the caring labour involved in social reproduction, Ford uses a common liberal discursive trope of systematic additive reasoning – "individual

participation in these rituals enforces a larger pattern” – to eventually crown an immutable peak; this summit then serves as an epistemic arc that reflects its circumscribed terrain exactly. “Labour” floats free within this structure; atomised units obscure its potential collectivity, and carework and care – which cannot be richly expressed without a radical (re)conception of collectivity and relationality – literally cannot be labour’s ground. An affect of shame and a moralising tendency instead become discursive propellants. Berlant (2011, p. 75) describes how “theorizing opens up the present to a lived alternativity in the present”: moralising, by contrast, closes the present down. Liberalism’s moralistic propensity leads to a narrowing of emancipatory horizons, which Ford (2018a, p. 34) exemplifies in observing “if we didn’t respond so enthusiastically to marketing then we wouldn’t be living in a destructive capitalist nightmare”. A hauntological reading method can prise open the closures enacted by affective modes typical of liberal discourse, revealing its haunting by elisions that are structural. Ford’s discourse, much like Locke’s, is haunted by labour’s abstraction from its underpinning in care.

## Marker Six: Objects of care as “flat” protagonists in narratives of domesticity

...writing is the destruction of every voice, every origin.

Roland Barthes, *The Death of the Author*

In *The Death of the Author*, Roland Barthes (1986, p. 50) writes “it is logical that in literary matters it should be positivism, crown and conclusion of capitalist ideology, which has granted the greatest importance to the author’s ‘person’”. In reading discourse produced by Clementine Ford and Jordan Peterson, representatives *par excellence* of opposite boundaries of the radical centre and thus of liberal capitalism’s progressive and reactionary variants, what Barthes locates as the “author’s person” is a constant textual presence. Indeed, the discourse produced by these authors is inconceivable without its structuration and inhabitation by the flat characters “Clementine Ford” and “Jordan Peterson”. In inhabiting and propelling their discourses, these authors command their characters and retain absolute control over their narratives: in so doing, they “impose a brake on it...furnish it with a final signified...close writing” (Barthes 1986, p. 53). Ford and Peterson’s discourses are absolutely “theirs”, however the function of this authorial authority is to open a space of intimate reception in which “armies of followers” can come to identify with, discuss and share these same discourses. Although “social media have become a means through which leadership is exercised while at the same time concealed...the very naming of the relationship as an act of following alerts us...that this medium involves or encourages some form of leadership” (Gerbaudo 2012, p. 144). Both authors attempt to remain resolute masters of what they inscribe: as such, the private domestic realm and the others who inhabit it feature prominently in both their discourses.

The characters introduced into their domestic narratives often serve a very specific function: they consolidate Ford and Peterson as both authors and characters and legitimate the dissemination of certain discursive norms and ideals. Chief among these is a certain notion of care. The real-life subjects who are the *objects* of Ford and Peterson’s care – their children as well as their family and friends – feature prominently in their discourses, and the performance of care is a vital discursive device for both authors, although with very different political resonances. What is also common to both is the highly individualised concept of care that emerges via the

presence of characters who are the objects of care. Caring for others – and which others are worthy of care – is inherently bound up with each author's individual self-conception, and thus with the discursive production of the author as (flat) character. Additionally, in both cases the adumbration of the subjects who are objects of care serves to bolster and propel what I denote narratives of “narcissistic domesticity”. Ford clearly situates her discourse in this narcissistic domestic realm – which is a logical location for the intertwining of political consciousness and self-development – when she announces how “a month before I published my first book, *Fight Like A Girl*, I faced one of my toughest challenges yet as a feminist: I became the mother of a boy” (2018a, p. 7). Ford here exemplifies how “the liberal culture of true feeling” is “sentimentally present...in the growth of diaristic, autobiographical, personal-is-political, intensified artwork across so many aesthetic sectors” (Berlant 2011, p. 65). Cultural theorist Anna Kornbluth (2023, p. 97) concurs: “cultivating our personal brands, social media makes memoirists of us all”. The liberal aesthetic trend Berlant and Kornbluth summarise reverberates throughout narratives of narcissistic domesticity, which to reiterate are logical sites for the flat characters who are objects of the authors' care to inhabit.

It is also logical that a discursive tradition that consistently evidences an impoverished concept of labour would produce an equally impoverished concept of care. Likewise, an impoverished *environment* of care – wherein “neoliberal capitalism...normalises endemic care deficits” (Chatzidakis et al. 2020, p. 9) – produces an impoverished concept of labour. An impoverished caring environment is surely the elided societal background to the profoundly individualised relations of care Ford and Peterson depict. Peterson (2018a, p. 258, italics mine) describes how during the writing of *Twelve Rules For Life*:

[M]y wife, Tammy...has been an absolute pillar of honesty, stability, support, practical help, organization and patience *during the years of writing that continued during anything and everything else that has happened in our lives, no matter how pressing or important. My daughter, Mikhalia, and my son, Julian, as well as my parents, Walter and Beverley, were also right there beside me, paying careful attention, discussing complicated issues with me, and aiding me in the organization of my thoughts, words and actions.*

In this passage, the simple repetition of “me” and “my” clearly denotes the objects of authorial care (although Peterson does describe his shared life with his wife using the possessive pronoun “our”), and thus reinforces these individuals’ value for the author. The underlying implication is that they have all provided necessary quantities of care for the author: amounts appropriate to enable the completion of his great work. The passage can be read as a narrative of narcissistic domesticity wherein the objects of authorial care serve to establish certain truths about the author and their world. For Peterson, these caring relations are how such relations *should* be, although they could certainly be conceived as impoverished and one-sided: the direction of care – or its lack – towards its objects is always-already entangled with a political salience. Peterson and Ford’s construction of objects of care encapsulates the process via which self-actualisation and development intertwine with ideological interpellation to forge and/or awaken political consciousness. Despite this, the dialectic of materiality and discursivity that enables the thinking of carework – and therefore also labour as a rich, multifaceted and ontologically-structural concept – is systematically elided across both of their discourses.

In *Semantics of the Object*, Barthes (1988, p. 183) explains how any object “is at the intersection of two coordinates, two definitions. The first...is what I should call a symbolic one...The second...is what I should call the coordinate of classification”. In Ford and Peterson’s discourse, the various different subjects who are “objects of care” – children, parents and friends, as well as the discourse’s intended receivers (Ford’s “girls who should fight” or Peterson’s “men who should stand up straight with their shoulders back”) – all embody this dual value system. At once symbolic in their uniqueness *vis a vis* each author (from Ford’s son and Peterson’s daughter to each individual follower as a unique individual uniquely capable of individuation), they also have a taxonomic function that situates them – throughout different iterations of each author’s discourse – within an epistemic order where certain forms of care or its lack are pre-given: always-already classified and operational within definite limits. The objects of care who function both as specific symbols and taxonomic types reflect an inexact but undeniable alignment with the Marxian categories of use and exchange value respectively. As care is fetishised as a commodity via its imbrication in “ever longer ‘global care chains’” (Fraser 2016, p. 114), we come more and more to see only its exchange value, which is precisely the value it has discursively for Ford and



Peterson. The care the authors insist they (and their readers) give and demand they (and their readers) receive is structured ontologically by the commodity form. Instrumentalised to propel narratives of narcissistic domesticity that assist in producing the author-character as a commodity, the object of care's "coordinate of classification" saturates both the object itself and care as a social relation with exchange value. Discursively situating care as a commodity thus overrides its symbolic (and subjective) use value. Ford and Peterson's discourses conceal the complex, subject-forming and sustaining reciprocity of *carework* as a series of social relations and labour processes and instead foreground care's value both for themselves as author-characters and for the self-actualisation of the individual in general. Exchange value, embodied in the subject who is objectified at the coordinate of classification, ultimately trumps all, as it tends to do in liberal discourses and in a capitalist mode of production.

Ford's extended comic riff on this carework and domestic labour in *Boys Will Be Boys* contains many salient points. What is also notable, however, is the relentless economisation of caring and reproductive labour which accompanies her treatment of the subject:

I didn't spend the self-esteem wasteland of my twenties sleeping with men...just to move in with them in my upwardly mobile thirties and become their long-suffering mother...It's an inescapable fact that the work of feeding a newborn baby can be labour intensive...Even if you were *only* doing the job of breastfeeding a three-week-old baby, you'd still be working a full-time job. When you consider that there are no weekends, your work as a food producer actually outstrips the average Australian's working week...you also get no sick leave, no lunch breaks, no formalised training and substandard pay. Who negotiated the enterprise bargaining scheme on that (2018a, p. 48 - 49)?

Economising care and showing that reproductive labour is "real work" akin to the typically masculinised labour undertaken under the banner of production is a valuable contribution Ford has made as an activist-influencer, surely serving at minimum as a consciousness-raising device. There are echoes here of the *Wages for Housework* theorists' work, especially in the insistence on the *necessity* of

performing carework and reproductive labour, its status as a “full-time job”. However, where Ford differs is in the fundamentally individualist way such labour is conceived. Far from “counterplanning from the kitchen”, a collective struggle whose end is ultimately the abolition of gendered labour, gender categories and concomitantly of capitalist labour processes entirely, Ford frames the struggle for carework’s recognition as taking place on a terrain that looks very much like that described by Thatcher above, wherein instead of society “there are individual men and women and there are families”. Ford’s son, the object of care introduced into her narrative, is the discursive propellant for an extended discussion of how feminised labour processes are hidden by a “patriarchal world” (Ford 2018a, p. 66) where “one of the cornerstones...is...oppression of women via the enforcement of reproductive and domestic labour” (2018a, p. 62). Within this world, however, the struggles of women are always-already individualised, so that the “revolutionary” solutions Ford proposes to the care deficit that theorists like Fraser and *The Care Collective* have identified boil down to suggestions like the following: “Repeat after me: *The cost of childcare isn’t the fucking responsibility of the mother*” (Ford 2018a, p. 65). The implication is not that the state should provide universal free childcare, or that childcare should be radically revalued: instead, the burden should be shifted to non-maternal subjects, regardless of their class position. For Ford, the fundamental function of an equal distribution of caring labour is to ensure that women aren’t denied “individual autonomy and freedom” (2018a, p. 66); that despite their caring responsibilities they aren’t kept “out of the workforce, threatening their superannuation payments and denying them the ability to live a life beyond their identity as a mother” (2018a, p. 65). This is not, of course, to downplay the value of the autonomy and freedom that Ford identifies, nor to suggest that identities beyond motherhood should either be denied to women or are intrinsically bound-up with the on-going operation of (neo)liberal hegemony. But within her discourse, objects of care serve only as flat protagonists in narratives that argue for a shift of balance in conventional domestic arrangements. The capacity for care and social reproduction to be sites from where the liberal, bourgeois family and its role in the perpetuation of capitalist social relations is challenged is consistently and structurally absent. Instead, we find an alignment with liberal feminist notions of care that argue for the need to rebalance caring responsibilities only within the existing social order, wherein “the *imbalanced* inculcation of caring attitudes and identifications as caregivers disempowers

women...elevating men's values, goals, and commitments over women's" (Brake 2020, p. 222). Similarly, Nussbaum (2021, p. 10 - 11) asserts that

...the demands of a collectivity or a relation should not as such be made the basic goal of politics: collectivities, such as the state or even the family, are composed of individuals...liberalism holds that the flourishing of human beings taken one by one is...prior to the flourishing of the state or the nation...liberal individualism seems to be a very good view for feminists to embrace...Women's individual well-being has far too rarely been taken into account in political and economic planning and measurement.

Such discourse has a profoundly flattening effect upon the subjects who are objects of care, whether they be givers or receivers: indeed, the dialectic of giving and receiving that enables care to be conceived as a dynamic flow is rendered stagnant and one-sided. Instead of a program that takes into account care's inherent capaciousness and the concomitant expansion of political possibilities, we find a wan struggle to address "economic vulnerability" (Brake 2020, p. 218) for individual women within individual family units or social bodies composed of atomised individuals. What results is merely the potential reversal of existing hierarchical structures, rather than their abolition.

The intriguing questions posed by family abolitionist Sophie Lewis in *Full Surrogacy Now* (2021, p. 117) – "can we parent politically, hopefully, nonreproductively—in a comradely way? Can humans collectively enact...‘counter-social reproduction’, a mode of ‘social reproduction against the reproduction of the social’"? – are answered by Ford only by eliding care's rich and multivalent potentialities. Instead of exploring the radical potential inherent in reproductive labour or a capacious concept of care, Ford concludes her reflections on carework and domestic labour by invoking the self-development and political awakening of the individual object of her care: "I want my child to see value in extending empathy and care to people beyond himself" (2018a, p. 68). The subject/object (a flat character is always thus) is a vessel to be filled with content which will enable appropriate individuation. It is difficult to see the "value" Ford identifies above as anything other than that which is "reduced to...human labour in the abstract" in the commodity (Marx 2004, p. 128). Further, Ford (2018a,

p. 68) declares that “our potential for success isn’t conditional on giving men a free ride”: the economisation of care in her work serves in the end to reinforce its status as a commodity. If only carework were more evenly divided or outsourced – note Ford’s (2018a, p. 46) claim that “the idea that it is a luxury to spend money on work women are ‘supposed’ to do for free is widespread” – more of us could reach our individual potential within the prevailing liberal order. Already for Ford (2018b, p. 16), “that any of us have the courage to claim any space at all in the verbal marketplace is nothing short of remarkable”. With care’s exchange value more equally distributed, the advancement of many more individual women will see Ford’s brand of feminist self-help triumph, leaving Peterson’s hierarchical caring structures in its dust. Ford claims that care needs to be shared or outsourced for more women to claim their rightful space in the market, whilst Peterson agitates for a patriarchal and heteronormative caring structure wherein care is given and received in alignment with “natural” and eternal social orders: regardless of the discursive strain in question, in both cases we find an elision of care and carework’s *richness*. Care’s ontological entanglement with human labour is thus always-already a structural absence, despite the consistent presence of objects of care in narratives of narcissistic domesticity.

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We now have outlined six markers of the elision of labour in liberal discourses, with certain “flat” or non-dialectical conceptions of time, nature and care underpinning each individual marker. The connection between liberal conceptions of care and labour’s discursive elision has been stressed at greatest length—the reason for this is twofold. First, historically there has been significantly less theoretical exploration of care than of nature and time in both the liberal and historical materialist traditions: it is only with recent advances in social reproduction theory that a concern with care has come to the surface in the latter, and in the former care is grounded in an additive individualism that limits how it can be understood. Second, this thesis’s contention is that a capacious and dialectical account of care is absolutely indissociable from a rich and multifaceted concept of labour: precisely the concept that liberal discourses elide. In light of our current political and ecological conditions it seems utterly essential to bring rich concepts of care “to the surface”: to “reimagine

the nature and scope of the economic so as to re-embed it in a society where care really is its organising principle, and ‘universal care’ its underlying model” (Chatzidakis et al. 2020, p. 71); to show that care and labour are always at root entangled, and how labour as the motor of history is always ontologically contingent on our care for ourselves and for others. Care is labour’s absolute precondition, and thus it is with care at front of mind that we must attempt to theorise and practice labour today, especially if we seek to turn human labour’s multiplicity of potentialities towards projects of collective emancipation. Indeed, how could genuine emancipation occur without the centring of care and carework?

As human subjects, we propel and are propelled by an incessant historical motion which determines our social relations even as our labour combines to set its coordinates; the affective and the objective (and the material and the discursive) ceaselessly rebound upon and enrich each other. This dialectic of labour and care demonstrates that neither can *be* without the other, even as each transforms the meaning and experience *of* the other in the process of historical development and change. Recall that care as human relationality’s ontological ground *and* most potentially advanced point of arrival is in many respects analogous to Marx’s (1991, p. 358) consistent emphasis on how “capital and its self-valorisation appear as the starting and finishing point, as the motive and purpose of production”. Further, it is in fact capital’s very *carelessness* that allows us to conceive of care’s potential development and inherent capaciousness.

The difference between care and capital is that care’s immanence is to *human relationality in general* rather than to social relations structured *specifically* by the commodity form. As “the motive and purpose” of social being, carework’s ongoing refinement can transcend the exploitation inherent in capitalist relations, just as the mutual recognition that is care’s point of departure can elude commodification. In short, capital’s totalising impetus – which we can locate discursively in the reification of time and nature and a tendency towards taxonomical rigidity and boundary setting – paradoxically means that care too has a totalising and thus emancipatory potential. Only from within capital’s grinding and atomising circuitousness can we glean the possibility of a future of abundant and capacious care. Both discursively and in practice, capital abstracts care from labour and entombs it in an artificially separate

sphere of reproduction, and yet the flattening of care under capitalism – and in liberal discourses – also contains the germ of uncaring's overcoming. We see this potential when care and labour are considered dialectically, and for the practice of labour and care to be emancipatory we must resist the common sense of liberal discourses that continue to individualise our social relations and halt dynamic flows.

It is with this potential in mind that we now turn to the Instagram discourse produced by Ford and Peterson during the first pandemic half-year. If we continue to find elisions of labour – locating consistent instances of the six markers outlined above – we can extrapolate that liberal discourses are unable to rise to the political challenges of the present, and that the self-actualisation they promise can only be realised at the cost of others' capacity for the same. It is not hyperbole to say that the political norms of our era threaten the very survival of our species and our planet. If the extreme ends of liberalism are unable to seriously address them, then a decisive turn away from liberal discourse is surely both necessary and urgent.

## Chapter Four: The Haunting of Flat Texts—Reading for Labour’s Elision

In this chapter, I employ the method of hauntological close reading articulated in *Chapter Three* to Instagram discourse produced by Jordan Peterson and Clementine Ford during the first pandemic half-year, from April to September 2020.<sup>51</sup> Essentially, this involves locating consistent concrete instances of the six markers of labour’s elision. Recall that I will read Instagram *posts* only: stories and reels are ephemeral and offer limited data. Two Appendices that begin on page 252 list every post discussed and the markers that are present in that post,<sup>52</sup> and excerpts from these appendices appear frequently.

The ephemeral and the enduring intertwine throughout this chapter, underpinning the cultural logic of social media as well as philological formalities. The presence of each marker is simultaneously a micro-indicator of the structural absence via which liberal discourses proceed and proliferate. As most posts that are analysed contain multiple markers, discussing each individual marker in every post cited was neither possible nor desirable. Instead I employed a fluid scholarly approach and read Ford’s and Peterson’s discourses as they unfolded organically, sometimes signalling a specific marker’s presence but more often referring readers to the Appendices to confirm the combination of markers evident in each instance of micro-discourse. By staying close to both characters and the discourses they produced throughout the first pandemic half-year, the overall picture that emerges is both empirically solid and politically and poetically sensitive.

As activist-influencers, Ford and Peterson produced a significant amount of content during this time, although Ford was more prolific. I highlight different (and similar) themes, responses to world events and authorial preoccupations as they appear, alongside patterns of terms, phrases, metaphors, tropes, images, gestures and visual styles: each activist-influencer’s characteristic poetics and aesthetics. Whether explicitly “political”, ostensibly “apolitical” or directed more ambiguously towards the

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<sup>51</sup> March 31 serves as a kind of prelude, an introductory appraisal and comparison of thematic foci.

<sup>52</sup> At times I refer to the content of a video embedded in a post: this is always noted when it occurs. This chapter should be read in tandem with the Appendices, wherein each post discussed is reproduced in full and tagged with the markers it contains. A list that reiterates each of the markers is located on page 238, immediately following the *Conclusion*.

“personal” or “familial”, an attention to the entanglement of form and content across multiple examples of micro-discourse allows the researcher to trace broader discursive trends and turns. James Clifford (1980, p. 218) observes that “discourse analysis is always...unfair to authors”, and in highlighting personal turns or “hero’s journeys” it must be borne in mind that it is as exemplars of different strains of liberalism that Peterson’s and Ford’s specific discourses are analysed. They form part of a discursive ecosystem that positions liberal subjects<sup>53</sup> and reinforces liberal subjectivity, consolidating liberalism as (precariously) culturally, economically and politically hegemonic.

The analysis begins immediately prior to the first pandemic half-year, as Melbourne (where Ford and I both live) prepared to enter lockdowns in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. It concludes on September 27, exactly a month before lockdowns were lifted. Peterson’s global movement compared to Ford’s confinement to Melbourne throughout this period makes adhering to the timescale of day-to-day pandemic life in Melbourne the most logical way to organise my data; Peterson’s global versus Ford’s mainly local public also validates this decision. Ford was speaking to a community that in large part was experiencing the same or similar conditions to her; Peterson, by contrast, had a unique experience during this time. Although this was a rare time where the same world-historical event underpinned the discursive production of both activist-influencers, a spectral *function* nevertheless haunts both bodies of discourse: this function forms a political limit that is ontologically entangled with the elision of labour. To reiterate, I understand “labour” *politically* as the capacity for humans to make their own history by collectively labouring and caring themselves into new sets of social relations. Simply, “labour practices have an ontologising effect – they make a subject come into being” (Gotby 2023, p. 4). My contention that liberal discourses *en masse* are structured by

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<sup>53</sup> “Interpellates” would be the more traditional term to use here, yet the specific role of “ideological state apparatuses” and the family in interpellation is problematised and brought into question precisely by the development of expansive concepts of labour and care. Additionally, the structuralist methodology that underpins Althusser’s account of interpellation imposes limitations on agential human labour that are analytically rigid, despite the usefulness of the concept. By using “positions” instead, more prominence is afforded to the agency of *all* interpellated beings, regardless of their class, gender or social role. Interpellation is never total or totalising: the interpellative call always overshoots the target, so that “not only does the subject never fully recognise itself in the interpellative call: its resistance to interpellation...is the subject” (Butler, Laclau & Žižek 2000, p. 115).



labour's elision can obtain empirical validity if elisions are revealed across a wide array of content.

March 31, 2020

Caring is Cool



In an Instagram post on March 31, 2020, Clementine Ford addressed the looming Covid-19 pandemic. Foreshadowing lockdowns, social distancing and individual isolation along with the need for vigilant hygiene practices, the advice Ford offers her followers was widely disseminated in the pandemic's early stages.<sup>54</sup>

Alongside text that relays this

advice, it is impossible not to notice the slogan on Ford's t-shirt. "CARING IS COOL" reinforces and contributes to discourses of care and mutual aid that became more and more prominent across both social and traditional media as the pandemic's novelty and severity became apparent. These discourses proliferated in opposition to discourses that expressed various degrees of Covid-scepticism, from outlandish conspiracy theories regarding the virus's origins to eminently reasonable questions

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<sup>54</sup> The full post (Appendix F31, p. 252) reads:

Thank you to everyone who tuned in to #KeepingUpWithTheKorona tonight! And thank you especially to the fabulous @dr.dna.nay, who was so calm and concise with her advice that I definitely left feeling a lot better.

Remember:

- \*Be thorough in your cleaning and hygiene, not paranoid
- \*It's better to be overly cautious than to risk passing on the virus
- \*Behave as if you already have it and act accordingly
- \*You don't need bleach to clean, simple detergent plus thorough cleaning will do
- \*Social and physical distancing is THE MOST IMPORTANT tool we have in this fight
- \*Stay at home to save lives!

Watch the video in my stories for more tips and calm direction from Doc Renee.

Tomorrow night: @later.ada to discuss Covid19 and the reality of increased domestic abuse during isolation. This will be a heavy hour but an important one.

9pm, AEDT. #calmercorona Tee: @theenthusiast.co (yes, I paid).

about the imposition of severe restrictions on the public. Ford's intervention is precisely aligned with the progressive zeitgeist of the pandemic's early stages, where terms like "care" and notions of "caring" came to prominence against a historical background of discursive elision.

Whilst both academic and popular liberal discourses have shown an increasing concern with care in recent years, this concern is also at the heart of contemporary iterations of social reproduction theory, as we saw in *Chapter One*. At the very beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic we find Ford contributing to a discursive trend that proceeded by foregrounding care – often described as mutual aid – in a way that we can now assess as both historically unprecedented *and* historically contingent. In the latter case, the mass use of social media as means of communication and source of information (and the literal *virality* of the spread of information and disinformation during the pandemic) is pivotal in establishing what was *specific* about discourses produced during the pandemic. The dialectic of immediacy and mediation – between digital representations of certain events and the actuality of the events themselves – that is at the heart of social media as a digital ecosystem “entails the *symbolic* construction of a *sense of togetherness* and the fuelling of an *emotional tension* extending from distant mediated connections to the ‘effervescence’ of physical proximity” (Gerbaudo 2012, p. 14, italics mine). The concrete absence of the “effervescence of physical proximity” under pandemic conditions profoundly disrupted ontological continuity and reliability, and the mass and mass-mediated experience of a radical shift in social and material conditions brought to the surface a consciousness of other temporal, spatial, political and cultural possibilities.

Liberalism's tendency to privatise, individualise and invisibilise care was to some extent reversed during the pandemic. In particular, progressive activist-influencers congregated online to produce masses of content celebrating human interdependence. Irony and form are rarely so harmonious, and we hardly need emphasise that this reversal remained only partial. In Ford's post above, for example, there is evidence of the elision of certain types of labour, both waged and unwaged, that *must* proceed for both capitalist production and social reproduction to continue, despite the disruptions caused by Covid-19. This is not to belabour a small point in one instance of micro-discourse, but to highlight that every post remains a

miniature literary node; as such, authorial decisions *are* made about what to include and exclude. In the post above, while the very real threats to home-bound women are acknowledged, and common sense advice about cleaning and social distancing is given, the sentence “Stay at home to save lives” could have – but does not – acknowledge that it is not possible for all members of society to stay at home. Indeed, those whose labour is centred on caring practices, whether waged, unwaged or a mixture of the two, are amongst those *least* able to do so, unless the primary site of the care they provide is the home itself. Whether or not caring is cool, carework must be performed, and a heightened discursive focus on “care” does not necessarily correspond to the development of practices and concepts of care that take into account the collective vulnerability that the pandemic revealed, or how the capacity to care for others – especially in radical, capacious or non-privatised ways – has been systematically eroded by what Fraser (2022, p. 72) describes as a “‘crisis of care’ that is rooted in the structural dynamics of financialized capitalism”. Ironically, it was from the experience of forced isolation that a discursive turn towards a more collective and thus radical concept of care occurred amongst activist-influencers, journalists, academics and others prominent in the production and dissemination of progressive liberal discourses. In Ford’s post above, the subject addressed is presumed to be able to perform and prioritise certain types of labour. The underlying assumptions about whether and how such labour is performed inform their positionality as a caring subject, but we must question how – and if – this subject is also reciprocally conceived as a subject – or even an *object* – of care. There is a flatness or lack of dynamism in the care that Ford’s post brings to the surface: care is here positioned not as a totalising practice in which alternatives to capitalist subjectification inhere but rather as a style of behaviour necessitated by current conditions that leaders – activist-influencers – should direct their followers to undertake. This networked mediation of care by popular feminists like Ford foregrounds an ontology of caring that is thin and narrow rather than rich and abundant: if caring is cool, then the early adopters of new caring discourses are those whose caring practices are to be followed and imitated. But what kind of care and what kind of subject is implicit here?

In short, the subject Ford addresses is assumed to be able to stay at home. In addition, they are assumed to have the capacity to radically and rapidly restructure

the quotidian labour processes that are necessary for their social reproduction in order to maximise the social sum of “care” that is available. The underlying assumption is that there are not enough individuals performing labour of this type. We have already located this additive logic in Ford’s discourse (see Marker Five); social change occurs via a majority of individuals making a rational decision – informed by discourses produced and shared by the heads of “leading publics” or prominent activist-influencers – to fundamentally alter their behaviour. An individualistic and top-down political and cultural orientation tends to result from this model of activism, even though discourses that support it often emphasise the value of mutuality and certain groups’ oppression by totalising abstract forces.

Following Gerbaudo, we can also see how the affective resonance of an event that many people in the Global North experienced *at home* (working from home, caring from home, schooling from home etc.) might differ from that of essential workers who still left their homes most days—not to mention those whose usual state is confinement. Regardless, 2020 was a time when caring was cool: a search of *The Guardian*, the traditional media organisation most associated with liberalism’s progressive tendency, reveals 46 hits for the term “mutual aid” between 31/3/2020 and 31/3/2021.<sup>55</sup> This data is taken from merely the first 10 pages of a basic Google search, so it is likely that a more comprehensive search would produce a significantly higher figure (*Google* 2023).<sup>56</sup> However, those subjects who were able to attend to and embody care’s particular discursive inflections during the first pandemic half-year are not necessarily the same subjects whose daily practices of carework preceded and will succeed care’s period of discursive prominence. Similarly, how these practices might be affectively, culturally and politically structural in the long-term for subjects from different class locations – or subjects who experience different forms and levels of raced or gendered oppression – is not yet clear. It is too early to assess whether an enduring turn towards the intertwined discursive and material practices that foreground *collective* care’s importance and

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<sup>55</sup> A search for “care” obviously brings up too many results to be analytically useful. A search for “care work” returned 50 hits, all contained within 6 pages: exactly the kind of “tight discursive knot” we might expect under novel pandemic conditions.

<sup>56</sup> A search for “mutual aid” under the same parameters for the period 31/3/2018 – 31/3/2019 reveals only 6 hits, and only 9 pages of search results are returned (*Google* 2023).

immanent radical potential has occurred, although carework itself – and the imbrication of labour with care – will of course continue to underpin our social relations and set history in motion.

Ford was doubtless sincere in trying to help her followers minimise the spread of Covid-19, and in Appendix F31 she acknowledges “the reality of increased domestic abuse during isolation”. However, there is a corresponding elision of the work that is materially necessary in order for abuse’s inverse – care – to occur. Much carework is impossible to perform in a socially distant fashion, and the common experience of increased online socialising during the pandemic precipitated a mass affective malaise that was impossible to overcome via any kind of networked *communitas*. From these conditions what I denote “distant caring” emerged, and Ford quickly established online events espousing caring practices. Distant caring supported the progressive liberal turn towards care in general, yet this notion of care remains historically consistent with liberal discourses that attribute responsibility for the care of the individual to the individual themselves, with the family as care’s guarantor. Under such conditions care remains ontologically bounded and caring a fundamentally private act; for Ford and similar activist-influencers, distant caring discourses developed precisely because care’s physical and psychic locations are *taken for granted* as private. “Care” flowed between atomised micro-nodes in micro-discursive iterations that urged individuals to support each other via furthering and deepening these same nodal networks. This is one significant shift that “mutual aid” brought about—transferring what are normatively and “logically” private practices into networked practices that enable online connections between those who resonate with certain discursive tendencies. The labour of care and the subjects of caring labour remain individualised, however, even if performed by many more individuals who have come to be conscious of care deficits.

Ultimately, the slogan “caring is cool” flattens the possibility of care’s expansion from a private practice to a public one. Everyone “cares” and performs some degree of carework, but denoting caring as cool precisely ties such practices to a particular temporal period, situating them amongst other markers of the zeitgeist in an ahistorical fashion. While care’s coolness might be “the most important tool we have in this fight” against the pandemic, it does not expand further into the most important

tool we have in the fight against the background conditions that enabled the pandemic to occur. As Fraser (2022, p. 159 - 160) writes

...the pandemic is the point where all of...capitalism's contradictions converge: where cannibalization of nature and carework, of political capacity and peripheralized populations, merge in a lethal binge. A veritable orgy of capitalist dysfunction, COVID-19 establishes beyond all doubt the need to abolish this social system once and for all.

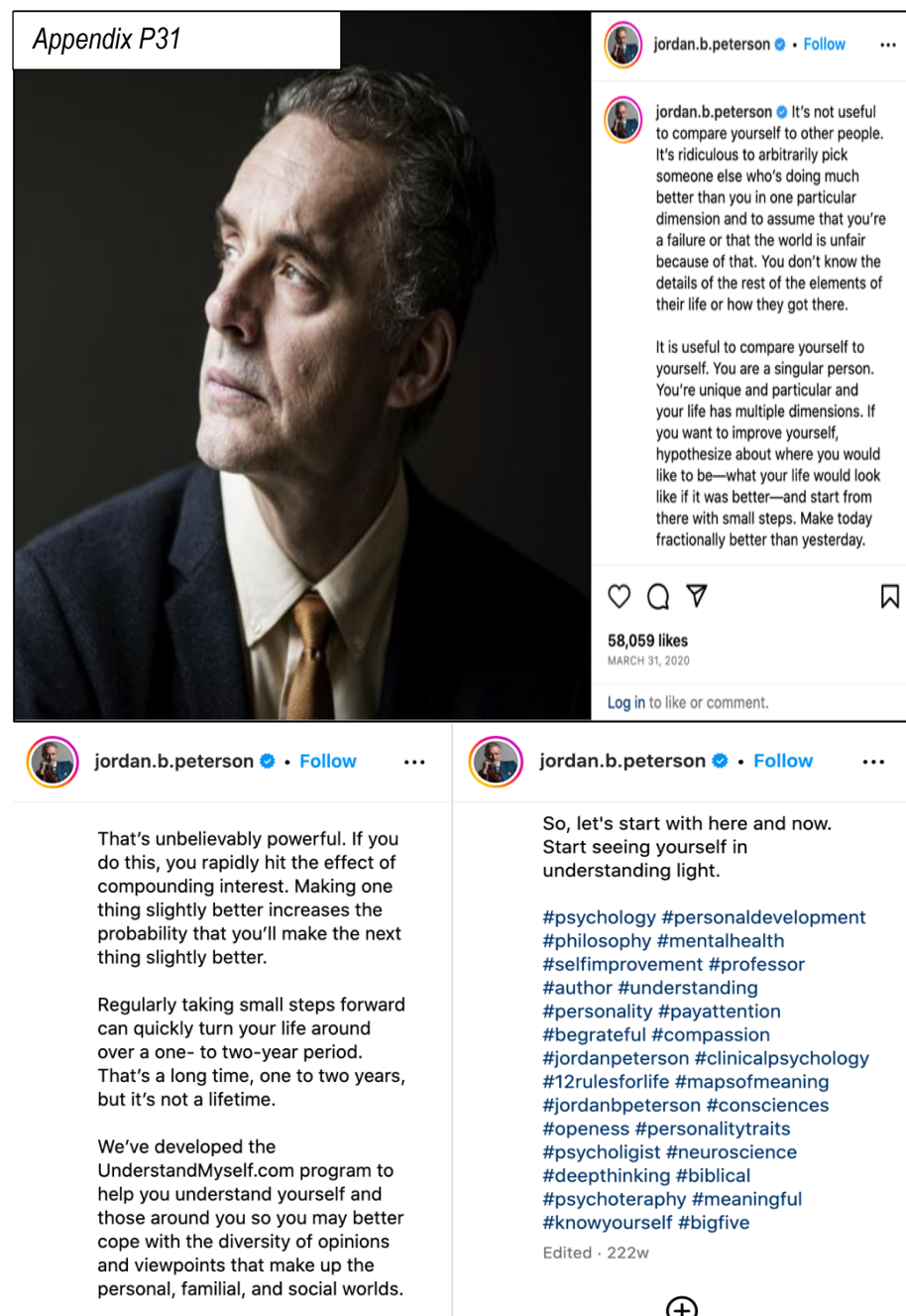
Not all discourse need be as strident, and to upbraid Ford for not speaking with the rigour and vigour that Fraser does would be to err into moralising. It is pertinent to note that while the deficits and crises of care identified by social reproduction theorists were starkly revealed by the pandemic, practices and discourses of distant care fell short of connecting these crises to their historical invisibilisation and the underlying material causes of care's elision. What caring was *before* it was cool is the question that dangles unanswered.

Ford explicitly pivoted her Instagram content towards "building community" as the pandemic progressed. Again, this online community doubtless provided comfort, material support and care to those who participated in and extended the networks it established, however the distant caring that Ford's community provided and continues to provide *is* distant precisely because

...a disproportionate influence comes to be acquired by those who have what we could call the "privilege of presence", that is, the time and energy to participate in the movement's actions (Gerbaudo 2012, p. 141).

Indeed, the more Ford positions herself as a crucial node in a networked movement, the more central her own role as a node is able to be. Ford receives more offers to endorse products, is able to boost her upcoming books to an audience that will buy and discuss them, and brings guests onto her platform that then cross- and re-promote Ford on theirs. Especially amongst those able to work from home (or forced to remain at home) during the pandemic, Ford's high visibility – whether sharing health advice, political admonitions, musings on affective states or offering discounts

on products – ensured that she maintained and extended her “privilege of presence”, building her army of followers and providing masses of content as extended lockdowns, social distancing, travel restrictions and household “bubbles” led to a general increase in social free time. As such, the radical potential that Fraser identifies as immanent in the material experience of Covid-19 dissipates, as distant caring – inherently mediated by “networked communications” that “materialize specific fantasies of unity and wholeness” (Dean 2005, p. 67) – fragments into an atomised array of “caring” practices that shift the terrain of political imaginaries from the collective (and capaciously caring) to the individual subject. As a tacit discursive current – or better, as a propulsive discursive undercurrent – Ford’s online community’s dominant imaginary is “liberal individualist and gender egalitarian” (Fraser 2022, p. 69). The distant caring exemplified via the diffusion of practices of care despite an ongoing elision of the radical potential of caring labour – which we will trace empirically throughout this chapter – is another symptom of such online communities’ and their discourses’ imbrication in a system that is “sapping energies needed to tend to families, maintain households, sustain communities, nourish friendships, build political networks and forge solidarities” (Fraser 2022, p. 53). It is also a preeminent example of Markers Five and Six.



If we examine Jordan Peterson's Instagram post from the same day – 31 March 2020 – we find a very different (non)response to impending epidemiological catastrophe. Similar to Ford, and typical of the self-help genre, we find a photo of the author: here gazing into the middle distance, looking “professorial” and perhaps slightly concerned. No mention is made of the pandemic, however it is very likely that much of Peterson's Instagram content is scheduled in advance: his Instagram page is managed by the *Daily Wire* as of August 2022. This organisation, “founded in 2015 by commentator Ben Shapiro and fracking billionaire Farris Wilkes”, has “published



many misleading and false claims” (*The Toxic Ten* 2021): it has ultimate responsibility for the content posted on Peterson’s page.<sup>57</sup> Data from Instagram’s parent company Meta reveals that as of 18 April 2023, there are as many as 49 people who manage Peterson’s page, with the majority based in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom (Meta 2023). As opposed to Ford, who has a relatively much smaller audience and seems to compose and post all of her Instagram content herself,<sup>58</sup> Peterson’s Instagram page – in contrast to his X/Twitter, where he unequivocally posts his own highly inflammatory content – is much slower to respond to current events. For example, commentary on Covid-19 did not feature in a post on Peterson’s Instagram until May 10. Even this post, as we will discover, contained only a vague allusion to the virus and the epochal disruption it caused: “with everything that’s going on in the world, fear and anxiety have taken a stronghold of many people’s lives” (Appendix P2a, p. 291). Awkward syntax notwithstanding, the late date at which Peterson – or those managing his account – acknowledged Covid-19 as a disruptive force reveals the relentlessly promotional as well as the political function of his Instagram page within his social media ecosystem.

On March 31, these intertwining functions are on display in typical Petersonian fashion: self-help bromides are mobilised alongside political content, both for ideological purposes and to direct followers to Peterson’s array of paid “know your-

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<sup>57</sup> According to fact-checking website Snopes:

DailyWire.com has a tendency to share stories that are taken out of context or not verified. For example, in the days after a violent white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017, the site helped spread a false rumour that “leftists” were digging up Confederate graves. In March of that year, the site spread a false claim that Democratic lawmakers refused to stand for a fallen Navy SEAL’s widow. In May 2017, the site falsely reported that Harvard University was holding segregated commencement ceremonies. The site was embroiled in another racial controversy after posting a video disparaging Native Americans in October 2017. After removing the video, Shapiro responded by apologizing but called the video “satire” (Palma 2018).

Peterson announced that he had joined The Daily Wire on August 3 2022, which highlights his shift from the “reactionary pole” of the radical centre and towards the far-right. This shift occurred decisively after the time period from which the data that forms the empirical content of this thesis is drawn.

<sup>58</sup> Ford advertised for a part-time assistant to help her coordinate social media content along with other administrative tasks in January 2021.

self” products, such as the “self-authoring suite” and various psychological personality courses. The relentless focus on the individual that these courses evince is evident in the post above, as Peterson urges each individual to take responsibility for their life by looking at *only* their own life, rather than arbitrarily comparing themselves to other individuals (Appendix P31, p. 289). This might be reasonable advice on its own terms, but within the liberal tradition broadly – and the specific context Peterson establishes for his followers across multiple discursive nodes – we find individuals persuaded to accept ultimate responsibility for the way their life unfolds, with corresponding elisions of class, race, gender, sexuality, ability, religion etc. Also absent are the different varieties of labour that individuals need to perform to survive, and how these might relate to the labour and labour *time* required to focus on improving the self. The notion of the individual developing via their situation in or via contributions to a collective social body is another notable omission.

The language Peterson uses to describe personal development in Appendix P31 is economistic, most notably the heuristic of compounding interest that symbolises the “slow and steady” progress individuals will make if they focus relentlessly on themselves and strive to make “today *fractionally* better than yesterday”. While fractional improvements rapidly attaining the status of compound interest may seem like language derived more from pyramid schemes or multi-level marketing than from the neoclassical tradition Peterson unquestionably accepts, the overarching framing of individuation as a process akin to enlightened investment has a long history in liberal and neoliberal discourses. Becker’s notion of “human capital” is the ontological ground on which Peterson is operating here. Becker (1998, p. 222) contends that:

[A] progressive income tax system not only reduces efficiency by discouraging investment but may also widen...inequality in disposable incomes. By contrast, policies that improve access of poor families to the capital market to finance their investments in human capital reduce inequality while raising efficiency.

Becker’s convictions are echoed in Peterson’s post above. Reliance on any form of collective provisioning, or drawing on others to improve one’s own situation, even

with the reciprocity that might ensue, is ultimately detrimental: the tacit moral corollary is that idleness, stagnation and a one-sided dependency on others occurs under these conditions, at the expense of developing a strong and actualised self with high human capital who is where they would “like to be”. The irony of such a hyper-individual piece of discourse appearing at the start of the first pandemic half-year should be noted, even though the post was probably scheduled in advance. Additionally, although Peterson may not have composed it himself, as a flat character with a distinctive discursive style his content could easily be replicated by an employee or artificial intelligence.<sup>59</sup> The post is a crystal-clear distillation of Peterson’s worldview, deploying a neoliberal “economization of heretofore non-economic domains” (Brown 2016, p. 31) in order to address a subject who is not all they could be, but who might accelerate the progress of becoming thus by purchasing Peterson’s personality courses and further following his discursive output.

Although Covid-19 is absent from this iteration of Peterson’s micro-discourse, we can locate all six markers of the elision of labour in this post. The notion that the same amount of time is available in each day for the subject to focus on self-improvement, and that the self develops in a relatively linear manner towards an individual *telos* that is inevitably better than what and where they were before corresponds to the elision of labour we have identified in Markers One and Two. On both quotidian and teleological and historical scales, Peterson’s discourse posits that time without interruption is “given” to each subject, and that how they use this time – ideally to become fractionally better each day in order to ultimately achieve an actualised self – is determined by each individual. The vast differences in the subjective experience and *ownership* of time that is the reality of existence under contemporary capitalism is elided in Appendix P31: indeed, such elisions are precisely what serve to situate the post politically.

Further, Makers Three and Four – relating to nature – are also evident. Peterson’s allusion to the individual being able to “better cope with the diversity of opinions and

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<sup>59</sup> Whether or not we accept Barthes’s thesis that the author is dead, there was a period during 2020 when Peterson was literally comatose yet his discourse continued to flow, as we shall see later in this chapter.

viewpoints” that exist “out there”, amongst other individuals, positions these viewpoints as fixed and unchanging: although there is variety among them, together they comprise a society/nature binary that is basically static. The hard distinctions Peterson draws between “personal, familial and social worlds” is a perfect example of Marker Four. Everyone within society is or should be attempting to improve themselves, but the background structures against which this improvement occurs are motionless, timeless and unchanging. This logic regarding the “society” that is imposed on “nature” and how the individual can develop within it seems initially to align with Rousseau’s (1968, p. 108) argument that:

In the order of nature...different wills become the more active the more they are self-centred. Hence, the general will is always the weakest...and the particular will comes first of all.

However, Rousseau (1968, p. 108) goes on to contrast the “order of nature” to “a perfect system of legislation”, where the opposite occurs and the “general or sovereign will” is dominant. As Peterson lacks Rousseau’s political sophistication, in reifying a background state of nature that ultimately determines the “society” that sits precariously atop it he in turn reifies a society where individuals *can* will significant change only by changing themselves: the individual must engage in internal struggle to find an appropriate place that is inherently *theirs*, and thus also static. How this correlates to his claims elsewhere that the dominant culture has been captured by those unworthy of it is murky. Nevertheless, in the post above the individual is assumed to be able to rise to a superior position in society’s natural hierarchy via only their *own* labour. Claiming that “it’s ridiculous to arbitrarily pick someone who’s doing much better than you” elides the different temporal possibilities each individual has, the fluidity of what constitutes society (and its inverse, nature), the effect of others upon the individual’s own life trajectory and finally our fundamental dependence upon and vulnerability to others, except for a narrow psychologism whereby the other serves only as an abstract point of reference. Care and caring labour cannot but be emaciated, flattened and thus haunted by richer possibilities under such discursive conditions, although Markers Five and Six are only weakly present in this post.

### Distant and Hierarchical Care

In contrast to the “distant caring” Ford expresses, Peterson’s model of care is strictly hierarchical. The emerging pandemic does not (yet) alter Peterson’s relations to or interactions with his followers—instead of the distant caring of Ford’s online community we find the ongoing operation of a community of individuated and explicitly (rather than implicitly) top-down care, if we construe care here as the stern fatherly advice that Peterson dispenses. This model is paradoxically less distant than Ford’s in some respects, as via the mass applicability of Peterson’s banal bromides each individual subject is able to locate advice regarding caring labour that is simultaneously specific enough to apply to each individual and general enough to encompass the diversity of his 3 million plus followers: what each needs is ultimately what all need, and care for the self is the ground of an ideal society wherein care is hierarchically and thus appropriately distributed. Like any other valuable commodity, care is scarce in this social imaginary, and carework must necessarily be rationed also. Care’s artificial scarcity results from the “unchecked acceleration of more and more abstract forms of commodification”, wherein “our sociability, our common and ordinary life together” appear as commodities” (Wark 2021, p. 14 - 15; p. 3), finite resources with a value set by the transhistorical logic of supply and demand. Peterson’s discourse implies an affective marketplace where each subject is always-already positioned, although such positionality is malleable: individuals themselves can act to bolster their own share of affective resources. To “improve yourself” as Peterson prescribes is precisely to accept – and act – against a background lack of reciprocal care.

As such, Peterson’s “hierarchical care” both predates the pandemic and is ultimately unaltered by it. There are several factors that account for this, including relative audience size (compared to Ford), relative position in a leading public and the more classically and overtly (neo)liberal tenor of Peterson’s content. Yet care – either for the self or for others – is not absent in the post above. It is merely subordinated to the striving and willing of the individual towards an ideal of the self that is assumed to be caring, among many other qualities, *at its most ideal point of development*. As opposed to Ford, who implores her intimate public to draw upon always operational yet undervalued reserves of care in response to epidemiological crisis, Peterson’s

intimate public is only expected to be able to meaningfully care or perform carework once they have their own house in order: further, care is intimately bound up with one's position in the hierarchy of the household. In urging his followers to better understand "familial and social" worlds there is nonetheless a tacit allusion to a notion of more capacious care, however this is instantly elided by the individualistic thrust of his discourse.

Before proceeding to a more wide-ranging hauntological reading – where patterns of elisions across a number of posts from April to September 2020 will be analysed – the obvious must be acknowledged. Whilst this initial process of granular reading has unearthed elisions, they are also elisions that are *gendered*. Via a preliminary close reading confined to two micro-discursive instances, we have found that liberalism's left flank or ostensibly "radical feminist" tendency evinces stronger elisions of the markers of caring labour. Liberalism's right flank – in this case, its patriarchal tendency – shows stronger elisions of the markers relating to time and nature. Will this pattern persist as we proceed chronologically through the first pandemic half-year?

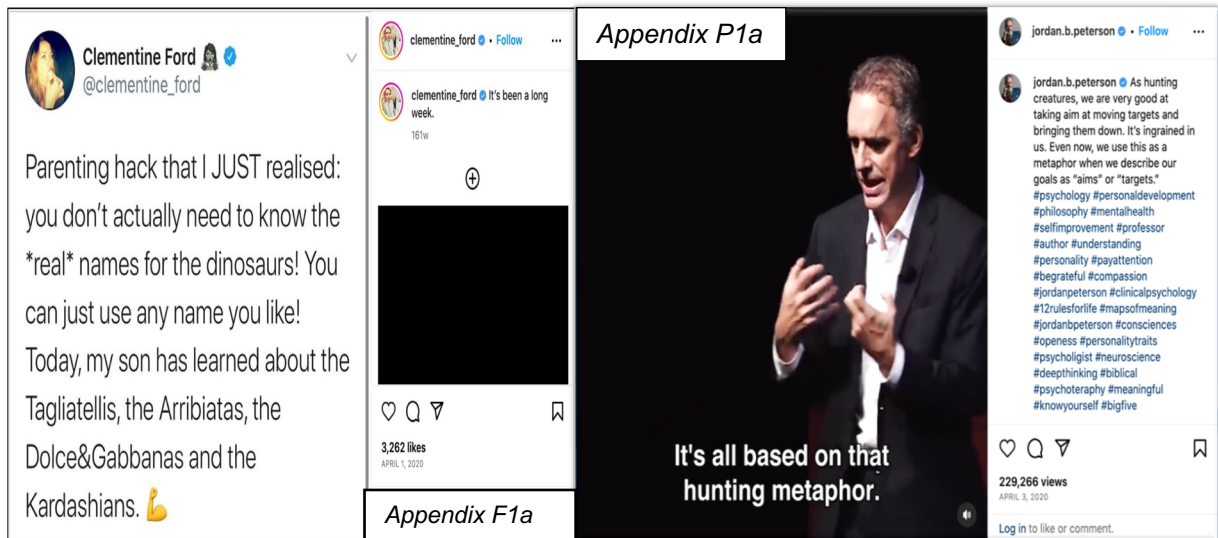
#### April 2020

##### Ancestrality

A strange coincidence: as we enter the temporal domain of the first pandemic half-year, both Ford and Peterson's initial Instagram posts refer quite explicitly to *ancientness*. True to the personas we have established as characteristic of both figures, Ford's post is humorous and exasperated and Peterson's deadly serious. With the caveat – which must be borne in mind throughout this chapter – that some of Peterson's Instagram content is scheduled in advance and composed by others, this convergence of two instances of micro-discourse that refer to historical time on a scale beyond human comprehension amidst other signifiers that are contemporary is certainly curious. Again, it seems likely this is merely a coincidence, however the mere fact of discursive coincidence does not preclude the possibility of significance. Aristotle notes in his *Poetics* that "coincidences are most striking when they have an air of design" (1997 [c.330 BC], p. 19), and we can certainly read these two posts (see p. 253 and p. 290) for markers of labour's elision: the conjunctive reference to

ancientness and time before human history in the early stages of a world historical event is worth examining.

Ford is clearly alluding to the difficulties of being in lockdown with a young child by publishing a joke attributing names of pastas and celebrities to dinosaurs opposite the caption “It’s been a long week”. Peterson meanwhile attempts to establish that



having aims or goals arises from our primordial past as hunters, those who “aim at moving targets and bring...them down”. Claiming that the metaphor of hunting still informs and underpins human behaviour today, this is a clear instance of Peterson’s on-going reliance upon a concept of nature that is given, ahistorical and “just there”—a variant on the “it’s ancient so it must be true” trope that saturates his work, and an instance of Marker Three. Ford’s intervention is more playful; an attempt to promote a mass affective resonance for those with young children as the novelty of lockdowns began to settle into a “new normal” yet historically specific pattern of life. By naming dinosaurs “tagliatelles”, “Dolce and Gabbanas” and “Kardashians” rather than recalling their actual names, Ford alludes to the exhaustion that prolonged carework in confined spaces produces, especially via the constant demands of children in one’s care for information and stimulation. In addition, she sutures a suite of signifiers of mass cultural “lean-in” style feminist aspiration to ancient creatures with both a mythical and pop-cultural status. Children are often fascinated by dinosaurs, of course, but might the affective and temporal logics underpinning liberal discourse have compelled Ford to bring these ancient creatures into conjunction with

contemporary cultural signifiers just as Melbourne settled into a new pattern of locked-down life?

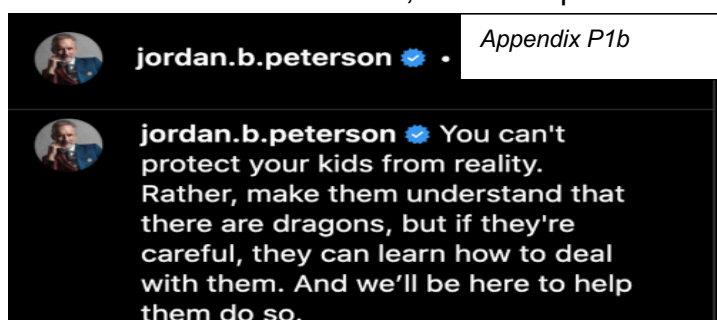
In *After Finitude*, philosopher Quentin Meillassoux (2009, p. 21) described how “the ancestral does not designate an absence *in* the given, and *for* givenness, but rather an absence *of* givenness as such”. As the history-making qualities of Covid-19 became ever more apparent, do Ford and Peterson’s reflexive turns to a past that is properly pre-human – “ancestral”, to borrow Meillassoux’s term – underscore the liberal tradition’s consistent tendency towards an ahistoricism that elides history as *made* by humans: by human labour and care? Is there a kind of comfort offered to their followers in situating discourse in realms beyond human history; in temporal and spatial locations of which humans cannot make sense, and thus cannot *have made*? Were temporal and spatial locations that are literally unthinkable – “that outside that was not relative to us, and which was given as indifferent to its own givenness to be what it is” (Meillassoux 2009, p. 7) – the most logical realms within which to position contemporary signifiers precisely because what was “given” to us all in April 2020 was an upheaval in which historical parallels seemed initially inadequate: this was history being made, after all. Human beings and human societies have suffered through many pandemics: the first global pandemic of the networked or information age, however, seemed to immediately send the characters under observation here back to a time before humans and human history, and thus in a sense before information—before the possibility of a pandemic occurring under the epistemic conditions set by liberal discourse. Dinosaurs and pre-*homo sapiens* humans constitute discursive presences which thought “could explore with the feeling of being on foreign territory – of being entirely elsewhere” (Meillassoux 2009, p. 7). Do we find references to these signifiers of ancientness in collision with the contemporary precisely because liberal discourses struggle to discern what *is* given to us when that something – in this case Covid-19 – radically disrupts our notions of how time proceeds, what nature is, and how we care for each other. We can certainly find our time-based Markers (One and Two) in Peterson’s post above, with an explicit teleological notion of human development or evolution and an implicit assumption that temporal uniformity prevails precisely because we are biologically determined “hunting creatures”.



Peterson often talks about nature's social determinist role, and perhaps Ford was caring for her son during a phase when he was curious about dinosaurs. These are likely the banal facts that explain the coincidence we have examined, yet regardless the notion of ancientness or ancestrality that has emerged provides some insight, I think, into how liberal discourses remain rooted within a very limited set of temporal possibilities. Even as the pandemic and the social and governmental responses that flowed from it came to structure quotidian life, temporality was not thought anew but rather bypassed altogether. Or, perhaps more accurately, we find these liberal discourses positing an "ancestrality that can appear as a future" (Spivak 1995, p. 71)—in remaining resolutely ahistorical despite the momentum of world-historical events, a turn to a pre-discursive "history" enabled Ford and Peterson to maintain discursive consistency with a liberal tradition that reifies temporal uniformity and a teleological account of time's motion. This turn also meant that Ford abstracted her care for her son from the labour of an engagement with history as she simultaneously positioned him as a flat protagonist in her narrative snippet of domestic life under pandemic conditions, exemplifying Markers Five and Six. The slyly funny closure of the conversation about dinosaurs that Ford initiates is offered as advice for numerous followers assumed to be in a similar position, for whom "the maternal becomes a personal problem to be solved by better time management rather than by structural social change" (Stephens 2021, p. 526). Ford's son's human specificity – his potential *lack* of flatness as a character or as a discursive object of care – is annulled in this post via this move.

### The Child as Object of Care

Peterson also deployed his children as objects of care in the pandemic's early stages. In keeping with the pessimistic, Manichean discursive style we have established as his trademark, Peterson posted the following on April 27, 2023:



Peterson's children appear as flat protagonists in this post, which accords with its highly general or even universal nature. Invoking dragons (another typical discursive trope, and interestingly another ancestral signifier) from which children cannot be protected consolidates the notion of a world that is fundamentally unchanging and overdetermined by perils that arise from a nature that humanity can barely influence, and where terror and evil lurk around every corner. Crucially, the vulnerability of children is not a spur to address evil or examine its causes, but rather a device by which the nuclear family and its "timeless" role as a "haven in a heartless world" is reified. In addition, the agency of children themselves is denied: the photo of a young Peterson holding his child enhances the post's tone and political tenor, suggesting that the ultimate impossibility of protecting our young is simply "how things are", and that introducing children to the harshness of reality must override the sentimental impulse to prolong their innocence. This theme is echoed in many instances in Peterson's written texts. *Twelve Rules for Life* (2018a, p. 51), poses the following "Question for parents: do you want to make your children safe or strong?"<sup>60</sup> In this question's reiteration in P1b (p. 290) we find further evidence of Marker Six, the deployment of objects of care in narratives of domesticity. The term "object" is particularly pertinent here: the denial of childhood agency and the overarching "terribleness" of the (dragon-infested) world alongside the universal limitations that apply to protecting children from it denies children – and tacitly also their carers – a rich subjectivity. The labour of care that Peterson alludes to is flat precisely because of its spurious universality.

Ford was less inclined to deny agency to her child during the early stages of the pandemic, writing on April 15 that "hanging out with this smöl hooman has also been so heart enriching" (Appendix F1b, p. 253). Using a contrasting style of self-help poetics to Peterson, Ford invites us to "relinquish control" and be with the alterations in affective temporality that the pandemic has wrought. "This may be a still life, but it's still life" alludes to a sense of mass temporal upheaval, and in urging us to find "joy in the moments between now and whatever the next phase of the pandemic

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<sup>60</sup> Note that these qualities existing in combination is annulled by the rhetorical question. Compare Sara Ruddick, who instead details the normative cultural and social barriers to raising children that embody "the possibility of being both strong and good" (Ruddick 1980, p. 355). "Safe or strong" and "strong and good" are not exactly synonymous, but Ruddick's epistemology allows for a much richer conception of human *being* to emerge than Peterson's.

looks like”, Ford highlights how temporal uniformity and consistency – as well as time’s teleological progression – has been disrupted. Implied at the same time is a background of temporal normativity that is felt in common and thus experienced under our “usual” temporal conditions in much the same way by members of her intimate public. From this ontological assumption we can locate Markers One and Two. Additionally, foregrounding her child “getting to spend so much time with me, which...he still seems to think is what his best life looks like” as well as “trying to tap into gratitude and patience” inflects the post with a sense of wonder and a quasi-spiritual timbre that is reinforced by the use of terms and phrases like “delightfully frivolous”, “heart-enriching”, “best life”, “heaven”, “grace”, “joy” and “love” (F1b). These combine to create a discursive atmosphere that is thick with allusions to self-care and abundance: even and especially an abundance that flows from precisely the temporal disturbance that Ford identifies. This disturbance is in fact what allows such “deep” affective signifiers to accumulate.

We can locate here what Berlant (2011, p. 91) has described as “a sense of out-of-synchness with the world that is reproduced in the protagonist”: in the “haste to batten down the historical present”, the temporal dislocation that Ford identifies is also what produces a sense of profound affective resonance for the “protagonists” – herself and her son, the object of her care – in this iteration of micro-discourse. One set of elisions enables another: Ford’s post posits an affective *telos* whereby temporal disruption is antecedent to the congealing of signifiers of care; the absent presence signified by Markers One and Two enable further absence, signified by Markers Five and Six. Care’s intertwining with and underpinning of labour – and care as a *practice of labour* – are elided in F1b, via both the novel chronicity Ford describes and in the mobilisation of her content to evoke affective congruence. Care takes time, yet Ford superimposes its practice – and the enhanced appreciation of it that the pandemic’s temporality allows – directly upon the assumedly freed-up labour-time during which we are “usually” unable to care in such abundant ways. Ford assumes that we now have an abundance of time that should produce an abundance of care: indeed, she has “spent most of the last week making insta stories about cooking and hair care and other delightfully frivolous things” (F1b). The fact that each individual has very different amounts of time that is labour-time – time they must sell – and thus very different amounts of time available to care for

themselves and others is not raised. Again, we find a foreclosure of the radical re-conceptions of labour and care that arise from historical upheaval at the very moment they are expressed. For Ford, care is first and foremost *self-care*, and via the assumption that the pandemic produced a uniform abundance of time for such care the author's class position and fundamentally (neo)liberal worldview begin to clarify. Also clear is an occlusion of the class divisions that the pandemic revealed so starkly, however here Ford is merely following her own discursive logic, where

...the horizon of change is limited and so the turn is inward...Documenting one's habits, accomplishments and maybe even failures becomes evidence of the labours of self-care offered up to peers...who confirm and validate the work done (Dowling 2021, p. 175).

Labour-time is a commodity, and so is care: like any commodity both tend towards scarcity, but Ford emphasises that the pandemic has uniformly slowed time so that the commodity of care – which in its commodification is always-already arcing back towards care for the self – is somewhat paradoxically more abundant, or can be accessed in its abundance by “going with” the pandemic's time. We can find critiques of this profoundly individualist additive logic even within the liberal tradition; witness John Rawls's (1999, p. 439) claim that “the idea of maximizing the aggregate of well-being...is vague and amorphous”.

The relentless directing of abundant care back to the self is even clearer in Ford's post on April 13 (Appendix F1c, p. 254). The intertwining of liberal conceptions of time and care structure the post's politics and poetics, especially where Ford declares:

you deserve to treat yourself like a special fucking occasion.

Because you are not just a special occasion. You are THE special occasion. Own it baby.

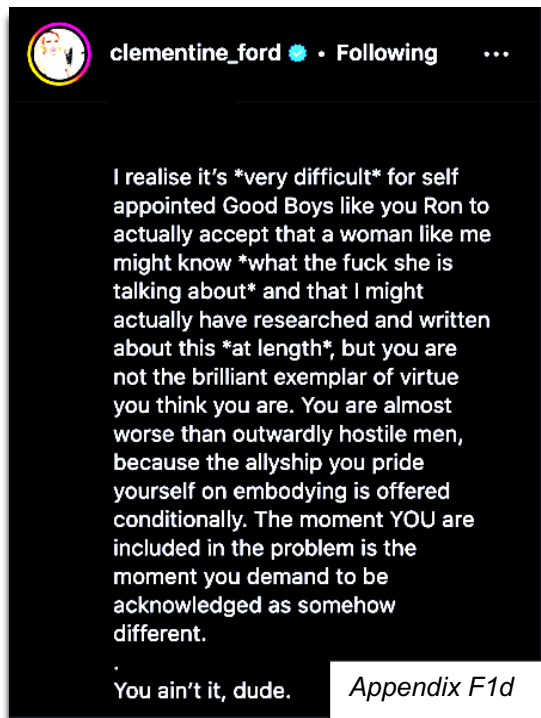
Appendix F1c

Again, we see how multiple elisions (Markers One, Two, Five and Six) occur in a synchronic fashion via the positing of a diachronic account of the affective experience of a historical event. The process Ford describes is unlikely to be

possible for someone with significant caring responsibilities for others, or for someone who needs to sell a significant amount of their labour-time to survive. Nevertheless, we can read these early pandemic posts from Ford as congruent with Berlant's claim that "the desire for alternative filters that produce the sense...of a more liveable and intimate sociality is another name for the desire for the political". However, throughout Ford's discourse we consistently find that "politics is reduced to the desire for affective attunement" (Berlant 2011, p. 227 - 228). In F1b the permanence of the political for Ford as Ford the activist-influencer is intimated by the phrase "relinquishing control over any outcome has never been my strong suit": Ford is visible as a figure who can suggest finding gratitude, joy and the like "in between now and whatever the next phase of this pandemic looks like" (F1b) precisely because she has built a platform – and a body of discourse – as an activist-influencer, even though her discourses' particular intertwining of the "personal" and the "political" align precisely with Berlant's insight about politics being "reduced to affective attunement".

In a more expressly "political" post (Appendix F1d, p. 255) where Ford shares the comments of a man who has disputed her account of the societal division of domestic labour, Ford oscillates between providing resources that prove that women still do "the lion's share of domestic labour *at the expense of their own work*" (italics mine), and berating and mocking the man who has been commenting. As a result, the salient points and valuable resources she provides are not proffered in service of the *collective* struggle for more a more equal division of domestic labour, nor in aid of a reconsideration of reproductive labour's importance (see my italics in the quote above) or a recognition of the radical political potential centring such labour might unlock. Instead, Ford deploys these resources to publicly belittle an anonymous man who becomes an avatar – a flat character – for the ostensibly well-intentioned progressive male who is in fact a hindrance to feminist struggle. This move individualises an inherently collective political project: transposing the contingent political contestations of reproductive labour onto static, transhistorical avatars – good "women like me" and "almost worse" men – voids Ford's discourse of radical potential. Further, in separating "domestic work" from women's "own work" in Appendix F2d, Ford continues the artificial demarcation of the spheres of production and reproduction, exemplifying Marker Four. The post also echoes Peterson's

Manichean pessimism, as the moral character of individuals is perceived as the fundamental barrier to social change. Ford concludes her post with the following:



Here, Ford’s discursive form is emptied of political content. Both caricaturing her interlocutor as “Ron” and the warning about men like him who “ain’t it” directs the post’s function away from a rigorous exploration of reproductive labour and its social role and towards a kind of “agony aunt” style advice on selecting a romantic partner. Again, Ford’s affect of ironic anger is mobilised to unite an exclusive community in a moment of Berlantian attunement that is ultimately anti-political. With all caps deployed to emphasise just how *wrong* her opponent is – an echo of the numerous

YouTube videos where Peterson “destroys” his opponents – Ford demonstrates clearly that she has dispensed with another problem – or rather a problematic individual, an adversary in her heroic journey – and in so doing has set an example for others to follow. Again, a discursive closure is initiated by this affective mode and its concomitant individualised political understanding at the very moment of the opening of radical possibility.

### Sleight-of-Hand

Later in the same month, a post appeared on Peterson’s Instagram that echoed content from *Twelve Rules for Life*—“you have a 10% chance of being in the top 1% of wealth for at least one year of your life and a 40% chance of being in the top 10% for at least one year of your life” (Appendix P1c, p. 291, video content). On the surface, and as is typical for Peterson, we find the deployment of self-help discourse, offering hope that his followers may become wealthy (although there is no citation for the figures he quotes) while simultaneously reminding them that their actual chances of this are statistically low. So far, this is a fairly innocuous iteration of micro

discourse, however as the video proceeds Peterson makes a couple of extraordinary claims that evince very clearly the absence of a rich concept of human labour. First, Peterson claims that the concentration of wealth at the very top (“the top 1% of the 1% have all the money”) is “the inevitable result of *iterated trading games*. And we don’t know how to fight it” (*italics mine*). “Iterated trading games” – and similar “profound” or “insider” sounding economistic phrases demonstrate that Peterson’s poetics speak to an affective need to be better than the other: presented as an aside in the video accompanying the post, this vague concept – gleaned from game theory and the dubious intellectual borders of neoclassical economics – serves a dual function. Casually deploying the phrase “iterated trading games” positions Peterson as a cross-disciplinary “master” whose erudition is profound, in addition to superficially carrying enough intellectual weight to render the rest of his claims in this post convincing enough at a glance.

Peterson goes on to claim that even if wealth is taken (how is not specified) from some individuals then others will automatically rise up to take their place, like a force of nature. There cannot *not* be a concentration of wealth at the top as society currently exists, and by implication has always existed and *must* exist. This claim, and the very tenuous figures he quotes throughout, naturalise the class divisions that structure capitalist society as well as abstracting the complexity of the production and distribution of wealth – and the various types of labour involved in it – into a very simple formula that applies regardless of context. “Iterated trading games” functions as pseudo-intellectual sleight-of-hand, directing Peterson’s discourse away from social, economic and political structures and onto the individual, who apparently, regardless of their social situation or economic location, has a 40% chance of being in the top 10% of wealth earners for at least one year of their life. Again, where these figures come from is never specified, however as a condensation of ideology and self-help the video accompanying the post is certainly powerful: what struggling young person wouldn’t like to be promised such possibilities, and wouldn’t want to follow the activist-influencer who makes such promises? <sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> These rhetorical techniques are typical of Peterson’s discourse, as we will come to see, and were apparently evident in his teaching style before he became famous. Writing in the *Toronto Star*, Peterson’s former colleague and friend Bernard Schiff recounts how “Jordan presented conjecture as

Pc1 is structured by Markers Two, Four and Five. That labour might have a grounding in care – or that the sphere of production might not be strictly demarcated – is annulled at the outset by its content. Likewise, history is perceived as a rigid and unchanging succession of individuals rising to and falling from the heights of wealth accumulation. Without any social context, or citations for the figures Peterson provides, the post’s combination of neoclassical economics and self-help rules out any historical motion that isn’t pre-determined and teleological, and also suggests that individuals themselves are ultimately responsible for their social positionality. The realm of reproduction is devalued under these conditions, as it is *a priori* not a space where the individual can accrue value of any kind. Do the limitations we can see in Ford and Peterson’s respective discourses in April 2020 indicate that liberal discourse as a whole was already beginning to strain in response to Covid-19, haunted by its inability to respond to history unfolding in the present?

## May 2020

### Peterson and the Pandemic: Existential Realities

On May 10, 2020, Peterson’s Instagram content addressed the Covid-19 pandemic for the first time. Without naming it specifically, Peterson assured his followers that “feeling anxious is normal. It’s a natural reaction to the awareness of vulnerability” (Appendix P2a, p. 291). So far, so sensible—we might only question whether an “awareness of vulnerability” is something rather more quotidian than Peterson’s implication that such an awareness has arisen as a kind of mass affective consciousness in response to epidemiological crisis. More significant for this thesis is how Peterson advises his followers to *address* their anxiety. Using the rhetorical device “clinically speaking” in order to lend intellectual heft to the advice that follows – again we can observe a sleight-of-hand at work, as if Peterson has surveyed the entire landscape of anxiety’s causes and effects and has the definitive answer to any question concerning it – Peterson declares that:

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statement of fact...He was a preacher more than a teacher...He overwhelmed challenges with volumes of information that were hard to process and evaluate” (Schiff 2018).



Clinically speaking, the way to treat anxiety and fear is to lay out in detail what makes one afraid, and then to dissect it into smaller, more manageable steps to conquer.

Appendix P2a

While the individualism inherent in this advice should be noted, perhaps more pertinent is the metaphor of “conquering” anxiety. To conquer is to achieve a final and absolute victory – to arrive at the end of a hero’s journey – and via “laying out in detail what makes one afraid” Peterson’s claim is that regardless of its source/s, anxiety is something over which individual humans can triumph once and for all.

The triumph of the individual over something naturally occurring is a particularly stark instance of Marker Three. What we might denote “pandemic anxiety” was certainly discernible as an affective phenomenon during 2020, however the social and relational character of anxiety remains unexamined within Peterson’s discourse. Martin Hagglund (2019, p. 136 ; p. 207) outlines the fundamentally collective nature of anxiety in observing that humans are always

...committed to persons and projects that can live on and flourish but also come to an end...I can...suffer from an irrevocable loss because of circumstances that are external to my will...The attempt to eradicate all forms of anxiety—all forms of attachment that expose us to suffering...is thoroughly misguided.

In Appendix P2b (see p. 292), Peterson declares that:



jordan.b.peterson

Appendix P2b



jordan.b.peterson To be fully self-conscious means that you're perfectly aware of your limitations and how you might be hurt. To decide to move forward into the unknown and the land of the stranger despite that is one of the secrets to a good life.

126w

The theme of anxiety is present, along with a tacit acknowledgement of vulnerability and of the presence of the Other or of

others, yet our limitations are ours alone; they do not arise from our relations to others. We are at risk of being “hurt”, yet to be “fully self-conscious” – to individuate and to defeat that which threatens our individuation – we must “move forward into the unknown and the land of the stranger”. The stranger, by definition, is not someone to whom we are committed. That this unknown terrain inherently belongs

to someone else is in congruence with Peterson's liberal individualism, and echoes of a Lockean ethics are discernible:

[H]e that *by Conquest has a Right over a Man's Person* to destroy him if he pleases, has *not* thereby a Right over *his Estate* to possess and enjoy it...The *Right* then of *conquest extends only to the Lives* of those who joyn'd in the War, *not to their Estates* (Locke 2016 [1689], p. 92).

Vulnerability, anxiety, the Other, and the uncertainty that arises from the existence of these ontological states and individuals all co-exist in Peterson's discourse, but they never come into any meaningful *corelation*. Whether we are to conquer or share the "unknown land of the stranger" Peterson does not specify, yet his overall discursive thrust tends towards the likelihood of our encounter with the stranger being a violent one: he would argue that by merely existing we are "joyn'd in the War". Despite assurances that "the battles you undertake...could be battles for good things" (Appendix P2g, video content, p. 294), the progress of the individual is ghostly insofar as it is progress for the individual alone; for Peterson, "challenges to...equilibrium are in no sense considered opportunities for progress, for bringing the society to a new and better state overall by virtue of transformations arising from...disturbances" (Blattberg 2019, p. 308). A deeper understanding of our situatedness *vis a vis* the world, the others who inhabit it and the anxiety and vulnerability thus produced might indeed help the individual to conquer that anxiety – and perhaps also others they encounter – but in doing so they leave no trace.

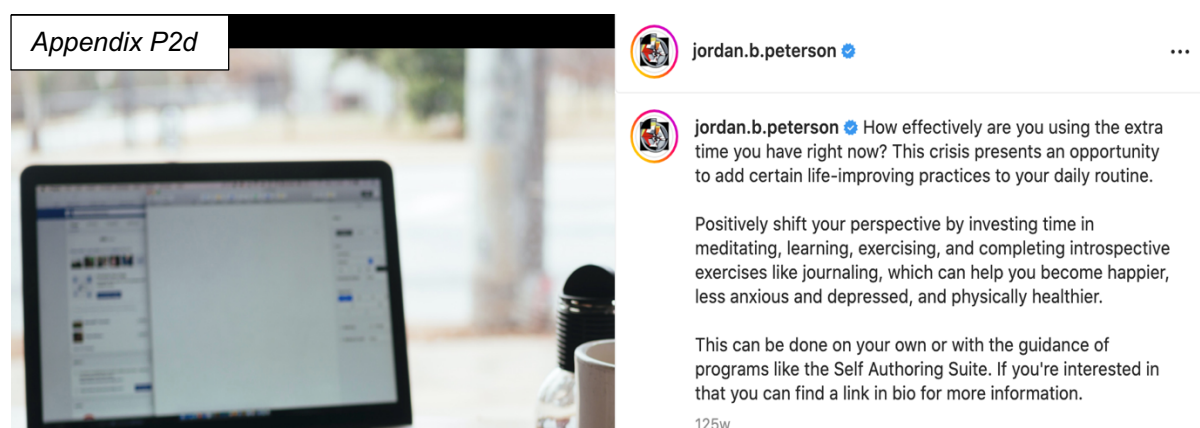
In short, Peterson's discourse remains rigidly focussed on the individual via positing the stranger primarily as someone by whom we might be hurt. In what can be read as an immanent critique of the liberal tradition to which his own discourse belongs, Rawls highlights "the social nature of humankind"; that "we depend upon the cooperative efforts of others not only for the means of well-being but to bring to fruition our *latent* powers" (1999, p. 500, italics mine). By contrast, Peterson seems unable to theorise the complexities and possibilities of our attachments to others. A flat and static background is always-already presupposed for an individual who can change *themselves* but is unable to draw upon any resources but their own in order to triumph over what they are struggling against.

Throughout May, Peterson refers to anxiety as something which individuals can conquer. Despite a distinct pattern of poetic emergence, with allusions to anxiety across a number of posts (Appendices P2a, P2b, P2d, P2e and P2g), Peterson often contradicts himself, downplaying our vulnerability to each other and the resultant political potential by employing what Judith Butler (2020, p. 35) describes as the “state of nature fantasy...that, in the beginning...there is a man and he is an adult and he is on his own, self-sufficient” throughout this period. Ultimately, Peterson occludes what even other liberal theorists acknowledge as our vulnerability to and dependence upon others. Rawls (1999, p. 502) is operating in an affective register not altogether dissimilar to Peterson in claiming that:

Those who love one another, or who acquire strong attachments to persons or forms of life, at the same time become liable to ruin...their love makes them hostages to misfortune and the injustice of others...Once we love we are vulnerable.

The presence of others and the political nature of our changing relations to them during the pandemic is barely acknowledged, even as our quotidian vulnerability to others was heightened by the increased possibility of sudden severe illness and death. Peterson urges us to “transform potential into reality through ethical decisions” (Appendix P2c, p. 292 ), yet as Derrida (1998, p. 139 - 140) notes, “there is no ethics without the presence of *the other*”. For Peterson, ethical decisions seem largely abstracted from “the other”: it is therefore rational that an individualised anxiety is ontologically abundant. Peterson mobilises the mass affective increase in anxiety wrought by the pandemic to promote his suite of “self-authoring” products: witness Appendix P2d (p. 293), where he urges his followers to “increase control over your anxieties and fears”. To achieve such control, one need only focus on the self: although the other remains a kind of ontological spectre, the elision of the possibility for care rather than anxiety to arise from our vulnerability to the other ensures that only *self*-control lights the “path you must take” (P2d). Markers One, Two, Three, Four and Five can be found in some combination in all of Peterson’s posts throughout May, with Marker Five appearing in all posts and Marker Three in all but P2c.

In Appendix P2d, Peterson declares that “conscientiousness stabilizes your environment by creating predictability. And if things aren’t constantly going wrong around you, you will suffer from less anxiety and emotional pain”. His followers can also find the “link to my Discovering Personality course in [the] bio” in order to address this anxiety and emotional pain. For Peterson and his followers pandemic anxiety produces first and foremost an opportunity:



Peterson draws on Nietzsche (Appendix P2f, p. 294, including video content) to affirm the opportunity for self-development that the pandemic presents, in a post where text accompanies a video of the author pacing a stage as he delivers a lecture. Peterson’s strong gaze and decisive hand movements evoke a theatrical grandeur and academic authority, as he gesticulates constantly and sharply to amplify ostensible profundity as well as to signify significant and serious affective and intellectual intensity. The effect is similar to what we witnessed in P1a, and the video is likely taken from the same source. The “Nietzschean” grandeur evoked is belied by Peterson’s reading of his hero, however.<sup>62</sup> The allusion to Nietzsche is in keeping with the trajectory and tone of Peterson’s discursive pivot, but Peterson’s grasp of his source material is shaky. Peterson announces that:

Nietzsche had this really interesting idea about freedom... That you had to... you had to submit yourself to some intense disciplinary process for some period of time in your life before you could develop any true freedom (P2f, second ellipsis in original).

<sup>62</sup> Nietzsche features prominently on Peterson’s list of “great books”. It is worth noting that only one female author – Emily Bronte – appears on the list, in addition to the lack of any texts that engage seriously with the “postmodern” and “Marxist” traditions he conflates. See <https://www.jordanbpeterson.com/great-books/>.

But if we read Nietzsche in *Twilight of the Idols*, we find that Peterson's understanding is somewhat shallow. Nietzsche (1988, p. 92) urges us to think of "war [as] a training for freedom". Freedom for Nietzsche (, p. 92) is "the will to self-responsibility...that the manly [sic] instincts that delight in war and victory have gained mastery over the other instincts". Peterson distils this axiom into a self-help cliché by substituting "war" for submission to a hard and lengthy process of discipline in one's chosen vocation, after which one emerges "from the disciplinary structure as someone who's free" (P2f). For Nietzsche though, "war" as metaphor for individual struggle against "pitiless and dreadful instincts" (, p. 92) was not a mere stage *en route* to a final destination. Rather, Nietzsche speaks of becoming free as a process that is always on-going:

The man [sic] *who has become free*...spurns the contemptible sort of well-being dreamed of by shop-keepers, Christians...How is freedom measured, in individuals as in nations?...*by the effort it costs to stay aloft*...One would have to seek the highest type of free man where *the greatest resistance is constantly being overcome*...(1988, p. 92, italics in final sentence mine).

Nietzsche speaks of the discipline required to understand and achieve freedom as "something one does not have, something one wants, something one conquers" (1988, p. 93), but Peterson has merely borrowed and diluted Nietzsche's military metaphors. He flattens the Nietzschean grandeur in which he has draped his discourse in the very next post he composes, which implores his followers to "be sure to consider your potential customer's risk tolerance before pitching your product to them" (jordan.b.peterson 2020a). What is this if not the "contemptible sort of well-being dreamed of by shop-keepers"? Likewise, it is unlikely Nietzsche would agree with Peterson's claim that "the bible" represents "humanity's collective attempts to solve our deepest problems" (jordan.b.peterson 2020b). On the contrary, Nietzsche famously railed against "the strange and sick world to which the Gospels introduce us", so that "one does well to put gloves on when reading the New Testament... Everything in it is cowardice, everything is self-deception and closing one's eyes to oneself" (1988, p. 142; p. 161).

Thinkers can and should draw upon texts and arguments that contradict and are opposed, but it is hard to square Peterson's regard for Nietzsche – for whom Christianity was “the *one* great curse, the *one* great intrinsic depravity...the *one* immortal blemish of mankind” (1988, p. 186 - 187) – with his valorisation of Christianity and Christian morality (see especially “August 2020” in this chapter). Cherry-picking examples from great philosophers to inspire individuals to work hard at what they are passionate about is a common self-help trope, but here Peterson is abstracting grand and impressive quotations, concepts and terms from their historical context – appealing to “timeless” thinkers and concepts – for self-commodification. Peterson attempts to transmute the pedestrian into profundity using intellectual sleight-of-hand; in P2f he achieves the inverse. As for Nietzsche, we need only move up a few paragraphs to find how he might respond to Peterson:

Liberal institutions cease to be liberal as soon as they are attained...there is nothing more harmful to freedom than liberal institutions. One knows, indeed, what they bring about: they undermine the will to power, they are the levelling of mountain and valley exalted to moral principle, they make small, cowardly and smug...Liberalism: in plain words, reduction to the herd animal (1988, p. 92).

Compare Peterson urging his followers to “stabilize...your environment by creating predictability” by taking his paid personality courses (Appendix P2d, p. 293). Unlike Nietzsche, Peterson is utterly convinced of nature's social determinist function. Reifying “hierarchies” from the natural world, he urges his followers to learn to “think and speak and write” so they become “absolutely deadly” (Appendix P2g, p. 294). Despite deploying similar military and hunting metaphors, Peterson's discourse appears decidedly pallid when set against that of his hero: he commodifies Nietzsche in service of ultimately banal self-help advice. This is not so much philosophising with a hammer as selling the possibility of *access* to a hammer that can conquer any nail.

Ford made fewer explicit references to the pandemic during May. Several factors might account for this, perhaps most obviously that she addressed it extensively in April, but also because by May 2020, day to day life in Melbourne had been profoundly disrupted by the pandemic. Conditions in Melbourne were significantly different to those in North America and Central Europe, where Peterson, unbeknownst to most, spent time recuperating after an extended detoxification from the benzodiazepine clonazepam. A “new normal” of lockdowns, social distancing and, for many, increased time online (zoom meetings for work, and recreation via screen-time and online socialising) had become routine. Ford alluded to this state of exception in Appendix F2a (p. 256), writing that “Time means nothing anymore” before advising her “coven” to:

Do a  
photo shoot in your house. Take a million selfies until you find  
one that makes you feel like the powerful witch you are. Post  
it. Tag me. Pray to the goddess of Miss Andry.

Appendix F2a

As we have already noted,  
this notion of time’s radical  
alteration corresponds to the

elision of labour indicated by Markers One and Two. The abundance of time that Ford has – and that she assumes, via directions to “take a million selfies”, that her followers have – engenders numerous discursive assumptions, ontologically underpinned by the notion of a historical *telos* that exists paradoxically outside of quotidian time. That time usually “means” something and is heading inexorably towards that “something” is a cornerstone of liberal ideology. Ford posits an essentially universal temporality that the pandemic has disrupted in a “uniform” fashion; as such, the affective experience of temporality is now *felt differently* in common as well. The vastly different amounts of time that each individual needs to sell as labour-time, the time that needs to be spent caring for others, and that the pandemic actually *decreased* the free time many essential workers had available are all neglected in Ford’s discourse.

The positing of these mass affective shifts are discernible in Ford’s posts throughout May 2020. She made numerous references to her “coven” during this month (Appendices F2a, F2b and F2c), demonstrating a pivot towards a more explicitly online day-to-day life that was assumed to be common amongst her followers; a coven is by nature a closed and exclusive group, and in Ford’s case seemed to

exclude “those who continued to work out of their homes, disproportionately Black and migrant working-class people, [who] faced high rates of exposure to COVID-19” (O’Brien 2022, p. 17). Shortly after the post above we find her celebrating how “I’ve absolutely adored making iso content and *building* something special with *all of you*” (Appendix F2b, italics mine, p. 256). Similarly, in Appendix F2c (p. 257) Ford addresses her “cooking coven”:



Despite “time mean[ing] nothing anymore” (F2a), Friday night is still the night to celebrate the end of the working (from home) week, and here we find a temporary restoration of pre-pandemic white-collar temporal normativity. Celebrating previous temporal norms despite acknowledging their disruption underscores how deeply Markers One and Two underpin Ford’s discourse, especially via the tacit assumptions that:

- a) temporal order will eventually and appropriately be restored, and
- b) that the only political potential that inheres in this disruption is an increase in opportunities to celebrate the self.

Ford’s proclamation that “if you’re a mother and you have a partner you’re clocking off at 6.30 and you are NOT TO BE INTERRUPTED” (F2c) recalls the arguments of the scholar of maternity and reproductive labour Petra Bueskens—that the emergence of the liberal individual has also enabled “a new category of woman: the individualised mother” to emerge. This subject is “able to leave the strictures of the mother/wife *role* in order to pursue autonomously defined work or leisure” (Bueskens 2018, p. 10; p. 22). Ford’s directive is a call for her followers to collectively recognise themselves as “individualised mothers”, possessing a strong sense of autonomy despite their historically assigned roles as primary care-givers, home-makers and part-time workers. For Bueskens (2018, p. 23), this trend is complex; one axis of complexity is a concern “that women have become more ‘like men’ but men have not become more ‘like women’”. The end result is an asymmetrical social order in which

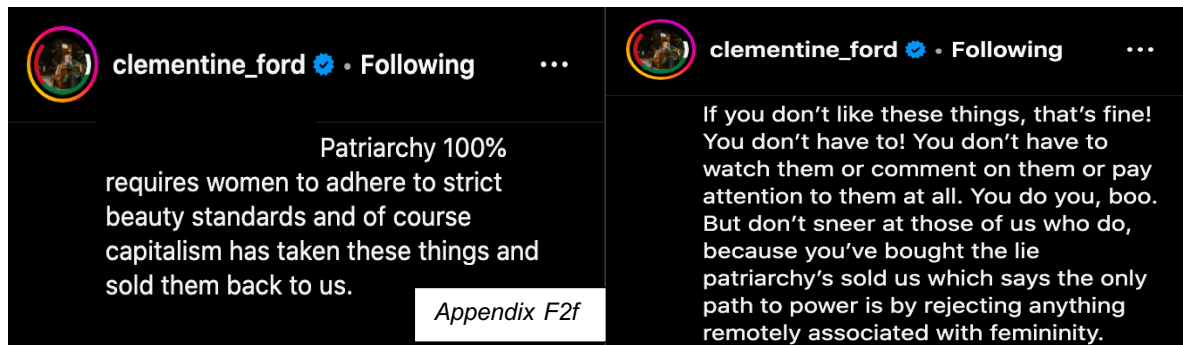


all are selfish individualists and few are carers. Yet Appendix F2c is instead a simple reification of the separate spheres model and thus evidence of Marker Four, the demarcation of productive and reproductive labour. Virtually inviting her followers to dinner exemplifies distant care and mobilises an affect of feminist intimacy, defining and securing Ford's public as *hers*, yet "clocking off at 6.30" to dress up (in clean clothes), "NOT...BE INTERRUPTED" and "eat...something delicious" potentially abstracts even *self-care* from its underpinning in feminised labour, echoing Marker Five. As Ford produced more and more "iso content", assumptions about the composition of her coven became more evident. She defines her public as largely composed of "white women between 25 and 40" (clementine\_ford 2020b): implicit is a progressive and professional woman with at least a basic understanding of the tenets of popular liberal feminism, and as such a certain class position. Also spectrally present are a possible set of more radical relations to labour and the labour of care, whose structural absence we are hopefully beginning to see in instance after instance of micro-discourse via elisions when time, nature (and culture) and care (and self-care) are discussed.

Throughout May we find Ford increasingly inviting her followers to  
to dress up, be themselves and make every moment of every day special:

<p>Life is short and it's over before we know it. Be ridiculous. Be ostentatious. Be absurd. Be brazen.</p> <p>Don't keep joy tucked away, wrapped up delicately and waiting for the right moment to wear it. The right moment is now. The right moment is always now.</p>	Appendix F2d	<p>It is worth pausing to examine some implicit assumptions here, as they speak to Ford's tendency – very much like Peterson's – to abstract the</p>
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forces that define our social positionalities and ultimately our lives; these same forces are understood as having absolutely deterministic control. In Appendix F2e (p. 259), Ford discusses "How women are taught to believe that everything we like is automatically shit". Presumably patriarchy is responsible here, but with no analysis of how this teaching happens, or any of sense of historical variance in or struggle against patriarchal norms, Ford annuls any possibly of meaningfully confronting this oppressive system. Similarly, in Appendix F2f (p. 259), Ford announces that:



The “of course” that connects patriarchy to capitalism is another example of Ford’s discourse opening up genuinely radical political potential; to form a feminist collective that recognises capitalism and patriarchy as intersecting systems of oppression and seeks to resist both. Immediately, however, the possibility is closed down: Ford divides her followers into those who accept that “colour and joy and adornment and sex and vanity and play and artifice” (F2f) are not inherently anti-feminist and those who believe the contrary. Regardless of the side of the divide you fall on, the analysis remains at the level of individual consumer choice. Ford acknowledges that “I participate in a system that wants me to buy things to strive towards an aspirational life that will never be reached” (F2f), but without any explanation of how capitalism – as a totalising economic system – structures institutions, constitutes subjects and intersects with patriarchy, or how “resisting [these systems] completely is also a privilege” (F2f), “patriarchy” and “capitalism” remain free-floating signifiers, to be fixed and filled with content as required. Sprinkling these terms indiscriminately throughout her discourse – amongst paid promotions for a superannuation fund “dedicated to growing the super and wealth of women” (clementine\_ford 2020e) or discussions of “what queer content creation looks like” (clementine\_ford 2020c) – evacuates any resources that might *challenge* patriarchal capitalism, beyond enlightened consumption and the development and celebration of the self under the auspices of systems of oppression that dictate our choices absolutely: these same choices, however, are what constitute the individual’s revolt against their oppression. “Leave your husband”, Ford’s oft-repeated trademark, can thus appear mottled with anti-patriarchal and anti-capitalist hues despite its presentation as merely the most rational choice – “evergreen advice” – for a “feminist” market actor (Appendix F2g, p. 260). In a different context, Sophie Lewis (2021, p. 102) has shown how easily “the sisterly call...to ‘leave your husband’...[can] come...at the cost of loving your boss”. This pseudo-radical advice

translates neatly for Ford and her followers, who as “powerful witch[es]” (F2a) epitomise the liberal feminist ideal of the “girl-boss”, resisting patriarchy by “feel[ing] good and being 100% myself” (F2f).

#### Time for the Self

Returning to Appendix F2d (p. 258), Ford rhetorically queries: “why is an ordinary Thursday in May not allowed to feel like a special occasion”?<sup>63</sup> Here, temporal and caring elisions combine to structure a post whose reach for poignancy instead ends up as a celebration of the liberal individual. Ford, her mother and her son are all mobilised to demonstrate to her coven that “the right moment is now. The right moment is always now” (F2d). But what and whose moment is this? And whose and what *now*? Again, the elision of both differing affective experiences of temporality and the different amounts of concrete time available for each individual to make an “ordinary Thursday” a special occasion is notable in Ford’s discourse. Ford gestures towards the way that much of our time is commodified under capitalism,<sup>64</sup> yet stops short of exploring exactly how or why a Thursday in May is not “allowed” to feel special, or how “the terror of aging” (F2d) is systematically instilled in women. Without any examination or interrogation, the forces that prohibit each day from being an unbridled celebration of the self appear natural and unchangeable: it is only individuals themselves who prohibit transmuting the mundane into the spectacular.

Objects of Ford’s care serve multiple functions in Appendix F2d. Ford’s mother and son frame its affective content: the “correct” use of time is the post’s overarching theme, and there is a strong connection to Peterson’s self-help discourse here. Despite the post touching on loss of life and each individual life’s precarity – “while my mother was still alive”; “a couple who had died” – the hydra-headed liberal trope

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<sup>63</sup> We should note the contrast between Ford continuing to celebrate Friday night as a mode of “activist self-care” with the injunction to celebrate the every-day. The latter is also a mode of activism directed towards the individual.

<sup>64</sup> With more and more leisure time spent generating algorithmic value, an argument can be mounted that almost all of our time is in some sense commodified, or at least inflected by the logic of the commodity form. As Mackenzie Wark (2021, p. 48) notes: “Quite simply, we have run out of world to commodify. And now commodification can only cannibalize its own means of existence, both natural and social”.

about the importance of using time well remains the post's main theme. For Ford, these sombre facts are employed in order to demonstrate the importance of individual self-betterment and taking as much time as possible to celebrate the self. The subversive potential inherent in reconsidering temporality – How much of our time actually belongs to us? How might celebrating our being disrupt capitalist time and provide resources for collective resistance to the forces that oppress us? – is bypassed in favour of an injunction to “Be ridiculous. Be ostentatious. Be absurd. Be brazen” (F2d).

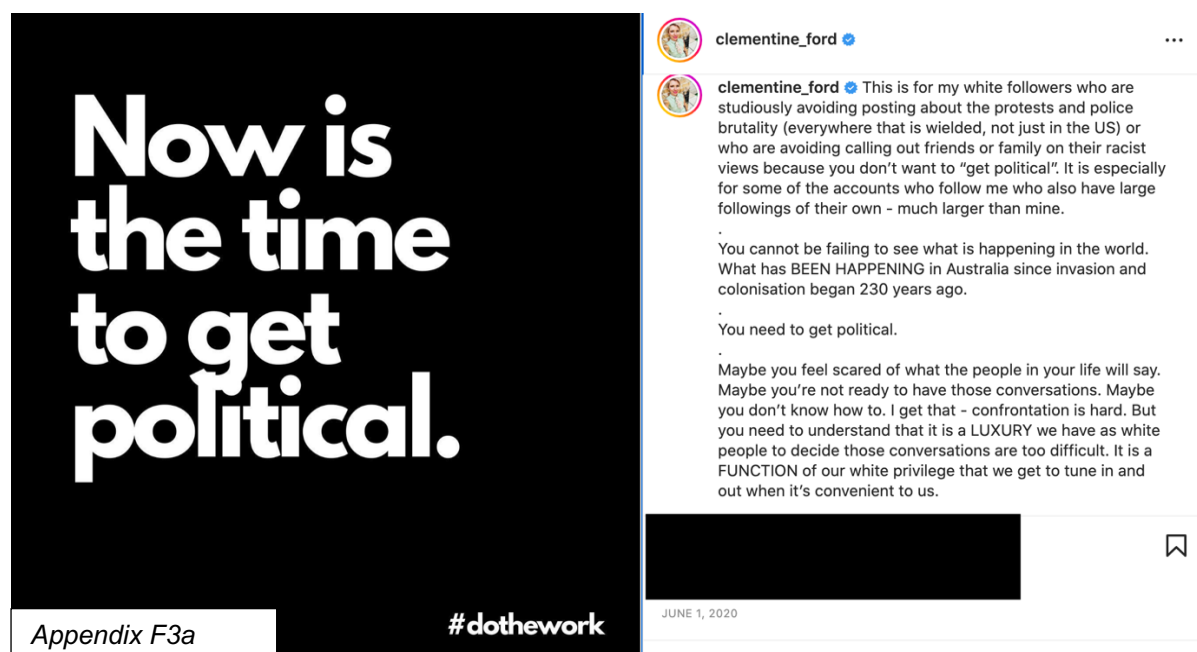
Ford's son, an object of her care, does compel her to consider submission to a capitalist temporal logic, and the memory of her mother and the long-dead couple who saved something special for a day that never came provokes a discursive intervention which abounds with radical possibility. But conceiving of time outside of its abstraction by (neo)liberal capitalism is explicitly posited as something that only individuals as individuals can do. Likewise, the objects of care in F2d remain flat and one-sided: they function only as props for Ford to model her “bespoke tinsel jacket” and to urge her followers to celebrate themselves. Their individuality will sparkle and shine in the act of celebrating, and however they *do* celebrate themselves will be the “right” way, as there is no “wrong” way to be yourself, or indeed to “be a woman, *awareness of which* makes one into a feminist” (Doherty 2023, italics mine). Ford's activism here aligns with “the present iteration of Anglo-American feminism...to make writing about oneself the central political act of one's life” (Doherty 2023). Inspiring her followers thus assumes they have the resources available to live their best life under pandemic conditions, just as Ford is demonstrably doing. Legitimising all and any celebration of the self as a challenge to oppressive forces both undermines the collectivity required to organise against such forces and positions political action as whatever the subject thinks and *feels* it is. Moving from the frequent use of “I” (14 instances) – which implies that Ford herself makes “momentarily magical” moments every day – to the authoritarian use of “Don't” (3 instances in three short paragraphs) in the final segment of the post reiterates the model of “distant caring” that is empty of radical potential. An additive account of care typical of liberal logic is again present, and again we can observe how “attempts to routinise, standardise and even rationalise care...end up jeopardising the very ability to provide that care” (Dowling 2021, p. 39). Absent in Ford's account is that

care needs to be considered outside of the logic of the commodity form if it is to underpin meaningful societal change.

June 2020

Loud, Quiet, Loud

As residents of Melbourne continued to endure a bleak locked-down winter, history-making events occurred throughout the United States after George Floyd was murdered by police on May 25. As the accompanying political unrest and the Movement for Black Lives came to dominate the news cycle, Ford immediately pivoted towards addressing white supremacy, urging her followers on June 1 to “get political” (Appendix F3a, p. 261). Instead of the fairly innocuous post she made the day immediately after Floyd’s murder – instructing her followers to read *Me and White Supremacy* and undertake the book’s corresponding “28 day anti-racism challenge” – here Ford is at her most strident, in turn imploring and demanding awareness and action from her followers:



BIPOC people are being killed and we don't want to have an argument with our friend about it?

Fuck that. You need to get political.

Use your platforms. Do the work. We don't have to be the best at doing the work but we have to at least accept that is OUR RESPONSIBILITY to do the work.

If you don't know where to start, that's okay. Use the internet. Google "how to call out racism" or "what is white privilege" or "books to read about racism" or whatever it might be. Whatever question you expect a BIPOC person to answer for you to tell you what to do, take that question and put it into google.

Follow BIPOC accounts, and follow who those accounts lead you. Search hashtags. Listen to podcasts made by BIPOC people.

Get political.

Get political.

Don't turn your eyes away from this. Don't decide it's too hard. Don't get defensive about it.

Accept the invitation being offered to you to begin to understand the world that you live in and to commit to being a part of making it better.

Stop keeping quiet and start getting political.

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Ford's poetics rely heavily on repeated terms and phrases, and this style underpins the post's political function. "You", "your" and "you're" appear 16 times in F3a, while "I", "me", "my" and "mine" appear five times; "our", "we" and "us" a total of eight. Regardless of the incongruity of Ford commencing with "This is for my white followers" when she has previously acknowledged that most of her followers are white (clementine\_ford 2020b), what is notable about Ford's intervention is how the demand for political action is situated at only two intertwining levels; the interpersonal and the online. "Do the work" in this instance primarily denotes diversifying one's social media feed and having discussions and/or arguments with racist friends and relatives, or friends and relatives who are reluctant to discuss racism. Despite the righteous anger and manifesto-like quality of the post, and despite the call to political action, Ford's prescriptions for challenging white supremacy, police brutality and structural racism are ultimately quietist. Directions to "Follow BIPOC accounts" and "listen to podcasts made by BIPOC people" position "BIPOC people" as a monolithic cohort who share the key to political awareness and action. Ford's furious style disguises the lack of any meaningful political content; the repetition of "political" is closer to palilalia than anything programmatic.

Ford continued to post in this vein throughout early June, as we shall see below; by contrast, Peterson seemed airily removed from world affairs at the time. On June 2, he posted a photo of himself and his wife Tammy linking arms from behind, alongside the caption "Today we celebrate both parents and children. We celebrate

the relationships that shape future generations” (Appendix P3a, p. 295). What are we to make of this, and a subsequent post that begins “The present is eternally flawed. But where you start might not be as important as the direction you are heading” (Appendix P3b, p. 295) in light of the political convulsions and pandemic anxiety of the time? To find an answer, we need to wait until the last day of the month, when Peterson’s daughter Mikhalia, herself an aspiring activist-influencer, “did a podcast with my dad @jordan.b.peterson about what happened in the last year” (Appendix P3f, p. 298). The lengthy video accompanying the post starts with Mikhalia stating plainly “the past year was absolutely horrible both mom and dad almost died repeatedly”. The video features a discussion about Peterson’s addiction to clonazepam and the variety of unconventional treatments he undertook to overcome it. It represents what is essentially a confession to his followers, albeit mediated by an object of his care, a relatively rare instance of Marker Six expressed strongly by Peterson. The ground for this confession was laid by reposts from Mikhalia to Peterson’s Instagram account on June 13 (P3d, p. 297) and June 22 (P3e, p. 297 ). In a month where Peterson posted very little, there is a neat division between the feel-good banalities offered up on June 2, 4 and 6 and the confessional and deeply personal posts that appeared on June 13, 22 and 30. Over the next few months Peterson’s content dried up even further, until announcing “I’m home” on October 20. From this point, content became more regular before the announcement of a new book on November 24, perfectly timed for a Christmas marketing bonanza. That the hero’s journey Peterson undertook – from desperately seeking a clinic that could treat his addiction to the articulation of “*Twelve More Rules for Life*” – concludes with a new text available in time for Christmas is surely no coincidence. Before his followers became aware of this journey, and the subsequent discursive silence the later-June posts legitimated – or even consecrated – Peterson and/or those managing his account had to ensure a certain measure of business as usual, which explains the banality of his early June content.

A certain logic for the further development of the flat character Jordan Peterson, with a supporting cast comprising his wife and daughter, was already in train at this point. As such, to examine these early June posts for the elision of labour that is structural to liberal discourse, we need to follow Fraser (2020, p. 27), so that “one read the work from the standpoint of an absence; that one extrapolate from things [the author]

does say to things he does not". Returning to P3a, the celebration of *both* parents and children can therefore be read as reinforcing Mikhailia and Tammy's specific presence in Peterson's overall discursive ecology. At the beginning of June, we find Marker Six deployed to emphasise that his wife and daughter both have a crucial role to play in the redemption narrative that will unfold over the rest of the first pandemic half-year. For Peterson, to reinforce a biological link between parents and children is a form of "reactionary subversion": a means to assert the importance of "traditional" family structures in a time where they are perceived as unravelling. Peterson and his wife are pictured, his children are not; regardless, it is explicit that the family unit is what shapes "future generations". The family as a privatised space of natural reproduction outside the chaos and turbulence of an uncertain world is also suggested by P3a: with Black Lives Matter protestors taking to the streets throughout the US against a background of Covid-19 and the final months of Donald Trump's scandalous presidency, Peterson's quietist retreat to the eternal certainties of what Deleuze and Guattari (2009, p. 265) called "daddy, mommy, me" is a study in discursive occlusion.<sup>65</sup>

Quietism is the tenor of Peterson's Instagram content in early June. He continues to offer depoliticised self-help to his followers, but against a background of momentous events – especially as Peterson is deeply connected to US domestic affairs, on which he usually comments incessantly on X/Twitter – affirming that:



jordan.b.peterson • The present is eternally flawed. But

. Much of happiness is hope, no matter how deep the underworld in which that hope was conceived.

Appendix P3b

could generously be read as a gesture towards the political. There is no sense of history in P3b however – Markers One and Two relating to liberal temporality are ever

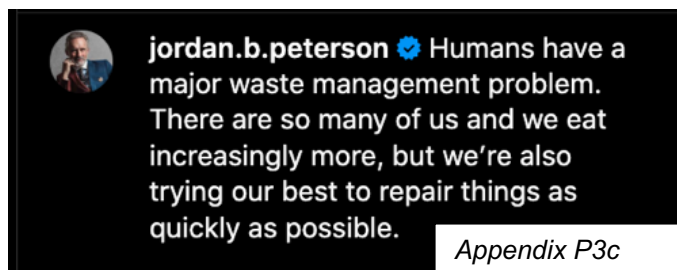
present – and the accompanying image of a white man with his arm around an

<sup>65</sup> As Deleuze and Guattari argue, "the Oedipal triangle is the personal and private territoriality that corresponds to all of capitalism's efforts at social reterritorialization" (2009, p. 266). Peterson certainly sees the nuclear family as a bulwark against efforts to disturb the natural order of patriarchal capitalism. As he writes in *Twelve Rules for Life* (2018, p. 44, italics mine): "Order, by contrast, is *explored territory*. That's the hundreds-of-millions-of-years-old hierarchy of place, position and authority. That's the structure of society. It's the structure provided by biology, too—particularly insofar as you are adapted, as you are, to the structure of society. Order is tribe, religion, hearth, home and country. It's the warm, secure living-room where the fireplace glows and the children play".



ambiguous figure – his wife or child? – pointing towards the top of an icy mountain, isolated in idyllic nature, serves to further abstract Peterson’s discourse from any relation to the contemporary. The text is bland and banal; so banal, in fact, that it suggests that Peterson’s account managers were actively posting “filler” content at this time, before the “reveal” posts later in the month set his hero’s journey in motion.

Appendix P3c (p. 296) is slightly less abstracted from the crises that defined June 2020. It is useful to recall that the *Daily Wire* has since assumed ultimate responsibility for Peterson’s Instagram content when reading this post, which was composed to mark World Environment Day. In keeping with his June discourse thus far, the style is almost inhumanly bland: sentences like “Instead of focusing on negativity, we should focus our attention and be grateful for those who make a positive impact on the environment” read more like an excerpt from a corporate induction booklet than the pronouncements of a “YouTube philosopher turned mystical father figure” and “thought leader” (Bowles 2018). Peterson commences this post by stating:



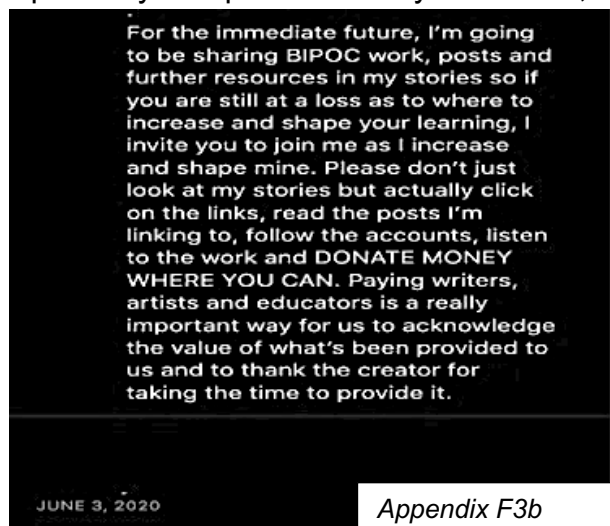
Studiously avoiding any mention of climate change – and with a paradisaical picture of the planet accompanying the text – Peterson seems to be resurrecting

environmental discourse of a Malthusian strain, albeit tempered with “hope”. Two hundred years ago, David Ricardo (2004, p. 61) drew on Malthus to claim that “the comforts and well-being of the poor cannot be permanently secured without some regard on their part, or some effort on the part of the legislature, to regulate the increase of their numbers”. This sentiment was common among liberals in the 19<sup>th</sup> century—witness Mill’s (2008 [1871], p. 125) claim that “a conscientious or prudential restraint on population is indispensable, to prevent the increase of numbers from outstripping the increase of capital, and the condition of the classes who are at the bottom of society from being deteriorated”. Peterson’s lament that “there are so many of us” (P3b) is haunted by an assent that there are *too* many of us, and in the post above there is a faint but definite connection to these ideas. Peterson’s post is a weak link – but a link nonetheless – in a liberal discursive chain that via Marker Three elides the historically variable nature *of* nature, and condemns surplus

humanity – the “too many of us” – to their “natural” situation. As we continue to read, the post is vague: what exactly constitutes a waste management problem? What “things” are we trying to repair, and who is the “we” performing these repairs? Peterson commences his next paragraph with something close to a *non sequitur*: “There will always be unreasonable people”. But who are these people? A suspicious reader’s thoughts might turn to climate change protestors and environmental activists, but is this fair? The text itself leaves us dangling in a moral miasma, without anything concrete to clasp. The next line furthers the post’s miasmatic quality; the nebulous waft then clears briefly as Peterson returns to a favourite theme, the conterminous social structures of humans and the animal kingdom: “for a bunch of creatures that only separated from chimpanzees seven million years ago, we’re not doing that badly”. As his discourse recedes back into the fog, Peterson declares “I believe that today, on World Environment Day, we should give credit where credit is due”. To whom this credit is owed, and for what, is never specified. We should just be grateful for those, whoever they may be, “who make a positive impact on the environment” (P3c).

#### Black Lives Matter

By contrast, Ford’s early June discourse exploded with political content. Inspired by the Movement for Black Lives, but aware of the limitations of activism for people in pandemic lockdown, she posed the question “What Can I Do?” to her followers on June 3 (Appendix F3b, p. 262). This is a good question: what action can “white followers, and...white me” (F3b) take to challenge structural racism, white supremacy and police brutality? For Ford, the answers are as follows:



Again, all solutions are tailored to the individual. Donating money to organisations dedicated to fighting injustice is undoubtedly worthwhile, but once more we find “BIPOC” deployed as a homogenising signifier that contains unexamined multitudes, as if all people with certain identity markers

are able to provide answers to all of Ford and her followers' questions about racial injustice—as long as they are not asked directly. To learn from victims of oppression about their oppression is again an eminently sensible suggestion, but Ford's framing of the process rules out any possibility of reciprocity or coalition building: Ford is also certain that “what we CAN'T do is personally and individually call on the people targeted by oppression and violence to be our private tutors and mentors” (F3b). This is not to suggest that members of groups who experience violence and discrimination should spend significant time educating those more privileged about what the experience of day to day and historical oppression is like. But by congealing all “BIPOC people” into an homogenous mass, the diverse political desires fuelling the protests, compelling many different subjects to take significant risks in confronting state power and violence, are unable to be articulated. Ford tends to repeat this error when addressing her followers, who she assumes are predominantly middle-class white feminists who share her beliefs and cultural mores: like many “radical” feminists before her, Ford “imagine[s] women [are] a coherent social group with a unifying set of easily aggregated interests” (O'Brien 2022, p. 140).

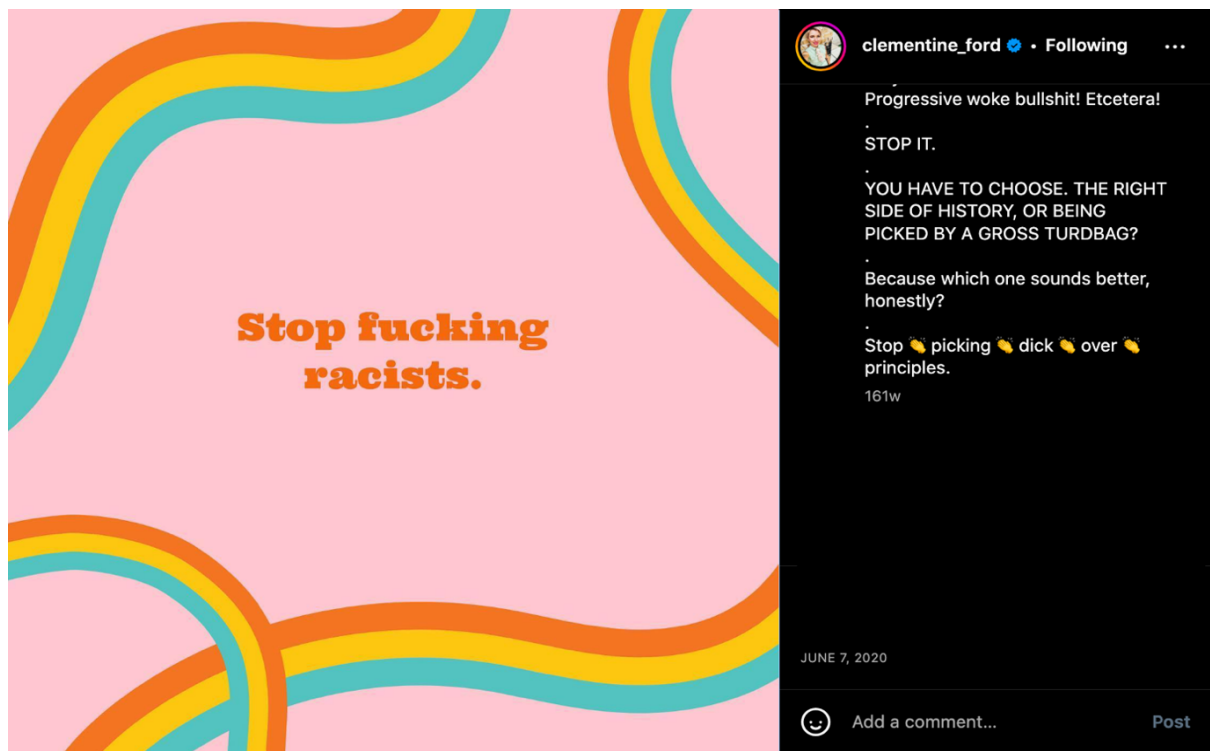
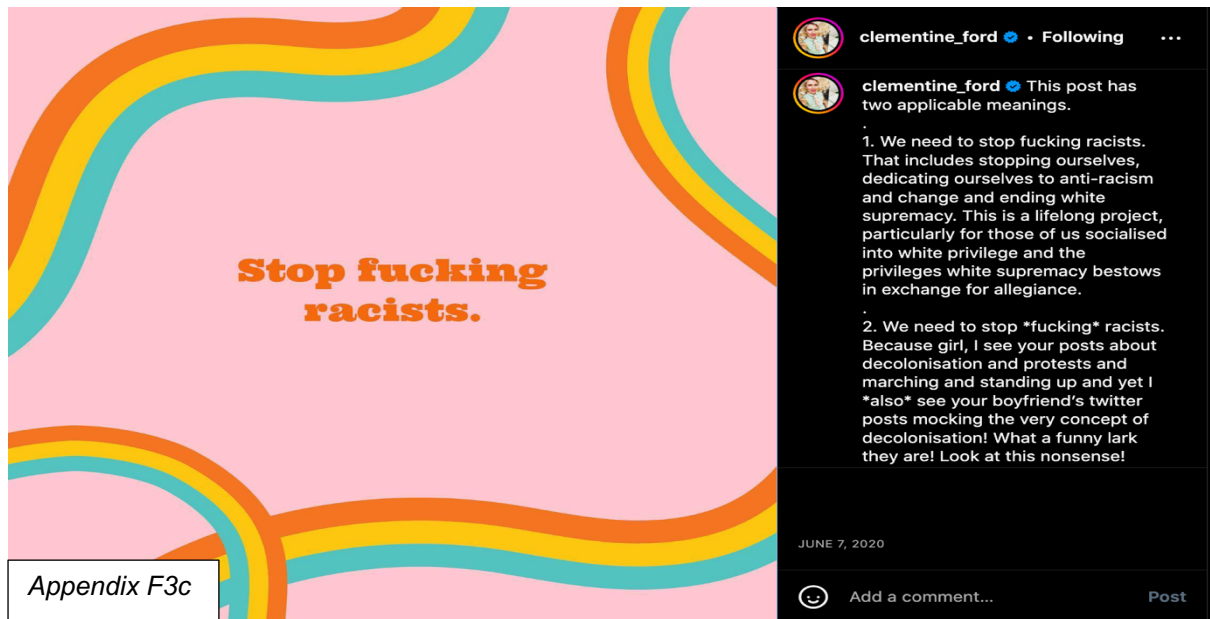
In a recent study where “fifty participants were recruited for online workshops to discuss online feminist cultures” (Kanai & Zeng 2023, p. 4), Ford was one of three popular Australian feminists selected as an “authority” and a “central reference point” (Kanai & Zeng 2023, p. 5). What was notable, however, is that some of the studies' participants “often straightforwardly conflated” intersectionality “with diversity of representation, including of one's social media diet” (Kanai & Zeng 2023, p. 6). This highlights how Ford's habit of homogenising oppressed groups, condensing complex political issues and using terms like patriarchy, capitalism and intersectionality as catch-all abstractions can affect *offline* political organising and emaciate the emerging political consciousness of her followers. Catherine Rottenberg has identified “a shift in emphasis” in much feminist politics, which is certainly discernible in discourses like Ford's. This is a move “from an attempt to alter social pressures towards interiorized affective spaces that require constant self-monitoring” (Rottenberg 2014, p. 424). We can certainly discern this tendency in both F3a and F3b: the emphasis on “doing the work” falls primarily on the individual, the on-going and inherently relational work involved in political organising is elided, and

oppressive forces and oppressed groups are abstracted and naturalised. As Fraser (2000, p. 112) describes, Ford contributes to a feminist discursive tendency that

...ends by valorising monologism—supposing that misrecognized people can and should construct their identity on their own...further, that a group has the right to be understood solely in its own terms—that no one is ever justified in viewing another subject from an external perspective or in dissenting from another's self-interpretation.

Ford paradoxically atomises *all* subjects of oppression, including relatively privileged white feminists like herself, who of course remain at risk of harm and discrimination. The labour necessary to build coalitions to fight oppression must be underpinned by both care for the other and recognition of our mutual interdependency. Even though we are differently vulnerable, “differences are not properties attached to individuals per se, but always relational, as is equality itself” (Kittay 2019, p. 15). Markers Five and Six relating to care are detectable throughout F3a and F3b—at its peak of political intensity, Ford's discourse most rigorously closes down the possibility of a dialectical relation between equality and difference and labour and care. Here, she follows a long genealogy of liberal discourse, under whose horizon dialectical relations are disavowed. Mark Fisher (2018, p. 480) once described how “I've seen what can happen when police treat people as an undifferentiated mass”: Ford treats both her followers and people of colour similarly.

The murder of George Floyd and its repetition on social media served as a metonymic catalyst for centuries of injustice experienced by people of colour in the United States, and the overflow of anger and grief produced innumerable responses that no simple synopsis could hope to contain. Ford's own discursive focus on the Black Lives Matter movement took an even more personal and individualist turn a few days after she quasi-rhetorically asked her followers “What Can I Do?” (F3b). In a post on June 7, after an uncharacteristic period of silence (Appendix F3c, p. 263), Ford demanded that her followers “Stop fucking racists”. Declaring that “this post has two applicable meanings”, Ford proceeded to address her followers thus:



This is a remarkable post, not least because it engages specifically with sexual desire at the expense of political desire. It is worth considering who Ford is addressing here: who are these subjects picking “dick over principles?” Why are sexual and political desire conflated in one breath and cleaved in the next? In positing withdrawing sex from allegedly racist men as a political act, is Ford not reversing feminism’s historical mission to position the feminised subject as something other – something *more* – than an object of male desire? The “choice” open to the feminist subject addressed here does not preclude acting with agency as

an *object* of desire, however underpinning this choice is a moral assumption that this same subject struggles to control her sexuality and thus makes bad sexual choices. This seems an odd injunction for an avowedly sex-positive feminist to make.

Ford's style of address in F3c is partially borrowed from particular African American and queer vernaculars – "Because girl" – but "Stop 🖐️ picking 🖐️ dick 🖐️ over 🖐️ principles", with clapping emojis emphasising each word, is typical of liberal feminist identitarian discourse, where moralising tends to substitute for the political. Policing the sex lives of her followers is a frankly bizarre response to the Movement for Black Lives, and reveals starkly how Ford's attempt at political righteousness strips her discourse of any potential expression of radical care in prioritising individual over collective action. Previous calls to educate oneself by listening to those less privileged do not extend to educating and thus potentially radicalising those with *more* privilege to whom one is close: instead, these assumed "GROSS TURDBAGS" are to be excluded and discarded, barred from participating in struggle. Employing a kind of formal bricolage, F3c suggests that one's position on the "the right side of history" can be discerned from the social media content of who one is dating at a particular time. Desire as such permeates the entire post, but Ford's tone – despite varying wildly throughout a mere two paragraphs – is ultimately that of the prim moralist. The cathexis that mass street protests allow – where libidinal and political energies combine to produce group affects and political events that can shape history – cannot be named within the discursive register in which Ford operates. Appendix F3c is notable for a stylistic collision that functions to mobilise shame and express impotent rage, however how and why such affects might dissuade her followers from "fucking racists" as a political act is unclear. Prior to Ford upbraiding her followers for having sex with racists Ford declares that:

1. We need to stop fucking racists. That includes stopping ourselves, dedicating ourselves to anti-racism and change and ending white supremacy. This is a lifelong project, particularly for those of us socialised into white privilege and the privileges white supremacy bestows in exchange for allegiance.

Again, we can observe a moral instead of a political demand. Stopping racists means regulating and surveilling ourselves, as neoliberal subjects always-already should. Ford's furious response to the violence of state

authorities is ironically an authoritarian discourse: a discourse that responds to police violence by policing her followers.

### Hero's Journeys

Ford continued to post actively about Black Lives Matter until June 17, when she recommended a podcast called “Seeing White” alongside an on-going commitment to “learning and ACTING” (Appendix F3d, p. 264). During this time, Ford took “a break of silence...in part to remove my voice from the public sphere but also to think about what I can do to go from being...a ‘good ally’ to an ‘effective ally’” (clementine\_ford 2020d). On June 19, Ford announced a “multi part post” to discuss “pelvic floor health, particularly in post partum bodies” (Appendix F3e, p. 265). This is the beginning of a micro-discursive turn wherein the hero's journey theme is discernible—coincidentally, Peterson's own hero's journey, although spanning a far longer time frame, was the sole focus of his Instagram content at this time. For Ford, this brief hero's journey is one from unknowing to knowing: from struggling with post-partum incontinence – after birth Ford “had a weak and battered pelvic floor” (F3e) – to bringing to light both the lack of information available and stigma attached to receiving treatment for “postnatal incontinence” and offering treatment solutions: “\$500 off “the #Emsella treatment for pelvic floor weakness” for her followers (Appendix F3h, p. 268).

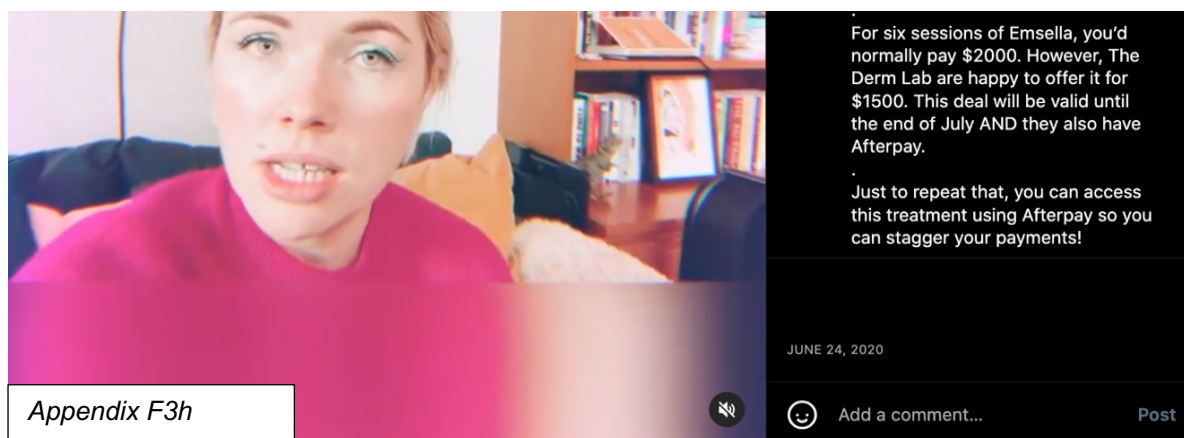
Ford commences with a flashback to the 2017 Australian Book Industry Awards, where despite enjoying “work wise, one of the most amazing nights of my life. Underneath that sparkly dress, on that sparkly night, I was wearing an incontinence pad” (F3e). Ford received many messages and comments that touched on similar stigma and suffering (Appendix F3f, p. 266): this is a clear example of how the online community she extended and solidified during the early stages of the pandemic was able to function as a consciousness-raising circle, in this instance bringing an important and overlooked issue affecting those who have given birth to light. Ford seemed genuinely gratified to receive so many messages regarding an issue she was attempting to raise awareness of, posting on June 20 that:





We can see here the hero validating both their own heroism and also how heroic acts can trickle down to inspire the hero's followers, breaking silences and illuminating political possibilities. Ford is explicit that "I didn't want to resign myself to

the 'oh well' school of thought that accompanies so much of the narrative around birth and birth injuries" (Appendix F3g, p. 267). After spending "the next year after giving birth googling different treatments and coming up with...well, not much" (F3g), Ford announced on June 23 that she had undertaken treatments in the Emsella chair, which quickly and significantly improved her condition. Ford brings the politics of social reproduction into the frame by stating plainly that "this treatment \*needs to be provided in the public healthcare system, to every suitable candidate\*" (F3g), however she concludes her journey by offering a \$500 discount to her followers:



The political content previously discernible in this hero's journey in miniature is overshadowed by offering a slightly discounted private treatment whilst proffering this same treatment as "truly life changing for me" (F3g). Instead of focussing her discourse on agitating for such treatments to become publicly funded and thus available to all who have given birth, Ford advocates using private credit companies in order to access treatment. Despite Ford's injunction that "birth is a big deal. You are a big deal too for going through it" (F3f), by the conclusion of this hero's journey Ford has again positioned "the maternal" as "a personal problem to be solved by better time management rather than by structural change" (Stephens 2021, p. 526, see also "Ancestrality" ): after six 28-minute sessions, her *own* life has been changed.



As in so much of Ford's discourse, a collective political solution hovers briefly in view, only for a resolute individualism to submerge it. In addition, we again find no interrelation between the spheres of reproduction and production: Ford's "amazing night" (F3e) celebrating her work as a writer is undermined by her ongoing reproductive labour. As such, we find strong evidence of Markers Two, Three, Four and Five in Appendix F3e. The hero's journey we have traced above is haunted by a more radical journey, where Ford's consciousness-raising around an issue coded "maternal" and thus relegated to the invisible domain of reproduction provides an opportunity for the feminist public she has consolidated to collectively organise and agitate to increase awareness of issues affecting those who have given birth and demand material resources to address these issues. As Stephens (2021, p. 525) notes, "maternal forms of selfhood have proven especially unsuited to and unsettling for neoliberalism and therefore have been sidelined or disavowed in the complex process of cultural 'forgetting'". Ford agitates for the recognition of a form of maternal self-hood, but immediately aligns it with a neoliberal logic, discernible in the constant use of "Your" (13 instances in main image) as an affirmative individualising device in Appendix F3f (p. 266). Instead of unsettling neoliberalism, Ford concludes her hero's journey by positing an expensive private treatment and "buy now pay later" financing as the solution for "a desire for sovereignty" as a mother (Stephens 2021, p. 524)—"you are entitled to a level of compassionate and responsible care that considers and centres your needs, and recognises your autonomy as the birth parent" (F3f). This desire, however, is "promised but never provided by market individualism" (Stephens 2021, p. 524).

Peterson's own hero's journey commenced on June 13, with a re-post from his daughter Mikhalia's Instagram account announcing his birthday – instead of a cake, Peterson has a birthday steak complete with candle – and tacitly reiterating that both Jordan and Mikhalia are objects of each other's care. All Peterson's June content contains Marker Five and Marker Six or both: as he prepares the ground for and then embarks upon his hero's journey, care increasingly comes to the fore in a decisive discursive shift. Peterson's battles with addiction and finding treatment are obliquely alluded to for the first time since a similarly obscure repost from Mikhalia's account in February: "Bye Moscow. Thanks for helping me save @jordan.b.peterson from the belly of very large whale" (jordan.b.peterson 2020c). Although the post expresses

that Peterson has had “the most difficult year” of his life (Appendix P3d, p. 297), as well as that “the future is full of opportunity and hope”, most significant is its final line: “Also...update coming soon” (ellipsis in original). Both the mediation of Peterson’s usually direct style and the increased presence of Mikhalia foreshadows something out of the ordinary in the near future. This sense is heightened by Appendix P3e (p. 297), which is another repost from Mikhalia’s account: here a relationship between father and daughter where each is positioned as the object of each other’s care is further consolidated, although this familial caring relationship is “naturally” more intimate than Ford’s “distant caring”.<sup>66</sup> Although top-down caring relations are present in both Ford and Peterson’s discourse – for the most extraordinary example of this caring structure see Appendix F3c, discussed above – in P3e, among various homilies to her father, Mikhalia thanks him for “telling me that the way to survive kindergarten was to find the biggest kid there and sock him so I’d be at the top of the dominance hierarchy 😂”. Ford’s discourse took an authoritarian turn in response to the Movement for Black Lives, yet Peterson’s proceeds with a relentlessly authoritarian logic.

In Appendix P3e, Mikhalia Peterson paints a picture of her father to highlight that “my dad wasn’t the usual dad”. This description (see Appendix P3e) converges with Peterson’s use of intellectual sleight-of-hand to position himself as a significant thinker: how could a heroic character like Peterson possibly be an “ordinary” dad? The realms of production and reproduction are unthinkable as intertwining spheres, and Marker Four appears, when a father is posited as a figure who towers above so many others: “the world found out about my dad and I realized he wasn’t normal” (P3e). Peterson might have shaped his daughter in remarkable ways within the private sphere of reproduction, but this achievement can only be understood via Peterson’s positionality as an activist-influencer for whom this private sphere is

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<sup>66</sup> Peterson’s valorisation and defence of the heteronormative nuclear family means that his conception of caring relationships radiates out in concentric circles from the self to the family to members of the same religion, ethnos and so on in a predictable, “natural” and uniform fashion, with hierarchy established by each circle’s proximity to the self. Ford’s identification as a radical feminist endows her discourse with a potentially more radical concept of care, although as we have seen the “distant caring” she espouses does not necessarily entail a care “ethics that proliferates outwards to redefine caring relationships from the most intimate to the most distant” (Chatzidakis et al. 2020, p. 41).

secondary to and separate from the public sphere where the real businesses of life – especially Peterson’s fame – takes place. Appendix P3e continues Peterson’s recent narrative strategy of leaving the reader hanging, with a concluding sign-off stating “Update coming June 30. A good update (finally)”. Having established Peterson’s more “nurturing” or even feminine-coded qualities in P3e and throughout June more broadly, the stage has been set for a major revelation that is to turbo-charge Peterson’s hero’s journey.

As promised, eight days later the update arrived. Another re-post from Mikhalia’s account accompanies a 56 minute video describing Peterson’s addiction to the benzodiazepine clonazepam and his many unsuccessful attempts to treat it in North America. Alongside this health crisis, Peterson’s wife Tammy was undergoing treatment for a cancer that was thought to have “something near a hundred percent fatality rate” (Appendix P3f, p. 298). Peterson was eventually admitted to a hospital in Moscow and placed in a medically induced coma: this was successful in detoxifying him, however “neurological damage” remained. This damage was eventually treated in a hospital in Serbia. The meandering conversation concludes as follows:

Peterson: Yes. Well, was good to be able to sit here and have this conversation.

Mikhalia: We’re gonna go...eat a steak (ellipsis in original conversation)

Peterson: That’s the theory.

Mikhalia: Okay.

Peterson: Well thank you for talking with me. (At this point, Peterson’s demeanour shifts, and the camera focusses on his gaze for an extra few beats).

Mikhalia: Wow, thanks for...thanks for being with me it’s being a hell of a year (ellipsis in original conversation).

Peterson: (after a long pause, and on the verge of tears) Thanks for your help too (P3f, video content).

While it is emphasised throughout their conversation that Peterson is far from in the clear, what *is* clear is that he has been through a terrible ordeal. The video reveals

that father and daughter remain in Belgrade, Serbia, and it concludes with Mikhalia echoing Peterson's own poetics: "there are hidden dragons everywhere. I'm just thankful my dad is back" (P3f). Sketched out across a mere three posts, Peterson has employed his daughter, an object of *reciprocal* care, to mediate a journey that reveals an all-too-human fragility and evinces a very pronounced intimacy: his followers have access to a detailed narrative, disturbing the distinction between public and private. Peterson's celebrity elevates the details of his private life so that they are in a sense always-already public and worthy of public interest; there is a paradoxical relation here to "key fourth-wave trends in the feminist movement", where "the personal is a mediating force" (Weber & Davis 2020, p. 945) in any discourse produced. Much like "Ford, as a public figure, frames the way [her] book is read" (Weber & Davis 2020, p. 945, see also *Chapter Two*) Peterson's hero's journey on Instagram is inherently framed by his own status as author and authority, even as it is mediated by his daughter as an aspiring activist-influencer. Although the 56 minute video details Peterson's addiction, treatment and recovery in full – his wife's cancer that led him to increase his benzodiazepine dose is a mere sub-plot<sup>67</sup> – the journey itself has not reached its final destination, although "we're confident enough that we've come out of the other side of it at least to some degree that we were willing to risk making...this video" (P3f). Peterson highlights that "I'm writing a new book and it's due in the middle of July and that's going quite well and I was able to do that even when I was in these different clinics" (P3f). It becomes clear, in this moment, that Peterson's hero's journey will be complete only with the appearance of a new text. Again, a paradoxical relation to Ford's brand of feminism is evident: "in the post-digital era...Print books—still—generate cultural capital...They also position their authors in a traditional field that social media cannot (yet)" (Weber & Davis 2020, p. 960). Peterson's online iteration of his hero's journey legitimises his upcoming book while grounding it in the discursive logic his Instagram profile has established.

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<sup>67</sup> Tammy Peterson's function as flat character and minor plot device despite undergoing treatment for a cancer that was apparently thought certain to be fatal is evidence *par excellence* of Peterson's system of hierarchical care, where the masculine thinker who operates primarily in the realm of production is naturally more worthy of having care directed towards him than the feminine figure who operates in the realm of reproduction. Care *is* directed towards her too, but less, and from less directions. This is exactly how care "should" function as a commodity that is naturally scarce in a "natural hierarchy".

July 2020

How To Think?

With his hero's journey elucidated, something like normal service resumes on Peterson's Instagram. Something *like*, because we wait a fortnight from June 30 for a new post to appear. Despite the paucity of posts in July (seven overall), five out of that seven featured some form of sponsored content: we can surely connect this to the announcement of a new book. Coincidentally, Ford began the month by alluding to the book she was writing at the time (see F4a and F4d). Despite the difference in their poetics, in July we find both authors compelled to remind their followers that commodities *they have created* are for sale. While Ford invites her public to take an intimate glimpse into her creative process, Peterson posits a lofty distance between his pronouncements and their conception. Ford expresses her gratitude to "every single reader who has held this book close to their heart and felt seen by it in some way – you are the ones I wrote it for and it has been an absolute privilege to speak to you in that way" (Appendix F4d, p. 271). Peterson, by contrast, solemnly intones that:

A meaningful life is not optional; it's the meaning that combats the suffering.

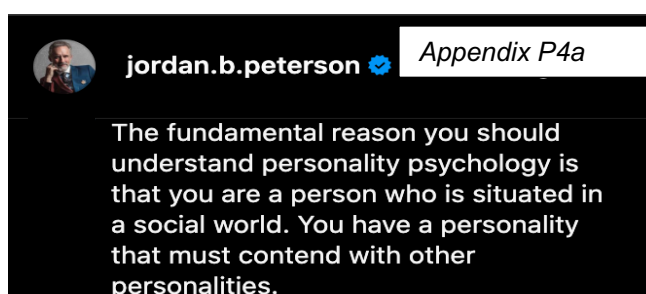
If you're interested, my Self Authoring program might help guide you toward envisioning your own meaningful, healthy, and productive future. Linked in bio.

Appendix P4c

Both, however, position their creative output as uniquely available to their followers as

followers; the position of the author as activist-influencer entails a unique and uniquely meaningful opportunity for each individual follower to improve themselves via connecting with the author's work. Indeed, their army of followers is tacitly understood as comprising individuals only: "your own meaning..." (P4c) and "every single reader...felt seen...in some way" (F4d) subtly but surely posits the ongoing process of subjectification as always-already one of individuation.

Peterson's first July post is typical of his discourse:



Although Peterson acknowledges our status as social beings, our fundamental relation to others in the world is one of competition. His personality course can assist the individual to "cooperate more

harmoniously with others” (P4a, p. 299), however it is clear that such cooperation is only a fig leaf for the nature of our real relations to others, which form a “dominance hierarchy” in which the individual should aspire to “occupy your territory, manifesting your willingness to defend, expand or transform it” (Peterson 2018a, p. 37). Peterson emphasises that:

your family, friends, and work environment are all places where you must cooperate with others.

Appendix P4a

Framed in this way, cooperation appears as unnatural; a departure from our instincts to occupy territory and fight our

way to the top of the dominance hierarchy. All six markers of labour’s elision, and especially Marker Three, can be located in this post. Further, Peterson aims to demonstrate that cooperation is unnatural and competition a natural law even *within* the self (Appendix P4b, p. 300), much as Dardot and Laval (2014, p. 265) describe the neoliberal subject as one who “above all seeks to *work on himself* [sic] so as to constantly transform himself, improve himself, and make himself ever more efficient”. We can witness this logic when Peterson declares that:



Appendix P4b

It’s really hard to think. You have to be trained like mad to think. You have to be able to divide yourself internally into a couple of different people, and then you have to let those people have a war in your head.

Peterson goes on to describe how the individual must “develop characters who have opinions in great detail—opinions that might be contrary to your own”. For Peterson, struggle and conflict is the nature of thought itself, however it seems impossible for a dialectical mode of thought to emerge

from this internal struggle between different characters. Philosophical thinking means creating an Other within the self that is both rich enough to be a “character” and distinct enough from the true self that its opinions can be contrasted with the true self’s mode of being and thought. To grasp the nature of thought and how to think, Peterson posits a static, unchanging self who must generate from within the variety of beliefs and modes of cognition that allow the “true self” to progress towards a more advanced capacity for thought and therefore greater wisdom. Others and the outside world seem not to feature in this struggle: to “think” is a fundamentally individual process, abstracted from the concrete cultural and social *habitus* in which the thinker exists. Further, thinking is posited as something of an elite preoccupation, something “really hard” for which one must be “trained like mad”. The post links to

=the *Thinkspot* platform, “a digital community built around a curated collection of ideas, with features that enable users to engage with some of today’s leading thinkers” (2023). “Part Facebook/Twitter-styled social media site, part Patreon/Kickstarter-modelled crowdfunding platform”, Peterson started *Thinkspot* as a “Patreon-like enterprise that will not be susceptible to arbitrary censorship” (Semley 2019). *Thinkspot* hosts a range of reactionary liberal and conservative “creators” that post blogs and videos and whom users can support financially, however browsing its forums on July 27 2023 revealed a paucity of content and very little public debate occurring. The most recent public forum post was 8 hours old, under the topic *Religion/Spirituality*, while the *Free Speech* forum’s most recent post was 2 days old. *Political Economy*’s last post was 9 days prior, and *Feminism*’s 23 days (*Thinkspot forums* 2023). Peterson himself had posted 689 times on the site as of July 27, with these posts typically linking to video discussions already available on other platforms such as YouTube and Instagram.

A number of Peterson’s posts throughout July link either to his Self-Authoring program or to *Thinkspot*—it was a month where he attempted to monetise almost all of his content. Imploring his followers to follow “the ethical way of life” in order to combat the “inalienable reality of finitude and suffering that characterizes people’s lives” (Appendix P4c, p. 300), Peterson is nonetheless vague about the ancient philosophical quandary of what might constitute an ethical life. If we refer to Aristotle (2004 [1953] , p. lxii - lxiii), for example, we find a similar question posed:

So much for ethical theory. How can it be put into practice? Goodness can only be induced in a suitably receptive character. Education in goodness is best undertaken by the state...The student of ethics must therefore apply himself to politics.

Peterson cites Aristotle approvingly in *Twelve Rules for Life*: “Aristotle defined the virtues simply as the ways of behaving that are most conducive to happiness in life...Cultivating *judgment* about the difference between virtue and vice is the beginning of wisdom, something that can never be out of date” (2018a, p. 11). If indeed the beginning of wisdom and thus the possibility of an ethical way of life entails that one learn to think – to “train...like mad” – Peterson offers both a potential

way forward and a salve for the ego in Appendix P4d, “Advice for Hyper-Intellectual people”, which was his final July post and his last until August 16:

[N]ot everybody is equipped to or interested in engaging in high-level discussion of abstract and creative ideas...heavyweight weight lifters compete with heavyweight weight lifters...the same thing applies to intellectual and creative endeavours. So what you do is you try to find a community where that’s the nature of the community (P4d, video content).

Although Peterson does not link to *Thinkspot* or the Self-Authoring suite in this particular post, he is clearly directing his followers to these locations. A sleight-of-hand is again at work. Truly intelligent and creative people are rare, but if you are one there is a community overseen by Peterson where other such people can be found; it goes without saying that Peterson is one of them. What is absent from Peterson’s discourse in P4d is what for Aristotle was inextricably bound up with ethics: politics and the question of the political. Indeed, throughout July Peterson’s discursive turn towards the elite practice of thinking – and thus of embodying an ethical mode of being – neglects any consideration of the political, either on a personal or social level. In this occlusion, we find a background acceptance of a (neo)liberal status quo, and an absence of the Aristotelian advice (2004 [1953], p. lxiii) that the “student [of ethics] must apply themselves to politics”. For Peterson, the student must apply themselves to *themselves*. Via such quasi-insights, five of the six markers of labour’s elision appear in Appendix P4d, and continue to haunt his discourse in general.



Ford continued to post prolifically throughout July. As we have seen, she also announced during this month that she was working on a book, declaring that:



Ford's use of humour contrasts starkly with Peterson's existential seriousness: self-deprecation is foreign to Peterson's poetics. Nevertheless, several serious and intertwining themes became prominent throughout Ford's discourse in July. On June 30,

severe restrictions on movement in Melbourne were reimposed until "at least July 29" (Storen & Corrigan 2020), and these conditions continued to render quotidian life both novel and radically restricted – almost exclusively homebound – for those Melburnians not deemed "essential workers". Ford described her frustration and "grief...the sense of being very small and isolated in this outbreak zone" (Appendix F4b, p. 269) with the tacit understanding that these feelings were widely shared and felt: the activist-influencer embodied the affective truth of the social body. Ford's sense of loss and longing as well as of adaptation and "trying to channel positivity and joyous frivolity" (P4b) were culturally disseminated as common sense progressive responses as the lockdown stretched into the long winter months and the pandemic continued to disrupt temporal, socio-cultural and political normativity.

Doubtless due to the harsh lockdown conditions that prevailed in Victoria, Ford posted much more content that related directly to the pandemic in July. Framed by discourse around mothering, the month opens with Ford thanking "everyone who's sent happy birthday wishes", but also reflecting on "my baby" and "one of the other most important people in my life, my mother" (Appendix F4c, p. 270). The post is also notable for mentioning Ford's work on her book – "thankfully delayed until the end of next year" – and for the metaphorical similarities to Peterson's discourse that are evident. Describing her mother's decision to give birth to her after almost dying birthing her older brother, Ford is very close to (a feminised) Peterson in evoking how going "willingly into the belly of the beast, the beast that is your belly, is an act of

faith” (F4c). Ford’s account of faith is secular, yet the undeniable congruence between accounts of childbirth that describe the “perils...hidden there” and Peterson’s oft-deployed metaphors of beasts, dragons and lurking, shadowy terrors should be noted. Ford (2018c) used similar language to describe her awakening sexual consciousness in a 2018 article in *Meanjin*: “Somewhere deep inside I had felt the sleeping beast begin to work its way awake”. Also pertinent is how for the writer, much like the mother, “every single word is twisted out of your gut” (F4a)—once again, bringing something or someone into the world is achieved via the struggle of the individual against a background state of nature against which we act but which we cannot alter, which corresponds exactly to Marker Three, and less strongly but still surely to Marker Four. Beyond the ever-present hero’s journey, is there a common discursive function that we can glean from this correlation of form and content at opposite poles of the radical centre?

Ford’s discursive turn to motherhood was inspired by the process of writing a new book in addition to the increased amount of time she spent with her child during lockdown. That book was *How We Love*, published in November 2021. On July 23 2020, Ford posted that “FB memories tells me it was five years ago today that I signed my contract with @allenandunwin to write #FightLikeAGirl!”. As Ford prepared her followers for the release of a new text she also revealed that while writing her first book she “held him [her son] as a secret...until I could release them into the world together” (Appendix F4d, p. 271). The conjunction of writing and mothering cements Ford’s positionality as a paradigmatic example of the new category of female subject described by Bueskens (2018, p. 10; p. 22) above: the “individualised mother...able to leave the strictures of the mother/wife *role* in order to pursue autonomously defined work or leisure” (see “Ford and the Coven”). Ford exemplifies this category in the public display and discussion of both her work and her leisure. Particularly in late July, we find a number of posts that seek to position the maternal or post-partum body as a source of individual pleasure. Ford uses her own body as an example, posting a picture of herself with expertly-done make-up and a slightly revealing dress along with the caption: “Your mom called. She’s hot” (Appendix F4e, p. 272). Similar content appeared on July 21 (Appendix F4f, p. 273) and reached its apotheosis on July 31, bookending a month that began with a reflection on childbirth and motherhood with a celebration of individualism, autonomy

and an invitation to participate in “SL\*TTY HOT MOM SATURDAY” (Appendix F4g, p. 283). The Americanised spelling is curious: it appears exclusively when Ford is discussing mothers’ sexuality or sexualising the maternal body.<sup>68</sup> A connection to US popular culture (recall Appendix F1a, p. 253) is undoubtedly there for the follower to draw, yet there is also a connection to what McRobbie (2013, p. 137, italics mine) describes as post-feminism, “a constellation of power which pre-empts possible recurrences of feminism by absorbing some of its elements, which in turn can be used to replenish *and appear to update* the fields of gender and sexuality”.

In F4g, Ford emphasises how “heteropatriarchy views women as the supporting characters in other people’s lives” before declaring “I just won’t compromise again on my value, my autonomy and my space”. Just as for Angela Davis (2019, p. 206) “the ‘housewife’ reflected a partial reality, for she was really a symbol of the economic prosperity enjoyed by the emerging middle classes”, we can observe Ford constructing herself and feminists like her as “individualised women”: as Bueskens (2018, p. 5) reminds us, “this subject position is only possible within the context of modern social structure”. Ford’s exhortation to her followers to be the “MAIN EVENT of your own time on earth...the headliner, baby!” (Appendix F4g, p. 273), reflects a partial reality, like the housewife for Davis. A particular version of (post)feminism mediated by social media platforms and profoundly inflected by economic class, against the background of forty years of neoliberal hegemony, has produced conditions for the “individualised woman” and “individualised mother” to emerge as subject positions. In knotting together discourses of maternal care and maternal sexuality, and of absolute individual autonomy via the reversal and display of a social positionality traditionally ascribed to bourgeois men – “a woman who wants to combine both ‘good mother’ ideals such as selflessness, presence, care and so forth with ‘the traditionally masculine, bourgeois, autonomous subject’” (Bueskens 2018, p. 20) – the female subject embodied by Ford is a liberal subject *par excellence*.

Ford claims that:

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<sup>68</sup> When Ford produces more “serious” or less “frivolous” discourse, she almost always uses “mother”, as will become evident in the next section. An exception to this rule occurs in F4f, where Ford’s imagery combines a sexualized maternal body with a child’s arm, as if to further her – absolutely valid – point that a fulfilling sex life can and should coexist with mothering. Indeed, it is in this post that maternal care and maternal sexuality are most coterminous: the reversion to “mothers” rather than “moms” is a way of naming this conjunction in a more subtle manner.

With the exception of my son, I am the main event. I love my life. I love my independence. I love the fact that the choices I make in regards to who I allow into my life are finally free from compromise.

Appendix F4g

I can't imagine ever living with a man again, which isn't to say this doesn't make other women happy. But I just won't compromise again on my value, my autonomy and my space.

Here Ford exemplifies the individualised mother that Bueskens

outlines, where the child as object of care is always acknowledged – every post from July contains Marker Six bar F4a and F4i – but the mother cares, works and enjoys leisure for themselves first, and exclusively on their own terms. Perhaps the pandemic made such a lifestyle more possible for some individuals for a certain period, but under conditions of late-neoliberal capitalist precarity and escalating crises of care, the possibility of *existing as* and *embodying the ethos of* the female subject portrayed by Ford is ultimately a fantasy for the majority of feminised subjects.

In representing this fantasy Ford doubtless speaks to many of her follower's desires, however it is clear that only a series of discursive elisions enables the articulation of this fantasy subject. Indeed, the Americanisation of the descriptor "SL\*TTY HOT MOM" alludes, whether subconsciously or otherwise, precisely to the fantastic status of this subject: its reality is belied by "how childbirth has always been a dangerous business" (F4c) as well as the posts on domestic labour that appeared in the same month (see the discussion of Appendices F4h and F4i below). This is not to employ a moral critique of Ford's discourse, nor to police the sexuality of the maternal or any human body. Unlike the rare Petersonian subject who can learn to think and live ethically (see P4b, P4c and P4d), Ford does invoke the political when discussing subjectivity, yet the discursive function of encapsulating (and monetising) the desire of the follower for an idealised subject position remains abstracted from the political forces and social relations which structure the possibility of its emergence.

Ford exemplifies the abstraction of the political and its shifting role in the constitution of subjectivity in Appendix F4h. As Stevano et.al. (2021, p. 276) describe, "the imposition of lockdowns as a primary response to the COVID-19 pandemic brought about a dramatic shift of life and work from collective and public spaces to individualized and private ones". Ford was certainly aware of this shift, and on July 16 passionately pronounced that:

We teach girls to shoot for the stars. We tell them they can be and do anything they set their mind to. We take them to the top of the mountain to show them the world, and then we march them right back to the kitchen and tell them to be happy standing at the sink.

Appendix F4h

Appendix F4h (p. 275 ) is largely concerned with how “patriarchy...conditions us to believe that true happiness comes from being picked by a man”, proceeding first via a

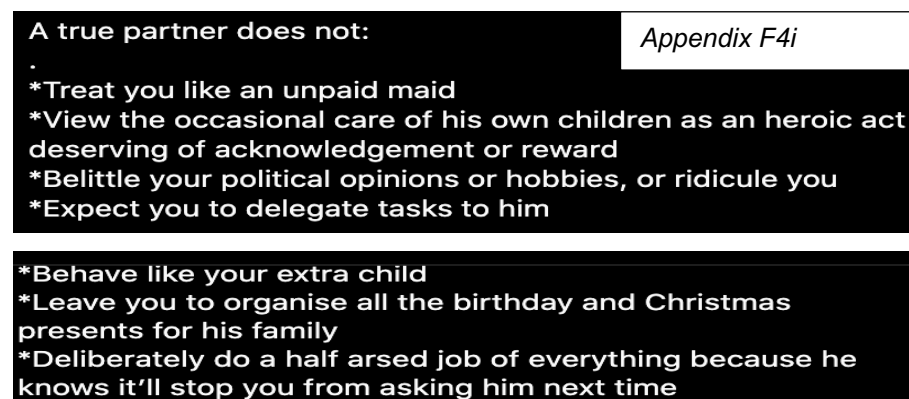
series of rhetorical questions to “patriarchy” as an answer before demanding of women: “want more for yourselves #toughlove” (F4h). This iteration of micro-discourse was bolstered by another that appeared on July 30, where statistics concretely demonstrate the unequal division of domestic labour in most Australian households where a male and female partner cohabit. Here (Appendix F4i, p. 276, see also F1d, p. 255) Ford announces that “I’ve stopped using the word “partner” in almost all cases when describing heterosexual relationships”, before highlighting that:

A 2014 study showed the GDP of women’s unpaid labour in Australia was \$434billion ANNUALLY. That’s the equivalent of 43% of the national GDP - except that women’s unpaid domestic labour has never been formally counted as part of the UN’s System of National Accounts!

Ford is to be applauded for drawing attention to the inequalities that define the division of domestic labour and more broadly the labour of social reproduction and care, and in her next paragraph she explicitly names “exploitation” as the basis of patriarchal domestic partnerships, drawing on language with a decidedly radical resonance in declaring that “I can’t force the men in your hetero relationships *to step up and stop exploiting you*” (F4i, italics mine). Although non-heterosexual relationships are not immune from unequal divisions of domestic labour, Ford’s allusion to exploitation opens up the possibility of connecting her discourse to the work of socialist feminists or social reproduction theorists. However, as we have witnessed previously, this radical discursive opening is shuttered almost immediately.

First, as Nancy Folbre (2021, p. 26) has detailed, Ford follows much “feminist scholarship” in defining “the patriarchal in purely cultural and psychological terms”. This move is immediately apparent when Ford instructs women in heterosexual

domestic relationships to “do one simple thing: change your language” (F4i).<sup>69</sup> Ford’s claim that the word “partner” implies an equality that is often not present in the division of household labour has undoubted salience, however in resolutely mooring her activism in the realm of the discursive we are left uncertain as to how this inequality might be addressed. She claims:



Here Ford strays from statistics into blanket moralising assumptions. Is there empirical evidence that a correlation exists between the unequal division of domestic labour and a “partner...belittle[ing] your political opinions or hobbies, or ridicule[ing] you”? Second, in the substitution of a moral for a political critique, Ford narrows the radical horizon that a reconsideration and recentring of reproductive labour and carework expands, instead remaining grounded in the equalisation of domestic labour in heteronormative families with an implicit middle or aspirational class location. She likewise directs her discourse away from the material reconsideration of what constitutes a “family” or “household”, let alone family abolition.

In *Abolish the Family*, Lewis (2022, p. 34) quotes “British scholar of ‘Blackness’ Annie Olaloku-Teriba: ‘The domination of the boy by the woman is a very routine and potent expression of patriarchal power’”. In Appendix F4i, we can find echoes of this phenomenon in Ford’s claim that men in heteronormative relationships “view the occasional care of his own children as an heroic act deserving of acknowledgment or

<sup>69</sup> The purely psychological and cultural register in which Ford conceives patriarchy is perhaps echoed in the design and aesthetics of F4h and F4i, which feature similar abstract paintings with a “takeaway” quote from Ford superimposed in bold type over the top, and Ford’s name below, in a style reminiscent of corporate motivational posters. Both these posts evince a combination of authoritative, inspirational, pedagogical and programmatic functions, which may well explain the similarity in design and the resemblance to a visual style that evokes “inspiration” within an environment (the corporate workplace) where individual behaviour is typically compelled, controlled and conformist.

reward". Similarly, when Ford admonishes her followers to not "become some man's surrogate mother" (F4h), there is an underlying implication, structured by Markers Five and Six, that *the child* is a rightful object of maternal domination, and that patriarchy is primarily expressed by the surrogate mothering of an adult heterosexual male by a heterosexual female. Ford's discourse does not completely evince the "absence of the child from contemporary theorizations of patriarchal domesticity" that Lewis (2022, p. 34) has identified, however the *agency* of the child is denied via the exclusive focus on women wanting more for themselves, as well as the description of mundane domestic life as "an unpaid job with a bullshit boss who does fuck all and doesn't respect you" (F4i), a potent example of Markers Three, Four and Five. Here, we can find Ford repeating an error diagnosed by M.E O'Brien (2022, p. 140):

Many radical feminist...analys[es] extrapolated their overall understanding of society as a whole from their critique of the atomized heterosexual nuclear family...This sex-class analysis coherently reflected their own experience of oppression, largely as white women entrapped in a suburban family. However, this analysis significantly misunderstands the place of the family within capitalism.

For Ford, this model of the household is not to be overcome: rather, it should be reversed so that women take their rightful place as bosses. The way to begin is by denying the male the privilege of their customary position in the order of patriarchal and heteronormative signification. Childcare and other domestic labour should be equally divided, but because "the title of partner has to be earned, and it has to be maintained every day" (F4i), the child is always-already rightly the mother's property.

Ford offers autonomy to the feminised subject by instructing them to deny men the assignation of the "partner" role unless they "earn it". This is reasonable on its own terms: domestic labour *should* be divided equally without regard for gender, and to rebalance its historical imbalance at the level of the individual household it is certainly fair that in many partnerships the male should do more than the female for

perhaps a quite extended period of time.<sup>70</sup> However, Ford positions equal partnerships between heterosexual couples as not only extremely rare but extremely unlikely to ever occur: radical options such as family abolition or socialised reproduction are not epistemically available and so the agent of social change is only ever the individual. How can radical reconsiderations and redistributions of domestic and caring labour be conceived and achieved when the only solution to the exploitation inherent in relationships under “patriarchy” is to “leave them” (F4i)? How might this apply to feminised subjects who lack the material resources at Ford’s disposal? Via the blanket assumptions in F4h and F4i, Ford rules out that we might “parent politically, hopefully, nonreproductively—in a comradely way” (Lewis 2021, p. 117). Instead, Ford offers a promise of individual autonomy and freedom that can be achieved via the allure of the “SL\*TTY HOT MOM” we have encountered earlier, a figure emblematic of how “sexuality pervades popular consumer culture, and it is as much a neoliberal and individualist injunction to enjoy as it is a source of freedom” (O’Brien 2022, p. 142).

## August 2020

### Absence and Performance

After an absence of over two weeks, Peterson returned to Instagram on August 16. As detailed earlier, almost all of Peterson’s July discourse was explicitly commercial: although the commodity’s logic is interwoven throughout his discourse, this was especially clear in a month where he posted little, as illness and a protracted recovery from unconventional treatments left Peterson unable to work. Since followers expect frequent new content, we could hypothesise that throughout July Peterson’s discourse was curated to reassure his followers of his *value* in a quite literal sense. Activist-influencers are inherently concerned with “build[ing] trust with their audiences through *participatory media practices*” and Rebecca Lewis argues that “these techniques are highly effective” (2018, p. 18, italics mine). In addition to building trust and generating commercial opportunities with *likeminded* audiences,

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<sup>70</sup> Obviously, problems remain with such a solution, which is ultimately underpinned by individualism and an economic logic. Assigning appropriate cultural value to domestic labour and carework would be preferable, but as we have seen the elisions that structure Ford’s discourse rule out any radical collectivism.

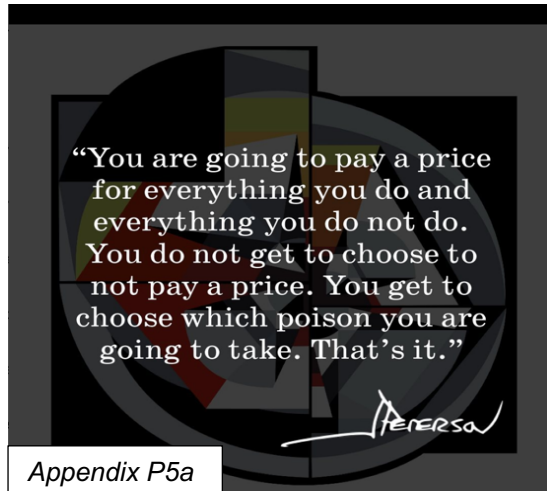


Peterson has previously claimed “that he had ‘figured out how to monetize social justice warriors’” (Lewis 2018, p. 32). This aligns with the social media strategies of reactionary activist-influencers, for whom (as we have seen in *Chapter Two*) “‘taking the red pill’...[means] accepting that the natural facts of inequality are the basis for true political reasoning” (Finlayson 2021, p. 179). Social justice warriors, in the simplest terms, are those who disagree that “the natural facts of inequality are the basis for true political reasoning”, and while Peterson’s discourse is ostensibly for and about those who think similarly to him, the porous nature of social media necessarily means that a not insignificant proportion of those who receive and disseminate Peterson’s discourse are individuals opposed to the basic tenets of his thought. Ford provides an example of this in Appendix F5a, where she offers advice on “what to do if your fiancé falls for Jordan Peterson 🤔🤔”.

In short, Peterson’s boast about “monetizing social justice warriors” is evidence that at least part of his audience is composed of those who are opposed to his ideas but nonetheless engage with them on one or more platforms in his discursive ecosystem, thus potentially generating revenue. Similarly, Ford’s regular “hatemale” posts, where she shares often horrifically violent sexist messages she has received set against idyllic backgrounds to “take the sting out and get power back through laughter” (clementine\_ford 2020a) demonstrates that an oppositional friction is a *necessary* part of any activist-influencer’s discursive strategy. “Opponents” regularly comment on Ford’s posts: these comments range from vile misogynist abuse to more subtle expressions of male insecurity in the face of a mainstream feminism that has typically “gone too far”. There is always an “Other” who the activist-influencer’s discourse is produced in opposition to and against, and the desire of the ardent follower to see the “Other” stripped of their power and/or put in their proper place is evident in Peterson’s “take downs” of SJWs and feminists as well as Ford’s “hatemale” posts. Instagram is a platform for the already converted, where the head of an army of followers can issue commands and advice to those most willing to receive.

Peterson’s account became active again on August 16, with a post that combined several typical themes: a fundamentally gloomy outlook – psychologist Daniel

Burston's (2019, p. 11) article on Peterson cites his "gloomy view of human nature and the whole human condition, emphasising the need for robust constraints to contain our innate depravity" – the reduction of worldly complexity to Manichean binaries and the reification of capitalist social relations via economistic language:



By this logic, there is no choice that does not lead to some variety of unpleasantness or perhaps even to sin; the wise and ethical individual we encountered in July as "one who knows how to think" is nevertheless unable to avoid a metaphorical sickness of some kind. Markers One, Two and Three are a strong presence here. Peterson seems

to be moving his discourse ever-closer towards a worldview that is aligned with conservative Christianity, where as individuals born into sin – and afflicted by the transhistorical tension between order and chaos – we cannot but be "poisoned" by our choices.

Further content influenced by Christianity appeared on August 27, where Peterson took aim at "safe spaces" as metonymic for a whole ecosystem of discourse and practices attributable to the aforementioned social justice warriors. "That's the story of the Garden of Eden. There is no place so safe that there isn't a snake in it. It's the fundamental story of mankind [sic]" functions both to continue a discursive pivot towards Christianity and to continue Peterson's assault on "wokeness"/"political correctness"/"cultural Marxism" (Appendix P5b, p. 302). It should be noted that these terms are seldom used on his Instagram page— the rawer and more directly combative Peterson is found on YouTube and X/Twitter. Nevertheless, P5b is a dense post that reifies the forces of "chaos" and "order" and by extrapolation the impossibility of protecting individuals from the consequences that flow from chaos's ontological irreducibility. Additionally, Peterson claims that:

An ancient representation of the dragon can be found worldwide. This symbol of chaos contains lessons from the past that are worth preserving today. We do not live in nature, and we do not live in society, we live in an amalgam.

Appendix P5b

An amalgam of nature and society points towards a richer concept of both “nature” and “society” than a discourse constrained by liberal horizons is typically able to express. Peterson’s combination of “nature” and “society” still positions these two spheres as separate, however, even though we encounter ancient

problems and lessons in a modern lifeworld that reflects the influence of both. The amalgam Peterson refers to can also be read as evidence of Marker Four, the demarcation of the spheres of production and reproduction: Peterson’s positing of eternal forces of masculine order and feminine chaos resembles the ahistorical yet “systemic logic that sets the conditions whereby people reproduce themselves, on the one hand, and capital produces value, on the other” (Ferguson 2020, p. 110). Although Peterson’s categories cannot be neatly divided into feminine/chaos/sphere of reproduction opposed to masculine/order/sphere of production – if anything he views the realm of reproduction as a space of order – the relentless binary logic that structures his discourse produces bounded and distinct categories even when their fluidity and combination is ostensibly under discussion. If we do not live in a “society” then the “amalgam” of nature *and* society surely positions the heteronormative nuclear family as a transhistorical structure. Thatcher’s remark is again pertinent, and echoed in Appendix P5b: “There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families”.

A rationale for the paucity of Peterson’s August content emerges from a consideration of the neoliberal individual. In Appendix P5c (p. 303), we find Peterson once more linking to his personality course, however more significant is his insistence on “one thing you can do to improve your personality”. Peterson’s positing of a “personality trait distribution”, along with advice that “as you’re developing your personality...you’re extending the standard deviation so that *you’re a bigger bag of tricks* (Appendix P5c, video content, italics mine), aligns with Erving Goffman’s (1969, p. 13) observation that “when an individual appears before others he [sic] will have many motives for trying to control the impression they receive of the situation”. Peterson alludes to the inherently performative nature of human being, in the sense of being as *doing*, as ontological, but Goffman’s (1969, p. 49) insight that “the

impression of reality fostered by a performance is a delicate, fragile thing that can be shattered by very minor mishaps” is occluded in his discourse. Peterson urges the individual to develop their personality so as to attain a bounded wholeness and fixed position in a reality that is fundamentally enduring and ultimately determined by “nature” and natural hierarchies. A curious symmetry with Ford’s discursive traits appears here, as we find radical possibility offered with one hand – the self is a “bag of tricks”, a character iterated by repeated performative acts rather than a stable and distinct individual – and then removed with the other. For Peterson, knowing and developing oneself and one’s personality is always and only in service of *improving* oneself, of getting ever further along *as an individual* in a world that will reward the minority of those that work hardest on their own development. Elided in this scenario is the capacity for the performance of self to impact reciprocally upon other performers; for the “fragile reality” Goffman describes to be *changed* by the revelation that personality *is* a performance, or by the development of new routines. Such routines might involve roles traditionally ascribed to certain categories of performer being taken on and collectively transformed in a concrete demonstration of the potentiality existent when reality *as made by* human beings and their labour is acknowledged. The germ of Goffmanite insight in P5c is crushed by an accumulated discursive weight – the fixedness of order and chaos, nature and society, gender categories and roles – as well as by the suite of elisions of human labour’s potentialities that structure both Peterson’s discourse as a whole and this instance of audio-visual micro-discourse, where Markers One, Two and Five combine.

In pivoting his discourse further towards monotheistic religion at the same time as Peterson presents evidence of the self and reality’s inherent malleability, we find an obvious contradiction. As such, the lack of content in August – a mere three posts, two on biblical themes and one on personality – can be understood as a function of two distinct logics at work in Peterson’s discourse since the articulation of the hero’s journey and the announcement of a new book. First, there is the nature of Peterson’s performance of himself as “Jordan Peterson”—as Goffman (1969, p. 14) describes, “when an individual...plays the same part to the same audience on different occasions, a social relationship is likely to arise”. Peterson has continued to resolutely play the part of “Jordan Peterson” despite the major revelations issued in June; it is vital for the ongoing stability of the character and his audience that the

*same* character appear post-revelations. Indeed, the character is strengthened by having overcome his tribulations; every individual faces some form of these on the perilous journey through a life that is rightly and unalterably unsafe and unfair, but not many are able to triumph over them as Peterson has, let alone write a book whilst grappling with mortal perils.

Second, Peterson's insistence that "you are going to pay a price for everything you do" (Appendix P5a, p. 302) naturally applies to the hero themselves. Peterson has literally drunk the metaphorical "poison" in becoming an addict, yet via the narrativisation of his recovery his personality has developed beyond even the exalted status it previously held. As an individual who has recently attained a more heroic position on the "personality distribution deviation" (Appendix P5c), to dispense advice both more sparingly and of a more serious – i.e. quasi-religious – nature is logical. We can locate an Aristotelian ethics in P5c, as exploring one's place on the personality distribution deviation could be construed as according with Aristotle's (2004 [1953], p. 254) advice that individuals "like and dislike the right things" and thus "attain to the mean". The difference is that Aristotle's mean is an ideal between excesses towards which the individual develops so as to live in harmony with themselves and their society, while for Peterson individual development is primarily in aid of aligning the self with ancient truths that will "naturally" propel that individual to a superior social position. This concern with the weightiest of themes is counterbalanced by the intertwining of monetised content, however if we trace Peterson's character development since the June revelations we find a flurry of followers-and-finances-boosting content in July succeeded by the solemn pauses and pronouncements of a sage who has overcome suffering. The sage stands in Nietzschean grandeur overlooking those who follow him, assuring them that if they too drink the poison there lies the opportunity to develop one's character/self further. That this self is male is implicit: the "choice" that is available boils down to the eternal binary of orienting oneself towards order or chaos, and the naturally chaotic feminine subject is also "naturally" lacking the ability to choose rationally. Appendix P6a (p. 303) further reinforces that Peterson is addressing a masculine subject: having chosen the proper poison to drink, an actualised, "good" male self who is "not a harmless man" but "a dangerous man who has it under control" emerges. That the character portrayed by Peterson is and can only be an atomised individual, a

(neo)liberal subject who is an “entrepreneur of himself [sic]” (Foucault 2004, p. 226) is also logical. As we all must ontologically “pay a price”, those who choose most wisely what, when and how to pay stand by right and by nature above the rest via savvy investments in their own development.

Having completed a journey of his own, Peterson’s discursive pauses are evidence of quantity as an affective *quality*. His followers surely want to hear more from their hero, but both the logic of the individual with an exceptional personality and the concomitant logic of the market dictate a reduction in overall content. Keeping his audience hungry for the content is likely beneficial for increasing book sales and attendance at speaking tours. In addition, the presentation of Peterson as an especially significant and serious character is heightened by issuing increasingly irregular iterations of solemn micro-discourse. Peterson’s lofty distance from his public – at least on Instagram, where there is no mention of Covid-19 from mid-June to the end of the first pandemic half-year – is entirely in keeping with the character he is portraying.

#### Fashion, Family and the Future of Work

The character portrayed by Ford is much more playful, and as the pandemic progressed increased time in isolation gave Ford increased time and space to explore playing different roles for her audience. The “SL\*TTY HOT MOM” character introduced in July appeared again on the first day of August (Appendix F5b, p. 277), as Ford declared:



There are several things to note about the quote above. The first is the hashtag “#LEWKDOWN”, which informs the reader of the playful nature of the post.

We should also note the class position evidenced via this hashtag: to increasingly cultivate play and artifice – let alone develop a broader repertoire of characters and modes of facing one’s public – was not an option for subjects in more precarious economic circumstances, even as the Australian government temporarily increased welfare benefits during the pandemic. Of course, creating content is Ford’s Job: she writes in Appendix F5c (p. 278)

D) I am allowed to earn money using the platform I have built, making choices I stand by and supporting	brands and (mostly) small businesses I like. This doesn’t make me any less feminist than when I was earning a marginal income as a freelancer for The Age and THEY were making money from my “brand” and “platform”.
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As an activist-influencer, content creator and published author, Ford’s class position is complex. However, Wark’s theorisation of contemporary class relations as irrevocably altered in their mediation by digital platforms and social media is useful to highlight the potential class *mobility* of Ford and similar activist-influencers: this is a mobility between – broadly – what Wark calls the “hacker” (techno-proletariat) and “vectoralist” (techno-bourgeoisie) classes. As Wark (2021, p. 43 - 44) describes, “the hacker class produces new information...hackers can’t be managed like farmers or workers...There’s no relation between the units of labour time and the units of value produced”. As for vectoralists, their position of class domination *vis-a-vis* the on-going antagonism between producing and capital-accumulating classes is premised upon “asymmetric relations of information...commanding and monopolizing attention...monetizing appearances. The thing to aspire to own is a brand, starting with a branded self” (Wark 2021, p 98). Counterarguments can be raised against Wark’s transmutation of Marxist class relations, not least that “the huge global transfer of labour from manufacturing to ‘services’” (Jones 2021, p. 23) simultaneously positions the “hacker” and “vectoralist” as possibilities as it imposes concrete limits on exactly how many might currently exist. Additionally, the implicit focus on relations of (information) production in the Global North limits the scope of Wark’s analysis; Phil Jones (2021, p. 28; p. 25) points out that in both the Global North and “the vast and expanding informal sector of the Global South” the “landscape of labour is stretching into a vast and desolate hinterland of informality, temping, gigs and pseudowork, much of which...is created simply for the sake of taming surplus populations”. Although the practices of digital piecework that Jones terms “microwork” might seem the preserve of the hacker class, Wark’s own

arguments undermine such a contention. Wark (2021, p. 96, italics mine) discusses “how working class women who will try to work in the fashion industry...*want to be hackers, not workers*, and how “the rise of the vectoralist class changes the kinds of credentials that appear to have value for class power...Access to such qualifications appears to offer the possibility of class mobility” (2021, p. 88). The subjects performing microwork lack this possibility: indeed, they form a “permanent reserve army of market fugitives, only called upon when a piece of work is available” (Jones 2021, p. 61).<sup>71</sup> Ford’s position within these emerging platform-mediated class locations is difficult to discern precisely, however she obviously enjoys more economic opportunities from the dialectical interplay of her self-branding as a feminist and her advocacy of a brand of individualised feminism than the “microworkers” that Jones describes. Definitely more than a “microworker” or even a “hacker”, Ford is closer – and actively aspires to be closer – to Wark’s “vectoralists”.

Elsewhere, Ford describes how:



It would seem that Ford has exactly what she wanted, and a good portion of her content is devoted to celebrating this fact. She continues in Appendix F5d (p. 280):

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<sup>71</sup> Jones emphasises elsewhere that “work” as traditionally understood – labour-time sold for a wage – is not what microworkers perform. “From victims of economic collapse to refugees and slum dwellers, platform capitalism preys on the nominally superfluous – its profits the result of a multitude of minute tasks carried out by those chronically excluded from anything that even resembles proper employment” (2021, p. 14). Further, “the possibility of the next task being paid tempts workers time and again to return for more. Intricate reward schedules and contestable pricing gamify tasks and effectively repackage superfluity and precarity as new, exciting forms of work-cum-leisure” (2021, p. 46). It is clear that the hacker class exists on a continuum with those who compete to perform minute online tasks, however there seems little possibility of class mobility for microworkers, who form a contemporary lumpenproletariat.



I sometimes think how amazing it is that I have been able to have the kind of life that would have seemed impossible to my mother and grandmother. To not just have been able to finish school, but to make my own money and support myself (so I would never have to rely on a man), and to carve out a path for myself that circumstance and trauma kept both of them from ever reaching.

Appendix F5d

This narrative of achieving freedom and independence through hard work is both a classic liberal trope – a bootstrapping narrative – as well as a reification of the

nuclear family and its social value, despite Ford's independence from this family form and the financial support of a man within it: a curious intertwining where Markers Four, Five and Six feature most prominently structure how intra-familial care is represented in Appendix F5d. Ford has been able to achieve independence via her hero's journey into feminism, however it is clear that she is not an advocate for the collective overcoming of asymmetrical dependence that defines the nuclear family. Consciously or otherwise she positions the male as the "natural" family breadwinner in underlining her independence from and lack of reliance on a traditional family structure: here Marker Three comes into view. However, uncritically valorising independence is not a progressive or feminist project in and of itself: the radical potential inherent in more expansive relations of care – and especially care outside and beyond the heteronormative nuclear family – in fact demand a renewed attention to our relations of *dependence* and how these might be radicalised and extended. As M.E O'Brien (2022, p. 220) reminds us, "if the nuclear family is not radically challenged, its counterrevolutionary logics of property, misogyny, heteronormativity and domination remain untouched". Ford's independence from the nuclear family structure is not in service of challenging its hegemony but rather a reflection of her particular brand of liberal feminism: a post reflecting on "builders and wreckers" (Appendix F5e, p. 281) is instructive in this regard. Ford writes in F5e that:



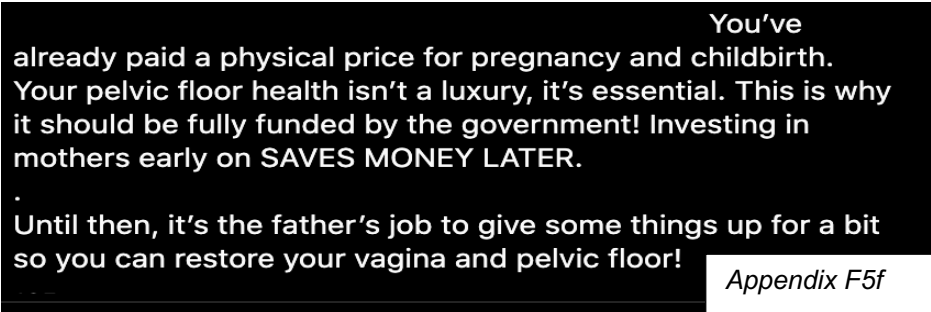
clementine\_ford • Following

wrecking gets you nowhere. It might feel good in the moment, but it won't materially change whatever it is that makes you feel disempowered in your life. Wrecking builds nothing, it just leaves you surrounded by a lot of rubble.

Compare Lewis (2022, p. 33), who writes that "the only way to ensure the destruction of the patriarchal state is for the institution of the family to be destroyed". There is a fundamentally conservative undercurrent to Ford's musings here

that undercuts previous iterations of micro-discourse where she rails against the all-encompassing and overdetermining power of capitalism and patriarchy.

Similarly, Ford's "broader political point" (Appendix F5f, p. 282) about the ultimate irreconcilability of men's and women's economic interests in domestic partnerships reveals a thoroughly neoliberal epistemology. Ford addresses mothers in heterosexual partnerships thus:



"Investing in mothers" is an expression of the logic of neoliberal human capital theory, and aligns with Becker's (1998, p. 57) argument that "married women with responsibility for childcare...invest less in market human capital". Although Ford is arguing for government rather than private investment in mothers in F5f, the underlying rationale is the same. As Cooper (2017, p. 57) notes, neoliberal theorists "posit the self-sufficient family as much as the individual as a basic manifestation of the free-market order". Ford's demands for the father to "give some things up" (F5f) until mothers are appropriately invested in positions the self-sufficient family – in Ford's argument, self-sufficient due to financial sacrifices the male can afford to make<sup>72</sup> – at the centre of society, which in contemporary Australia remains structured by neoliberal norms. Ironically, it is Ford's hard-won individuality that enables her to consider and position the family thus: we therefore have the individual, the family and the market as three points of the socio-ontological triangle underpinning Ford's discourse.

Appendix F5g (p, 283) is another post in which the "lewkdown" hashtag appears: this was a common trope throughout Ford's August and September discourse. Alluding to both a combative style of highly individualised, personalised feminism and Ford's

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<sup>72</sup> See the rhetorical questions with which Ford leads to her conclusion in Appendix F5f:

- \* Does he have a PlayStation?
- \* Does he drink beer or any other kind of alcohol regularly?
- \* Does he have any hobbies that require a financial output? (Golf, AFL membership, music etc)
- \* Does he have a car he likes to spend money on?

enjoyment of “aesthetic performances that celebrate sex, desire and romance or playfully explore tropes” (F5g), Ford’s pun on lockdown is also a signifier for a style of feminism and a feminist style that Ford expresses through “make up, fashion and dress ups” (F5c). This is in opposition to “Real Feminists(TM)”, who “need to get over their petty bullshit. I’m very very very sorry if I’ve ‘disappointed’ them in some way, but they don’t own me. No one owns me, not even feminists” (F5g). As is usual for Ford, definitions are vague, and centred on how abstract forces compel and condition behaviours that are against the interests of the subject. Ford’s insistence that “no one owns me” exposes the economic logic that structures her discourse. Play, artifice, make up, fashion and dress ups are the *sine qua non* of Ford’s brand of feminism, as they allow her to express herself by reclaiming what are often understood as soft tools of the patriarchy. Ford reminds us that “almost nothing I do is FOR men or done WITH men in mind” (F5g); her feminism exists without regard for either “patriarchy” – an abstract force that functions as an absolute structural horizon, so that “make up, fashion and dress ups function as part of a patriarchal system in *exactly the same way everything does*” (Appendix F5c, p. 278, italics mine) – or indeed for anyone else at all, either other feminists or the discursively necessary oppositional “Other”, which for Ford is both the totality of individual men who make up a patriarchal society and patriarchal society as a totality. Sophie K. Rosa (2023, p. 146) describes how:

It has become a popular feminist insistence that we only or primarily tend to our appearances “for ourselves”. But if we were guaranteed a lifetime of cherishing love no matter how we looked, would we really spend so much time “optimising our assets”?

Rosa’s question underlines the elision of labour’s structuration by care that is evident throughout Ford’s discourse: she explicitly tells her followers that “I don’t care” (F5c) what others think of her. This lack of care goes deeper, however. Ford’s highly individualist feminism cannot *be* without a structural absence of collective and capacious care: indeed, such a rich concept of care cannot appear as content. It is not coincidental that every August post analysed features Marker Five, the abstraction of labour from an underpinning in care, which in practice emaciates both labour and care as concepts. This absence lingers as a haunting, just as for Derrida

(2001, p. 4) “the relief and design of structures appears more when content...is neutralized. Somewhat like the architecture of an uninhabited or deserted city...A city no longer inhabited...but haunted by meaning and culture”. This haunting is evident in the simultaneous opening and closing of radical possibilities that both Peterson’s and Ford’s discourses evince. The above are concrete examples of how the elisions that structure liberal discourses tend to produce incongruities, contradictions and strained affects at the level of content and form, such as Ford’s “sl\*tty hot mom” who belies the playfulness of the “lewkdown” trope by deploying the ultra-serious liberal feminist “clapping hands interspersed between words” trope: “don’t even try to cross their kid because they 🙌 will 🙌 destroy 🙌 you” (Appendix F5b, p. 277). We need only recall Ford’s earnest distinction between “builders” and “wreckers” in Appendix F5e to register such affective incongruities: there, the intertwining of liberal discursive form and content gives rise to a liberal political function. In the final month of the first pandemic half-year, the contradictions that discourses structured by absences reveal became ever more apparent.

## September 2020

### Gender Categories, Categorical Morality

Early in September, Ford posted an update on Instagram to coincide with father’s day. Using the day to honour single mothers, Ford acknowledged how “broader society doesn’t appreciate or value the work that you do” (Appendix F6a, p. 284). Ford also alluded to the moral standards that often apply distinctly and disproportionately to single mothers by naming “disappointments”, “hurt” and “betrayal” as affects commonly experienced on “a nonsense Hallmark holiday” (F6a). Ford goes on to counter these negative affective states by claiming that “your children will one day look back on the *fierceness* with which you looked after them and guided them through the world, and they will feel lucky to have been raised by someone so *powerful* and *brave*” (F6a, italics mine). Ford’s affective claims about single mothering, although doubtless accurate as well as resonant for many of her followers, remain bound to what Barrett and McIntosh (2015 [1982], p. 106) describe as a particular “feminist analysis of gender socialization” which despite being “in many ways revelatory and consciousness-raising”, tends to assume “a pre-given

content that is mechanically transmitted from one generation to the next: ‘roles’ already exist in society, and the task of socialization is to funnel people into them as actors in a play whose script is already written”. While Ford’s discourse in F6a has salience in naming the undervaluing of single mothering and the moral opprobrium single mothers often face, she also posits that this “role” is always-already inhabited by a character who is a “fierce”, “brave” and “powerful” individual – by social necessity but also *ineluctably* – without any consideration of historical context or economic situation. A flat character emerges as the radical potential of the single mother’s outsider positionality dissolves. Following Lewis (2021, p. 121), we could instead begin by asking “how... [would] you talk to your child about family abolition?”. What subject might develop from conceiving of single mothers collectively, rather than as brave individuals, and from thinking of their caring labour as the potential ground of a politics that seeks to overcome the hegemony of the nuclear family that renders them moral outsiders?

The imagery in F6a is striking. Accompanying Ford’s text is a picture of actor Linda Hamilton from the film *Terminator 2*, brandishing a machine gun and with another weapon of some sort dangling from her belt, cigarette in hand. The incongruity Ford cultivates between text and image is echoed in the mere two sentences that comprise Appendix P6a (p. 303), where Peterson informs his followers:



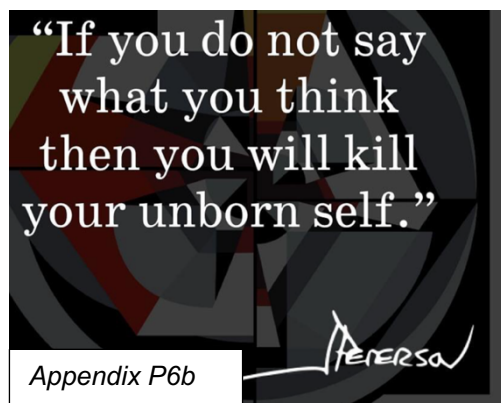
The overarching message of the post is that a “good man” is a desirable thing to be, a subjective possibility towards which one should aim. We know that a good man is not a “harmless” man, although why a harmless man cannot be or is not good is not clear. Why then *does* being a good man require an

originary subject position oppositional to harmlessness that has somehow been sublimated so that the subject has attained enough self-control not to endanger others? Peterson’s conflation of “thinking” with being “deadly” or “dangerous” (Appendices P2g and P4b) may provide a clue, as might his oft-repeated assumptions about the fundamentally perilous, competitive and hierarchal nature of social being. That for Peterson society is ontologically determined by nature is surely also a factor here, but ultimately none of this is *evidence* that moral labels like “good”

necessarily apply to those who are “dangerous” but “under control”. Peterson’s discourse in P6a seems directed instead to an affective *need* that he feels a reasonable proportion of his followers share. First, to be considered dangerous is conjunctive with a cultural coding that valorises masculinity, risk-taking, competitiveness and entrepreneurship—a patriarchal liberalism. Second, adjacent to the dangerous but in control subject is the notion of “hierarchical care” we explored at the beginning of this chapter: the dangerous subject cares in this fashion by restraining their animal instincts so as to be able to protect those around them – women and children are the subjects implied – who lack a biological and cultural situatedness in the same ontological category. Fierceness, bravery, powerfulness and being dangerous are not synonymous, but there are certainly connections between these modes of being. The three initial traits – listed by Ford – do imply a danger “out there” that is mastered by being assigned a certain gender role. Similarly, we need not look too deeply to find the gendered character of Peterson’s “dangerous *man*”: it is likely he would define a “dangerous woman” rather differently. In Appendix P6b we can perhaps locate where Peterson would morally situate our hypothetical subject.

Appendix P6b (p. 304) follows a number of Peterson’s posts which feature a quote from a text, video or lecture framed against his trademark background image.

It reads:



There is an obvious allusion to abortion here; elsewhere Peterson has said “I certainly believe abortion is morally wrong” (Show 2018). Through vague allusions and concrete elisions, we again find Peterson tacitly reifying “natural” gender roles, in addition to larding his discourse with socially conservative moral values, despite the directive to “abandon

ideology” in *Beyond Order* (Peterson 2021, p. 178). Although Ford’s defence of single mothers – and elsewhere the right to abortion (see the chapter “Are You My Mother” in *Fight Like a Girl*) – can be favourably contrasted with Peterson’s misogyny, both authors posit ideal gender categories that subjects then inevitably fill, annulling the possibility of a richer conception of the political potential of social

reproduction in Ford's case. In Peterson's case, the possibility of unlocking the richness that lies latent in his followers' intersubjectivity is denied. Despite his preoccupation with self-improvement, the positing of inevitable and ahistorical gender traits and categories denies his followers the possibility of understanding themselves as active agents in their own lives. A gender essentialism is present in both Peterson's and Ford's discourses, whether progressive or reactionary, overt or covert: this manifests at the start of September via the strong presence of Markers Three, Four and Five in Appendices F6a, F6b and F6c and P6a and P6c.

The essentialism – and moralism – that saturate Peterson's discourse are especially evident in Appendix P6c. Accompanied by a video of a lecture – presumably taken *in situ* at the University of Toronto, and likely drawn from the same source as Appendix P5c – Peterson directs followers to his *Discovering Personality Course* after declaring:

In order to maximize your success and well-being, it's important to understand the roles of intelligence, conscientiousness, creativity, stress tolerance, and agreeableness. Neuroticism and the ability to cope with negative emotions are really important for maintaining a high-paying job in a dominant hierarchy (Appendix P6c, p. 304 video content).

The content and form of P6c evince the intertwining of a number of typical Petersonian themes: as we have seen, the presence of these themes also correspond to absence; the six markers of labour's elision. The moralism, essentialism and reification of "natural hierarchies" that are evident in P6c are strong indicators that one or more of the six markers will be present. As in Ford's discourse at the opposite pole of the radical centre, these indicators of absence demarcate a discursive horizon and reflect an ontological underpinning that restricts the expression of rich concepts of labour and care. In P6c, these overarching conceptual elisions are discernible on a more granular scale in the deployment of terms, tropes, phrases and images. Peterson paces the classroom as if on stage and gestures with precision: dressed in a suit and tie and speaking into a wireless microphone, his constant movement and sharp eye contact project confidence and authority. Although the advice he dispenses is banal, boiling down to "try to get a job that you enjoy and are

competent at”, an essentialism regarding what human beings are able to *be* is inherent in phrases like “most people have one significant weakness in their intelligence personality make-up” and “almost all the jobs at the top of complex dominance hierarchies require very high intelligence and insane levels of conscientiousness” (Appendix P6c, video content). While earlier in the video Peterson assures his audience that there is “nothing wrong with leisure” (P6c), his advice that the top of “dominance hierarchies” are populated exclusively by hyper-intelligent and hyper-conscientious individuals inserts moralism into discourse that appears superficially neutral. Along with intellectual sleight-of-hand go implicit moral assumptions about what the *best type* of people aim at, as well as absolute certainty regarding the essence and transhistorical truth of the structures these individuals maintain their dominance or hierarchical pre-eminence within. Essentialism and moralism intertwine in the production of transhistorical epistemic “truths”: the persistence of naturally-determined hierarchies of dominance are both corollary and ground of this intertwining.

We can also trace the absence of a rich concept of labour via the use of discursive building blocks that add up to moralism, essentialism, ahistoricism and reification on a conceptual level in Appendix F6b (p. 285). Although the advice issued again boils down to the banal or common sense demand that “men should respect women and women should not expect or accept a lack of respect and care in intimate relationships with men”, Ford’s discursive logic means that an individualist variant of feminist politics emerges. Ford is certainly making a political point, however it is in the least ostensibly “political” part of the post that the strongest indicators of Ford’s politics are discernible. Ford describes from experience:



She then reveals that:



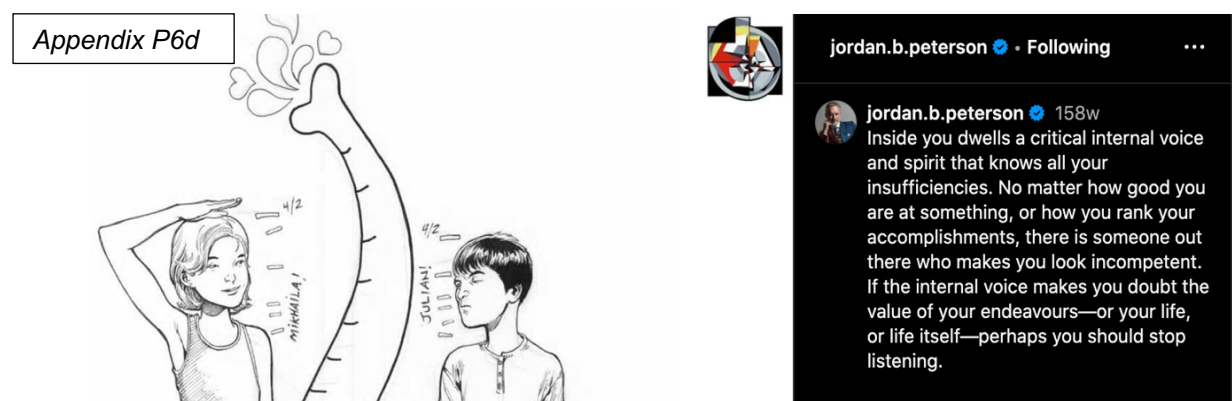
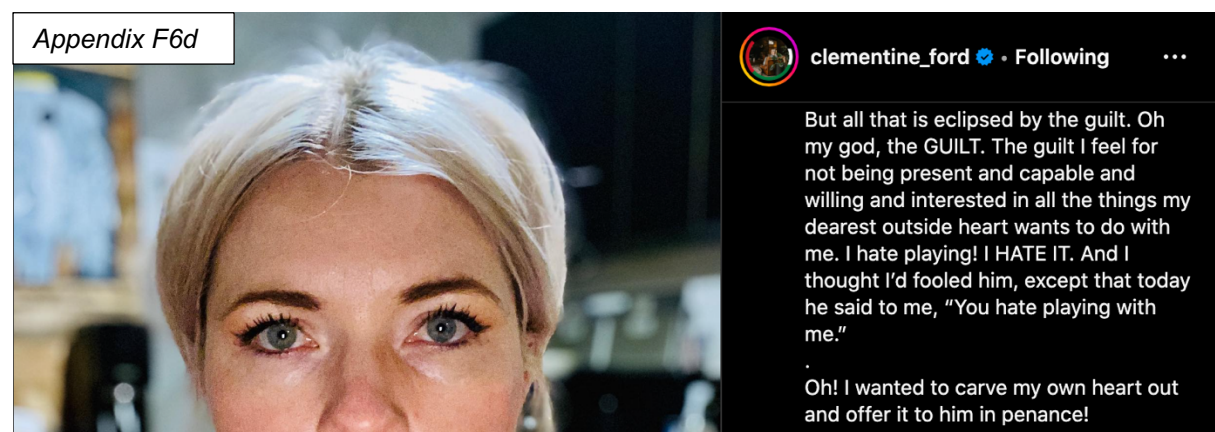


First, the validity of Ford's claims must be acknowledged. Certainly "romance" and all the term connotes can be understood as "a trick played on women": Rosa (2023, p. 60 - 61) concurs that "there are whole industries – in self-help, therapy and advice-giving – that profit from this ideal [romantic love], generally exhorting heteronormative mores...the myth that there is no alternative to the prevailing romantic and sexual order is confirmed all around us". The claim regarding the display and (lack of) self-promotion by men on dating apps is more subjective but no doubt has some veracity, even if the marketing of the self as a commodity in the sexual marketplace remains unproblematised. Further, positing "men" as a static category who uniformly fail to live up to a certain moral standard of individual online display can be read as merely reversing the historical demands upon women to present themselves in a fashion that men are likely to find desirable. This demand for "equality" – what Ford elsewhere describes as a "carry[ing] half the load" (F6b) – between personas whose subjectivity is constructed and mediated by the expectation of being perceived as a commodified self in online interactions, or for equal amounts of unpaid labour-time and emotional labour to be expended on online platforms, elides that equality itself remains "a bourgeois political concept which relies on the erasure of substantial differences between different material conditions" (Gotby 2023, p. 110). As Gotby (2023, p. 110) notes, "the discourse of equality has taken us to a limit-point in feminist politics, and it must now be replaced with a move towards the abolition of feminised labour, the family and gender".

Less certain is that "the most romantic fucking thing you'll ever experience" is "a love affair with yourself and your freedom" (F6b). As we move further into Ford's own experience, the epistemological horizon of her discourse is evident in both the terms she uses and the political and affective resonances that arise from them. A resolute individualism is palpable in the demand that women live alone and enjoy a love affair with themselves. Most pertinent for the thesis advanced here, however, is Ford's contention that "living alone" and "having a love affair with your freedom" are the apotheosis of feminist empowerment. First, there is an obvious elision of class difference – and thus of differences in labour-time that must be sold and caring responsibilities, corresponding to Markers One and Five – in this advice. Although Ford does not "call for women experiencing abuse or violence or living in fear to 'just leave'" (Appendix F6c, p. 286), the claims that "being the star of your own story" and

“put[ing] yourself and your happiness centre stage” (F6c) are the *sine qua non* of feminist struggle and female empowerment are enmeshed in an individualist feminist politics that substitutes the struggle for collective emancipation for “stardom”, but only for those women “brave” or “powerful” (F6a) enough (or financially secure enough) to “reclaim your light” (F6c). As the blanket advice to “leave him” except in cases of abuse appears again in F6c, we again find a presumed irreconcilability between not only men’s and women’s economic interests but between their ahistorical *essences*, an instance of Marker Three that remains surprising in feminist discourse. The women unable to “reclaim their light” inevitably occupy a subordinate position within the hierarchy of feminist empowerment Ford tacitly constructs.

## The Guilt, The Guilt



Peterson could be responding directly to Ford in the quotes above. Does this hypothetical interlocution provide any further insight into the elision of labour in their respective discourses? The complexity of Ford’s range of feelings, and her

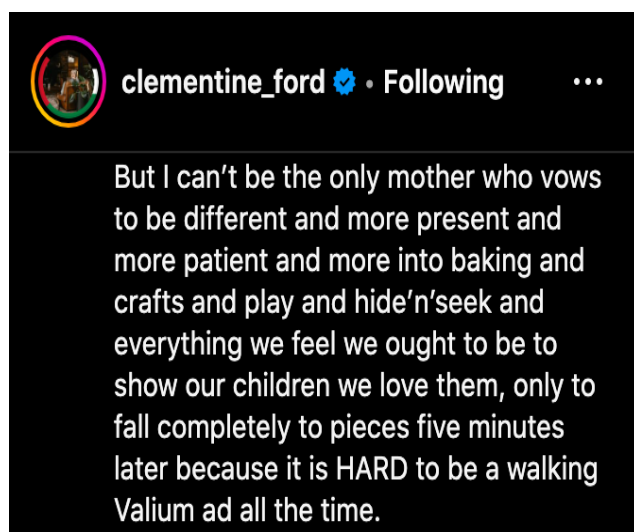
confessional tone, captures something of the affective ambiguity that is inherently part of parenting, and particularly part of *mothering*. Feminist philosopher of motherhood Sara Ruddick alludes to this complexity (1980, p. 343) in detailing how “central to our experience of our mothers and our mothering is a poignant conjunction of power and powerlessness”. For Peterson, a conflicted position like Ford’s is attributable to “a critical internal voice”—although he has previously advocated developing a range of different internal characters in order to “learn how to think” (P4b), the inevitable discourse of a voice critical of one’s self and its endeavours does not issue from a character to be cultivated or developed. In acknowledging that there is “someone out there who makes you look incompetent”, Peterson gestures towards the inherent sociality of human beings, however a familiar pattern of simultaneous opening and closing reoccurs in the momentary positing of an expansive conception of the nature of *being*: the image in Appendix P6d (p. 305) contains text that reads “compare yourself to who you were yesterday, not who someone else is today”. At once, rich concepts of labour and care and our status as social beings who are fundamentally dependent upon each other dissolve as Peterson urges us to compare ourselves only to ourselves. While there is a germ of self-help common sense here, in zooming out we witness a consistent discursive tendency to deny any social entanglement. If we are to “stop listening” to our critical inner voice yet also resolutely avoid others in assessing ourselves and our lives then a monadic individual subject is presupposed, outside of history and in a sense outside of “society” as well.

Ford’s tormented reflections on parenting evidence a similar simultaneous opening and closing. Naming the guilt that mothers disproportionately feel has radical potential, as does articulating the vast amount of unpaid caring and reproductive labour that mothers perform. Confessing that she “hate[s] playing” is yet another instance of an attempt to generate mass affective resonance, however the very normativity of this confession reveals Ford’s thorough-going situatedness within the constraints of the liberal discursive tradition. Ferguson (2017, p. 124) writes that

...play represents an alternative to...the instrumentalization and disciplining of concrete labour that is enforced by the law of value. Children’s playful or

praxic tendencies thus constantly butt up against the socio-political forces of capitalist subject formation.

This is not to claim that playing with children is inherently radical or anti-capitalist, but rather to demonstrate that Ford's discourse continually denies that human labour might be conceived in a manner that allows a far-reaching re-conception of our social relations. Following Ferguson (2017, p. 129), children "provide a window onto an alternative mode of being that many adults recognize as valuable and something to be preserved, even fought for...as children remind us...labour power is not a thing". It does seem likely that Ford is assuring her followers that certain ideals of motherhood are impossible, and thus tacitly redolent of patriarchal ideology—to "fail" at them is not to be a failure as a parent:



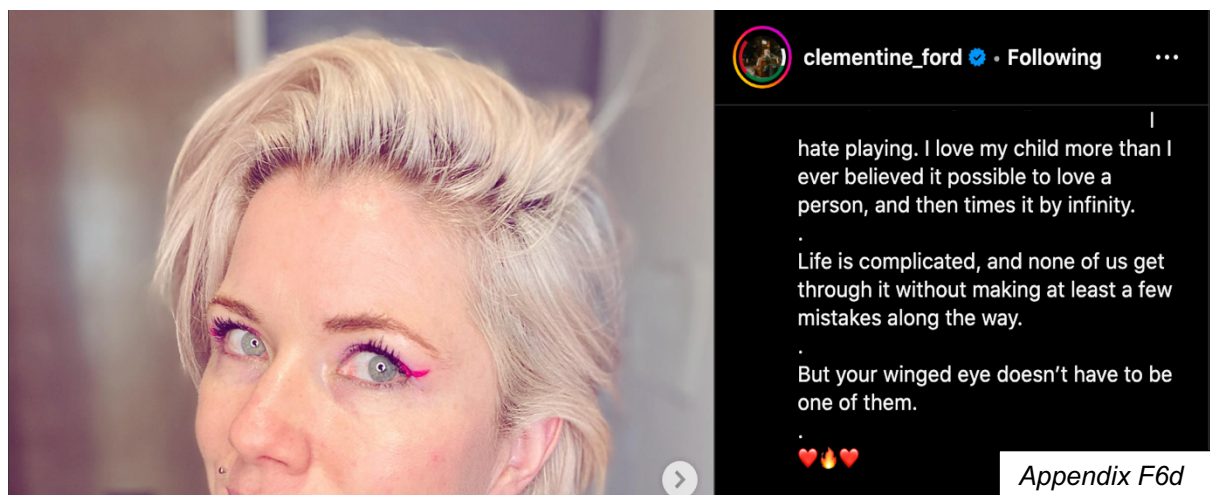
Ford knows the answer to the rhetorical question she is posing, and yet the unifying function of this trope contains no gesture towards other modes of mothering, parent-child relations or caring: much like all men are assumed to own either a PlayStation, play golf, follow AFL, drink alcohol or be interested in cars (F5f), a gender essentialism is always

present. Intra-familial social relations and parenting practices are pre-determined, and the collectivised social reproduction and bonds of solidarity her online discourse at times alludes to cease at the threshold of the household. That Ford "can't be the only mother" who has ambiguous feelings towards their child and the concrete labour of caring for them – and her "vows to be *different* and *more present*" (Appendix F6d, p. 287, italics mine) – position mothering, the mother-child bond and the labour of care as inherently *private* relations and practices. To return to Lewis (2022, p. 22):

[T]he family is also the legal assertion that a baby...is the creation of the familial romantic dyad; and that this act of authorship generates, for the authors, property rights in their progeny...but also quasi-exclusive accountability for the child's life.

Although Ford struggled greatly with “feelings of agitation towards single parenting in lockdown” (F6d), and despite her “evergreen advice” to “leave your husband” (F2g), an interrogation of the privacy of the parent-child bond – or of the fundamentally private nature of the family– is absent in her discourse.

Appendix F6d employs a formal structure where the volatile affects and counter-affects that relate to the object of Ford’s care intertwine, evincing a particularly strong example of Marker Six throughout. Building from Ford’s individual experience to uniting her “coven” by naming the conjunction of love and frustration inherent to parenting, and especially to single parents in the first-pandemic half-year,<sup>73</sup> Ford uses the pronouns “I”, “my” or “me” 26 times in this post (“I” accounts for the vast majority of these uses). Yet as she pivots to inviting her community to recognise a shared affective volatility in paragraph seven, “we”, “you” and “our” become more common (8 uses in total). The post concludes thus:



The conjunction of opposing affects at the post’s climax is undercut by humour, which is an effective rhetorical strategy in online discourse. Yet almost immediately a practical question arises. How are single parents to apply the complex make-up techniques Ford models under conditions where a “never ending fucking MESS of toys fills my waking hours” and “the expectation to play” is incessant (F6d)? Without any consideration of the labour-time single parents may need to sell in addition to performing carework and domestic labour, the spheres of production and

<sup>73</sup> I also struggled as a single parent under these same conditions, and Ford is obviously speaking from and to a common experience shared amongst her followers.

reproduction are again demarcated, indicating the presence of Marker Four. Moreover, there is a subtle patriarchal logic at work in positioning the mother as a subject who must perform a certain role so that “everything we feel *we ought to be* to show our children we love them” (F6d, italics mine) is communicated against a social background where care’s demand is higher than its supply: implicit is that mothers are still primarily and “naturally” responsible for ensuring children’s emotional needs are met. Although Ford demands fathers do more, she also seems resigned to an unequal division of domestic labour that burdens the mother: this contradicts her optimism elsewhere about the advances made and still to be made by heroic feminist warriors. Ford emphasises the inevitability of imperfection in parenting, but that a conscious ontological shift – “everything we feel *we ought to be*” – is required to show children love radically reduces the capacity to think collective practices of care outside the confines of the bourgeois family. As with Peterson in Appendix P6d, Ford’s post no doubt resonates for many, but in zooming out we find Ford reifying a version of familism that Lewis (2021, p. 103) describes as a “moderately defiant stance toward heterosexual proletarian marriages” that remains within the boundaries of liberal common sense. Precisely because liberal discourses do not and indeed cannot “counter the tendency to present patriarchy as transhistorical” (Gotby 2023, p. 60), Ford’s confession falls far short of recognising that

...it is precisely the family, the bourgeois norm that capitalist society naturalizes and imposes on everybody, that privatizes and stratifies social misery, structurally obscuring the flourishing of “collectivized means of survival that bring us into relation with each other in bonds of solidarity and care” (Lewis 2021, p. 104).

#### Commodity Production and Content Producers

The video content in Appendix P6c can be read as another attempt to monetise the “Jordan Peterson” brand. The discourse and the character producing it simultaneously legitimise each other and reaffirm both Peterson and his discursive ecosystem as commodities. In P6c, we witness a formal structure that is typical

when he is aiming at capital as well as clicks.<sup>74</sup> A video featuring intellectual sleight-of-hand – here it is “hierarchies of competence” and “fluid intelligence” – in addition to essentialism, moralism, and the application of ostensibly timeless categories and structures from the natural world to human society accompanied by text that distils the video content into an explicit message of self-improvement before linking to Peterson’s paid personality courses, books or external websites is a formal structure he has employed consistently. In Ford’s case, moralism, essentialism and the reification of structures like “capitalism” and “patriarchy” give rise to different forms, but similar variations in levels of “engagement” versus “income-generating” content against a background of subjective commodification are nevertheless discernible. Ford often interweaves political content with sponsored content: recall the posts in June about the lack of government funding for pelvic floor health and the discount offered on private treatment “you can access...using Afterpay” (F3h). In keeping with the gendered nature of the elisions identified in this chapter (see “Distant and Hierarchical Care”), it seems safe to conclude that Ford’s discourse evidences more instances of the elision of care and Peterson’s of nature, although Peterson drew heavily on care to undertake his hero’s journey, and Ford often reifies nature as static and unchanging, demarcating “production” from “reproduction”. Both activist-influencers rely on ahistorical concepts – underpinned by time’s uniformity, linearity and inherent *telos* – to explain either the (moral) rightness or wrongness of social structures and the individuals who occupy them, and concomitantly their followers’ ability to master or resist them. Relatedly, their own discursive horizons proscribe the expression of accounts of our social being that gesture beyond the liberal individual.

The question of labour and how it is understood and practiced is pertinent when examining human subjectivities. Zeroing in on the subjects whose discourse is under investigation here, we must pause to consider the novel ways class might be conceived amongst activist-influencers. As both producers of value and owners of the source of that value, Peterson, like Ford, brings Wark’s vectoralist to mind (see “Fashion, Family and the Future of Work”). The consumer who engages with Peterson’s content obviously does not sell him their labour-power for an agreed

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<sup>74</sup> While the primary function of a post can be hypothesised as “generating engagement” or “generating income” from certain formal features, ultimately all content is in service of both: capital is clicks and clicks are capital.

amount of time in the classic Marxian sense. If we understand “value” more fluidly, however, as accruing through attention and profile enhancement as well as in more traditional ways – many, many people buy Peterson’s books, take his online courses and attend his talks; it is even possible to pay for a private zoom consultation with him – then both the *quantity* of followers and the time they spend with his content, and the affective *quality* via which his content resonates for so many indicate that there is a significant imbalance between Peterson’s own labour-time and the aggregated *engagement* time of his followers. This equation points toward some ways that *value* might be conceived in an online “information economy”.

Both Ford and Peterson generate value via the use of their labour-power, however their own labour as content creators is at times elided. In short, neither Ford or Peterson are able to express a coherent concept of *class*: recall Ford’s repeated abstractions regarding “capitalism” and “capitalist-patriarchy”, and Peterson’s “iterated trading games” that make an uneven distribution of wealth inevitable regardless of historical motion. Instead, hierarchical structures are naturalised and abstracted, dominating lives and directing behaviour in a manner that denies agency to human subjects. Whether to be contested or upheld, these structures cannot be theorised in such a way that their quality *as structures made and upheld by human beings and their labour and care* is clear. An ironic corollary is Ford and Peterson’s inability to articulate their own class positions and the antagonisms that flow from these. As class is “a phenomenon which is visible only in process” (Wood 2016, p. 81), the static, flat and teleological structure of liberal discourse cannot account for the construction of a classed subject via the performance of their own labour or their exploitation of others’ labour, let alone such labour’s presence – or indeed absence – in that subject’s discourse.

Wark’s theorisation of the “vectoralist” is the result of specific historical processes, yet the emergence of this class position was not an inevitability. The “vectoralist” category is not sufficient to explain or exhaust the class position of activist-influencers like Peterson and Ford though, let alone the complexity of contemporary economic class, where “modern users contribute to capital formation simply by engaging with platforms” (Varoufakis & Moscrop 2024). We cannot simply denote those who do not reap any value from their participation or engagement in the



production, reception, reproduction and circulation of various online discourses “the working class”; the owner of a means of production may spend all their time online generating value for others, just as a minimum wage worker may accrue substantial – yet always-already commodified – cultural capital by creating online content. Much work remains to be done in theorising class as it pertains to activist-influencers and followers.

To return to our theme: human labour always takes and, crucially, *makes* time: those who produce online content and ultimately generate income from the aggregated labour time that others spend accessing that content are in control, to varying degrees, of a means of production. They may not directly exploit others’ labour, and followers’ time is often given willingly, generating value that is “reproduced by people in their leisure time who work for no pay” (Varoufakis & Moscrop 2024). Successful activist-influencers are those able to appropriate the most time relative to the time they spend producing, or the labour-time – which I define as “leisure labour-time” – others expend producing for them.<sup>75</sup> Activist-influencers with multiple platforms are able to rise from working or hacker class to bourgeoisie or vectoralist class within an online information economy. Within such an economy, all subjects are able to construct a persona that might be valuable, but only a handful are able to extract value from others’ engagement with that persona and its content. Although on the surface this economy might appear totally abstracted from the material processes involved in “classical” capitalist production and social reproduction, it is still underpinned by constant capital – the globe-spanning physical infrastructure of communications technology and the consumer products that connect to that infrastructure are merely two examples – and variable capital, the exploitation of human labour at every point in the chain of information production and dissemination, from miners who extract rare earth minerals used in the manufacture of iPhones to the access to personalised data granted in exchange for access to various forms of online content, a frontier of the commodification of the self. And always, the living labour that forms variable capital is incessantly performed in dialectical relation to the similarly incessant labour of social reproduction and care.

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<sup>75</sup> Producing can include creating brand new content as well as commenting on, sharing and reproducing existing content.

## Chapter Five: A Complex Mesh of Cables

The ambivalent materiality of social media is underpinned by a “complex mesh of hundreds of cables” on the bottom of the ocean that transmit “ninety-nine percent of all international data” (Bischof, Fontugne & Bustamante 2018, p. 78). This fact is harder to grasp than the content of a post on Instagram. If we propose a “common sense” empirical binary between a “complex mesh of hundreds of undersea cables” and an “Instagram post”, where “the only solid foundation we can give...must be laid on experience and observation” (Hume 1985, p. 43), the “complex mesh” forms the abstract pole. This is not to posit a vulgar distinction between the material and the immaterial, or between information (discourse) and the structures that contain it; “the use of words...communicates a material act” after all (Papacharissi 2015, p. 97). Rather, I aim to emphasise how the dialectics of materiality and immateriality and immediacy and mediation that are always-operational in our engagement with online liberal discourses are in turn predicated upon the commodity form, which emerges via the dialectics between use and exchange value and constant and variable capital. Variable capital, which generates surplus-value, is living human labour. Constant capital is “that part of capital...which is turned into means of production...[and] does not undergo any quantitative alteration of value in the process of production” (Marx 2004, p. 317). Consequently, constant capital is the product of past labour and thus “dead”: living labour as “productive activity directed to a particular purpose...raises the means of production from the dead merely by entering into contact with them, infuses them with life” (Marx 2004, p. 308). Marx’s definitions enable us to conceptualise how a complex mesh of cables lying immobile beneath human visibility nonetheless pulse with value-generating information: this “dead” infrastructure’s transmissions allow social media to *live* as an artificial realm of life.

Ford’s and Peterson’s Instagram content is carried by these cables. Its dependence on constant capital, or dead labour, is therefore clear. It will be useful to recall the Six Markers of labour’s elision at this point.<sup>76</sup> We will explore later in this chapter how online content can be theorised as a form of constant capital, which is brought to life

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<sup>76</sup> A list of the Markers can be found on page 238.

by the *decommodified* labour of following to yield value in both economic and socio-cultural senses. Whether commodified or otherwise, human labour as an utterly necessary subject and world-making process is what constitutes human *being* regardless of the prevailing mode of production. Who the subject can be, how they can think their being and what kind of world we can collectively make is inherently bound up with how human labour is understood. As such, labour's elision is the *fundamental* elision via which liberal discourses proceed; from it flows the impossibility of thinking and enacting radical changes to the *status quo* under liberal conditions. Within liberal discourses, whether progressive or reactionary,<sup>77</sup> we find that labour's elision also conceals – and that a hauntological reading method can *reveal* – how the *status quo* functions as a normative horizon, where liberalism becomes the limit of potential. If the limit of potential is in question, then what of our expanded definition of care as always-already carework: the ontological relations and increasingly *commodified* labour practices at the heart of social reproduction and capitalist production? We will commence this chapter by exploring in more depth the “distant and hierarchical” care that exists, as well as the care that might be possible, between Ford and her followers and Peterson and his followers, and by extension how care might be conceived – and commodified – across the radical centre.

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<sup>77</sup> That quotidian life and our existing social relations constitute a situation where the rightful order of things has been and lost and must be restored – or at least that this natural order is gravely under threat – is a fascist tendency when it bursts the radical centre's boundaries. Peterson's discourse evokes these palingenetic resonances, but actual fascists tend to find him frustrating even though he may at times be useful to them (Berlatsky 2018). Peterson's discourse up to September 2020 remained at the radical centre's reactionary pole: he has since shifted rightwards, on X/Twitter particularly, but his positionality on that platform, unmediated by a social media team and a certain distance from unfolding events, is beyond the scope of this thesis.

In progressive liberal discourses, by contrast, quotidian life and (unjust) social relations can be reappraised and engineered to construct a more egalitarian society, especially by increasing the representation of women, LGBTQIA+ people and people of colour in leadership positions. Ford remains at the radical centre's progressive pole, although her advocacy for Palestine in the face of the genocide in Gaza goes beyond that of many progressive liberals. Beyond the radical centre, as we shift from recognition to redistribution, in Fraser's formulation, this tendency becomes genuinely emancipatory.

## Commodified Care

At the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, feminist economist Nancy Folbre (2021 p. 221; p. 137) wrote that:

A care economy that can never be fully commodified remains central to its social reproduction. Even in the United States...more than half of all the work performed on a daily basis is unpaid, involving the provision of goods and services for oneself and others...These tangled social relations suggest that many different forms of exploitation can—and often do—coexist with variable forms of solidarity and mutual aid.

The coexistence of exploitation and care that Folbre refers to seems especially applicable to the structure of relationships between followers and prominent online radical centrists. That care contains a non-commodifiable kernel – an aspect of its transhistorical necessity – attests to the possibility that capacious practices and notions of care might coalesce as activist-influencers and followers together mould the discursive ecosystems that inform their subjectivities and open (and close) their political positionalities. To reiterate: care is an ontological relation always-already present in the dialectic of recognition that leads us to sustain both ourselves and the other, thus propelling human labour throughout history. Labour has a historically specific function as labour-power under capitalism, but is also an always variable series of processes that constitute human subjectivity and set history in motion—care is and *does* likewise. So can we locate the blooming of radical, collective and capacious caring practices in the constitution of online intimate publics, in the act (or via the labour) of following, and, crucially, between activist-influencers and their followers?

What follows will necessarily be speculative. Future research might reveal more about how care is conceived or elided in the production and reception of liberal discourses, whether online or offline. Before we proceed to these speculations, however, the conceptual reversal alluded to above must be insisted upon. Just as labour as traditionally understood is *decommodified* in the act of following liberal

activist-influencers, under the same conditions it is likely that the labour of care tends towards *commodification*. As liberal discourses cannot proceed without eliding labour, they likewise cannot proceed without eliding care; yet these discursive tendencies do not absolutely rule out the possibility of radical caring practices emerging in the relationships between followers and activist-influencers. *Chapter Four* located thirty-one concrete instances of Markers Five and Six, with many more instances implicit. Is the emergence of a radical, capacious and collective concept of care a potentiality that exists in performing the *labour of following* which is this chapter's focus?

Although Ford and Peterson embody very different notions of care – overdetermined by feminised and masculinised modalities respectively – common to both are a set of caring practices that reinforce normative gender roles, although in Ford's case this is more oblique. Peterson's hierarchical, "fatherly" notion of care, and the profoundly individualist practices of self-care he advocates, shows his followers that they should care for themselves first and foremost. In these evocations we can at times glimpse a concept of care that threatens to escape from the patriarchal confines his discourse imposes, however these caring practices, whether tacit or overt, are defined by quantity rather than quality. Peterson does not deny that "in everyday life persons never make substantial sacrifices for one another, since moved by affection and ties of sentiment they often do" (Rawls 1999, p. 154). Yet he would also agree with Rawls (1999, p. 154) that "such actions are not *demanded* as a matter of justice by the basic structure of society". Peterson is more pessimistic and far less concerned with justice than Rawls, and when he speaks of altruism and affection he is at pains to emphasise the precarity and rarity of such acts against the inevitability of selfishness: he has no time for the Rawlsian contention (Rawls 1999, p. 4) that "society is a cooperative venture for mutual advantage". The thin and linear notion of caring labour that emerges in Peterson's discourse resembles nothing so much as the classical model of the *absent father*,<sup>78</sup> and his concept of care is thus riven with contradictions. The hero or fatherly Other, despite his power and prowess, is unable

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<sup>78</sup> This absence is not literal – Peterson abhors non-nuclear family structures – but rather that of the father who is perceived as a quasi-deity, or at least a judge, in his inscrutable silence, distance from the world of day to day social reproduction and monopoly on punishment and reward.

to offer any substantial protection to those he cares about: he transmutes his followers' desire for care and protection into a desire not to *need* to be cared for or protected, even as he emphasises that the follower *should* be able to care and protect. These intertwining caring desires collide and contradict each other, negating the possibility that caring practices might suffuse, let alone transform, our social relations. Even a "dangerous" man who has mastered the "terrible" world, although he may wish to protect those close to him, is likely to experience defeats that lead to a generalised surplus of uncaring, in an "emotional economy" (Rose 1996, p. 54) where care's demand outstrips its supply. Care for Peterson remains a flat, individualised concept that ultimately absolves the hero/father of any genuine responsibility to offer his followers a model of care that might make the world less terrible for them. In so doing, Peterson shirks the terms he has established for "model fatherhood". Instead, as we have seen, the hero becomes the absent father, leaving a hollow and one-sided affective terrain for his followers to tread in his wake.

Further, because Peterson has proven materially incapable of caring for himself, his rage at those who would upend the timeless authority of the patriarchal family can be seen as a kind of psychic salve for the lack of care that defines his own affective horizon. The father or authority figure – note the religious echoes of the shepherd and the flock, or the guru and the neophyte – cannot provide the hierarchical care a high-status patriarchal individual should be able to dispense,<sup>79</sup> despite the relative paucity of Markers Five and Six in Peterson's discourse. Indeed, Peterson as carer has been revealed as *vulnerable*, but in his vulnerability he turns away from his followers, barely posting for months at a time. In short, Peterson's followers flock to him for the protection he implies they should seek: he demands that *they* demand more of *themselves*, and he then abdicates any responsibility for or insight into the collective maintenance or improvement of a world where danger is imminent and a surplus of uncaring immanent. Care is offered, and at some moments hints and traces of care's potential richness and fullness can be glimpsed, but these

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<sup>79</sup> Of course, a stern and aloof father has centuries of textual support if we consider the Bible and the classics. Peterson represents an updated version of this figure, and thus his inability to care for his followers, even in the top down fashion his model of "hierarchical care" presupposes, reveals a further contradiction *vis à vis* caring labour and liberal discourses.

immediately shrivel as care dissolves into the commodity form and his followers are left merely with affective hauntings: the “promise” of care as commodity simultaneously opens and closes even a rich *patriarchal* reciprocity. Similarly, the impossibility of self-mastery tumbles from psychic insight to commodified self-help: all that care can be amongst the contradictions and limitations that Peterson’s discourse produces is a commodity, its scarcity as “natural” as uncaring is abundant.

Surely it is between Ford and her followers, then, that a radical, collective concept of care might emerge? Her “evergreen advice” to “leave your husband” certainly contains a germ of capacious caring potential if “leaving your husband” *en masse* leads to the profusion of non-privatised and non-normative caring relations, and Ford mobilises the desire for care amongst systems of exploitation in a manner that operates on several levels, the first quite literal: we see posts praising feminist solidarity and demanding social justice alongside posts that valorise a very neoliberal notion of commodified self-care alongside posts that advertise actual commodities, and usually commodities that are feminised. Beyond this, though, we need to excavate the kind of caring relations and practices that inhere between Ford and her followers, who form a much more intimate “intimate public” than do Peterson’s. This involves taking stock of the “emotional economy”,<sup>80</sup> to again borrow Gillian Rose’s term, that is the background to the tangled social relations against which Ford’s discourse emerges.

While conscious of her discourse’s enmeshment in exploitative systems, Ford’s tendency to abstract and idealise these systems means that the care that she explicitly declares *is* reciprocated between her and her “coven” is always-already constrained by forces that defy resistance, leaving a theoretical terrain where “priority is...attributed to the categories that arise in...abstract analysis...over the categories yielded by the concrete complexities of history” (Connell 1979, p. 316). As a corollary, R W Connell (1979, p. 327) points out that “because it has no historical method of proof, this literature [discourse like Ford’s] constantly falls back on sheer

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<sup>80</sup> Joanna Walsh (2022, p. 11) describes an online “attention economy”, where “attention has value online”. There is no doubt significant overlap between an “emotional” and an “attention” economy; further research might explore the intersection of these affective economies.

postulation". And postulating that a kind of "radical", "sisterly" mode of care is generated through online engagement does not at all translate "on the ground" to practices of care that accord with such postulates; cultivating care amongst an online intimate public exemplifies how "leadership is exercised while at the same time concealed" (Gerbaudo 2012, p. 144) on social media, and such care remains distant in its mediation by an activist-influencer.

Ford often says that she cares for her followers, and encourages them to care for themselves. Sometimes, she extends this care-chain to those her followers care for. She typically demonstrates her gratitude for her followers' care by offering gifts and discounts on desirable products, training modules for self-actualisation, or exercises for increasing political awareness and the capacity for activism. However, Ford also exhorts her followers time and again to put themselves first, just as she assuredly and unabashedly puts *herself* first, albeit in what she acknowledges is an exploitative political and emotional economy. In so doing, Ford centres a notion of care that is as individualist – and as gendered – as that which we find in Peterson. This is of course a notion of liberal feminist *self-care*, and in establishing self-care as care's apotheosis Ford reinforces liberalism's hierarchising tendency. Indeed, the liberal common sense of self-care's pre-eminence, alongside the stream of feminised commodities that Ford endorses, ensures that conceptualisations of care in Ford's discourse are structured by the commodity form first and foremost, although the weaker force of social capital is also at work. Any radical potential exists *despite* such structurations, and as in Peterson's discourse, these radical traces and hints appear as glimpses that quickly dissolve; both the subversive and the humdrum are subsumed into the relentless circuits of capital accumulation, where "value valorising itself" (Marx 2004, p. 988) includes the ongoing (re)production of Ford herself as a commodity. The decommodified labour of following an activist-influencer moves us into a realm where affect more and more inflects our labour processes even as it occludes their status as processes of labour. It is reasonable to assume that the caring labour given and received in the act of following is similarly flat.

Care's radical potential is inherent in its status as a "background" domain outside the real subsumption of capital; from its ontological abundance flow practices of



resistance to the commodification of our social relations. Care's capaciousness also inheres when it is reciprocally embodied in concrete acts towards the other/s, and in its capacity to infuse our social relations with an ethics and a politics antithetical to the logic of value extraction. The epistemic horizons of radical centrist discourses and the concomitant relations between followers and activist-influencers are thoroughly saturated by the commodity form, however. The heroes who produce these discourses struggle to articulate care as something more than a narrow and inner-directed form of labour that is undertaken only to replenish, rather than to *replenish and resist*. As replenishment (self-care as primary) rather than resistance (self-care as ground of collective, radical care), however, care shifts beneath us, and we find ourselves standing alone on our own two feet. As "the default setting of the commercial internet is the capture and commodification of your life" (Solnit 2024), it can be difficult to see how things could be otherwise, and perhaps upbraiding Ford for propagating normative, gendered and faux-radical practices and concepts of care is not altogether fair: liberal ontological positions and epistemic norms continually empty radical notions of content. And yet: as heads of armies of followers, with vast platforms and the devoted daily attention of many, Ford and Peterson retain the opportunity to play a significant role in uniting atomised individuals into nascent collectives that could affect real political change. Did Ford's and (to a lesser extent) Peterson's failure to inform, develop, practice and embody the multi-faceted concepts of care that a genuinely emancipatory politics of social reproduction requires correspond to their status as activist-influencers at the radical centre's boundaries?

The desirability of these positionalities, and the desire to hold the centre itself, can surely be intuited as a factor in this failure. Care as theorised by avatars of contemporary liberalism did reach a mass audience during the first pandemic half-year, but it is not unreasonable to speculate that the "mutual aid" the pandemic precipitated was largely in spite of, not because of, the discursive production of these same radical centrists. The ideals of care that liberal activist-influencers extol – and the material caring practices that remain underdeveloped via the same activist-influencers' self-commodification – occur within a complex mesh of social relations, both online and offline. Was a genuine mass desire for expansive caring practices

stifled, and this radical desire diluted, by the continuities we have observed between historical and contemporary liberal theorisations of care, remembering that a flat concept of care emerges in train with a flat concept of labour?

### Decommodified Labour

However abstract a complex mesh of undersea cables stretching over a million kilometres might appear, their concrete reality is testament to human labour's indispensability. Relatedly, the need for human beings to connect with each other and the technologies enabling them to do so cannot be disaggregated from capital's relentless search for new frontiers: new opportunities for primitive accumulation and potential new sources of value extraction. To return to Marx (2004, p. 727):

It is the old story: Abraham begat Isaac, Isaac begat Jacob and so on. The original capital of £10,000 brings in a surplus-value of £2,000 which is capitalized. The new capital of £2,000 brings in a surplus-value of £400...[and so on] Just as capital begets capital begets capital begets capital, labour begets labour begets labour begets labour.

The “multiple scales at which media and communications networks and practices operate, from undersea cables to...handheld devices” (Plantin & Punathambekar 2019, p. 166) is ultimately empirical evidence that human labour takes – and *makes* – myriad forms. The digital ecosystem, including Instagram, is only the most visible level of liberal discourse's materiality, and thus merely one site where human labour takes place.

In a political-economic sense, and at the most “material” level of discursive reception, we can understand the labour of following as what Jones (2021, p. 27, italics mine) describes as “decommodified labour”. Such labour is that of

...the intern who works for the promise of pay...the unpaid research assistant; or the online influencer who sacrifices a wage for the prospect of exposure.  
*Freely employed*, labour ceases to be a commodity and becomes

decommodified – labour without a price which continues to produce profit...the wage relation itself is brought out of exchange, so that the worker receives precisely nothing, while the employer enjoys labour for free.

Jones's insights are fascinating, but his political concerns are beyond the scope of this thesis.<sup>81</sup> We need to transpose “decommodified labour” into a different register. This enables us to explore how the labour performed by followers as they engage with online liberal discourse, or with the digital radical centre, is materially elided in the act of following. Activist-influencers produce themselves as commodities. They ostensibly own themselves as means of production,<sup>82</sup> and the personas – flat characters – that legitimise the content that appears throughout their discursive ecosystems ground the possibility of reaping *surplus-value*. The “leisure labour-time” of followers that produces the possibility of activist-influencers accumulating capital can plausibly be described as decommodified, but it is obviously not undertaken under any kind of explicit contract or duress. Here we need to supplement Marx's notion of capital with that of Pierre Bourdieu, who expands the definition to take in social and cultural capital while retaining an economic grounding.

According to Bourdieu (1986, p. 46), capital is “a force inscribed in the objectivity of things so that everything is not equally possible or impossible...the distribution of the different types and subtypes of capital at a given moment in time represents the immanent social structure of the world”. Each individual's social capital “depends on the size of the network he [sic] can effectively mobilise” (p. 51)—social capital is an

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<sup>81</sup> Jones uses decommodified labour to examine the relationship between a platform based precariat or surplus population based predominantly in the Global South, who scramble to perform micro-tasks – like training AI, or completing miniature pieces of translation – on vast micro-work platforms. See *Work Without the Worker*, especially Chapters One and Three.

<sup>82</sup> Although recall Peterson's publishing arrangement with the *Daily Wire*, and the undoubted influence of that right wing platform on his content. His relationship with Penguin Random House is also crucial to his celebrity. Likewise, Ford is represented by an agent, and dependent on her publishers (Simon & Schuster initially, and now Allen & Unwin) to commission and promote her work. She is also both dependent upon and an integral part of the circuit of mainstream literary culture in Australia, which involves appearing at writer's festivals, on podcasts, on radio and on television panels. It is worth noting that as of 2024, her advocacy for Palestine in the face of Israel's genocide in Gaza has led to some of her public appearances being cancelled.

integral part of how different subjects understand their own and others' subjectivity and intersubjectivity in general, and extremely pertinent when considering online influence and status in particular. On Instagram, "reactions to news and current events...are also part of the everyday context of presenting the self...Friction and acquiescence are integrated into self-narratives, channelled into performances that are telling of both what we want to be and what we cannot be" (Papacharissi 2015, p. 96 - 97). As heads of armies of followers, porous boundaries between offline and online social capital typify the status of activist-influencers; social capital also accrues to followers in performing the decommodified labour that following an activist-influencer entails. Hierarchies are established in the accumulation of social capital, and exist among followers as well as activist-influencers: online, they can be constructed rapidly by the quantity and quality of content and reactions to it. Although hierarchies are the *result* of contestations over social (and economic) capital, liberal discourses tend not to be capable of grasping by the roots the historical, temporal and political-economic occlusions via which certain hierarchies appear timeless and natural, even if their appearance is recent. Hayek (2006, p. 76) exemplifies this position in claiming "as a statement of fact, it just is not true that 'all men [sic] are born equal'" While we might counter that hierarchies are mutable, indicating that "society is criss-crossed by plural temporalities" (Toscano 2023, p. 5), the decommodified labour that distributes social capital online carries multitudes in its unidirectional train regardless. Whether liberal discourses naturalise or challenge hierarchical structures, the reification of these structures results.

There are of course many possible levels of engagement throughout different discursive ecosystems. Yet as Bourdieu (1986, p. 52) demonstrates:

The reproduction of social capital presupposes an unceasing effort of sociability, a continuous series of exchanges in which recognition is endlessly affirmed and reaffirmed. This work...implies expenditure of time and energy and so, directly or indirectly, of economic capital.

Here is our link between the labour of following and classical Marxist categories;

further, it should be clear by now that the implied expenditure of time and energy and thus of economic capital also implies that following a liberal activist-influencer involves labour that is overlooked. In examining labour and value creation on social media platforms, the orthodox Marxist thesis that the organic composition of capital tends to rise holds true,<sup>83</sup> albeit in a curious way that highlights capitalism's tendency to innovate, or at least to overcome barriers to accumulation. David Harvey (2018, p. 129) notes that "the concept of organic composition...focuses our attention on the manner in which technological change within the production process enables the same quantity of applied labour power to preserve and expand greater value than previously". Indeed, rather than a general rise in constant capital leading to a reduced need for living labour to reap surplus-value, the need for living labour to engage with online content (as constant capital) actually increases, but this labour is, crucially, not labour for which a wage is paid, and thus not "variable capital" in the classic sense. The demand for labour – and here we mean the micro-labour of millions of followers – does not decrease in online arenas, or under "platform capitalism", but as *decommodified* labour its increase still indicates a tendency towards the dominance of dead over living labour. In short, the act of following is a *form* of labour, but *understanding* following as labour is another matter entirely.

Just as "on the basis of accumulated data from profiling a user's history and preferences, the user is fed personal findings which functionally determine one's windows on the info-world" (Boler & Davis 2018, p. 83), the accumulated weight and attenuated horizons of liberal epistemology, combined with the fundamental atomisation of liberal ontology, determine the follower's window both onto their "infoworld" but also *into* their inner-world. Subjectivity is established and re-

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<sup>83</sup> Marx describes how the "law of capitalist production is to increase constant capital at the expense of variable, that is, to increase surplus-value, net produce. Secondly, net produce is to be increased in relation to the part of the product that replenishes capital, i.e. wages" (Marx 2004, p. 1051). By "organic composition of capital" Marx means "the progressive decline in the variable capital in relation to the constant capital", which leads to "a rising organic composition of the total capital" (Marx 1991, p. 318). I.e. the longer capitalism as a mode of production endures – and as technological change and development is concomitant with such endurance – more constant capital is produced and less living labour is required, which should lead to a falling rate of profit over the *longue durée*, although this latter does not concern us here. What matters for us is that the rising organic composition of capital means that more and more capital *qua* capital is constant capital, dead labour: the rise of *decommodified* labour could be theorised as paradoxically bolstering this contentious aspect of Marx's theory of value.

established in this dialectic between the inside and outside – between the “infosphere” and the “psychosphere”, to borrow Berardi’s terms (2017, p. 2) – and the liberal tradition’s positing of an emaciated concept of labour is likely to manifest in a concept of “following” that remains as flat, one-sided and underdeveloped as the concept of labour that underpins that following. Further research is necessary here, and I do not mean to suggest that followers are duped or suffering some form of false consciousness: this chapter has already veered dangerously close to psychologism. Rather, the data which I have examined leads me to posit that most followers of liberal activist-influencers would not conceive of their following as decommodified labour, or as “leisure labour-time”: as a means by which they self-exploit (and self-commodify) in order for those with large social media followings (and the social media platforms that host them) to accumulate surplus-value and social capital, even as followers gain micro-shares of the latter via their micro-labour.

#### [Content as Constant Capital?](#)

In analysing discourse produced on and for social media, we must “account...for both technical things...and ‘soft’ cultural practices that, taken together, organise and structure the production and circulation of texts, images and symbols, ideas, and so on” (Plantin & Punathambekar 2019, p. 165). Whether thinking of “technical things” or “texts, images...symbols, ideas”, it is only with living labour that we have the possibility of generating value, yet liberal discourse as a totalising field proceeds by denying labour’s value-generating quality, as well as its capacity to congeal into genuinely emancipatory social formations. For liberals, labour is not world-making, as the world already *is* – and human beings already *are* – naturally and atemporally a certain way. Indeed, Hayek (2006, p. 104) contends that

...it is often not easy for them [the employed] to see that their freedom depends on others’ being able to make decisions which are not immediately relevant to their whole mode of life... What...[under capitalism] enabled those who did not inherit land and tools from their parents to survive and multiply

was the fact that it became practicable and profitable for the wealthy to use their capital in such a way as to give employment to large numbers.

Hayek's elision of capacious, non-familial care should be noted here, although his rigidly economistic explanation for human survival is also paternalistic, Eurocentric and elitist. The implication that the "freedom" of the many depends on their not necessarily "feeling" free legitimises a notion of freedom wherein different subjects are naturally and necessarily subject to different social constraints. Such a notion enacts an absolute closure of labour's plurivocity and emancipatory potential. Even more, the attribution of a kind of false consciousness to "the employed" (Hayek 2006, p. 104) – the overwhelming majority of people who sell their labour or commodify their subjectivity to survive – denies these subjects any role in the genuine shaping of their own lives, and thus actually *being* free. For Hayek it is self-evident that an elite should control the conditions under which "labour" as a category is theorised and inhabited; Peterson would concur. For Ford, this control must be appropriated by powerful women to set things right. That labour is not value-generating in the Marxist sense is the strictly economic corollary of this ontological position. More expansively, the ontological corollary of the liberal economic position is the individual subject whose natural mode of being is determined and shaped by hierarchical social relations that only flow one way:<sup>84</sup> whose practices of caring are narrow, family-centred and inherently inadequate; and for whom history's *telos* is clear only to an elite intimate public, despite the subject's experience of common, linear time. Ford and Peterson's discourses do not "prove" my hypothesis, but rather point over and over again to the epistemic horizon that constrains what subjects can concretely *do* and *be* when the dialectic of subjectification develops from the subject's situation as a *liberal* subject; that is, as an *individual* who defines themselves against a background static world – exemplified by Marker Three – and whose labour flows from their natural being into linear, common time, as demonstrated by Markers One and Two.

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<sup>84</sup> Needless to say, that way is upstream from and for the majority of subjects.

As we know that social media is a site of value generation, can we rise up from the mesh of cables on the ocean's floor and understand an Instagram post, once composed, as constant capital? Living labour is certainly crystalised in it, and once published it *is* in a sense “dead”—text, image and video are presented for comment, replication and explication, but the thing itself has been fixed, as the possibility of engaging with it shows. Constant capital contributes no *new* value in the process of commodity production. Rather, it transmits small increments of the value entombed in it *only* via its absorption of living labour as it gradually wears out until it eventually requires replacing. Obviously, online content does not “wear out” like a machine does: instead, it withers away as engagement declines, wherein its value declines also. This is not to suggest that the *meaning* of the content as constant capital is fixed: editing posts is common enough. Rather, much like a book only “comes alive” in being read, interactions with the post, comprising potentially millions of instances of individual micro-labour, suffuse it with “life” that can take a dizzying array of forms. These living responses include complex individual, social and intersubjective combinations of attraction and repulsion, affective consonance and dissonance and political resonance or dissensus, all along an unstable continuum grounded in each individual's own mutable (inter)subjectivity. As a tentative definition, “politico-affective micro-labour formally subsumed under the banner of variable capital” might allow us to conceptualise the materiality of interactions with Instagram content as a form of value-producing labour akin to variable capital, and the form of that content as constant capital.<sup>85</sup>

The living labour of followers is what animates an activist-influencer's post, bringing it *alive for that subject at that time within the particular context in which they encounter and understand it*. Myriad facets of a follower's subjectivity might be triggered by the content, form and function of the post itself; it is safe to assume that some

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<sup>85</sup> See Alexander Galloway (2013, p. 358), who comments: “While mathematical algorithms may assist in the extraction of value, the surplus-value being extracted is itself first produced by human labour. A good example would be Google. Much of the labour happening in Google's server farms is performed by clustering algorithms running on massive fleets of machines. Nevertheless, the value being extracted is gleaned from the large reservoirs of micro labour performed by web users around the planet. Users perform micro labour whenever they send email, post messages online, or update websites. Hence Google is merely skimming value from information networks that ultimately have their origins in human labouring activity”.



mobilisation of affect and desire is always a component of such labour. In the labour of producing and receiving online discourse, we find the simultaneous presence of multiple levels of materiality and mediation within and between each follower, activist-influencer and intimate public: the totality of such labours constitutes a pulsating and proliferating network of content and response to content; indeed, what is “content” and what is “response” is far from clear at all times. Whatever the blend of attunement, reinforcement, distance or indifference any post may induce for any individual or public,<sup>86</sup> it is nevertheless clear that “content” and “response” set in motion a dialectic between dead and living labour. This, as Marx shows us time and again, is the dialectic (underpinning the commodity form) that generates capital, value in motion, however far we might seem from a worker operating a machine or a carer bathing and clothing their child. If the living labour of followers is required to reanimate the dead labour of activist-influencers, then it follows from our hypothesis about labour’s positionality in liberal discourse that the labour of following must also be – *cannot but be* – elided. Followers are always just *behind* activist-influencers, grasping the content or “dead labour” they produce and enlivening it, often almost simultaneously. This is what gives the discourse of activist-influencers its sense of utterly current and thus flat temporality, even if there is always a *lag*, however infinitesimal, between content’s production and reception.

In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin (2008, p. 4) described how “the hand was for the first time relieved of the principal artistic responsibilities, which henceforth lay with the eye alone as it peered into the lens”. Benjamin’s insight about photography holds good for social media, where the hand’s act of scrolling, clicking or typing *just* follows visual perception. This lag, or what we could term an “aperture of reception”, is crucial if we are to insist on a congruence between classical Marxist categories of value and labour and the production and reception of online discourses. While the voluntary nature of interacting with online discourse appears to annul the possibility of conceiving of these interactions as *labour*, it is nevertheless the *presence* of the activist-influencer and their potential to

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<sup>86</sup> Certain individuals, such as other activist-influencers and prominent followers, can have an outsized role in shaping how an intimate public or indeed a broader public interacts with, understands and embodies different instances of micro-discourse. Some may become memes viewed by millions while some may effectively disappear whilst still being physically present.

inscribe and thus prescribe desired political and subject positions that propels the labour of the follower. Also, a mass voluntarism is surely not sufficient to explain the literal compulsion towards engagement that is a structural feature of social media platforms; this compulsion is often the result of an emotional and/or attention economy where (self) righteous rage and outrage in general dominate on both supply and demand sides. The possibility of activist-influencers genuinely caring for their followers is diminished by this structural feature of social media platforms, and Ford and Peterson specifically have more to gain by provoking affective extremes than by more subtle or indeed caring methods of explicating political events. The notion of an aperture of reception strengthens our contention that the labour involved in consuming, circulating and engaging with online liberal discourse is elided in undertaking such acts, precisely because it reveals these acts as forms of (decommodified) labour. In addition, the aperture of reception furnishes further evidence of how a hauntological heuristic might unveil occluded labour practices and processes: a gap, however quickly it is filled, remains at least momentarily indeterminate as regards its content.

Once the eye becomes the first instrument of labour and the hand follows, “the reader is constantly ready to become a writer” (Benjamin 2008, p. 23). Benjamin’s prescience regarding the above is clear when we consider social media in general and Instagram in particular: “denizens of developed nations now write more than ever before” due to an “explosion of writing through social media” (Kornbluth 2023, p. 97). Further, his claim that “it has always been among art’s most important functions to generate a demand for whose full satisfaction the time has not yet come” (Benjamin 2008, p. 30) can be negatively (and admittedly imprecisely) transposed to the mass affective identification with the activist-influencer and their political self-help discourse. The *desire* for the coming-to-be of an actualised self – via engaging with liberal discourse mediated by an avatar who embodies both the actualised self (with its correct politics) *and* the journey towards that self – also speaks to a demand for “full satisfaction”, although the inherently commodified character of social media, and for us the Instagram post specifically, continue capitalism’s contradictory creation of demands and desires that cannot be fully satisfied. That “[d]esire is...central to the algorithm” (Boler & Davis 2018, p. 83, italics in original) is both crucial and immaterial: social media is merely another arena wherein subjectification in the

shadow of the commodity form inevitably fails, precisely because the commodity form becomes the subject's *telos*.<sup>87</sup> Indeed, whether on the level of affect or the political, fulfilling the desire for self-actualisation is impossible. To return to Berlant (2011, p. 116, italics mine):

At the same time that one builds a life the pressures of its reproduction can be exhausting...the body and the life are not only projects, but also sites of episodic intermission from personality...Most of what we do, after all, involves not being purposive but *inhabiting agency differently in small vacations from the will itself*.

Inhabiting agency differently in small vacations from the will itself in the shadow of the exhaustion of life's reproduction—what could better describe the day-to-day affective compulsions and repulsions that identification with an activist-influencer and fellow members of their intimate public – and disidentification with politically oppositional activist-influencers and their public – provoke in any particular follower?

The inhabiting of agency via identification with activist-influencers who articulate intertwined political and personal desires and desirable subject positions on a mass scale represents an opportunity for immersion in an affective-political intimate public that can feel transformative and emancipatory. Multitudinous micro-labours combine with multiple instances of an activist-influencer's micro-discourse to produce a sense of sweeping and collective world-making activity. Yet the confounding of affect and the political is grounded in the elision of human labour via which liberal discourses proceed: the desire for the fullness of agential inhabitation is ultimately impossible to fulfill both subjectively and intersubjectively. There is no complete "fullness" for the individual subject except death.

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<sup>87</sup> This is not to imply that previous art forms or means of mass communication were capable of satisfying this demand, or that social media is unique in denying its satisfaction. Neither should we conflate "demand" – which connotes both the desire for existing commodities and an explicitly articulated political program – with "desire", which may encompass mass aspiration for the production and distribution of imagined commodities, the realisation of various political imaginaries and profoundly individual fantasies, both conscious and unconscious.

Even though we have confined our political radius to the radical centre, it is clear that there is no collective subject or intimate public that can arise that does not bear an impure trace of an oppositional political position, as Derrida would concur. Boler and Davis (2018, p. 79) describe how “the mediatized public sphere...is shaped by starkly divergent systems of liberal and conservative ‘feeling rules’ that are interrelated, and mutually produce one another”, and Papacharissi (2015, p. 98) echoes that “each self contains an ever increasing multiplicity of other selves or voices”. Papacharissi’s insight goes some way to explaining why activist-influencers like Ford and Peterson must remain resolutely flat characters. As subjectification under liberal conditions entails a paradoxical denial of our inherent human collectivity or species-being, the emancipatory promise of liberal discourses is haunted by liberalism’s flattening tendency. When labour is always-already conceptually underdeveloped, one-sided and non-dialectical, a subjectification that proceeds via recognising and identifying with “*the other* whose face is prior to our...being” (Matar 2022, p. 152, italics mine), let alone the “multiplicity of other selves” we all contain, is ruled out; recall Peterson’s demand to “stop listening” to our critical internal voice. The process of liberal subjectification is in contradiction with its discursive representations, hence the tendency towards elisions, haunting and idealism. This is to say, although we always come into being and continue to be alongside each other, constituted by our interdependence, liberal discourses continue to offer a fantasy – which doubtless responds to a desire that many feel – of becoming a totally fulfilled and independent individual. The material reality of our interdependence as social beings, the very idea of “we”, would be rendered meaningless by the full actualisation of *any* individual self except a divine one, who would of course not require a *process* of subjective actualisation. At our human level, “we”, of course, requires a ‘they’ in order to become an ‘us’, in order to become an ‘I’” (Laor 2017, p. 139).<sup>88</sup> Though Ford and Peterson’s discourse shows them

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<sup>88</sup> Even when the divine, or our relationship to that which might be “more than human” is explicitly under consideration, for example in Buber’s *I and Thou*, we still see an acknowledgment that “true community” comes into being because different people “have to stand in a living, reciprocal relationship to a single living centre, *and they have to stand in a living, reciprocal relationship to one another*” (Buber 1970, p. 94, italics mine). Liberalism’s tacit gestures towards divinity (as in Peterson’s discourse) via the abstraction of *actual* collective material relations is revealed by Buber to be profoundly idealistic. The living centre of liberal discourse can only be the human, all too human liberal subject.

undertaking hero's journeys and/or achieving and embodying an "heroic" positionality, implicit in the hero's journey is an individualism that rules out collective – and thus intersubjective – subjectification. As such, a rather more quotidian ontological position must be insisted on, especially in discourses of putative emancipation.

Beyond this liberal ontological position, the commodity-form itself and thus the commodification of care and labour comes into question. To venture there requires a change in the mode of discursive production – from terms, tropes, metaphors and images to a focus on the "army of followers" rather than their "hero" – that negates the inner logic of the projects of Ford, Peterson and others like them. To ask producers of liberal discourse to *not produce* liberal discourse is to demand the impossible, yet it is also to demand a radical reconsideration of the dialectical relations between practices and concepts of labour and care. It is not the medium – in our case Instagram – that makes the above an impossibility: the "aperture of reception" is also potentially an "aperture of freedom", a means of grasping a different set of social relations that make a different world. Social media can be used in accordance with the logic of the commodity; alternatively, we can begin to build networks of capacious care and solidarities amongst all who labour via "the radical opportunities afforded by developing (and alienating) forms of technological mediation...There are incessantly proliferating tools to be annexed" (Cuboniks 2018, p. 35). Activist-influencers of the radical centre *use* but do not *annex* these tools; yet their followers, as they flit from post to post across an affective terrain whose horizon is dimmed by liberal capitalism, retain the potential to burst the radical centre's boundaries and demand what they – what we – deserve: practices of labour that are meaningful, fairly shared and non-exploitative, and practices of care that truly nourish, replenish and connect us all. We have seen glimpses of how to live this way, even in discourses trapped within liberalism's temporal, natural and careless confines, although ultimately the consistent presence of six markers of labour's elision reveals a structural absence – the elision of rich concepts of labour and care – that deny our fundamental interdependencies. To turn towards each other to shape our subjectivities as interdependent caring and labouring beings is to turn away from liberal discourse.

## Conclusion

To conclude with a contradiction: the radical centre has been subject to expansions and contractions in the four years since September 2020, the end of the first pandemic half-year. A number of contradictions have been stressed throughout this thesis, among them that the apotheosis of liberalism's tendency to elide labour's richness and potentiality is reached at the very foundation of our relations to each other. Our capacity and need to give and receive care is at the heart of what is absent throughout the history of liberal discourse. The Covid-19 pandemic, which initially produced an upsurge of discourses of care, brought this harshly to light. Although a liberal consensus about appropriate behaviour did arise at its progressive pole during the Covid-19 pandemic, the world-wide rise of far-right movements tended to complicate and frustrate official responses that aligned with this consensus. Liberalism's reactionary pole consolidated itself further rightwards in response to restrictions on personal liberty that aimed to stop the spread of the virus, as many subjects who understood themselves as individuals first and foremost acted in favour of their individual freedom and against the well-being of the collective: in so doing they expanded the radical centre against what was perceived as its contraction in favour of the common good. As long as they could breathe freely, whether or not others could was a secondary consideration.

On the heels of the world's first lived-streamed pandemic came the world's first live-streamed genocide, undertaken by the apartheid state of Israel in response to the Palestinian resistances' uprising on October 7 2023. Peterson urging Benjamin Netanyahu to "Give 'em hell" (@jordanbpeterson 2023) on the day the resistance breached Gaza's prison wall has since become the stuff of internet infamy. However, he had previously displayed strong enthusiasm for the increasingly fascistic and messianic Zionist project, posting a picture of himself and *Daily Wire* owner Ben Shapiro shaking hands with Netanyahu over an opulent dinner in Israel (jordan.b.peterson 2022b) before conducting a fawning interview with Netanyahu that was posted to his Instagram on December 6 2022. Peterson's rightward trajectory has been both steady and increasingly hysterical since the release of *Beyond Order: Twelve More Rules For Life* in December 2020, and via this trajectory the ability of reactionary liberalism to function as a gateway to the far-right is clear.

Again, we can observe simultaneous expansions and contractions here: the centre as an *actual* “political centre” shrinks as it expands rightwards in conjunction with global political trends.

Clementine Ford’s recent political trajectory could be posited as exemplifying a different mode of the radical centre’s contraction: she has made Palestine, and particularly denouncing the genocide in Gaza, her *cause celebre* in recent times. While this seems to be a genuine and heartfelt political and personal position – “#Free Palestine” appeared in her Instagram biography long before October 7 – there is also no doubt that she has attained a degree of radical credibility due to her stance on this issue. Here we find a movement towards the left from a progressive-liberal positionality: although space prohibits an extended discussion, it does seem likely that the unprecedented visibility of Israel’s genocide has radicalised a significant number of progressive liberal subjects, further straining and constricting a centre that was already struggling to hold. In Ford’s case though, amongst many posts protesting and drawing attention to the genocide, we still find plenty of content related to self-improvement and the endorsement of self-care products that commodify feminism for a follower/customer base that her support for Palestine has certainly not diminished: as of June 27 2024, Ford had 247,000 Instagram followers, compared to 193,000 on December 15 2021.<sup>89</sup> On February 14 of this year, a day on which she typically encourages her followers to engage in “radical” self-care as a political act against patriarchal norms – “Your worth and value as a human being is not dictated by whether you have romantic attachment to someone else” (clementine\_ford 2021) – we find the following product endorsement:

Don’t let ‘em fool you this Valentine’s Day. Be the love of your own life by getting yourself a brand new bed all to yourself. Like the Zero Gravity mattress from @emmasleep.au, whose award-winning mattresses promise to be the best bed buddy you’ve ever had! Use my code CLEMENTINE5 to get an additional 10% off the website price for this Emma V Day sale (clementine\_ford 2024).

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<sup>89</sup> See footnote 26.

This sponsored content is flanked by posts devoted to anti-Zionist organising and a pro-Palestine protest. Of course, Ford's very flatness as a character means her discourse can function smoothly as gateway to a more radical internationalist politics whilst also maintaining a resolute focus on the absolute right of all women to self-actualise on their own terms against an omniscient "patriarchy" that has neither origin nor end. Similarly, Peterson's flatness means that his increasingly radical right-wing content nestles comfortably amongst posts that timelessly evince his distinctive brand of self-help. Any change in the political positionality of activist-influencers is thus less significant than it might appear, and corresponds to the radical centre's synchronous expansion and contraction. Following the late anthropologist David Graeber, we can agree that what he called the "extreme centre" (our radical centre)

...has been reduced...it's become this pure set of performative symbols and at the same time you get to feel morally superior...ultimately what liberal centrism is all about is you get to feel better than other people (2024).

Self-actualisation and political alignment with an activist-influencer and their discourse, including the undertaking of the hero's journey, produces precisely these feelings of moral superiority without necessarily entailing material political action: the structural elision of a rich concept of labour ensures that liberal discourses are what activist-influencers tend to produce and what their followers tend to seek. "Feeling better than other people" implies individualism – and subjectification as a process of individuation – as well as the confounding of affect and politics and the commodification of care we have identified as characteristic of liberal discourses.

As characters that are also commodities, the commodity form and its logic overdetermines Ford and Peterson's content; we can extrapolate and claim that it tends to overdetermine liberal discourse *in toto*, despite the fact that liberal hegemony is always contested and that numerous oppositional currents are always producing counter-discourses. However, we must conclude as we commenced: liberal discourses remain hegemonic throughout much of the world, however fragile and ineffective liberal governments, institutions and media currently appear. As this thesis has demonstrated, such discourses elide a rich concept of human labour via consistently deploying certain notions of time, nature and care: these notions, and



many other liberal conceptualisations that flow from them – “teleological progress”, “temporal uniformity”, “nature as unchanging and opposed to society”, “the hard demarcation of production and reproduction”, “care as family-centred, hierarchal and abstracted from its underpinning in labour”, “patriarchy and capitalism as ahistorical and unchanging structures” et.al. – contribute significantly to liberalism’s haunting by epistemologies, ontologies and temporalities that it cannot express.

Despite the examples above of more radical political content in response to an historically specific conjuncture, ultimately the discourses produced by Ford and Peterson remain somewhat abstracted from history as it unfolds. Whatever event they respond to, the iterations of micro-discourse they produce are always-already mediated by the flat characters “Clementine Ford” and “Jordan Peterson”: these micro-discursive moments function first and foremost to reinforce subjective and discursive commodification. The extent to which they can propel meaningful political and personal change is therefore limited. The more significant question of whether liberalism can maintain its hegemony as the institutions through which it functions and the discourses via which it interpellates subjects continue to strain under the accumulated weight of events it can neither adequately explain nor engineer an end to cannot be answered by liberal discourses themselves, despite the radical centre’s expansion and contraction in response to these events.

Although the data I have analysed and the discourses I have read throughout this thesis may indicate that certain political trends and modes of subjectification are currently ascendant – or affirm contemporary shifts in the dialectic between subjectification and politicisation – this is not a project whose evidence has been marshalled for the purposes of forecasting the future, except for the observation that capitalist “business as usual” cannot continue if we as a species are to have a future at all. On the contrary, the analysis of liberal discourses I have undertaken highlights the imprudence of making definitive claims about what might come to be: Moyn (2023, p. 87) reminds us that “Francis Fukuyama...baptize[d] the end of the Cold War as the end of history. The year 1989, when he did so, now looks celebratory and complacent”.

Derrida wrote *Spectres of Marx* in response to liberalism's triumphant proclamation of the end of history. As evidenced by the pandemic, and now a genocide that is similarly being experienced by billions of people as both perpetrators and victims post their actions and reactions on social media,<sup>90</sup> history is not just underway again but accelerating at an unprecedented velocity. Our present is defined by the intersection of economic, ecological and epidemiological crises, multiple devastating conflicts and the rise of ethnonationalism and the far-right. As such, I will risk the imprudence I have just cautioned against and reiterate – for the final time – that liberal discourses, especially via their structural elision of labour and their concomitant inability to theorise carework, are profoundly inadequate in the face of the crises that confront us as a species. Nor can they offer a political imaginary that might allow for the emergence of an emancipatory political subject, or even an individual process of emancipatory political subjectification, if a non-collective process of the latter is even possible. Against a political tradition whose discourse is emaciated, flat and frankly exhausted, it is high time for the myriad ghosts that haunt liberal discourses to become flesh—for new subjects to constitute new discourses that might yet offer our species a fighting chance of survival.

As I write this *Conclusion* in 2024, we find at the level of hegemonic discourses what Anna Kornbluth (2023, p. 96) describes as:

[T]he new dominance of first-person narration...elevation of the individual's lived experience...the filtering of social and historical dynamics through subjective lenses...the enterprise of confessionality; preoccupation with domesticity...the individual's heroic overcoming of circumstance; therapeutic narrativization of political, social and corporeal challenges; a centring of the historical present; solemn solicitation of readerly recognition.

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<sup>90</sup> South Africa's application to the International Court of Justice urging for provisional measures to be taken to prevent genocide described how "images of mutilated and burned corpses — alongside videos of armed attacks by Israeli soldiers — billed as 'exclusive content from the Gaza Strip', are reportedly circulated in Israel via a social media 'Telegram' channel called '72 Virgins - Uncensored'" (*Application Instituting Proceedings* 2024, p. 37). Both Covid-19 and the genocide have demonstrated the human subject's capacity – conterminous with the discursive cacophony that informs and re-forms their subjectivity – for the most refined practices of care, empathy and solidarity as well as for the most barbarous and sickening brutality.

Whether Ford, Peterson and other activist-influencers like them pioneered this style, whether the cultural logic of social media has swamped culture in its totality, or whether the fragmenting and ever-more inequitable economic base of contemporary capitalism makes a subjectivist, first-person and ahistorical discursive style more likely to arise as hegemonic is impossible to say with certainty. What *is* certain is that the characteristics Kornbluth identifies as typical of contemporary art and literature were discernible in Ford and Peterson's online discourse during the first pandemic half-year: a liberal individualism – coterminous with a flat concept of labour and a non-capacious concept of care – is at the root of all the tropes listed above. And yet: human beings continue to labour and care ourselves into being, despite and against these discursive tendencies. Even as liberalism's stale air thickens into the foul smog of barbarism, we retain the potential to remake our social relations by our collective labour and care.

## List of Markers

### **Time**

Marker One: Time as strictly linear, unidirectional and experienced in common

Marker Two: A teleological conception of time's motion (history)

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### **Nature**

Marker Three: Nature as an ahistorical given, something “just there”

Marker Four: Demarcation of the spheres of production and reproduction

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Care**

Marker Five: Labour abstracted from its underpinning in care

Marker Six: Objects of care as “flat” protagonists in narratives of domesticity

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## Appendix 1: Clementine Ford Instagram Content

F31 — Markers 1, 2, 5 & 6 present.



**clementine\_ford** • Following ...

**clementine\_ford** • Thank you to everyone who tuned in to #KeepingUpWithTheKorona tonight! And thank you especially to the fabulous @dr.dna.nay, who was so calm and concise with her advice that I definitely left feeling a lot better.

Remember:

- \*Be thorough in your cleaning and

MARCH 31, 2020

Add a comment... Post

<p><b>clementine_ford</b> • Follow ...</p> <p>hygiene, not paranoid              *It's better to be overly cautious than to risk passing on the virus              *Behave as if you already have it and act accordingly              *You don't need bleach to clean, simple detergent plus thorough cleaning will do              *Social and physical distancing is THE MOST IMPORTANT tool we have in this fight *Stay at home to save lives!</p>	<p><b>clementine_ford</b> • Follow ...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Watch the video in my stories for more tips and calm direction from Doc Renee.</li> <li>Tomorrow night: @later.ada to discuss Covid19 and the reality of increased domestic abuse during isolation. This will be a heavy hour but an important one.</li> <li>9pm, AEDT.</li> </ul>
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Ford, Clementine, *Thank you to everyone who tuned in to #KeepingUpWithTheKorona tonight!!*, viewed 27/9/22, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/B-a5khCJoJ0/>>.

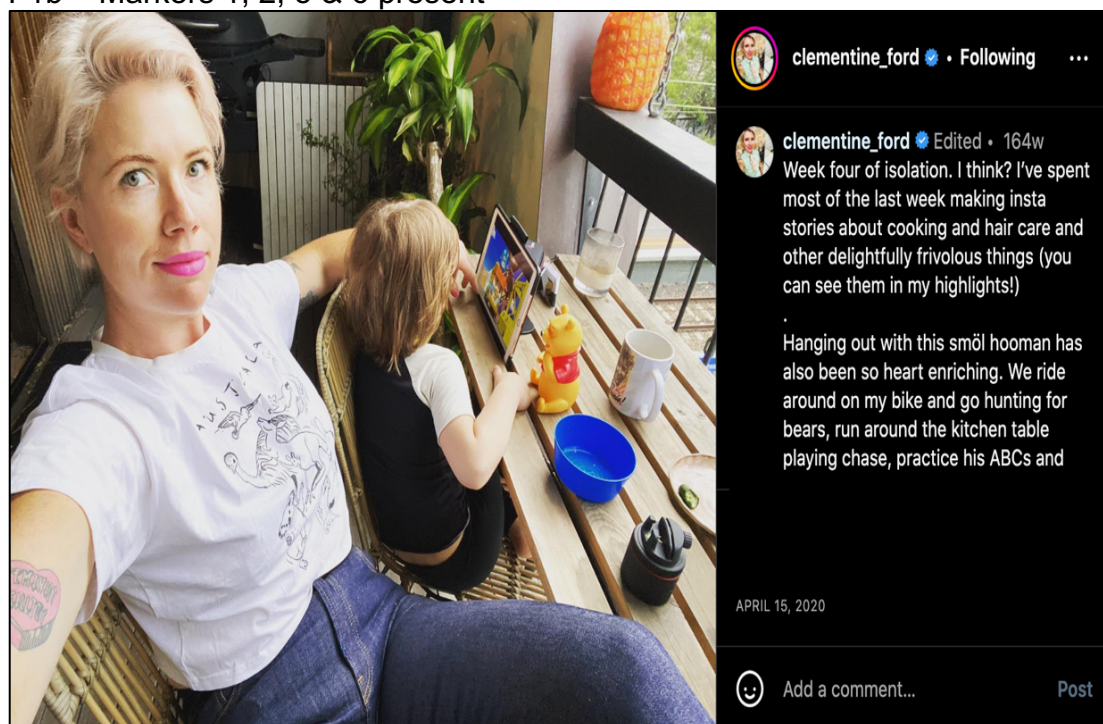
April

F1a – Markers 1, 2, 5 & 6 present

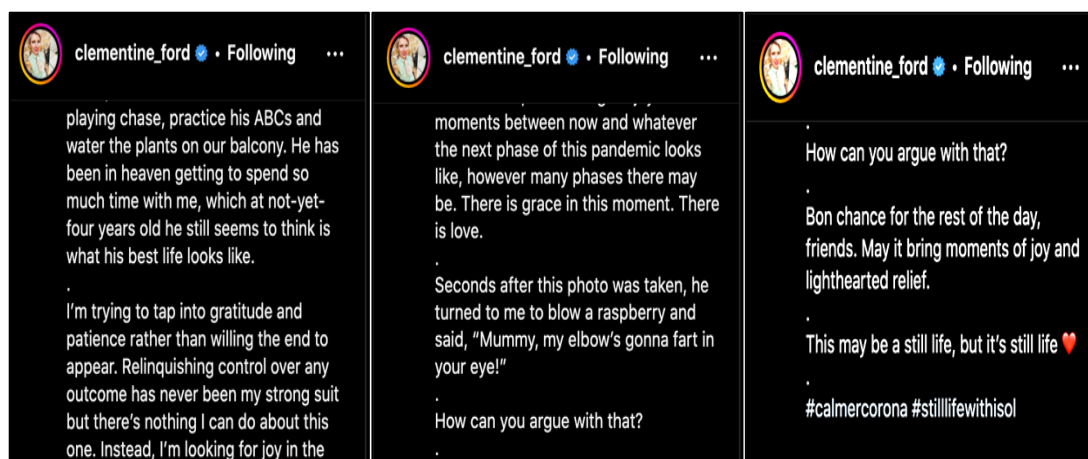


Ford, Clementine, April 1 2020, *It's been a long week*, viewed 19/10/2022, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/B-bChd-JB1c/>>.

F1b – Markers 1, 2, 5 & 6 present

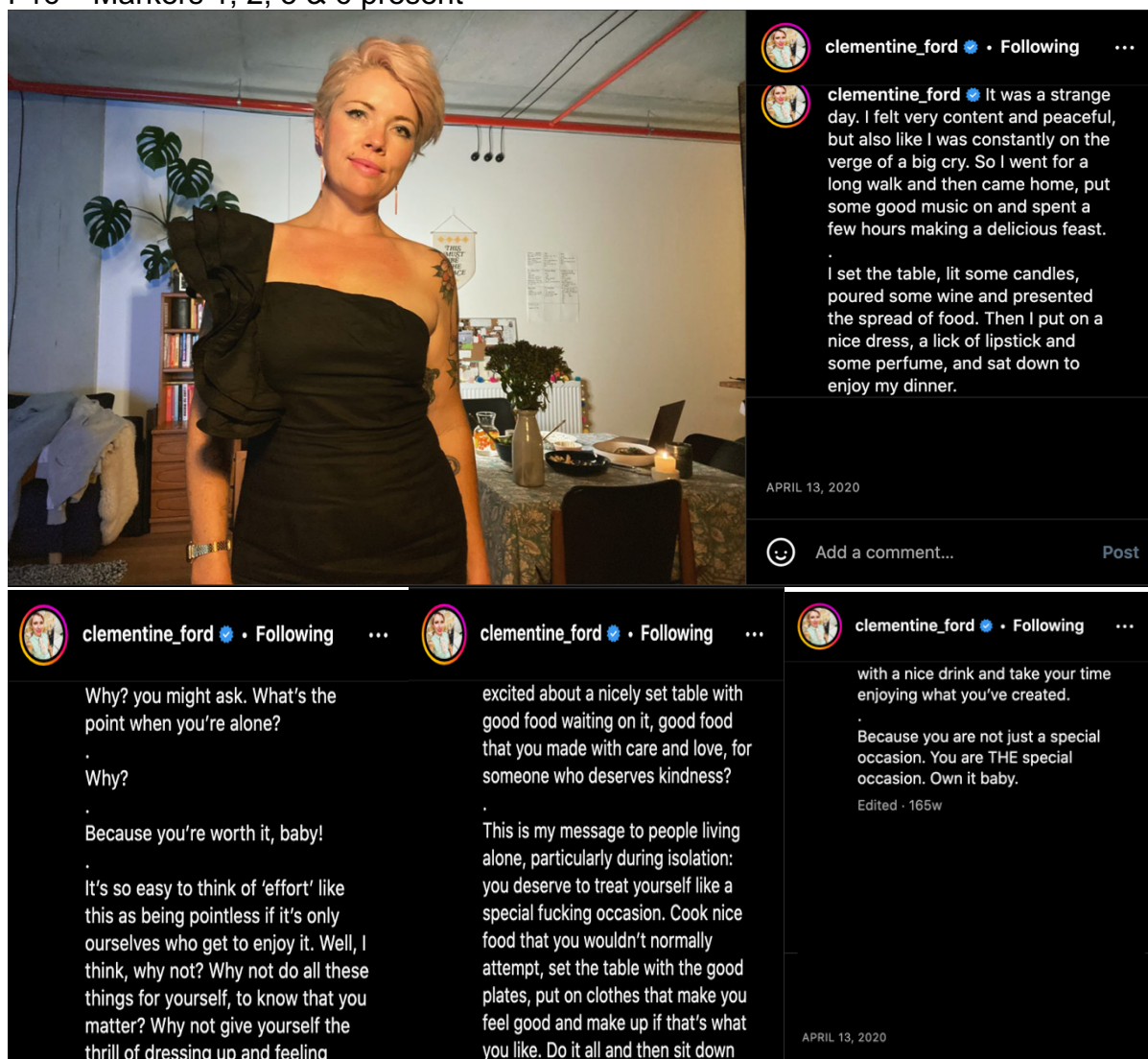







Ford, Clementine, April 15 2020, *Week four of isolation*, viewed 23/10/2022, <[https://www.instagram.com/p/B-\\_kb6RplJv/](https://www.instagram.com/p/B-_kb6RplJv/)>.

# F1c – Markers 1, 2, 5 & 6 present



Ford, Clementine, April 13 2020, *It was a strange day*, viewed 23/10/22, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/B-4oxKEJl4G/>>.


## F1d – Markers 2, 3 & 4 present



commented:

@clementine\_ford I don't dispute the existence of oppressive men in relationships. It's the idea that most are - and you seem to freely vacillate between most and all. Anecdotal evidence is important and confirms the existence of such relationships and I'm not minimizing that. But I've seen no "statistical data" as you call it, to justify a claim that most, if not all as you're wont to suggest, heterosexual relationships are oppressive. Of course there are way, way too many, but if there's to be a meaningful discussion about this, resorting to hyperbole and exaggeration as you so regularly do helps no one 4m

Reply



clementine\_ford • Following


clementine\_ford This not-all-men guy has been going off in the comments on my video about domestic labour in partnerships. Apparently he and all his male friends are 100% equal contributors to the household and it's unfair and unreasonable for me to posit that most men are not - despite the fact I have statistics, history and the testimony of women on my side.

Where is his cookie? He's a GOOD GUY! And, my favourite bit, he's seen NO STATISTICAL DATA to back up my argument!

Listen Ron, your inability to properly research topics that you clearly feel have no relevance to you really isn't my problem. But for anyone else who


APRIL 26, 2020

Add a comment... Post




clementine\_ford • Following

- \*might\* be interested in actually learning rather than just holding their hand out for their @awardsforgoodboys, you can check out:
- \* The HILDA longitudinal study detailing domestic labour in Australian homes
- 's book, Fed Up
- \* Susan Maushart's book Wifework
- \* Annabel Crabb's Quarterley Essay, Men At Work
- \* Crabb's book, The Wife Drought
- \* Marilyn Waring's work in exploring the absence of women's domestic labour from the GDP



clementine\_ford • Following

- \* Anne Manne's work documenting domestic labour
- \* ALL THE ARTICLES COMING OUT DURING COVID THAT SHOW WOMEN ARE BEING CHARGED WITH THE LION'S SHARE OF DOMESTIC LABOUR AT THE EXPENSE OF THEIR OWN WORK, INCLUDING THE MOST RECENT NEWS THAT WOMEN IN ACADEMIA ARE SUBMITTING SIGNIFICANTLY FEWER PAPERS THAN THEIR MALE COUNTERPARTS, WHOSE OUTPUT HAS GONE UP
- \* The aforementioned @awardsforgoodboys
- \* History




clementine\_ford • Following

- \* History

I realise it's \*very difficult\* for self appointed Good Boys like you Ron to actually accept that a woman like me might know \*what the fuck she is talking about\* and that I might actually have researched and written about this \*at length\*, but you are not the brilliant exemplar of virtue you think you are. You are almost worse than outwardly hostile men, because the allyship you pride yourself on embodying is offered conditionally. The moment YOU are included in the problem is the moment you demand to be acknowledged as somehow different.

You ain't it, dude.



clementine\_ford • Following

Beware the men who force you to give them a Hall Pass. Their actions reflect exactly what kind of person they are.

Do your own homework Ron.

Edited · 163w

Ford, Clementine, April 26 2020, *This not-all-men guy*, viewed 25/10/22, <[https://www.instagram.com/p/B\\_bsSTxpveh/](https://www.instagram.com/p/B_bsSTxpveh/)>.



May

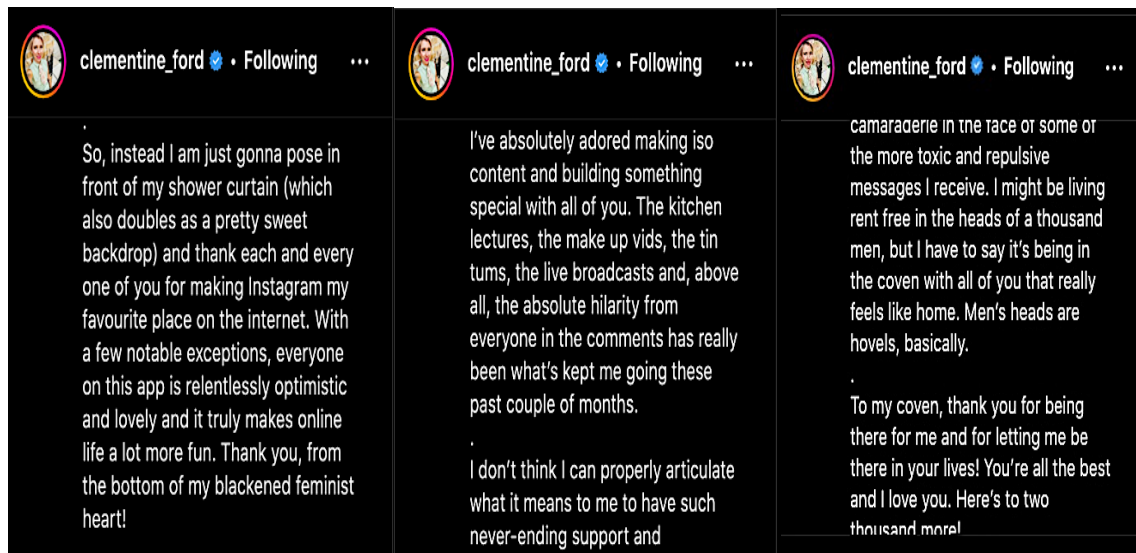
F2a – Markers 1, 2 & 6 present



Ford, Clementine, May 15 2020, *Time means nothing anymore*, viewed 4/11/22, < <https://www.instagram.com/p/CANNIEJgRjB/> >.

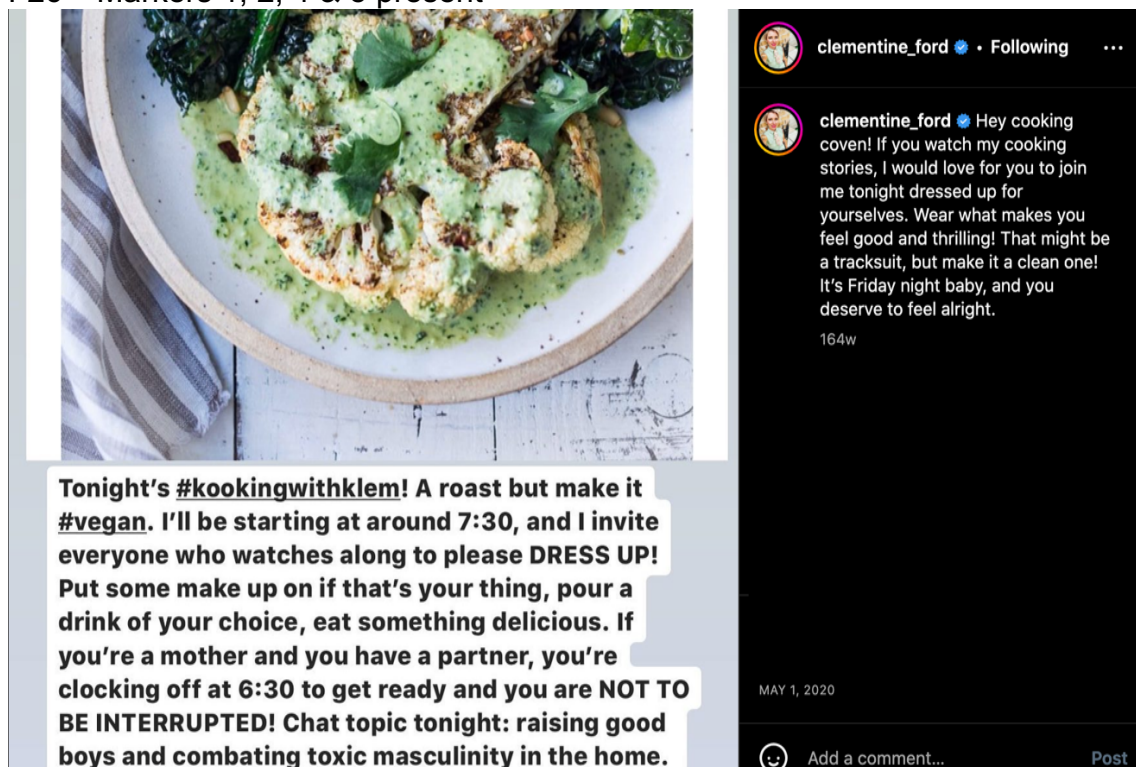
F2b – Markers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6 present





Ford, Clementine, May 18 2020, *As a lovely member of the coven informed me*, viewed 4/11/22  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CANNIEJgRjB/>.


## F2c – Markers 1, 2, 4 & 5 present




Ford, Clementine, May 1 2020, *Hey cooking coven!*, viewed 29/10/22,  
[https://www.instagram.com/p/B\\_ozdyLp1SJ/](https://www.instagram.com/p/B_ozdyLp1SJ/).



## F2d – Markers 1, 2, 3 & 6 present






clementine\_ford

• Following

...



clementine\_ford

When my mother was still alive, she told me a story about a couple who had died in a light plane crash while on holiday. In the woman's suitcase, they found a brand new silk negligee, still wrapped delicately and carefully and waiting to be worn for the first time.


.

For the special occasion.

.


When I was getting dressed this morning, my son pointed to my

MAY 7, 2020



Add a comment...

Post



clementine\_ford

• Following

...

morning, my son pointed to my denim jacket and said, "that jacket is SO BORING mum."

.

"Really?" I replied. "I think you're right. What about this one?"


.

"Can I touch it?" he said when I pulled this one out of the closet, mesmerised by the way it sparkled in the light.

.


"Of course," I told him.

MAY 7, 2020



Add a comment...

Post



clementine\_ford

• Following

...


I bought this thinking I would save it for "special occasions", because where else would you wear a bespoke tinsel jacket? I mean, it's not an everyday item!

.

But...why not? Why are the things that sparkle and shimmer and make us feel momentarily magical NOT everyday items? Why is an ordinary Thursday in May not allowed to feel like a special occasion?


.

MAY 7, 2020



Add a comment...

Post



clementine\_ford

• Following

...

In a month, I'm going to be 39. Despite the terror of aging and turning "THE BIG 4-0" that gets instilled in us (and in women in particular), I am without a doubt living my absolute best life right now. I have a joy that eluded me in my teens and twenties and the first half of my thirties. I know myself in a way I never have and I am friends with myself in a way I've never been before.

.

clementine\_ford

• Following

...

Don't let the colour hang in the back of your wardrobe, don't let the fear of feeling ridiculous or "a little too" stop you from indulging joy.

.

Life is short and it's over before we know it. Be ridiculous. Be ostentatious. Be absurd. Be brazen.

.

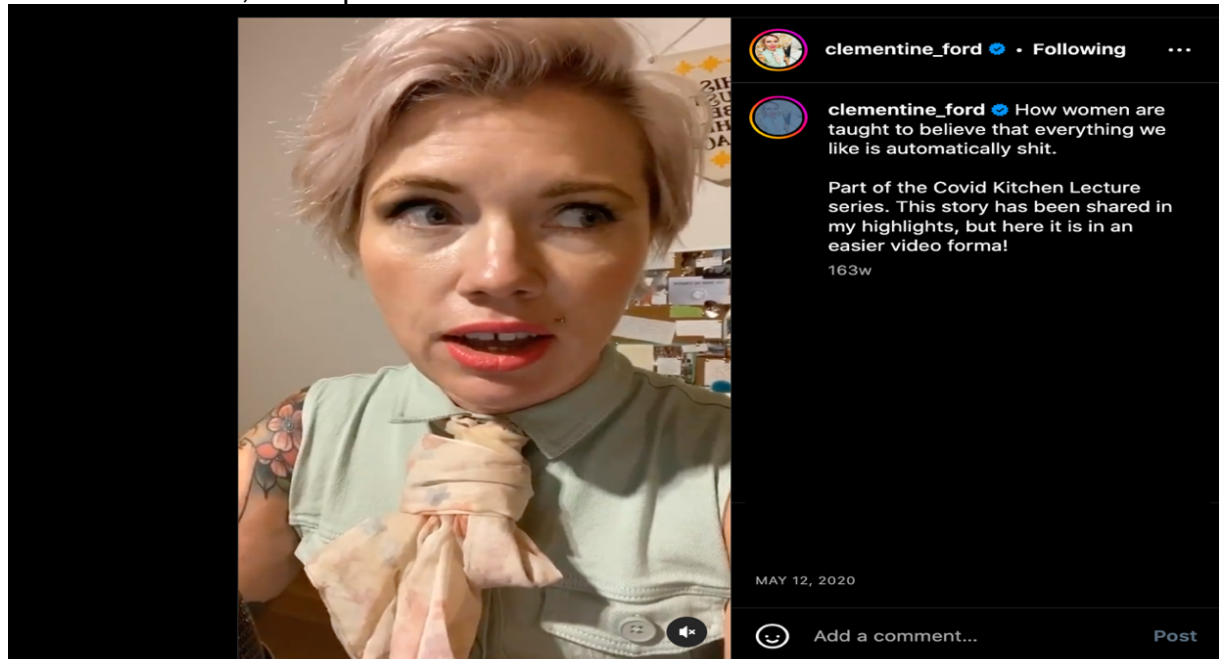
Don't keep joy tucked away, wrapped up delicately and waiting for the right moment to wear it. The right moment is now. The right moment is always now.

Ford, Clementine, May 7 2020, *When my mother was still alive*, viewed 3/11/22, <[https://www.instagram.com/p/B\\_4t8YtgRPd/](https://www.instagram.com/p/B_4t8YtgRPd/)>

258

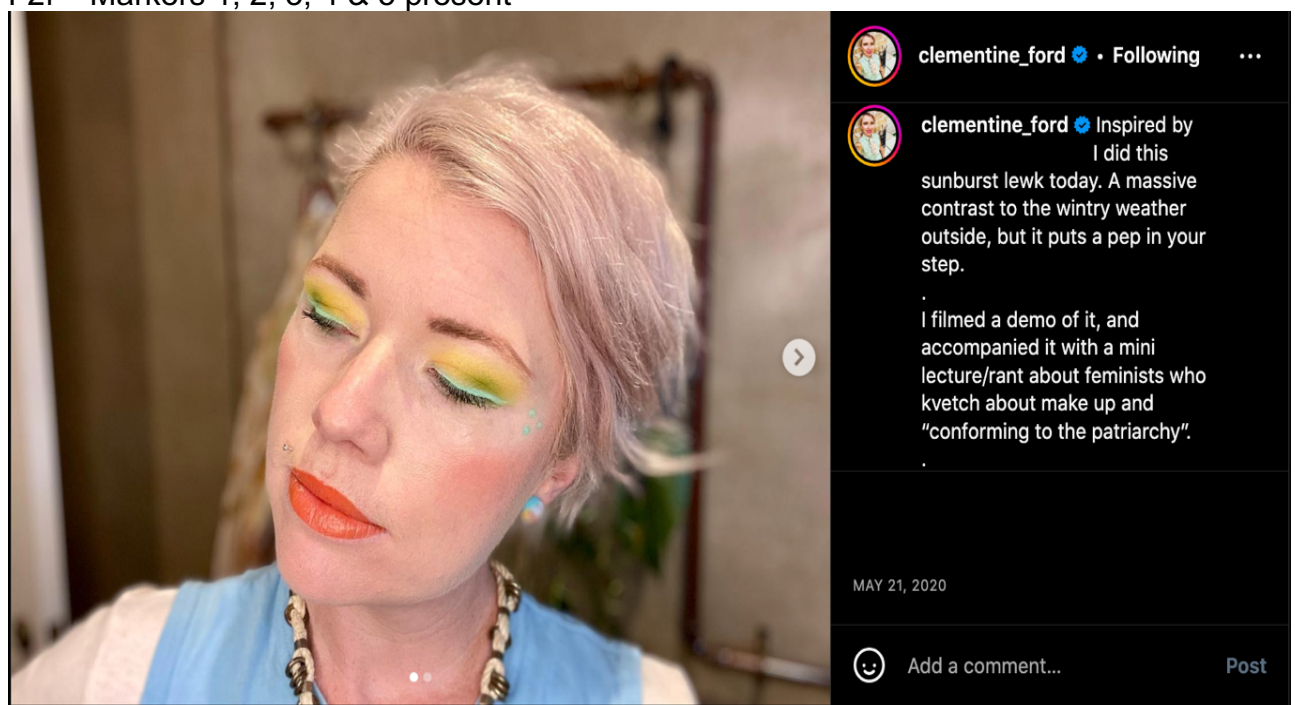


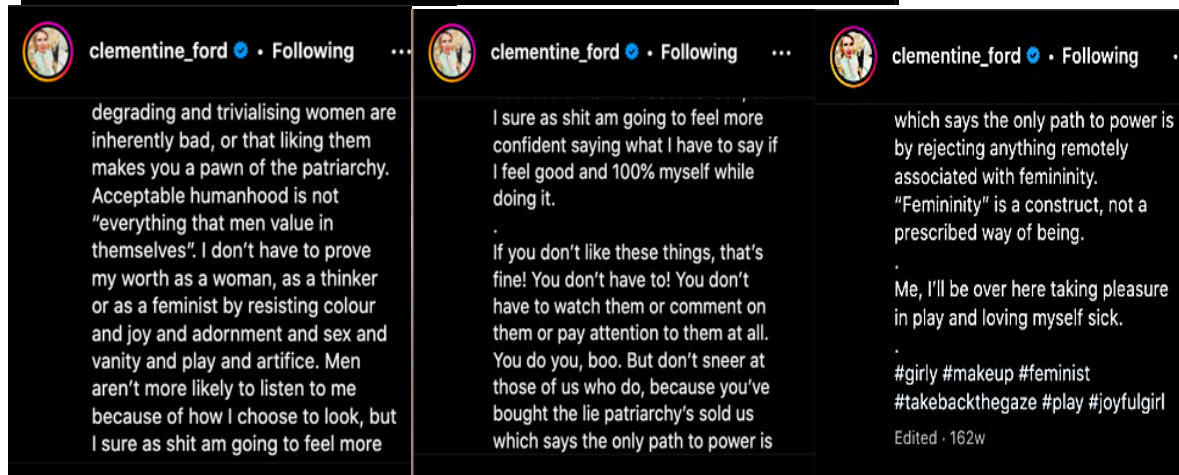
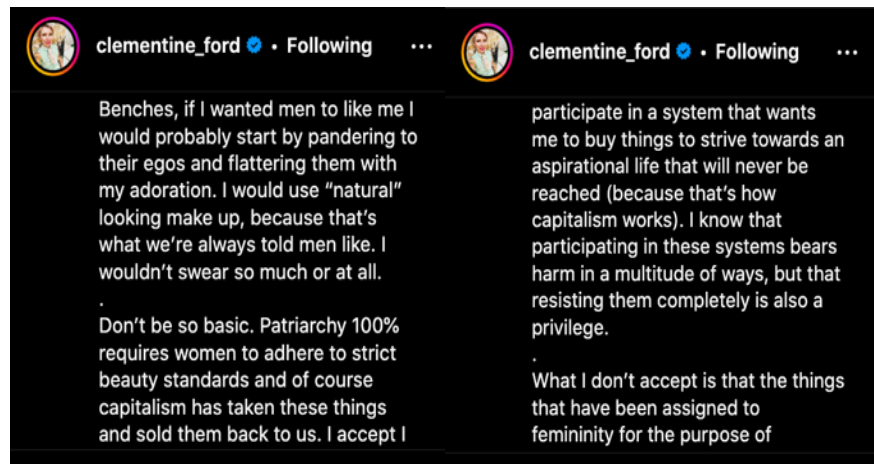
F2e – Markers 1, 2 & 3 present



Ford, Clementine, May 12 2020, *How women are taught to believe*, viewed 3/11/22, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CAE8xJTgIH0/>>.

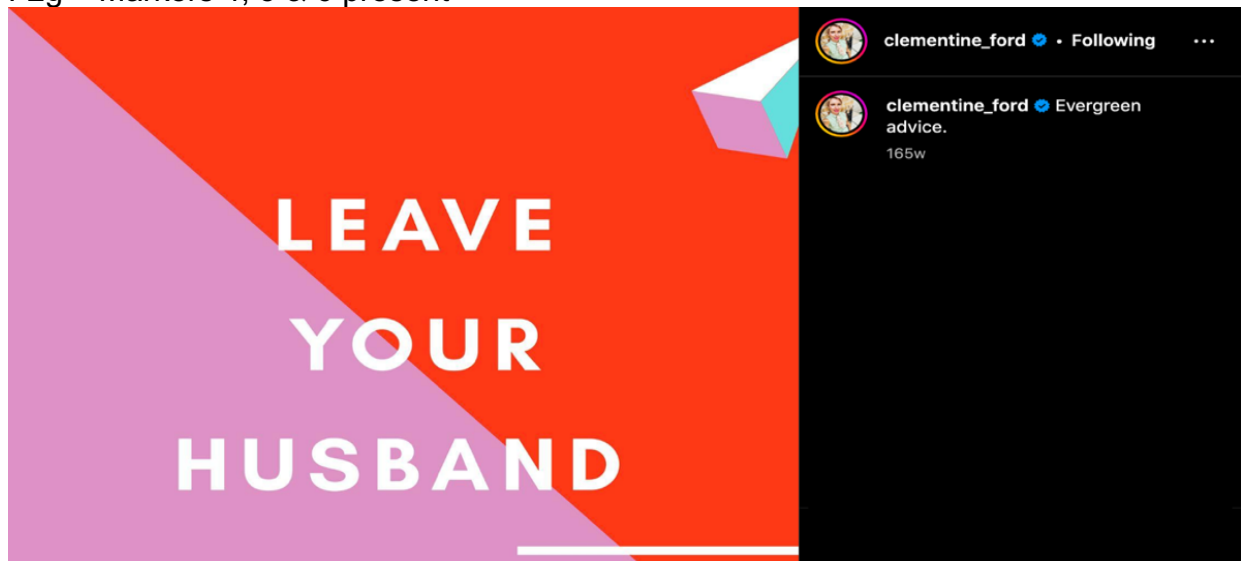
F2f – Markers 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5 present





Ford, Clementine, May 21 2020, *Inspired by...*, viewed 4/11/22, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAbxtURgEpe/>.

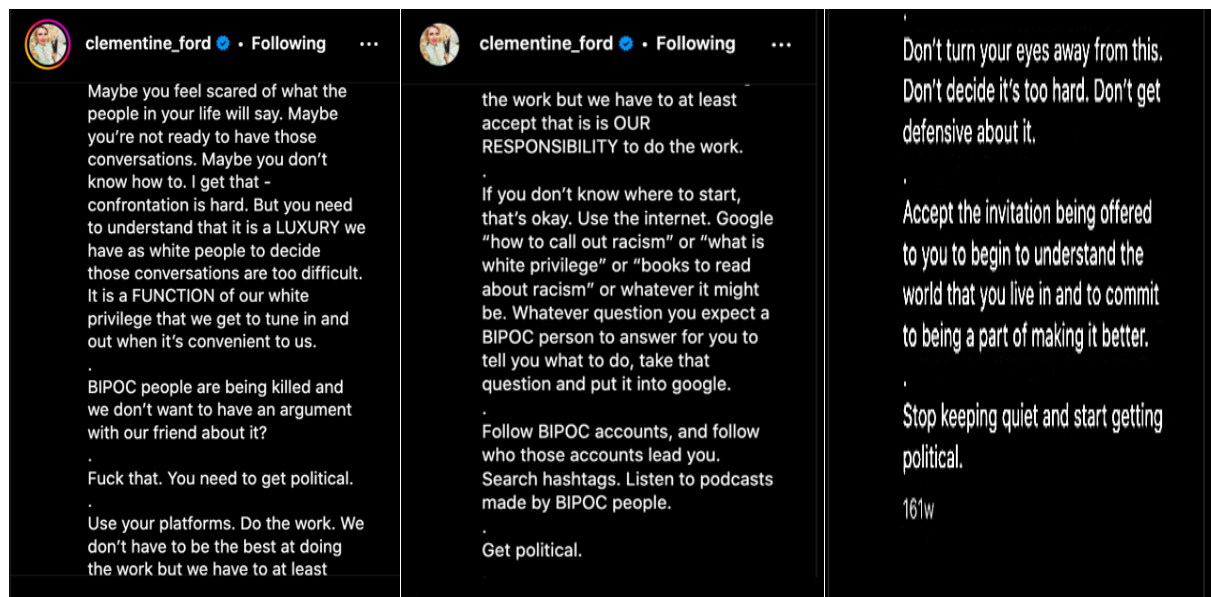
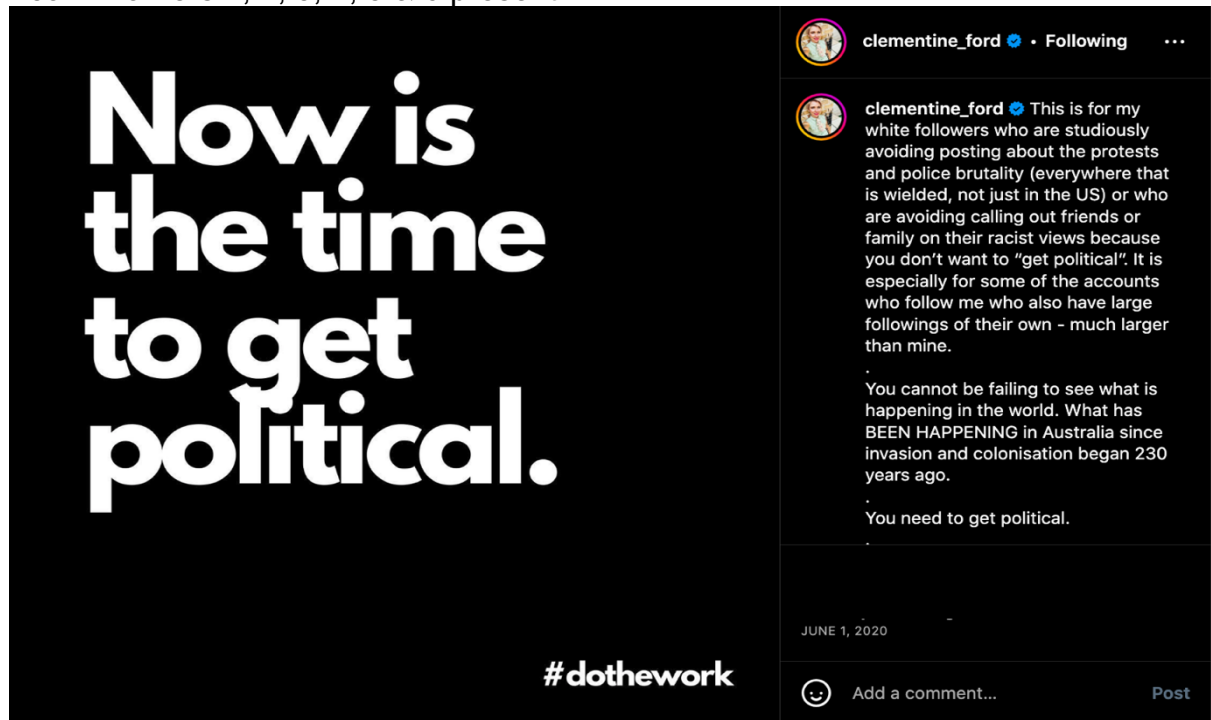
## F2g – Markers 4, 5 & 6 present



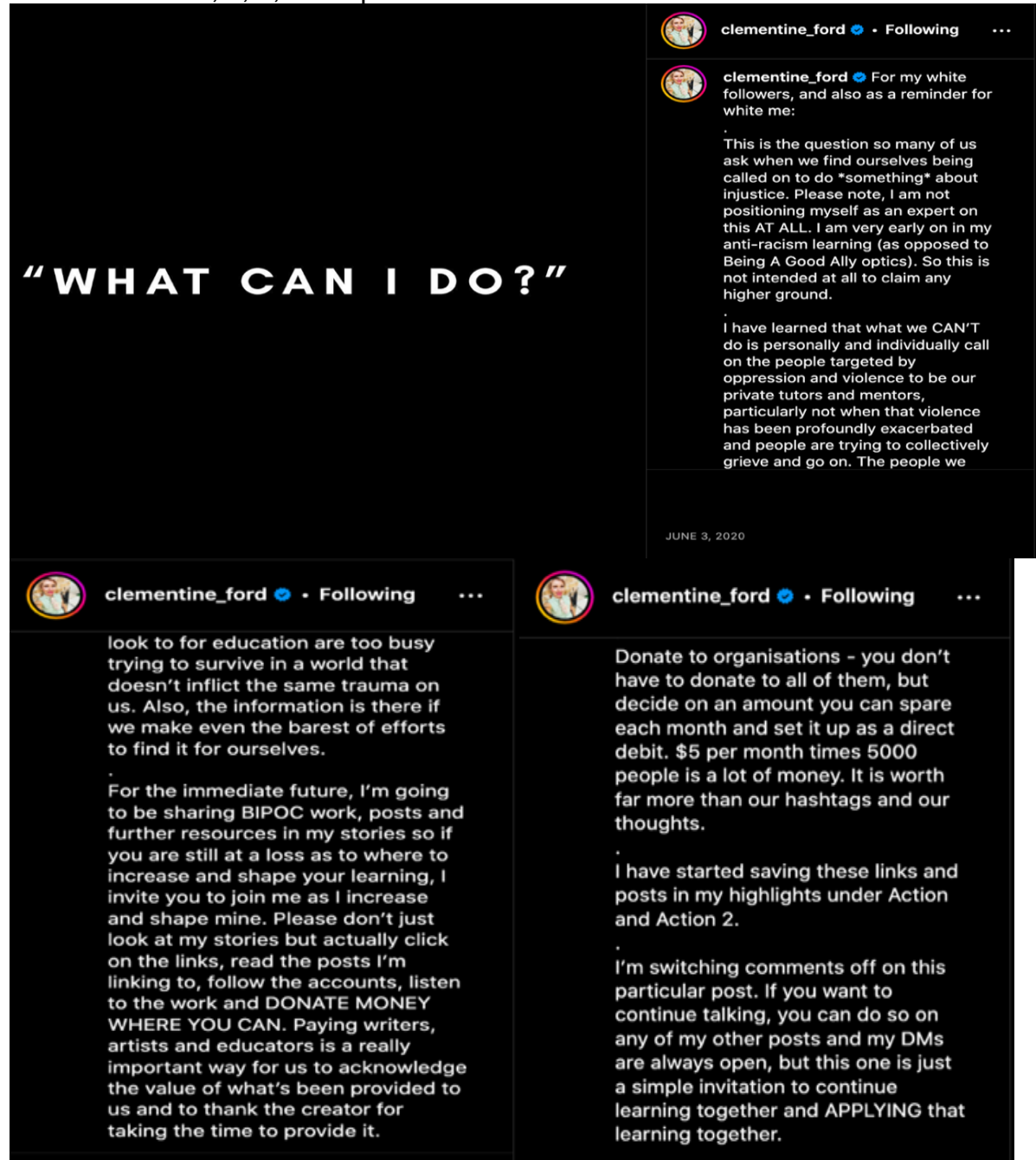
Ford, Clementine, May 2 2020, *Evergreen Advice*, viewed 29/10/22, [https://www.instagram.com/p/B\\_phKXdJnnj/](https://www.instagram.com/p/B_phKXdJnnj/).

June

F3a – Markers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6 present



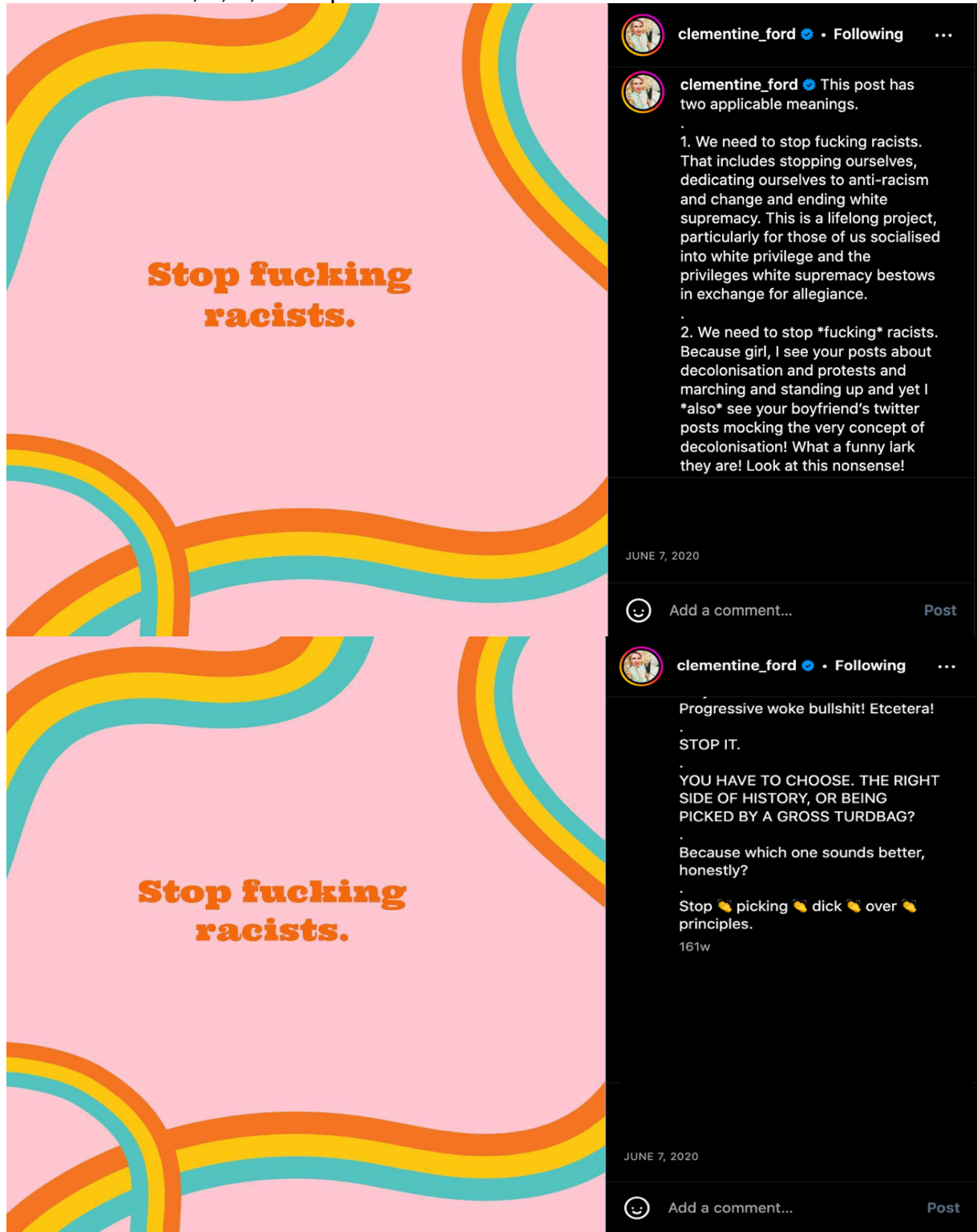
Ford, Clementine, June 1 2020, *This is for my white followers*, viewed 7/11/22, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CA4auNtJ1It/>>.



Ford, Clementine, June 3 2020, *For my white followers*, viewed 5/12/22,  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CA9owFqplEt/>.



F3c – Markers 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5 present



Ford, Clementine, June 7 2020, *This post has two applicable meanings*, viewed 5/12/22, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CBItlabJyv8/>>.

# F3d – Markers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6



SEASON 2, EPISODE 1

## Turning the Lens (Seeing White, Part 1)



Play

17 min.

Events of the past few years have turned a challenging spotlight on White people, and Whiteness, in the United States. An introduction to our series exploring what it means to be White. By John Biewen, with special guest Chenjerai Kumanyika.




clementine\_ford • Following

I've spent the last week or so listening to this podcast from Scene On Radio. It was really pretty mind blowing.

Over 14 episodes, the host explores the history of whiteness and how it was constructed, not to mention his own relationship to whiteness. He is joined by numerous black scholars and anti-racism activists throughout the series, including Dr. Chenjerai Kumanyika (with whom he shares frequent dialogues about

JUNE 17, 2020

Add a comment...




clementine\_ford • Following

whiteness.)

There's a lot in here to take in (and I need to listen to the whole thing again I think) but it provided me with a much deeper awareness of just how deep and systemic the machinations of racism are. It's explored mainly through a North American lens, but a lot of it is applicable to Australia as well.


I am aware movements have sparks and moments and there is a history



clementine\_ford • Following

of white people like me in allowing our commitment to anti-racism to disappear with the news cycle. I am a work in progress, but I wanted to state again here that I am committing to being part of this change. To amplifying BIPOC voices, deferring to their leadership, listening, learning and ACTING.


You'll still see posts here about make up and feminism and clothes and even fucking flowers if I feel like it and realistically I will also have some



clementine\_ford • Following

sponsored posts from time to time (because I have to pay bills too!) but I'm going to keep using my insta stories and posts to share BIPOC work and BIPOC led anti-racism education (check the Action folder in my highlights). I commit to maintaining vigilance in pursuing anti-racism in myself, knowing that the success or otherwise of this isn't something I get to decide.

I'm aware that reading books and listening to podcasts etc etc is



clementine\_ford • Following

I'm aware that reading books and listening to podcasts etc etc is nowhere near enough or the 'answer', but simply part of what needs to be a lifelong commitment to this work.


I'm here, I'm ready, I'm signing on.

(Podcast: Seeing White)

Edited · 160w

Ford, Clementine, June 17 2020, *I've spent the past week or so*, viewed 5/12/2022  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CBhX0Mqp0RI/>.

### F3e – Markers 2, 3, 4 & 5 present



**clementine\_ford** • Following ...

**clementine\_ford** • CN: birth trauma, pelvic floor

This is a multi part post

This photo was taken just over 3 years ago. I was getting ready to go to the 2017 ABIs. That same night, i won the Matt Richell Award for Best New Writer of the Year. Work wise, it was one of the most amazing nights of my life.

Underneath that sparkly dress, on that sparkly night, I was wearing an incontinence pad. Because I was still recovering from giving birth eight months earlier.

Did you know it's World Continence Week? So let's talk pelvic floor

**clementine\_ford** • Following ...

health, particularly in post partum bodies!

So, in 2016 I had a pretty stressful vaginal birth delivery. I've written about that before so won't go into details here, but the end result meant that in addition to a bonnie baby I also had a weak and battered pelvic floor. I was shocked at the difference in control I had over my body pre and post baby and it really dampened (ha!) my spirits and confidence for a long time.

I was also shocked by the "oh well" approach I found in postnatal aftercare. When I mentioned my pelvic floor concerns to the MCHN at my five week postnatal appt, she handed me a leaflet that said "1 In 3 women wet themselves after birth."

**clementine\_ford** • Following ...

That was it. No checks, nothing. At no point was I examined by any healthcare provider for prolapse (which 1 in 3 of us risk experiencing post menopause, with the risk increasing if we've had vaginal deliveries), nor was I given any info about pelvic floor therapy or physio.

I spent the next year after giving birth googling different treatments and coming up with...well, not much. I worried that this would be a feature of my life forever, an embarrassing fact that no one wanted to talk about because it's not "nice" conversation.

Did you know it takes women an average of SEVEN YEARS to seek treatment for postnatal incontinence, because of a mix of

**clementine\_ford** • Following ...

shame and the belief no one else is going through this?!

To be clear, my experience of it was pretty mild. Run of the mill, people might say.

"Normal".

It's not normal. It's common. There's a big difference.

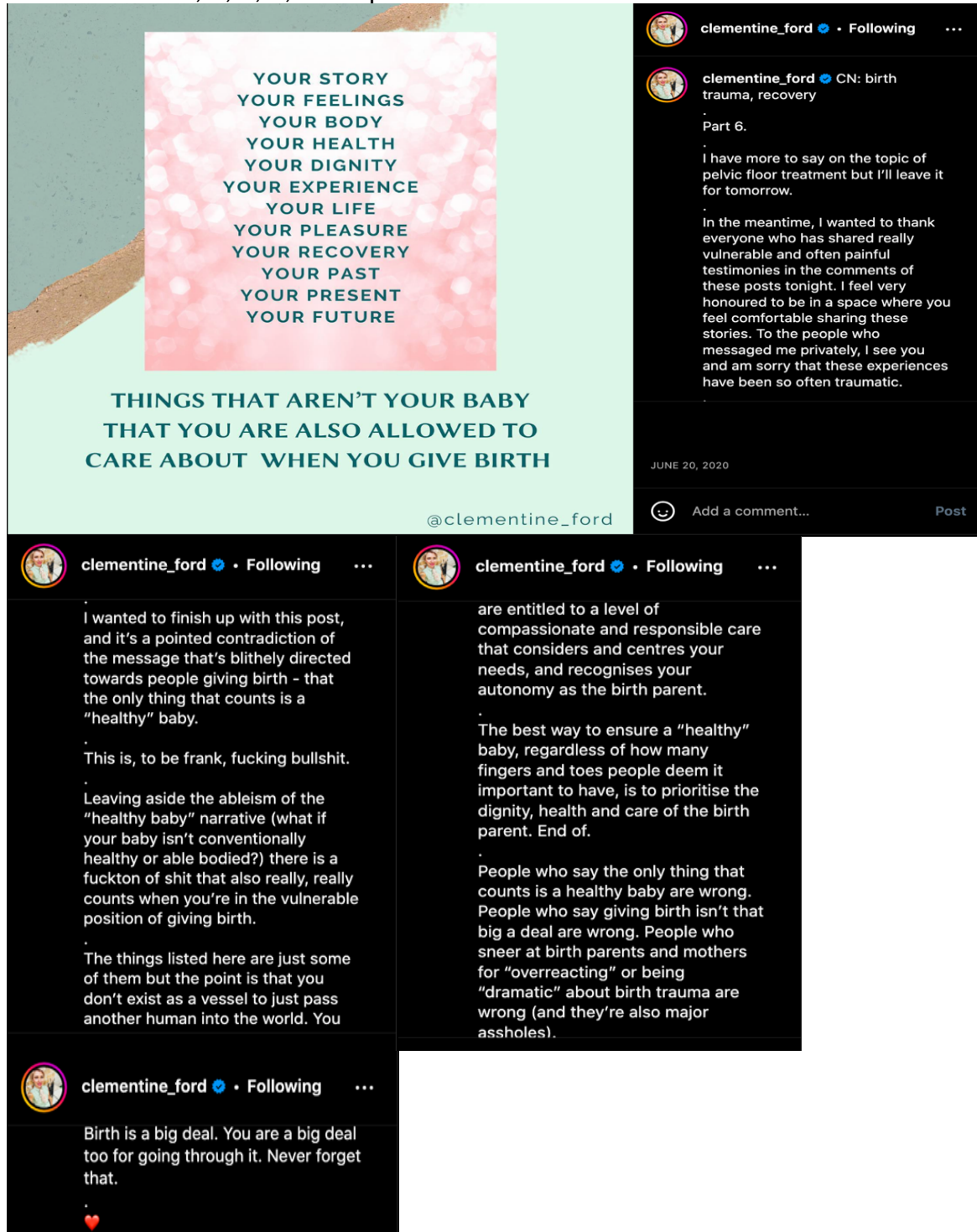
And it's treatable, if the government would just consider it important.

CONT IN NEXT POST.

160w

Ford, Clementine, June 19 2020, CN: *birth trauma, pelvic floor*, viewed 21/2/2022, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CBmnuvxBJsj/>>.


F3f – Markers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6 present



Ford, Clementine, June 20 2020, CN: *birth trauma, recovery*, viewed 21/12/22, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CBnxaHepT2M/>>.



### F3g – Markers 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5 present



**clementine\_ford** • Following

**clementine\_ford** • CN: birth trauma, pelvic floor, discussion of #Emsella.

\*This is not a sponsored post, but it does involve a treatment that was provided to me because I'm writing about this topic for my book. I wouldn't endorse something I didn't believe in or that hadn't worked for me.\*

Over the weekend, I opened up a little bit about some of the physical impacts of childbirth and the stigma and shame that keeps us silent about them. These can include, but are not limited to: significantly weakened pelvic floors, stress and/or urge incontinence, pelvic organ prolapse, nerve damage, pain

JUNE 23, 2020

Add a comment... Post

**clementine\_ford** • Following

during penetrative sex and mild to significant impact on sexual pleasure.

For the last four years, I've been looking for an effective treatment for my weakened pelvic floor. I tried physio (helpful, but difficult to sustain due to cost and time.) I took up Pilates, which was great for my mental health and core stability and probably helpful for my pelvic floor, but still not the "cure" I had been hoping for.

I didn't want to resign myself to the "oh well" school of thought that accompanies so much of the narrative around birth and birth injuries. I do not accept that this is just the consequence of giving birth, or that I - or \*anyone\* who has

JUNE 23, 2020

Add a comment... Post

**clementine\_ford** • Following

suffered birth injury on \*any\* scale - should just have to live with it.

And then I read about the Emsella chair, a non invasive electromagnetic pulse therapy that contracts your PF 11,000 times in 28 minutes. The concept isn't dissimilar to treatment provided free of charge to all French birth parents.

This photo was taken last Friday, after I'd finished my sixth and final session. And all I'll say is this: this treatment \*needs to be provided in the public healthcare system, to every suitable candidate\*.

I really noticed results after the third session and by the end of the sixth it felt completely different. My Kegels

JUNE 23, 2020

Add a comment... Post

**clementine\_ford** • Following

felt completely different. My Kegels feel significantly stronger, my orgasms are a lot more intense and since session 3 I've been ending the day with totally dry underwear (sorry for TMI!!)

Thank you so, so much to @thedermlab for providing this treatment to me to write about. It has truly been life changing for me.

More in the comments!

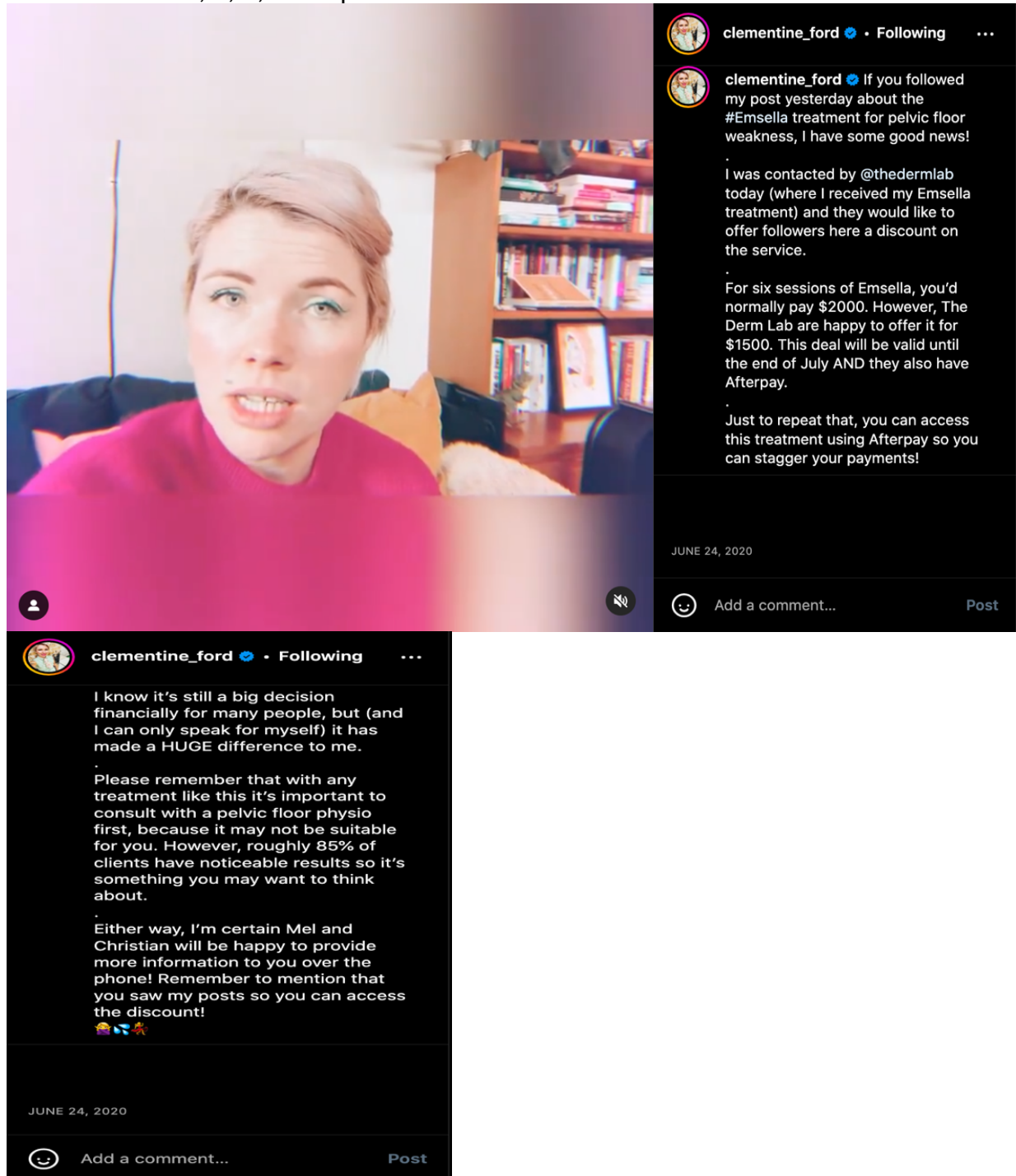
159w

JUNE 23, 2020

Add a comment... Post

Ford, Clementine, June 23 2020, CN: birth trauma, pelvic floor, discussion of #Emsella, viewed 21/12/2022, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CBxlm8OpuVO/>>.

F3h – Markers 1, 2, 4, 5 & 6 present



The image shows a screenshot of an Instagram post by user clementine\_ford. The post features a video of a woman with blonde hair tied back, wearing a pink top, speaking to the camera. The background shows a bookshelf filled with books. The post's caption is written in white text on a black background. The post is dated June 24, 2020, and has a comment input field at the bottom.

**clementine\_ford** • Following ...

**clementine\_ford** If you followed my post yesterday about the #Emsella treatment for pelvic floor weakness, I have some good news!

I was contacted by @thedermlab today (where I received my Emsella treatment) and they would like to offer followers here a discount on the service.

For six sessions of Emsella, you'd normally pay \$2000. However, The Derm Lab are happy to offer it for \$1500. This deal will be valid until the end of July AND they also have Afterpay.

Just to repeat that, you can access this treatment using Afterpay so you can stagger your payments!

JUNE 24, 2020

Add a comment... Post

**clementine\_ford** • Following ...

I know it's still a big decision financially for many people, but (and I can only speak for myself) it has made a HUGE difference to me.

Please remember that with any treatment like this it's important to consult with a pelvic floor physio first, because it may not be suitable for you. However, roughly 85% of clients have noticeable results so it's something you may want to think about.

Either way, I'm certain Mel and Christian will be happy to provide more information to you over the phone! Remember to mention that you saw my posts so you can access the discount! 🎁👉👈

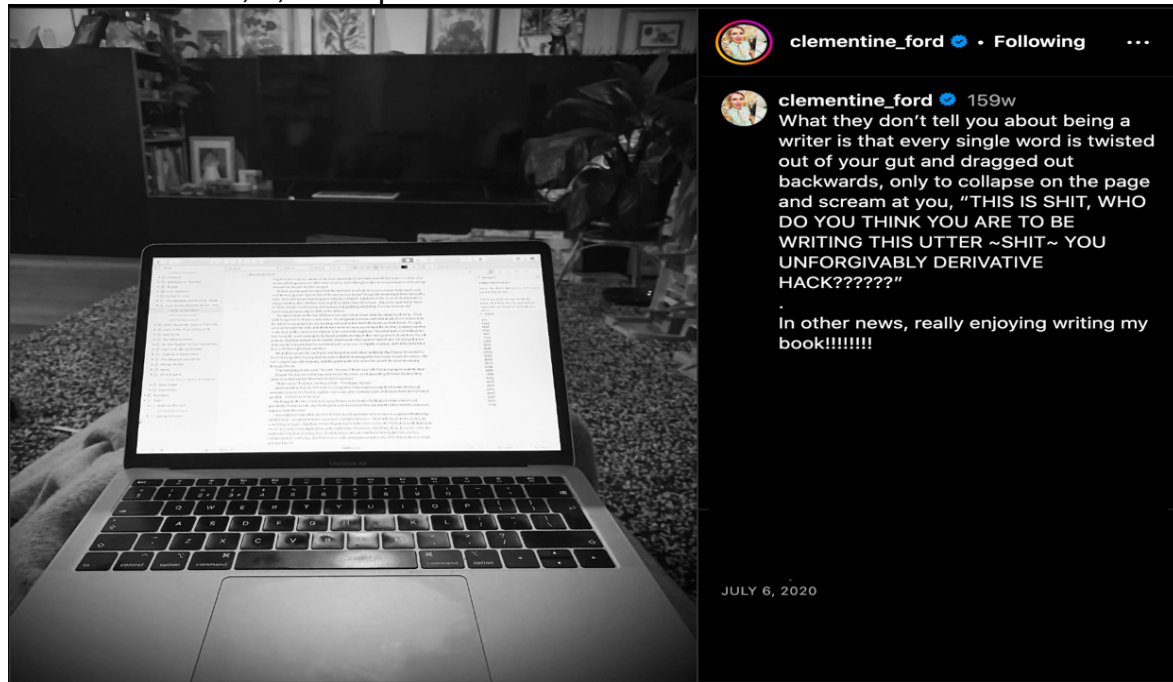
JUNE 24, 2020

Add a comment... Post

Ford, Clementine, June 24 2020, *If you followed by post yesterday about the #Emsella*, viewed 21/12/2022, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CBzlgzjpYK5/>>.

July

F4a – Markers 1, 3, 4 & 5 present

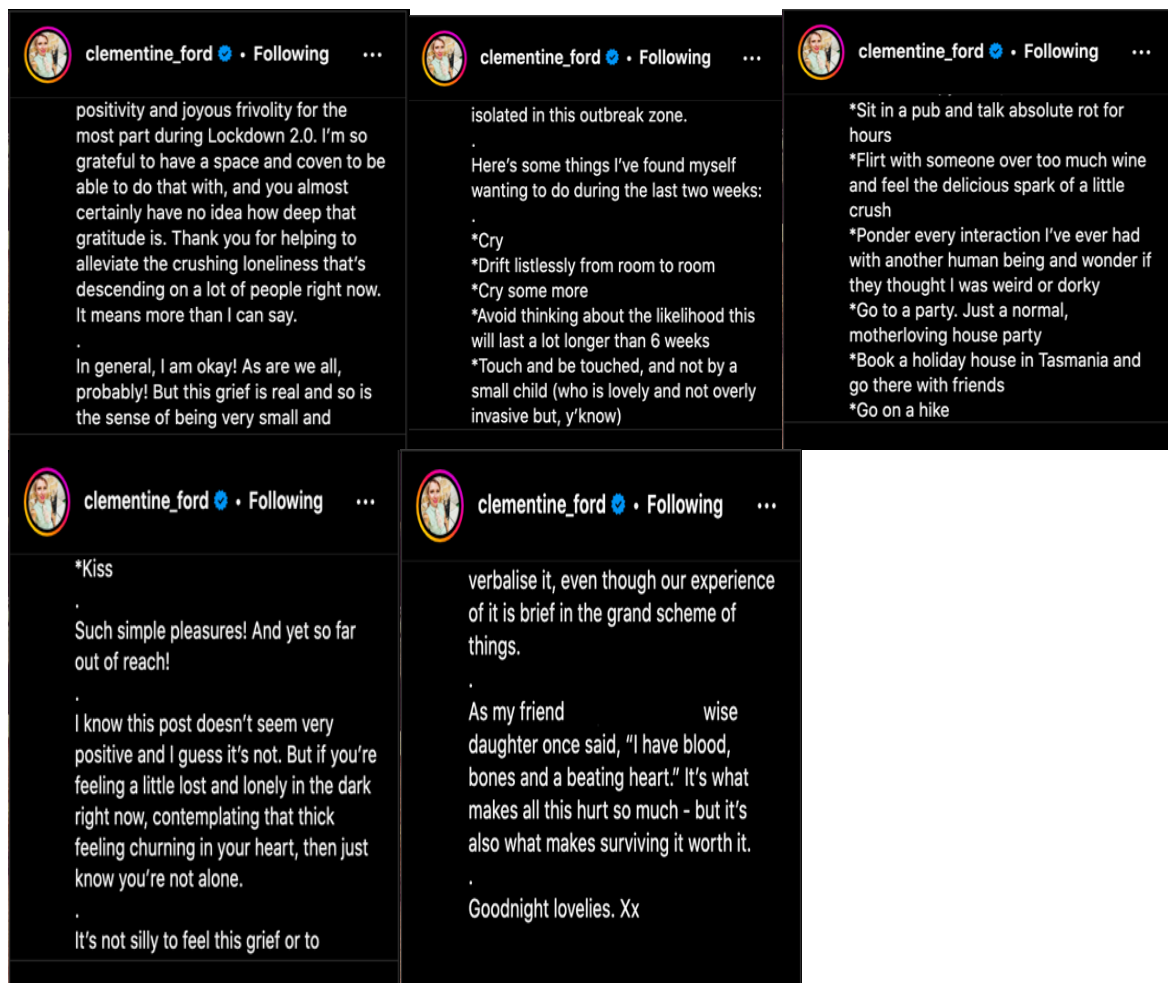


Ford, Clementine, July 6 2020, *What they don't tell you about being a writer*, viewed 27/12/22, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CCTVoflJDUH/>>.

F4b – Markers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6 present







Ford, Clementine, July 24 2020, *Hello Melbourne and Mitchell Shire lovelies*, viewed 9/1/23, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CDBqgoep9mL/>>.

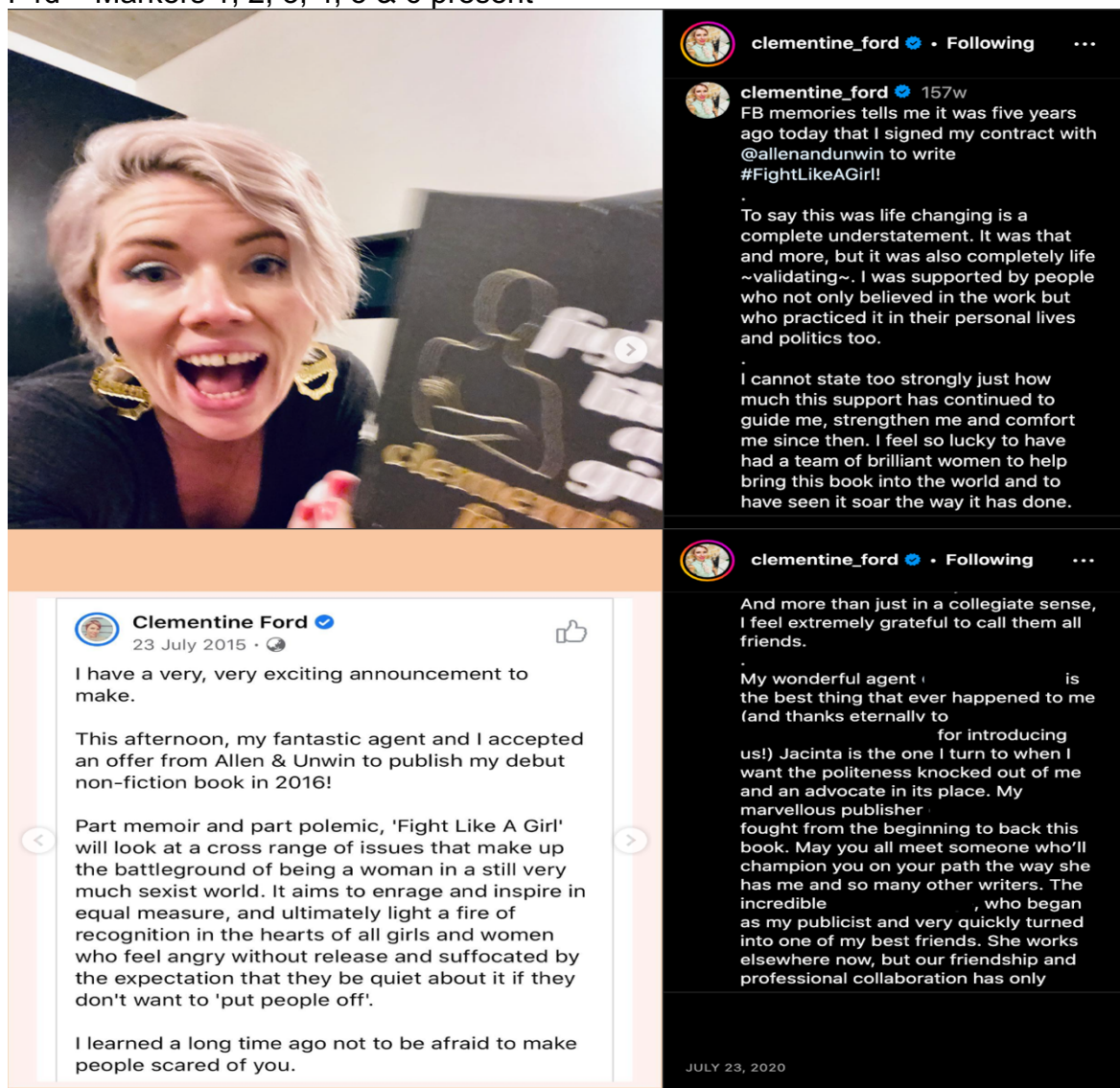
#### F4c – Markers 3, 4, 5 & 6 present

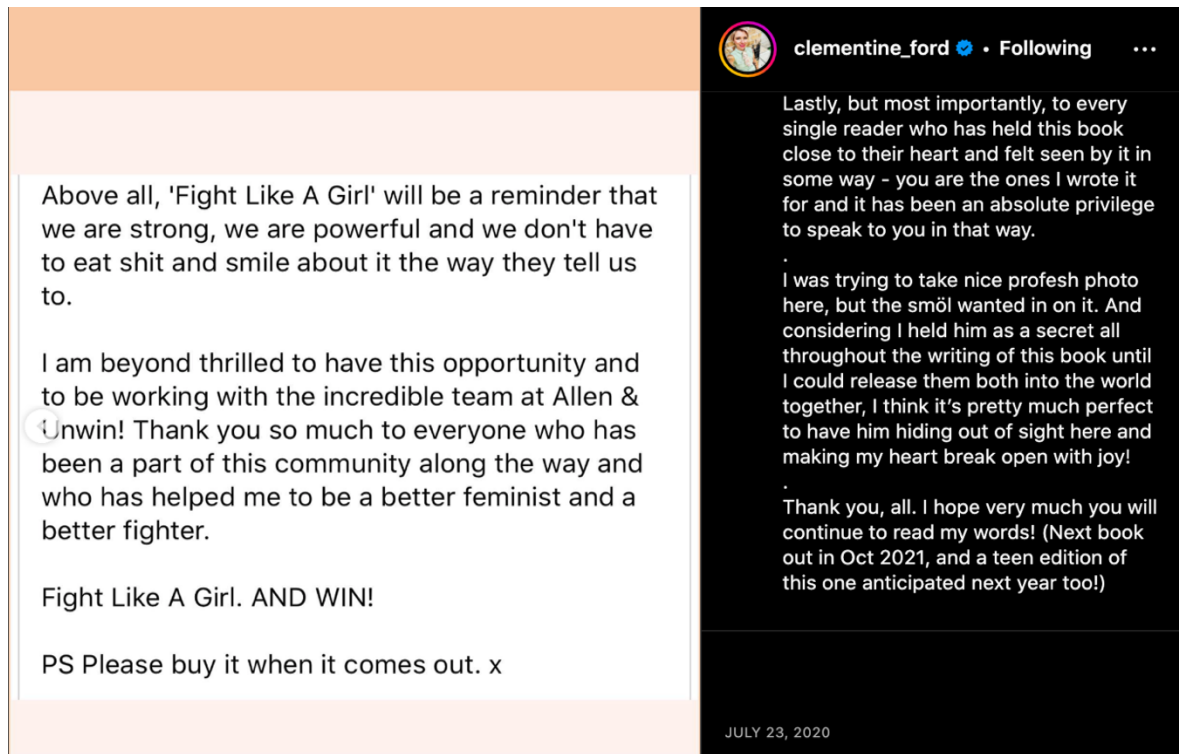




Ford, Clementine, July 1 2020, *Thank you so much*, viewed 21/12/22, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CCD-l2CJtd8/>.

#### F4d – Markers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6 present





Ford, Clementine, July 23 2020, *FB memories tells me*, viewed 9/1/23, <[https://www.instagram.com/p/CC\\_EaF3pg59/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CC_EaF3pg59/)>.

#### F4e – Markers 3, 4, 5 & 6 present



Ford, Clementine, July 25 2020, *Your mom called. She's hot*, viewed 9/1/23 <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CDDGlwzpbWc/>>.

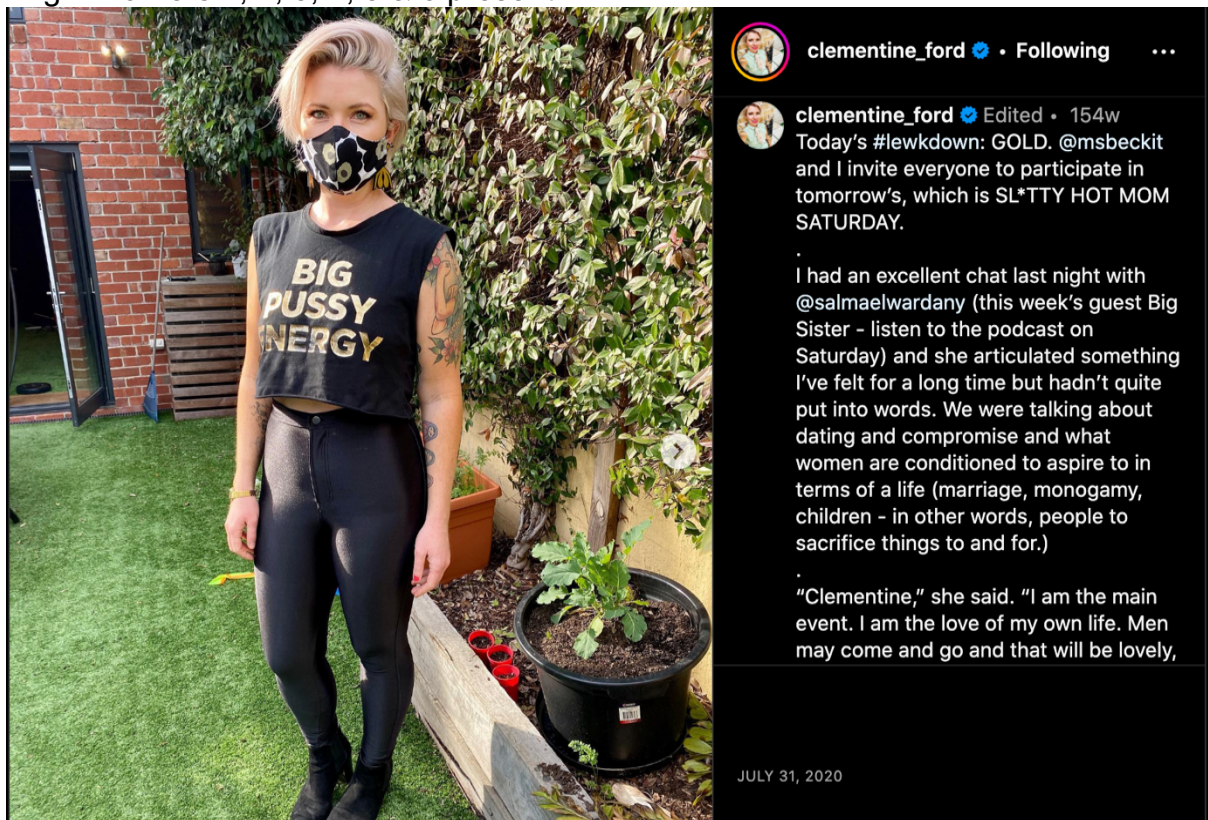


F4f – Markers 4, 5 & 6 present



Ford, Clementine, July 21 2020, *Hello mothers!*, viewed 9/1/23, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CC5-euCpgFp/>>.

F4g – Markers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6 present





clementine\_ford • Following ...

but I am the main event."

It really spoke to me. With the exception of my son, I am the main event. I love my life. I love my independence. I love the fact that the choices I make in regards to who I allow into my life are finally free from compromise.

I can't imagine ever living with a man again, which isn't to say this doesn't make other women happy. But I just won't compromise again on my value, my autonomy and my space.

Heteropatriarchy views women as the supporting characters in other people's lives: the lives of men first and foremost, then the lives of husbands, boyfriends and fathers, the lives of their children and finally, once we're old, the lives of

JULY 31, 2020



clementine\_ford • Following ...

nobody at all.

But OUR lives are full and rich all by themselves. We don't need anyone to qualify our existence or make it purposeful. We don't need men to bring us into focus. We don't need to bring new life into the world to make our life mean something. We have purpose alone.

Thank you SO MUCH Salma for giving this framework a language for me to speak with. I love you!

Because we each of us only get one shot at life. This is YOURS. Why the hell wouldn't you want to make yourself the goddamn motherloving MAIN EVENT of your own time on earth?

JULY 31, 2020



clementine\_ford • Following ...


You're the headliner, baby! Take the spotlight!

Crop: @neishaclothing  
Mask: @thedesigncourt  
Pants: @americanapparel  
Big P\*ssy Energy: this girl right here

JULY 31, 2020

Ford, Clementine, July 31 2020, *Today's #lewkdown: GOLD.*, viewed 9/1/23, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CDS34jwpe3v/>>.





**WANT MORE FOR YOURSELVES.**

**- CLEMENTINE FORD -**

**clementine\_ford** • Following ...

**clementine\_ford** 159w  
Every week, I receive countless messages from women asking how they can get the men they live with to "help" more.

My answer now is always the same: want more for yourself.

Why is it \*such\* a battle for so many women who live with men and have kids with them to get even the barest scrap of respect? Why do we feel so inclined to publicly perform gushing praise for men who are "so amazing" and "really help at home with the kids", especially when those men barely if ever acknowledge their lives are possible because of women's labour?

Why do women have to carry the lion's

JULY 16, 2020

**clementine\_ford** • Following ...

share of the domestic burden and yet still have to endure being called "lucky" if their husband or boyfriend does \*slightly\* more than the national average?

Because patriarchy! It conditions us to believe that true happiness comes from being picked by a man, and the way we can thank him for sparing us of a life "on the shelf" is by mothering him for the rest of his life.

This is for the women who once believed their lives would involve more than picking up after a man. This is for the women who are tired of spending every day in an endless negotiation that requires willpower and iron clad strategy, just to gain the tiniest scrap of ground. This is for women who think

JULY 16, 2020

**clementine\_ford** • Following ...

back to themselves as little girls, and wonder what they would say to them about the life that's waiting.

Want more for yourselves.

We teach girls to shoot for the stars. We tell them they can be and do anything they set their mind to. We take them to the top of the mountain to show them the world, and then we march them right back to the kitchen and tell them to be happy standing at the sink.

Maybe some of these situations and the ties that bind them together are too deep in to really change. And so this is also for the other women, the ones in their 20s, the ones who still have so many choices and who haven't yet discovered that the aspiration to familial

JULY 16, 2020

**clementine\_ford** • Following ...

and domestic happiness that women are sold is largely a lie. These women ask me if they should stay with men who are "great" but who think "feminism is ridiculous".

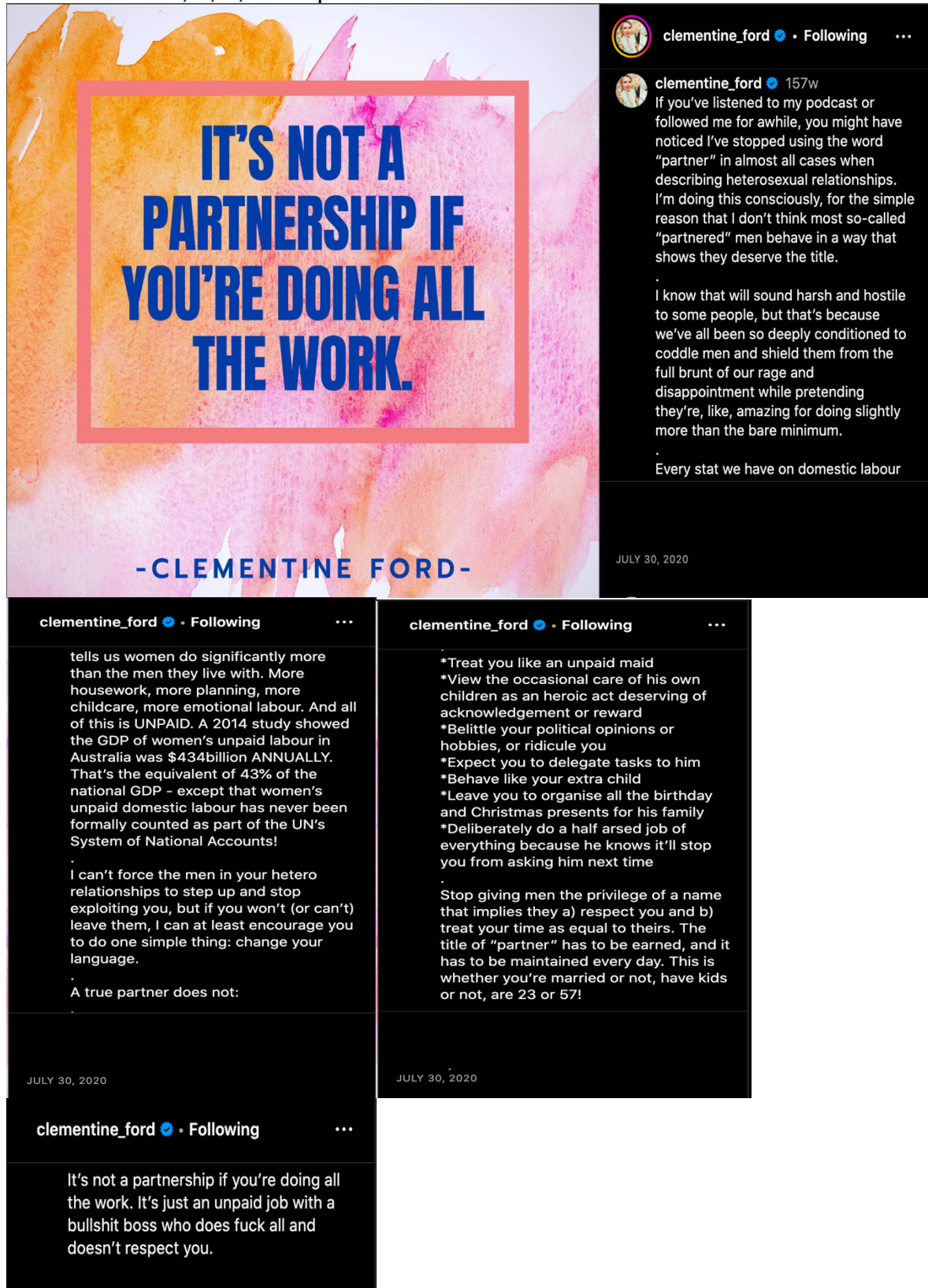
Don't become some man's surrogate mother.

Want more for yourselves.

#toughlove

JULY 16, 2020

Ford, Clementine, July 16 2020, *Every week, I receive countless messages*, viewed 27/12/22, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CCsO131JsYF/>>.



Ford, Clementine, July 30 2020, *If you've listened to my podcast*, viewed 9/1/23, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CDQLW66J1td/>>.



August

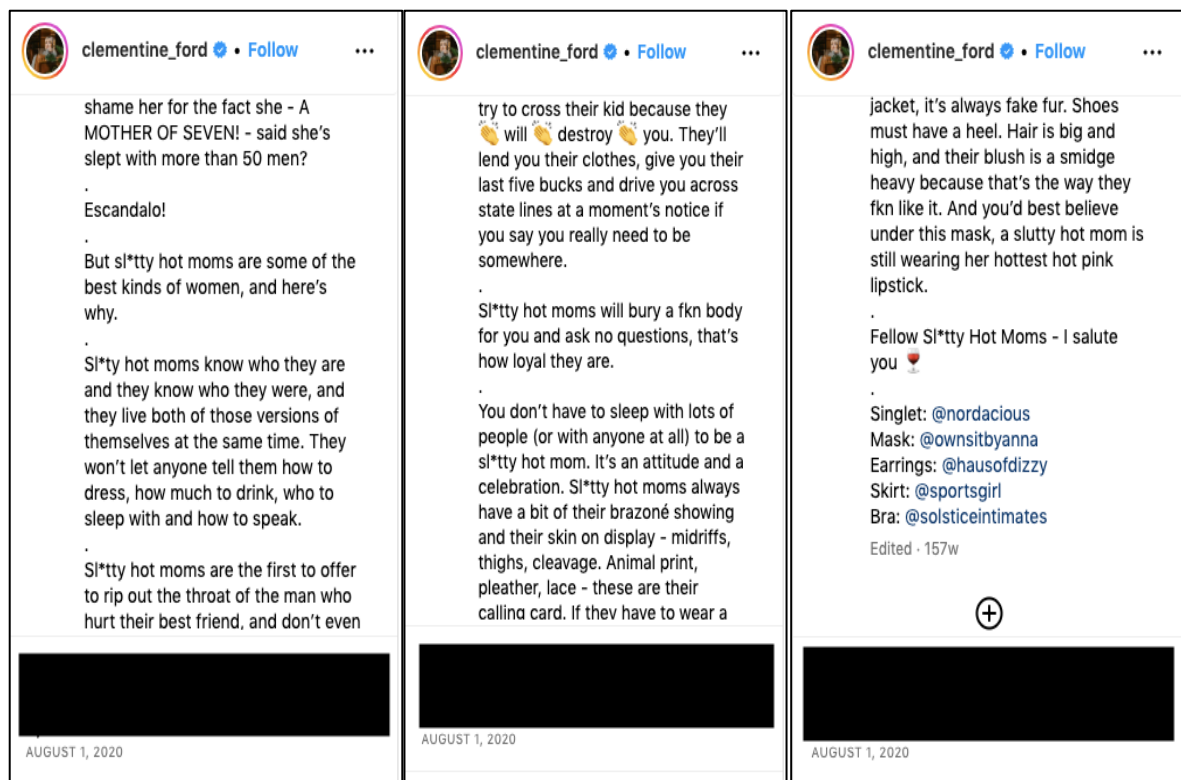
F5a – Markers 1, 2, 3 & 5 present



Ford, Clementine, August 19 2020, *Here's an excerpt from this week's episode*, viewed 21/1/23, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CEDvCSwJpkJ/>>.

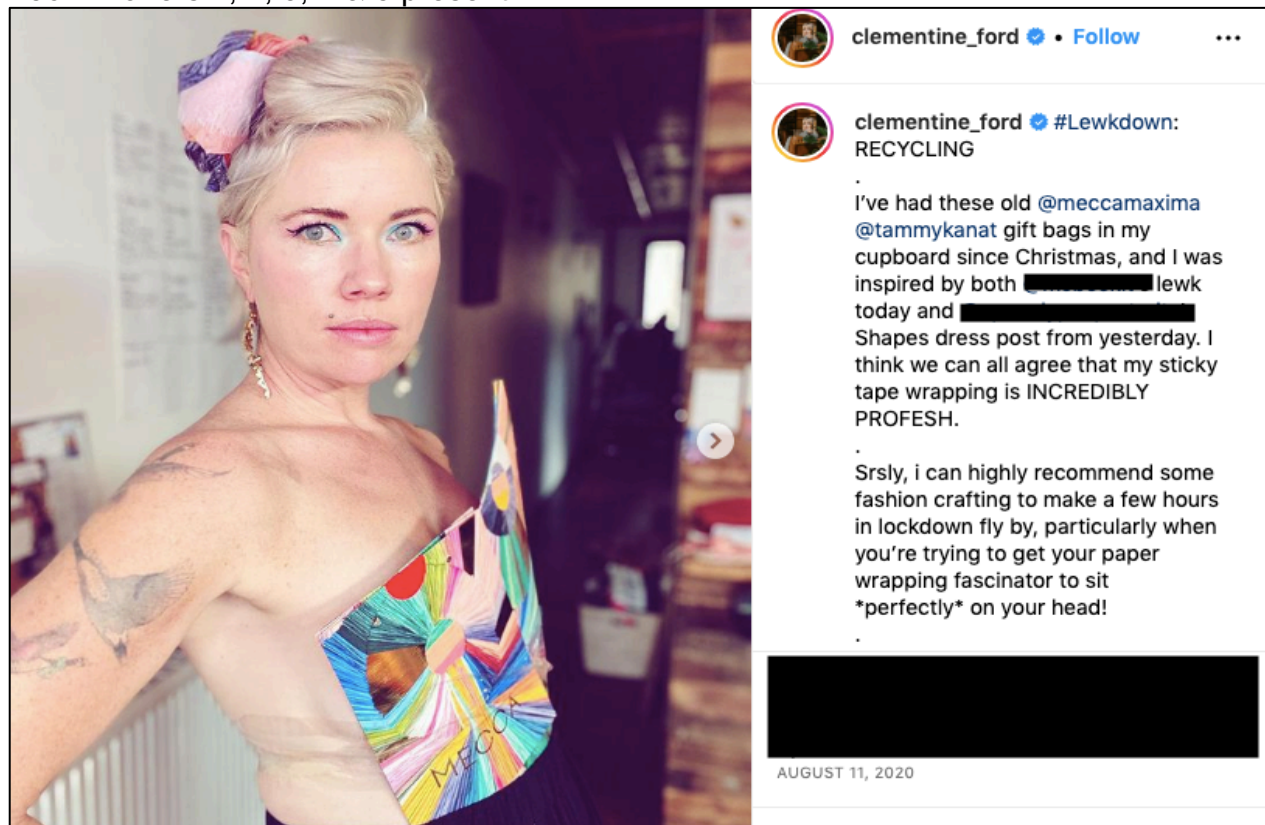
F5b – Markers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6 present

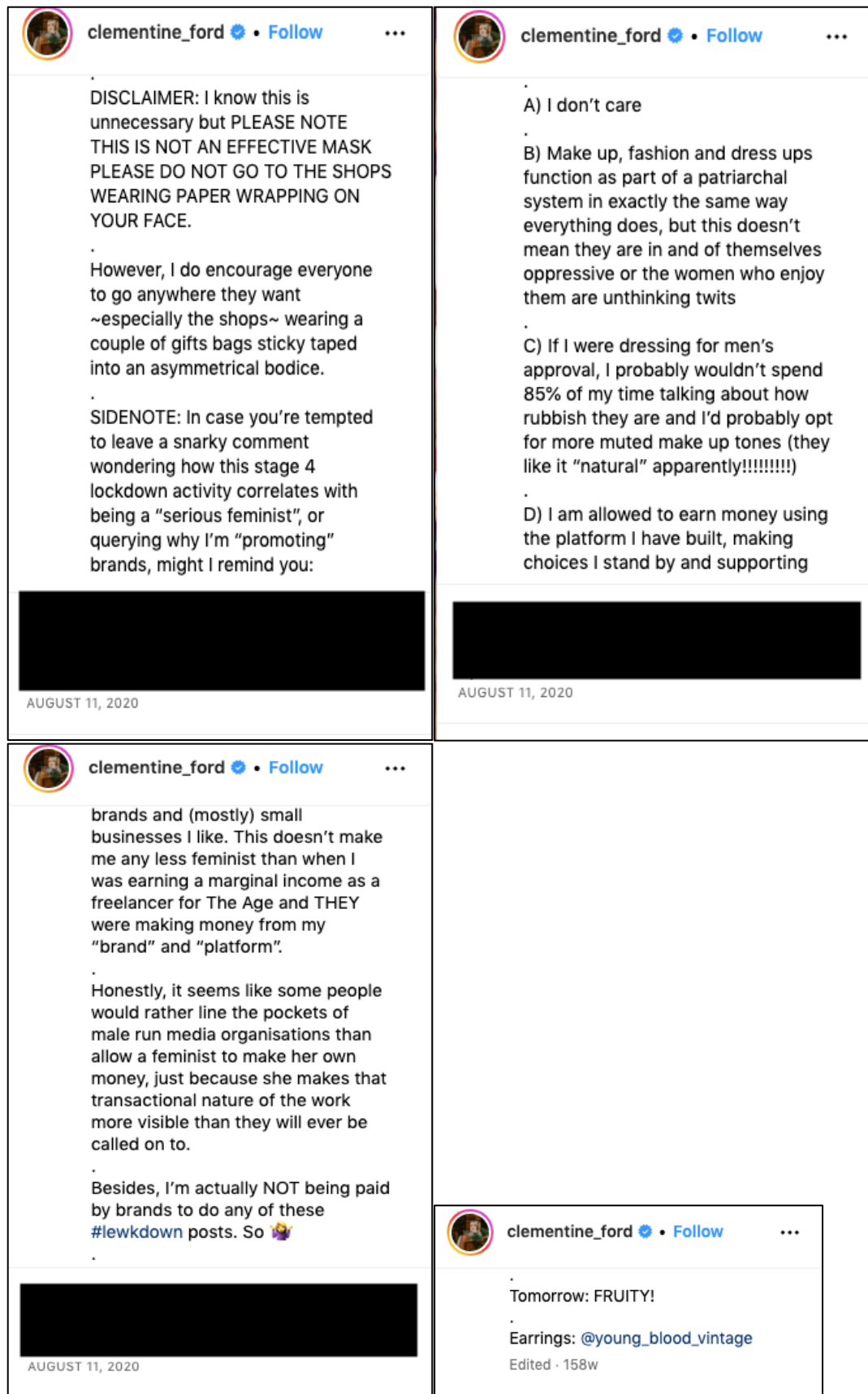




Ford, Clementine, August 1 2020, *LEWKDOWN: Sl\*tty Hot Mom*, viewed 12/1/23, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CDVkWLYpsAe/>>.

#### F5c – Makers 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5 present





Ford, Clementine, August 11 2020, *Lewkdown: RECYCLING*, viewed 12/1/23, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CDvZ-sEp900/>>.



## F5d – Markers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6 present



**clementine\_ford** • Follow

When I was little, I wanted nothing more than to grow up to be Melanie Griffith in 'Working Girl'. Secretaries lived alone, made their own money and slept with who they liked. This was how I imagined freedom for women, and I wanted it!

I didn't come from a matrilineal line where women had a lot of opportunities. My mother wasn't a lawyer or an editor or an academic or anything that denoted privilege or opportunity. In fact, she was forced to leave school when she was 13 and go out to work, and she never completed her schooling.

Her own mother had spent her early adolescence suffering unimaginable

AUGUST 14, 2020

**clementine\_ford** • Follow

abuse in a concentration camp and then a labour factory during WWII. Anna was 14 when the war ended, by which time she had chronic twin cases of PTSD and venereal disease. She married my Guyanese grandfather when she was 17, moved to Georgetown and had four children by the time she was 23.

When my mother was 10, Anna remarried a British engineer (the second of five husbands) and moved to the UK. He said only the two girls could come, so my mother's two younger brothers were left behind. She never saw them again.

At school, she was teased for her thick accent. She responded by

AUGUST 14, 2020

**clementine\_ford** • Follow

"developing a British accent that could cut glass".

When she met my father, she was a single mother working in a pub. I loved her so much, but as a mother she was also often absent both figuratively and literally. It took me awhile to figure out not everyone's mother slept until 4 in the afternoon and left them waiting at the school gate for hours.

I sometimes think how amazing it is that I have been able to have the kind of life that would have seemed impossible to my mother and grandmother. To not just have been able to finish school, but to make my own money and support myself (so I would never have to rely on a man),

AUGUST 14, 2020

**clementine\_ford** • Follow

and to carve out a path for myself that circumstance and trauma kept both of them from ever reaching.

I feel so proud to be the product of two such incredible women. They didn't have the opportunity to become who they could have been, and so I strive every day to do it for them.

158w

AUGUST 14, 2020

Ford, Clementine, August 14 2020, *When I was little*, viewed 12/1/23, <[https://www.instagram.com/p/CD3JKPYpO7\\_/>](https://www.instagram.com/p/CD3JKPYpO7_/>).

## F5e – Markers 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5 present

clementine\_ford • Follow

clementine\_ford • #Lewkdown: BRUNCH

Are you a builder or a wrecker?

This is me with [REDACTED] in our respective offerings for today's prompt (which, as it is a Sunday, will always be brunch.)

Bec and I met earlier this year through her boyfriend, who is one of maybe five men I actually like. I immediately knew she was a kindred spirit, another dorky theatre kid who loved to play make believe and wasn't afraid to lean into the ridiculous for fun. (I actually met her bf while on an immersive Survivor weekend, so you know exactly what kind of people we all are.)

AUGUST 16, 2020

clementine\_ford • Follow

Bec and started the #Lewkdown daily challenge as Melbourne entered Stage 4. We wanted something fun to do each day while we were stuck in our houses, and we wanted other like minded people to join in as much or as little as they wanted to share a little bit of levity during this moment. Playing together, but responsibly!

One of my best friends [REDACTED] says there are two kinds of people in the world, builders and wreckers, and this really rings true for me.

There are lots of ways to be a builder. You can build community, you can build other people's confidence, you can build

AUGUST 16, 2020

clementine\_ford • Follow

opportunities for yourself and others, you can build platforms. Builders try to make the world better.

There are also lots of ways to be a wrecker. You can destroy other people's self esteem, work to undermine their confidence, try to gaslight them into doubting themselves. Wreckers bring nothing to the table, because they're not interested in making anything better only in bringing other people down to make THEMSELVES feel less shit.

You probably know some wreckers or have had to deal with them. Maybe you've been one. I know I have! But wrecking gets you nowhere. It might feel good in the

AUGUST 16, 2020

clementine\_ford • Follow

moment, but it won't materially change whatever it is that makes you feel disempowered in your life. Wrecking builds nothing, it just leaves you surrounded by a lot of rubble.

If you look to build yourself up by wrecking the people around you, you will fail. Trust me.


So here's to the builders! May your Sunday be filled with sunshine, good coffee and people who love you.

Tomorrow: THE HERO, CAROLE BASKIN

Top: @frockmeout  
Mug: @nordacious

AUGUST 16, 2020

Ford, Clementine, August 16 2020, #Lewkdown: BRUNCH, viewed 12/1/23,  
[https://www.instagram.com/p/CD7\\_jl0pOh5/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CD7_jl0pOh5/).



**Pelvic Floor**

clementine\_ford I did a series of stories last night that are now in my highlights under "Pelvic Floor". It's a pretty frank, vulnerable discussion about the impact of birth on my body, but also the lack of care and attention given to the pelvic floor health of mothers and birth parents in this country in general.

We know that shame is the major reason so many of us stay silent on this topic. Trust me, it isn't easy to put myself forward publicly to talk about struggling with stress incontinence and light leaks (so hot! so sexy!) but I also have the opportunity to help destigmatise those things for a huge number of people and that makes it worth it. It takes an average of 7 years for someone to seek help for pelvic floor prolapse and birth injuries, and this is just completely unacceptable. We need COMPREHENSIVE and fully funded treatment for birth parents, and it MUST include early, preventative pelvic floor physio and treatment.

I'm interested to see the number of women who expressed concern about investing in products to help them. Of course economic concerns are paramount for everyone (particularly now!) but this seems to pre-date Covid. Simply put, women often put themselves last on the list of needs.

I wanted to touch on a broader

**PREGNANCY AND PELVIC FLOOR:**

- 1: ONE HALF OF ALL PEOPLE WHO GIVE BIRTH WILL EXPERIENCE SOME FORM OF PROLAPSE
- 2: IT TAKES AN AVERAGE OF 7 YEARS FOR SUFFERERS TO SEEK HELP
- 3: THE BEST PREVENTION IS TO MAINTAIN STRONG PELVIC FLOOR MUSCLES
- 4: SHAME IS THE BIGGEST DETERRENT TO SEEKING HELP, FOLLOWED BY INTERNALISED BELIEF THAT THE HEALTH OF MOTHERS IS BOTTOM ON THE LIST OF PRIORITIES

AUGUST 22, 2020

political point about what is seen as a priority and what isn't. I'm just going to throw some scenarios out there, and these won't apply to everyone but it's something to think about. (These are really specifically for women who live in a domestic setting with a man and the father of their child/children):

- \* Does he have a PlayStation?
- \* Does he drink beer or any other kind of alcohol regularly?
- \* Does he have any hobbies that require a financial output? (Golf, AFL membership, music etc)
- \* Does he have a car he likes to spend money on?

This should not be your financial

burden to bear! You've already paid a physical price for pregnancy and childbirth. Your pelvic floor health isn't a luxury, it's essential. This is why it should be fully funded by the government! Investing in mothers early on SAVES MONEY LATER.

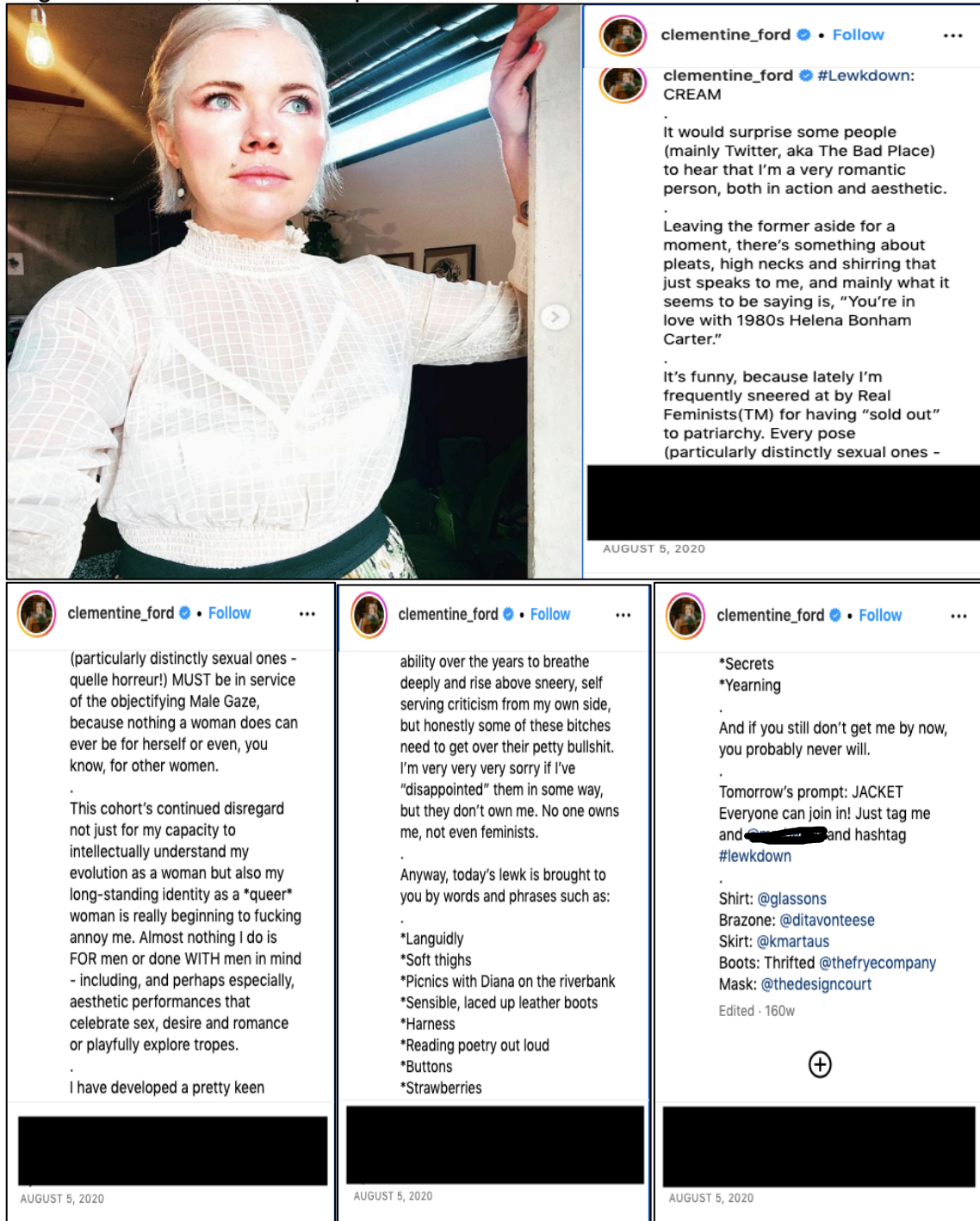
Until then, it's the father's job to give some things up for a bit so you can restore your vagina and pelvic floor!

158w

Ford, Clementine, August 22 2020, *I did a series of stories last night*, viewed 21/1/23, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CELlvPJpazj/>>.



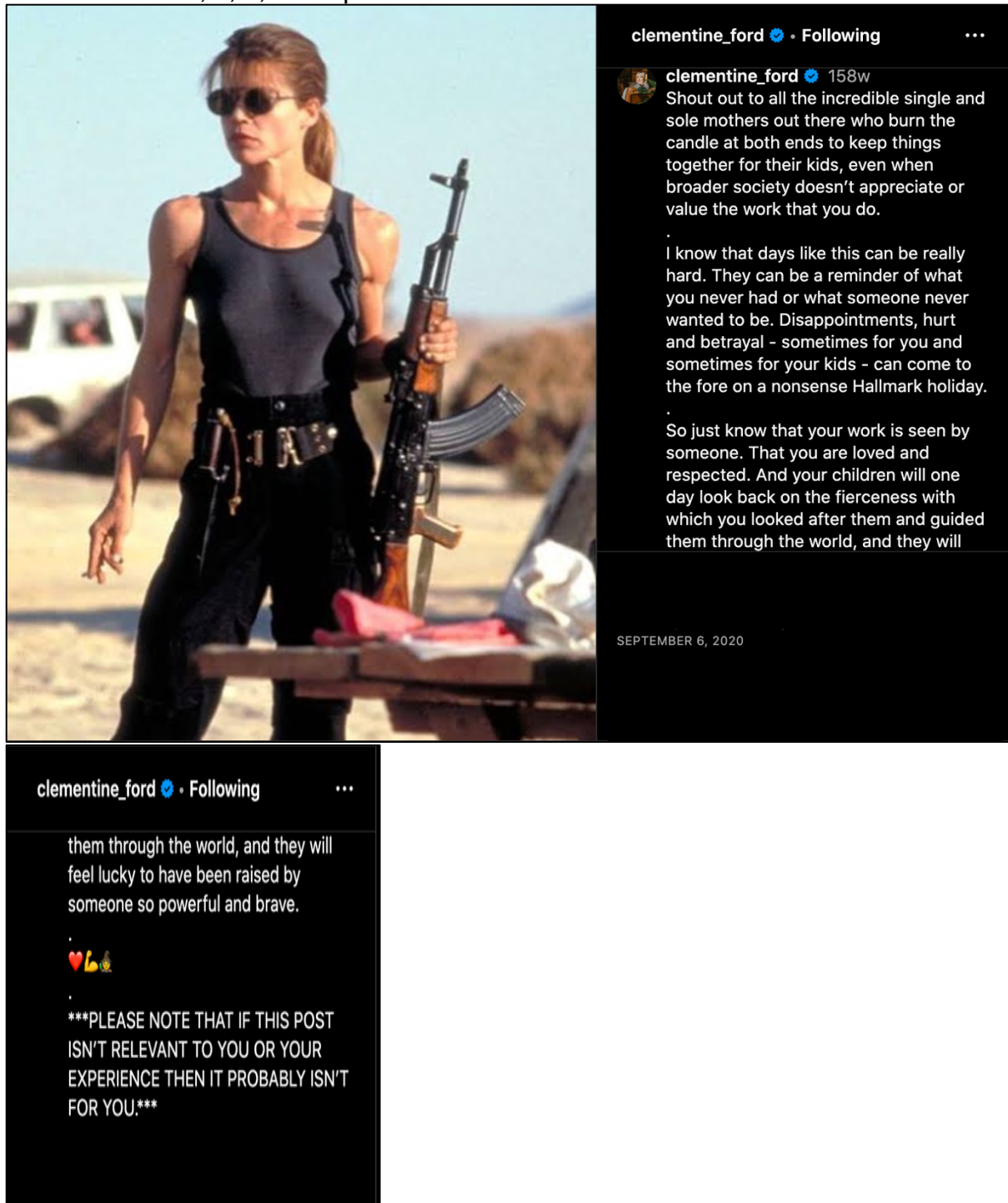
## F5g – Markers 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5 present



Ford, Clementine, August 5 2020, #Lewkdown: CREAM, viewed 12/1/23,  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/CDf-Fh0JAfE/>.

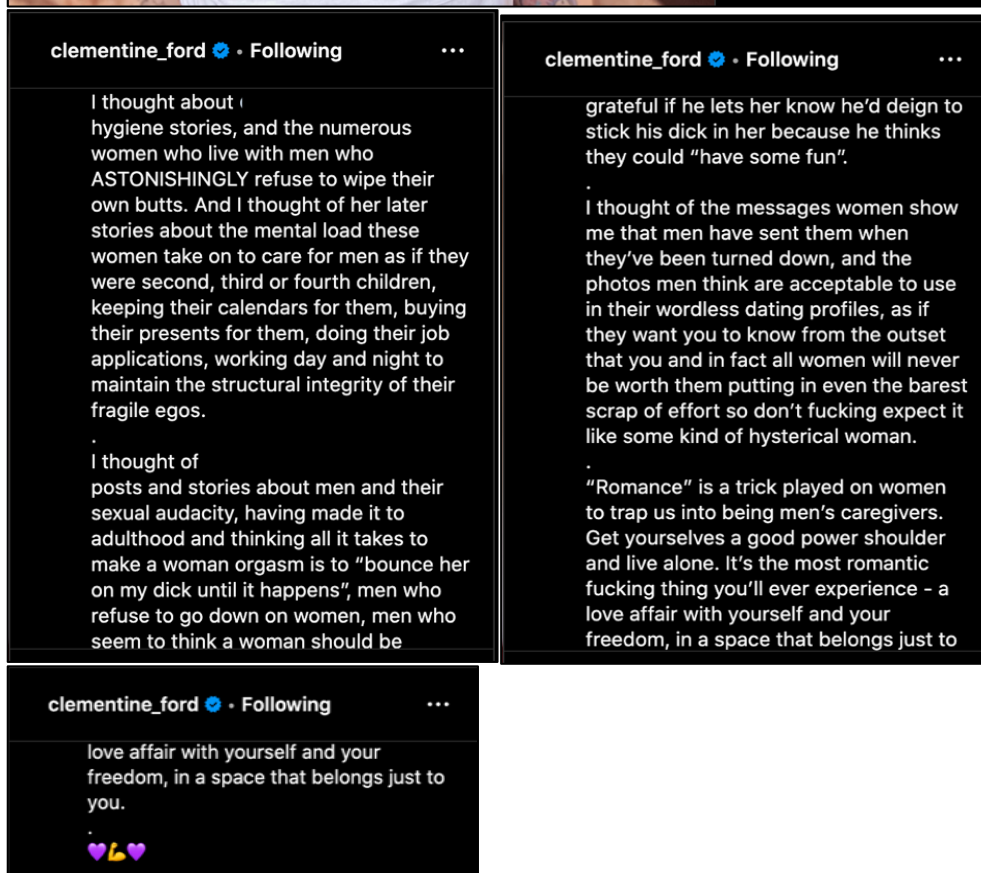
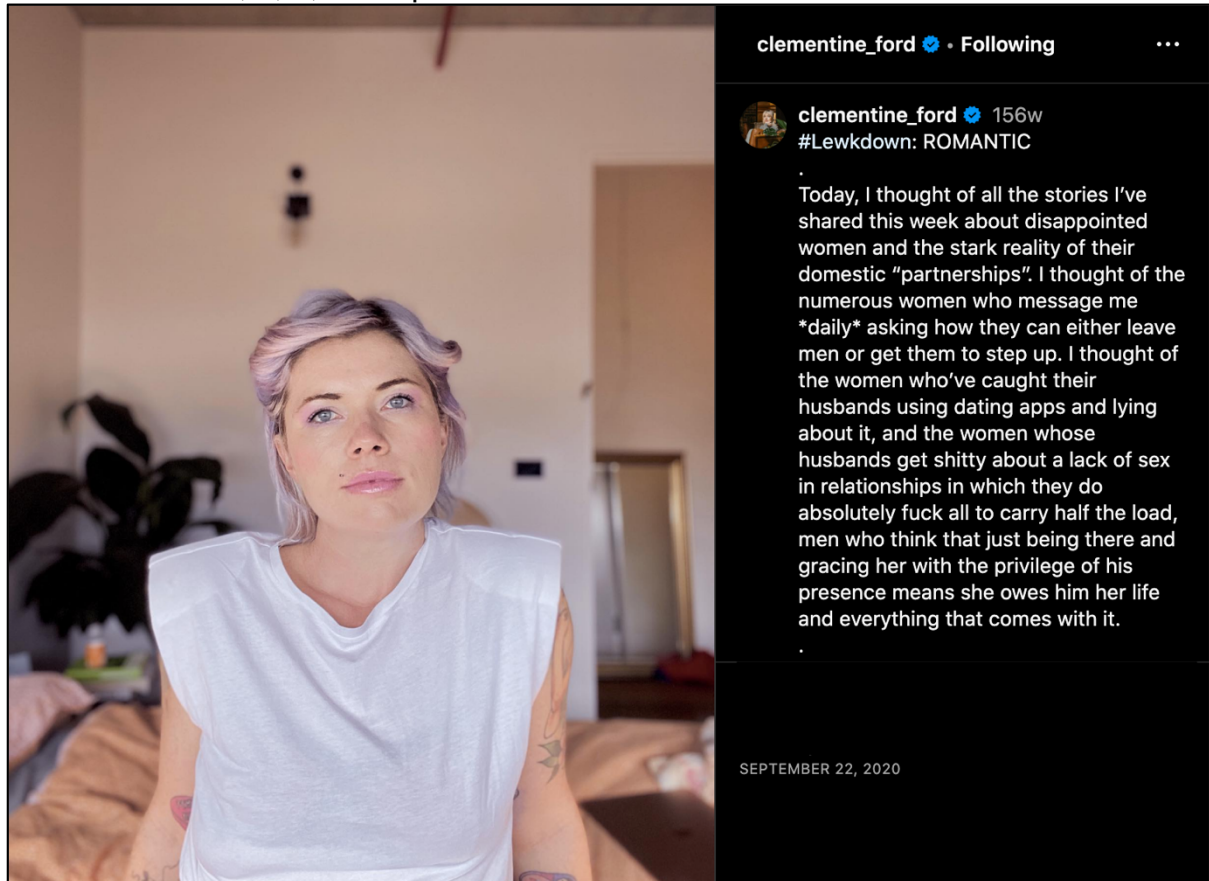
September

F6a – Markers 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5 present





Ford, Clementine, September 6 2020, *Shout out to all*, viewed 9/2/23, [https://www.instagram.com/p/CEyAMXKhKv\\_/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CEyAMXKhKv_/).

F6b – Markers 1, 3, 4, 5 & 6 present



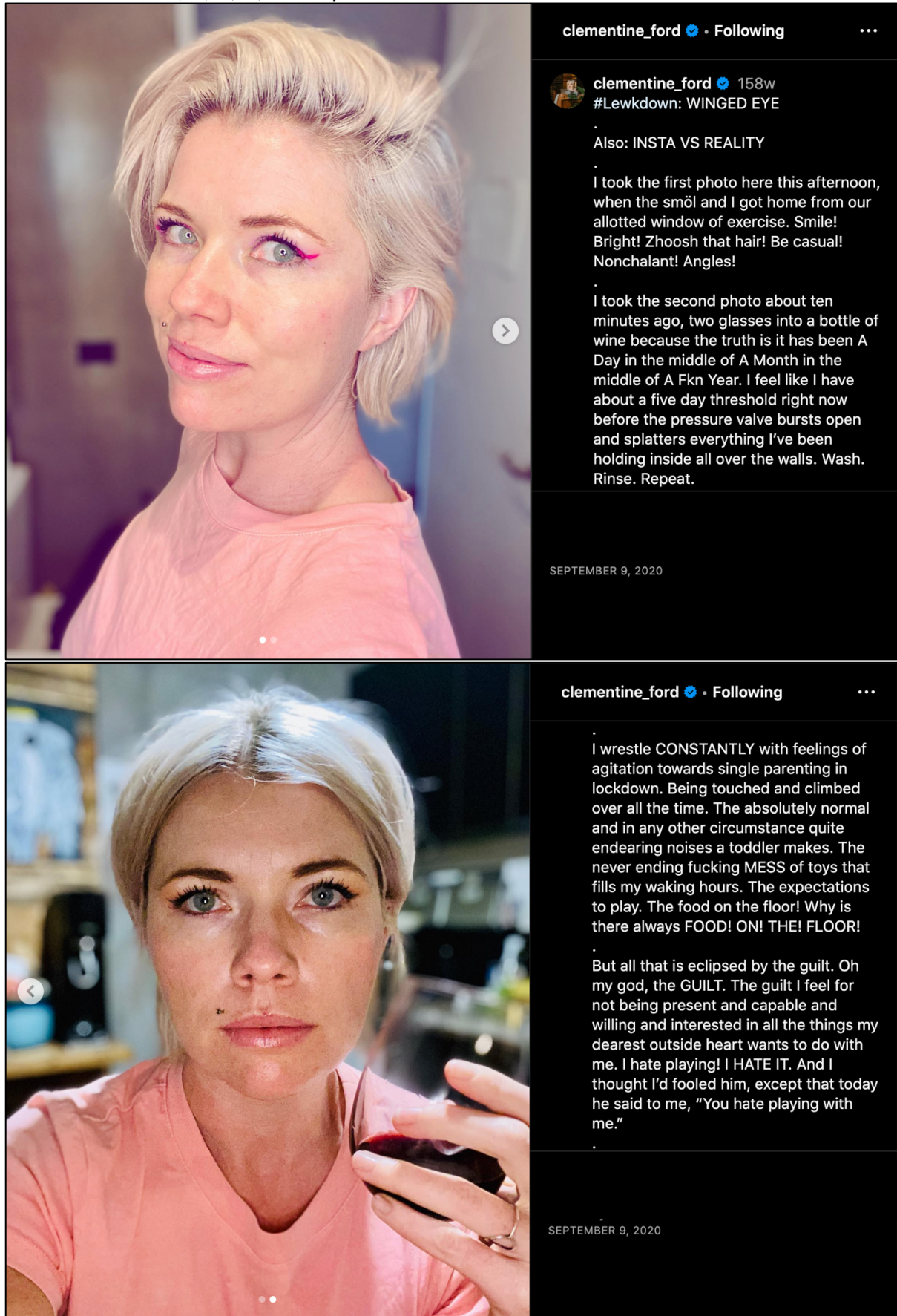
Ford, Clementine, September 22 2020, #Lewkdown: ROMANTIC, viewed 10/2/23, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CFbpU5PhDb9/>>.

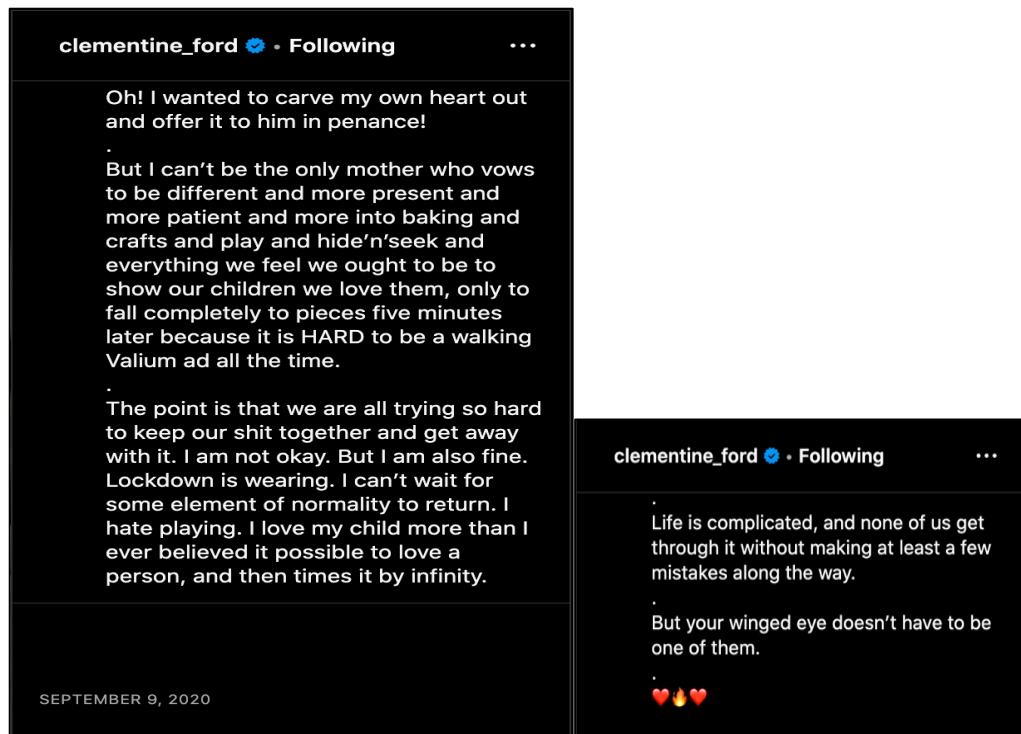
	<div> clementine_ford • Following </div> <div>  clementine_ford Edited • 157w  <b>HIGHLIGHT:</b> </div> <div> <p>I have a new highlight from my stories. It is about patriarchy, relationships and the lies women are fed from girlhood about how men will set us free and bring our lives into focus, finally.</p> <p>This is a thread for women thinking about leaving mediocre, unhappy relationships. It's a thread about male inadequacy and disrespect. It's a thread about being the star of your own story. It's a thread about it never being too late to put yourself and your happiness centre stage.</p> <p>Please note, this is NOT a call for women experiencing abuse or violence or living in fear to "just leave". That is a very</p> </div>
	<div> clementine_ford • Following </div> <div> <p>different dynamic and requires a lot more sensitivity and care. If you are in that situation, I strongly urge you to call 1800-RESPECT. This is true even if you just suspect you might be, but aren't quite certain.</p> <p>Can I also recommend you listen to r he latest episode of #BigSisterHotline. Warning: it has a content note for heavy themes and discussion of sexual coercion and emotional abuse in a marriage. The audio and sharing of the content had been approved by the person who submitted the question. It's a very important listen, particularly if you suspect you might be experiencing sexual abuse and/or coercion in your relationship but aren't quite sure. The link is in my bio or here: <a href="https://podcasts.apple.com/au/podcast/clementine-fords-big-sister-">https://podcasts.apple.com/au/podcast/clementine-fords-big-sister-</a></p> </div> <div> clementine_ford • Following </div> <div> <p>In the meantime, please check out these highlights and send it to women you think might benefit from reading it.</p> <p>You do not exist to service the needs of a man. Ask what you would want for your daughters and demand the same for yourself. Ask what you would expect of your sons in their own relationship, and know that you deserve the same.</p> <p>It is never too late to start writing a new story. You are the sun. Reclaim your light.</p> <p>#marriage #leavehim #feminism #singleandhappy #aloneandfree #liberated #nomen2020 #asknotwhathe likes about you but what he knows</p> </div>
<p>SEPTEMBER 16, 2020</p>	<p>SEPTEMBER 16, 2020</p>

Ford, Clementine, September 16 2020, **HIGHLIGHT:**, viewed 10/2/23, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CFLXxprBQCY/>>.



F6d – Markers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6 present

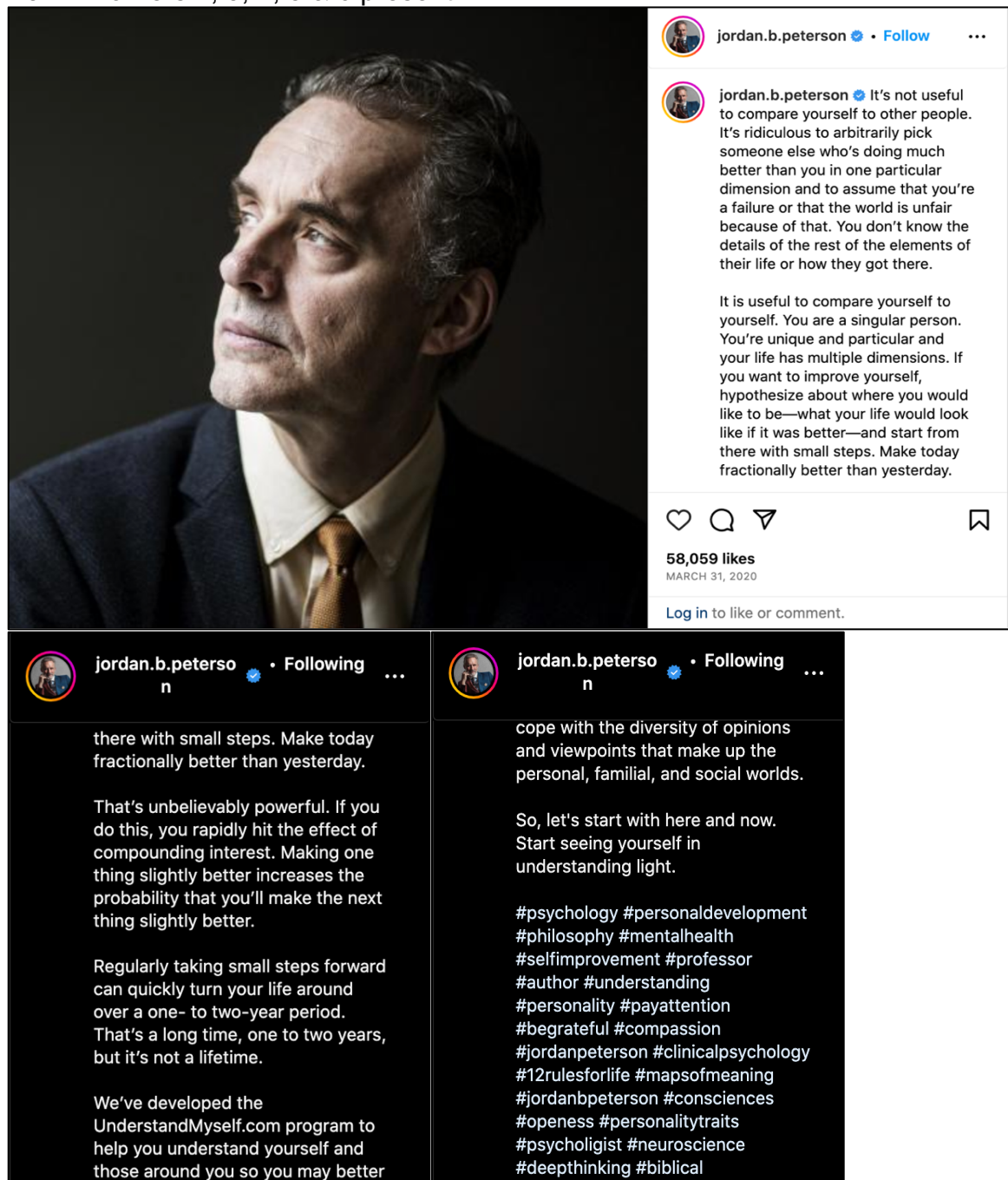




Ford, Clementine, September 9 2020, #Lewkdown: *WINGED EYE*, viewed 9/2/23,  
<<https://www.instagram.com/p/CE6XQzbhHGq/>>.

## Appendix 2: Jordan Peterson Instagram Content

P31 – Markers 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6 present



jordan.b.peterson • Follow ...

jordan.b.peterson • It's not useful to compare yourself to other people. It's ridiculous to arbitrarily pick someone else who's doing much better than you in one particular dimension and to assume that you're a failure or that the world is unfair because of that. You don't know the details of the rest of the elements of their life or how they got there.

It is useful to compare yourself to yourself. You are a singular person. You're unique and particular and your life has multiple dimensions. If you want to improve yourself, hypothesize about where you would like to be—what your life would look like if it was better—and start from there with small steps. Make today fractionally better than yesterday.

58,059 likes  
MARCH 31, 2020  
Log in to like or comment.

jordan.b.peterson • Following ...

there with small steps. Make today fractionally better than yesterday.

That's unbelievably powerful. If you do this, you rapidly hit the effect of compounding interest. Making one thing slightly better increases the probability that you'll make the next thing slightly better.

Regularly taking small steps forward can quickly turn your life around over a one- to two-year period. That's a long time, one to two years, but it's not a lifetime.

We've developed the UnderstandMyself.com program to help you understand yourself and those around you so you may better

jordan.b.peterson • Following ...

cope with the diversity of opinions and viewpoints that make up the personal, familial, and social worlds.

So, let's start with here and now. Start seeing yourself in understanding light.

#psychology #personaldevelopment #philosophy #mentalhealth #selfimprovement #professor #author #understanding #personality #payattention #begrateful #compassion #jordanpeterson #clinicalpsychology #12rulesforlife #mapsofmeaning #jordanbpeterson #consciences #openess #personalitytraits #psychologist #neuroscience #deepthinking #biblical

Peterson, Jordan, March 31 2020, *It's not useful to compare yourself to other people*, viewed 27/10/22, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/B-XFevEld-0/>>.



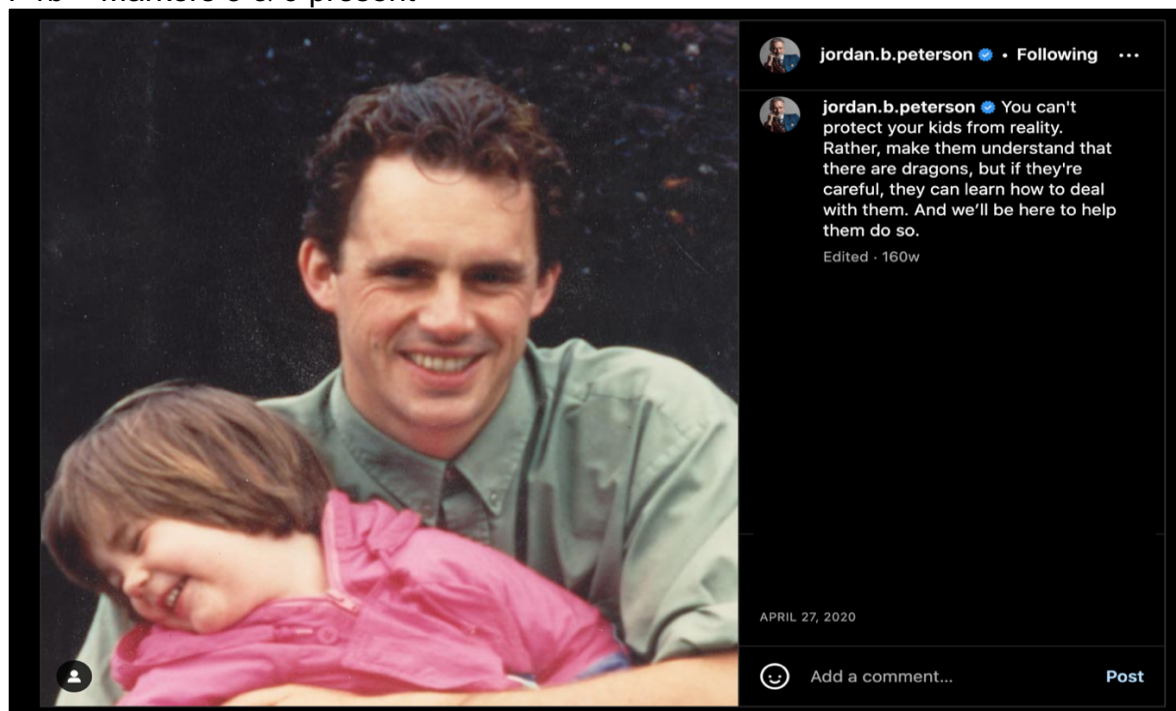
April

P1a – Markers 1, 2, 3 & 4 present



Peterson, Jordan, April 3 2020, *As hunting creatures*, viewed 5/10/22, <[https://www.instagram.com/p/B-fiF9Nliy\\_/](https://www.instagram.com/p/B-fiF9Nliy_/)>.

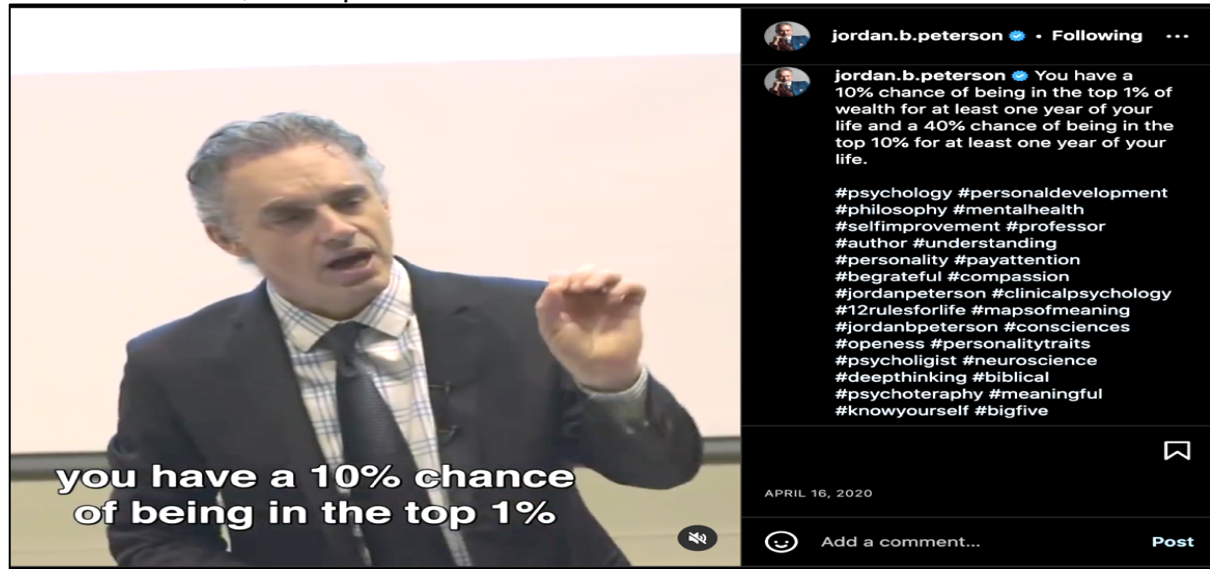
P1b – Markers 3 & 6 present



Peterson, Jordan, April 27 2020, *You can't protect your kids from reality*, viewed 19/10/2022, <[https://www.instagram.com/p/B\\_cvaOulFgJ/](https://www.instagram.com/p/B_cvaOulFgJ/)>.



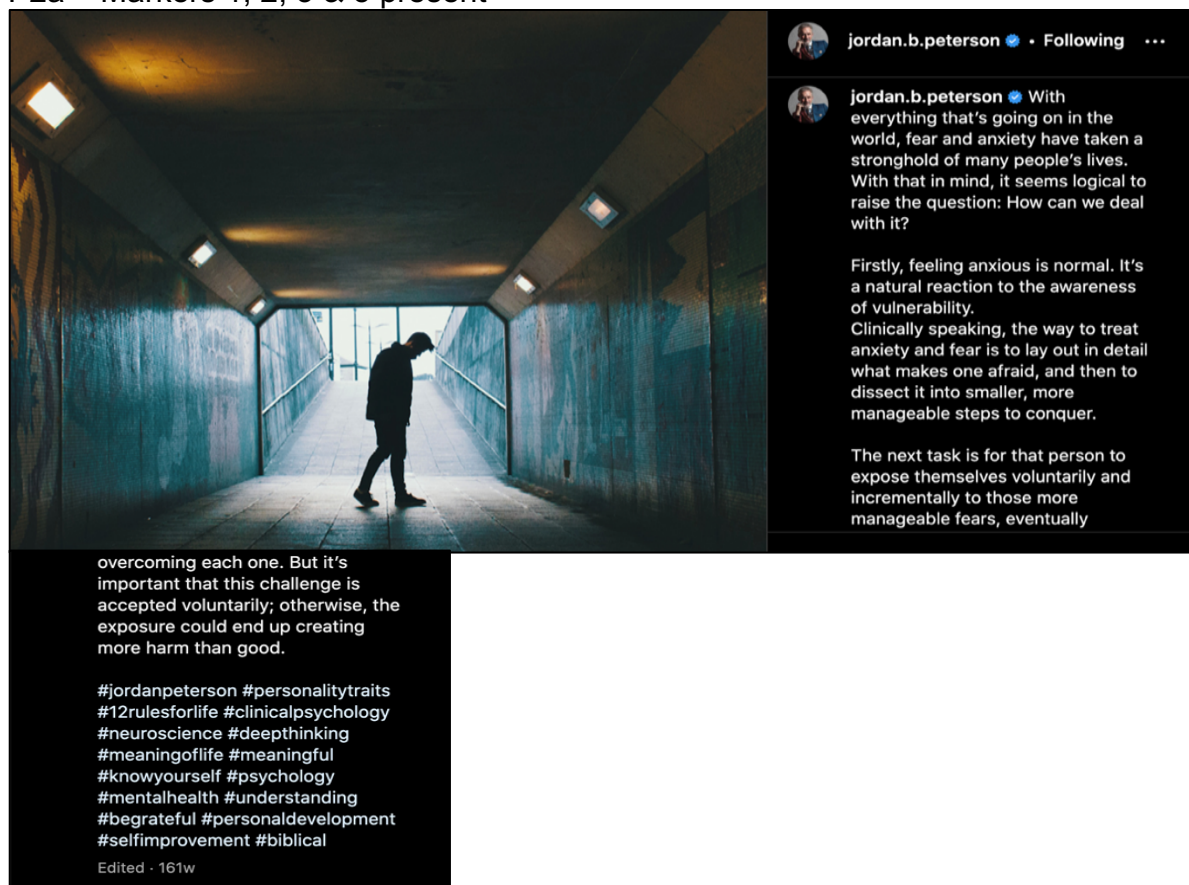
P1c – Markers 2, 4 & 5 present



Peterson, Jordan, April 16 2020, *You have a 10% chance*, viewed 18/10/22,  
[https://www.instagram.com/p/B\\_AYJ9KFUdZ/](https://www.instagram.com/p/B_AYJ9KFUdZ/).

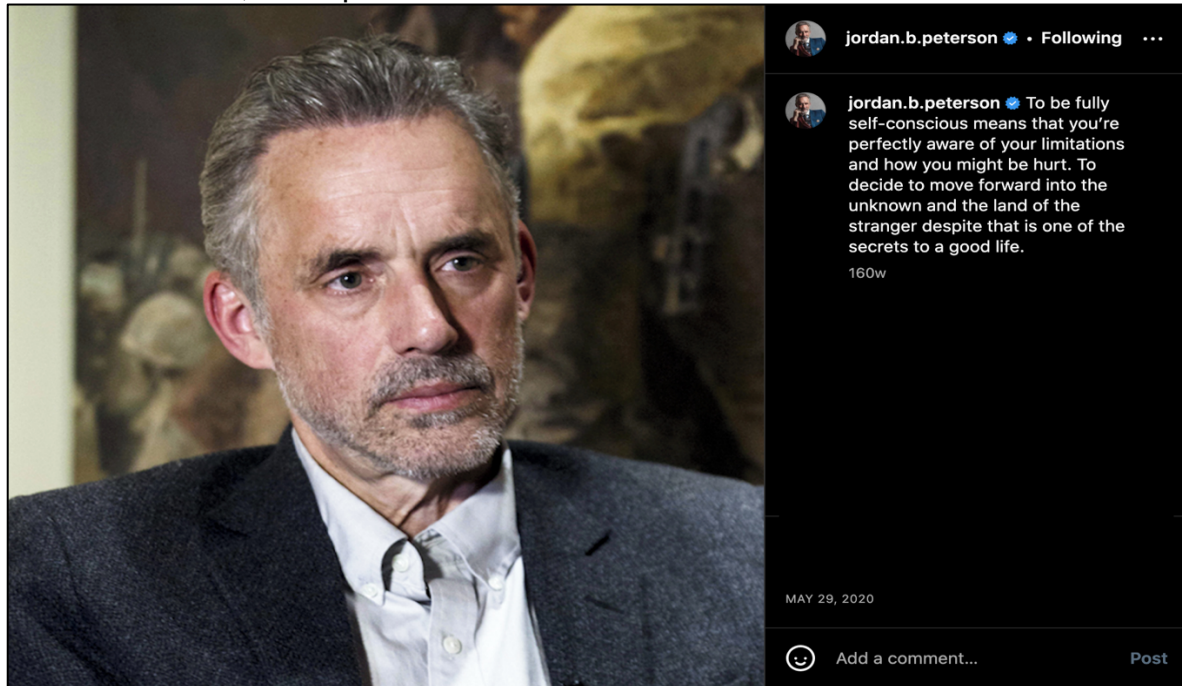
May

P2a – Markers 1, 2, 3 & 5 present



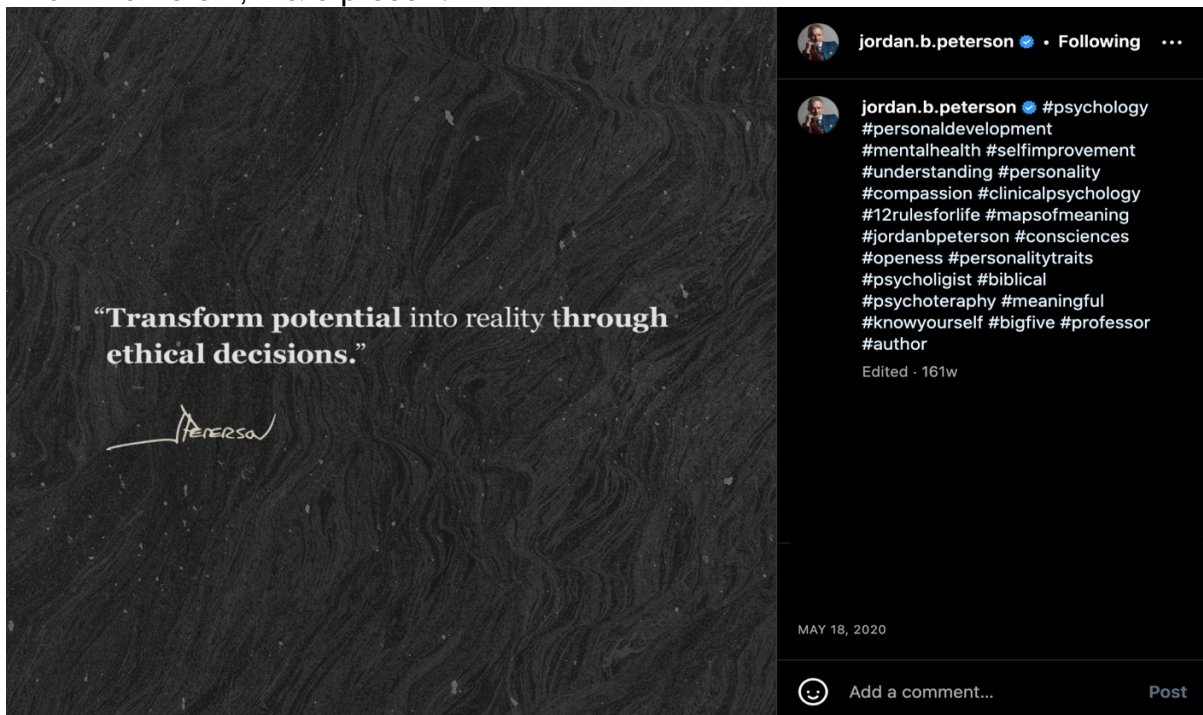
Peterson, Jordan, May 10 2020, *With everything that's going on in the world*, viewed 27/20/22,  
[https://www.instagram.com/p/B\\_-pcPjIJOY/](https://www.instagram.com/p/B_-pcPjIJOY/).

P2b – Markers 2, 3 & 5 present



Peterson, Jordan, May 29 2020, *To be fully self-conscious*, viewed 28/10/22, <[https://www.instagram.com/p/CAu\\_AdiF40S/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CAu_AdiF40S/)>.

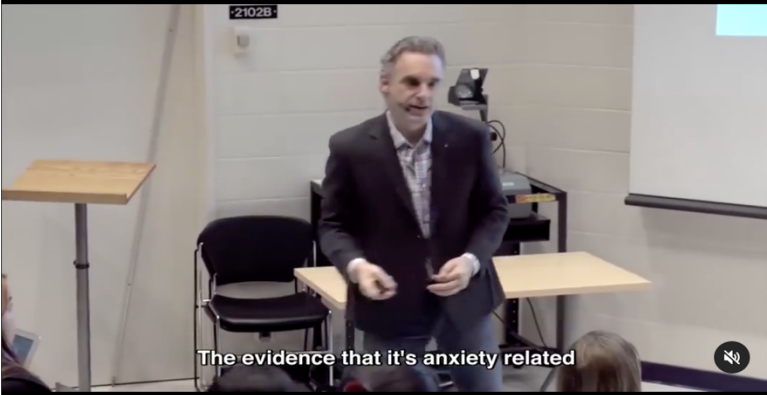
P2c – Markers 1, 2 & 5 present



Peterson, Jordan, May 18 2020, *Transform potential into reality through ethical decisions*, viewed 27/10/22, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CAS4HGUFwQ7/>>.



## P2d – Markers 1, 2, 3 & 5 present



The evidence that it's anxiety related

**jordan.b.peterson** • Following ...

**jordan.b.peterson** • Conscientiousness stabilizes your environment by creating predictability. And if things aren't constantly going wrong around you, you will suffer from less anxiety and emotional pain.

My personality course can determine your level of conscientiousness and help you understand yourself better in general, so you can envision the path you must take to increase

MAY 21, 2020

Add a comment... Post

### Affect/Emotion

- Strongly related to life satisfaction and "happiness"
  - DeNeve, K. M., & Cooper, H. (1998). The happy personality: A meta-analysis of 137 personality traits and subjective well-being. *Psychological Bulletin*, 124, 197–229.
  - Heller, D., Watson, D., & Ilies, R. (2004). The dynamic process of life satisfaction. *Journal of Personality*, 74, 1421–1450.
- Conscientiousness related to depression
  - Guilt: Fayard, J.V et al. (2012). Uncovering the affective core of conscientiousness. *Journal of Personality*, 80, 1-32.
  - Study 1 used meta-analysis to show that Conscientiousness was associated with specific emotions and overall negative affect but was most strongly associated with guilt.
  - Conscientiousness was negatively related to guilt experience but positively related to guilt proneness.

- So what else is useful about conscientiousness?

Peterson, Jordan, May 21 2020, *Conscientiousness stabilizes your environment*, viewed 28/10/22 <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CAaffbiFoYG/>>.

## P2e – Markers 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5 present



**jordan.b.peterson** • Following ...

**jordan.b.peterson** • How effectively are you using the extra time you have right now? This crisis presents an opportunity to add certain life-improving practices to your daily routine.

Positively shift your perspective by investing time in meditating, learning, exercising, and completing introspective exercises like journaling, which can help you become happier, less anxious and depressed, and physically healthier.

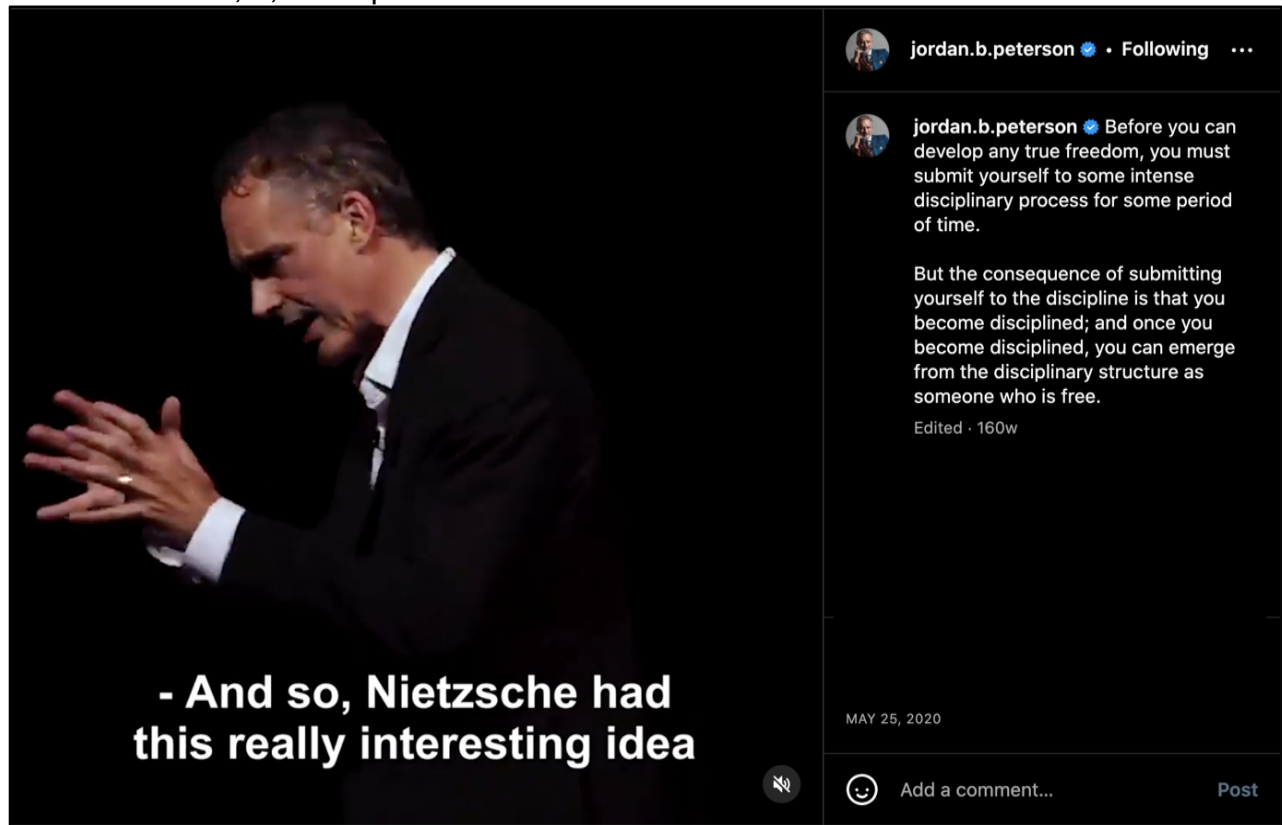
This can be done on your own or with the guidance of programs like the Self Authoring Suite. If you're interested in that you can find a link in bio for more information.

MAY 30, 2020

Add a comment... Post

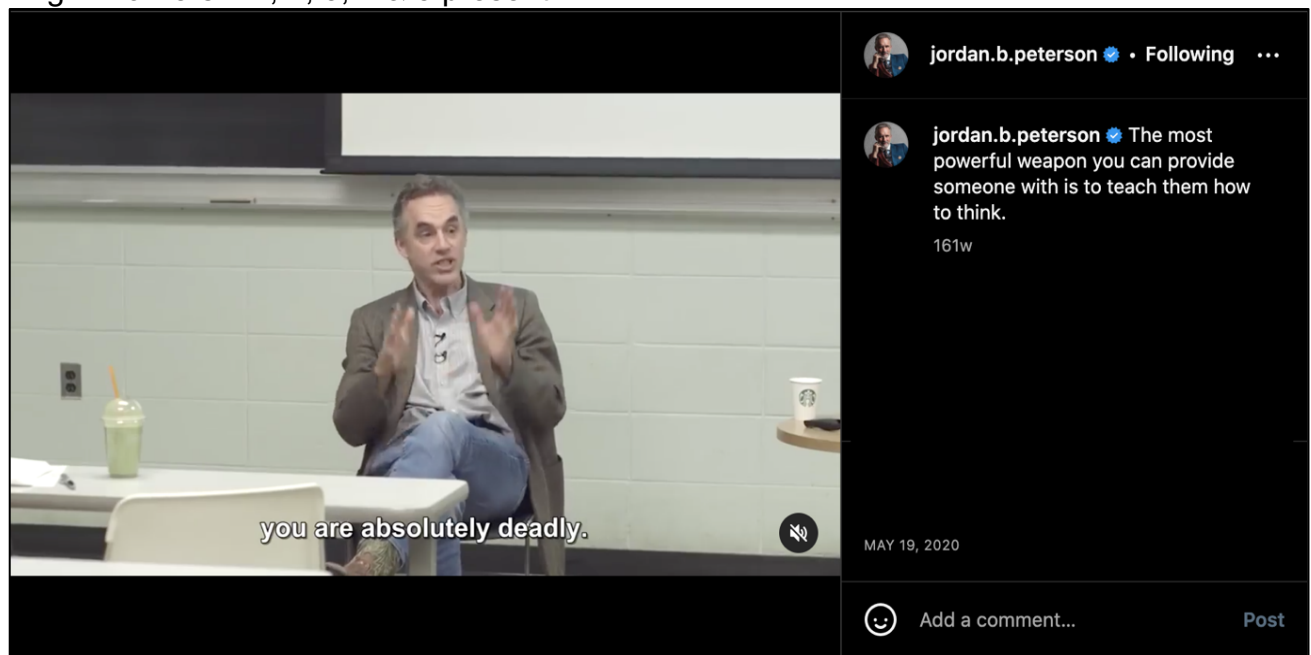
Peterson, Jordan, May 30 2020, *How effectively are you using the extra time you have right now?*, viewed 28/10/22, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CAX8wljd3g/>>.

P2f – Markers 1, 2, 3 & 5 present



Peterson, Jordan, May 25 2020, *Before you can develop any true freedom*, viewed 28/10/22  
<<https://www.instagram.com/p/CAk4345FCU6/>>.

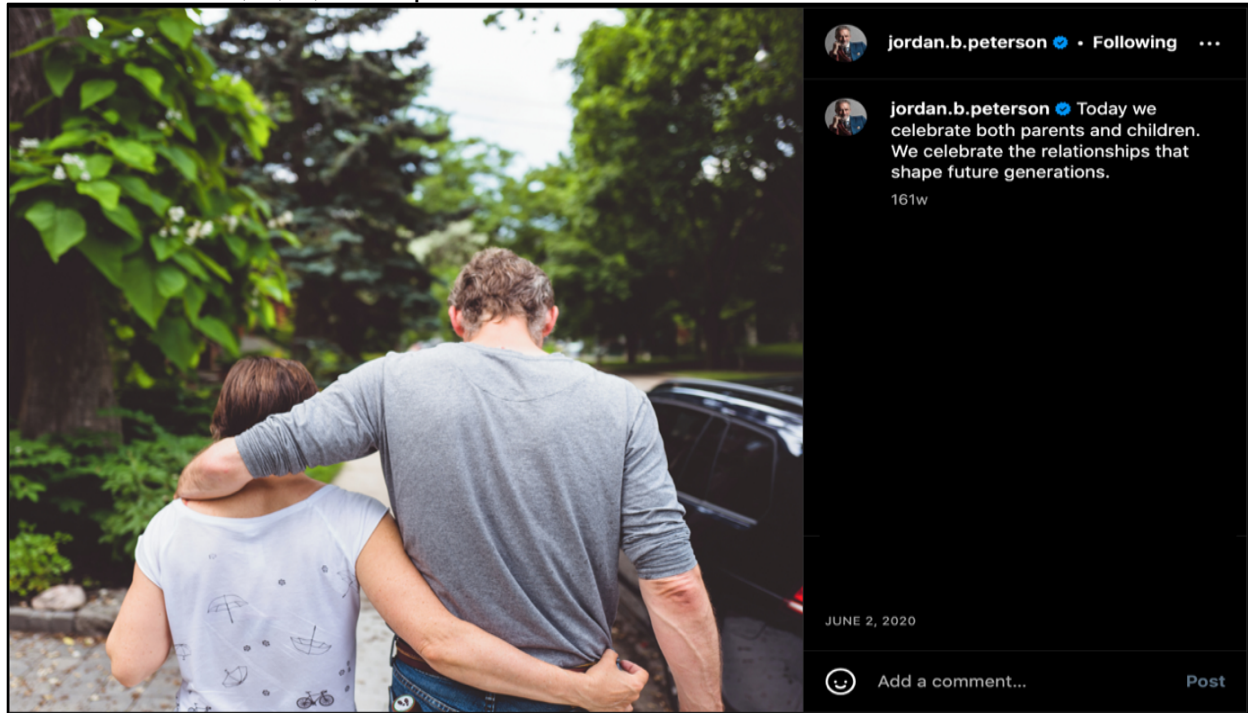
P2g – Markers – 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5 present



Peterson, Jordan, May 19 2020, *The most powerful weapon*, viewed 28/10/22,  
<<https://www.instagram.com/p/CAVZeNCIsqX/>>.

June

P3a – Markers 1, 2, 3, 4 & 6 present



Peterson, Jordan, June 2 2020, *Today we celebrate*, viewed 7/11/22  
<<https://www.instagram.com/p/CA5mVENIG9a/>>.

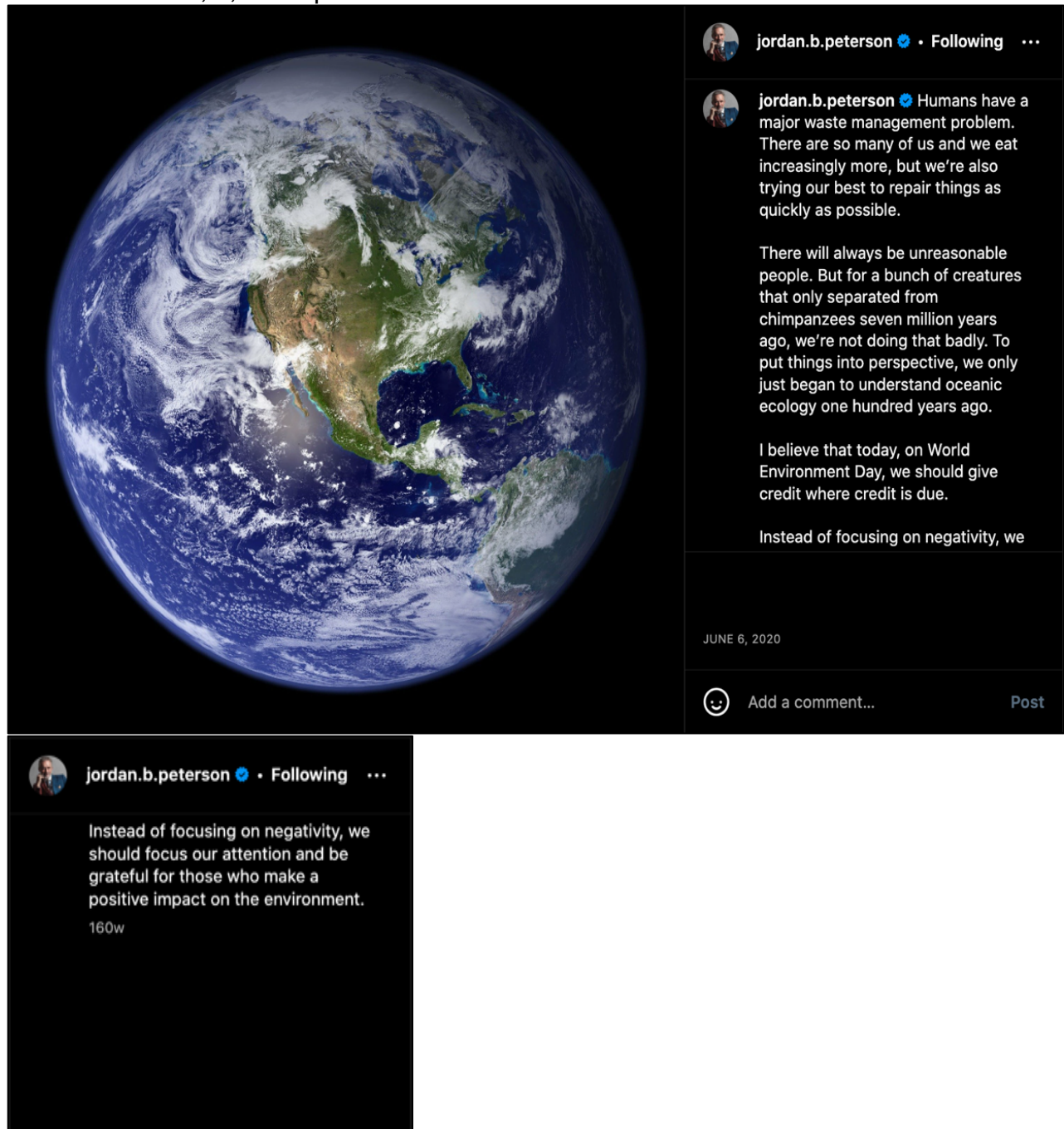
P3b – Markers 1, 2, 3 & 5 present



Peterson, Jordan, June 4 2020, *The present is eternally flawed*, viewed 7/11/22  
<<https://www.instagram.com/p/CA-uM7WF6vK/>>.



P3c – Markers 1, 2, 3 & 5 present



Peterson, Jordan, June 8 2020, *Humans have a major waste management problem*, viewed 7/11/22, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CBDsAWrFcbq/>>.

P3d – Markers 1, 2, 5 & 6 present



Peterson, Jordan, June 13 2020, *Repost from @mikhailapeterson*, viewed 7/11/22, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CBWWi88jcWt/>>.

P3e – Markers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6 present

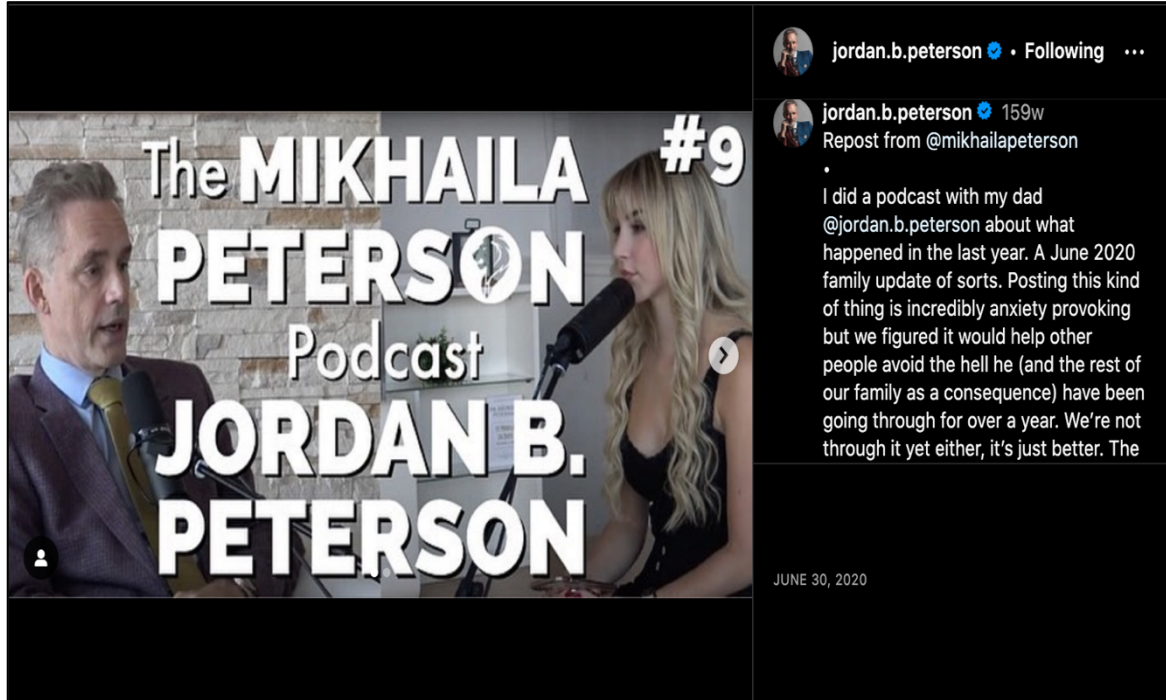




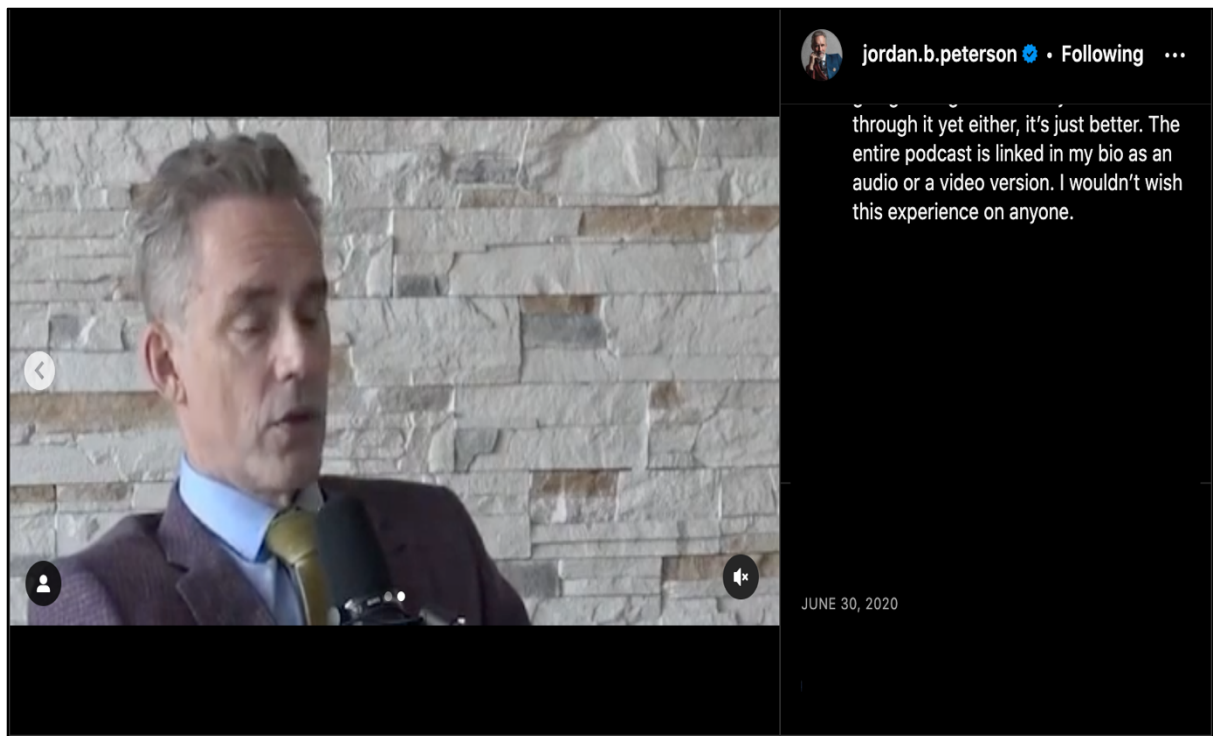


Peterson, Jordan, June 22 2020, *Repost from @mikhaliapeterson*, viewed 7/11/22, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CBtDiIWJOtV/>>.

P3f – Markers 3, 4, 5 & 6 present



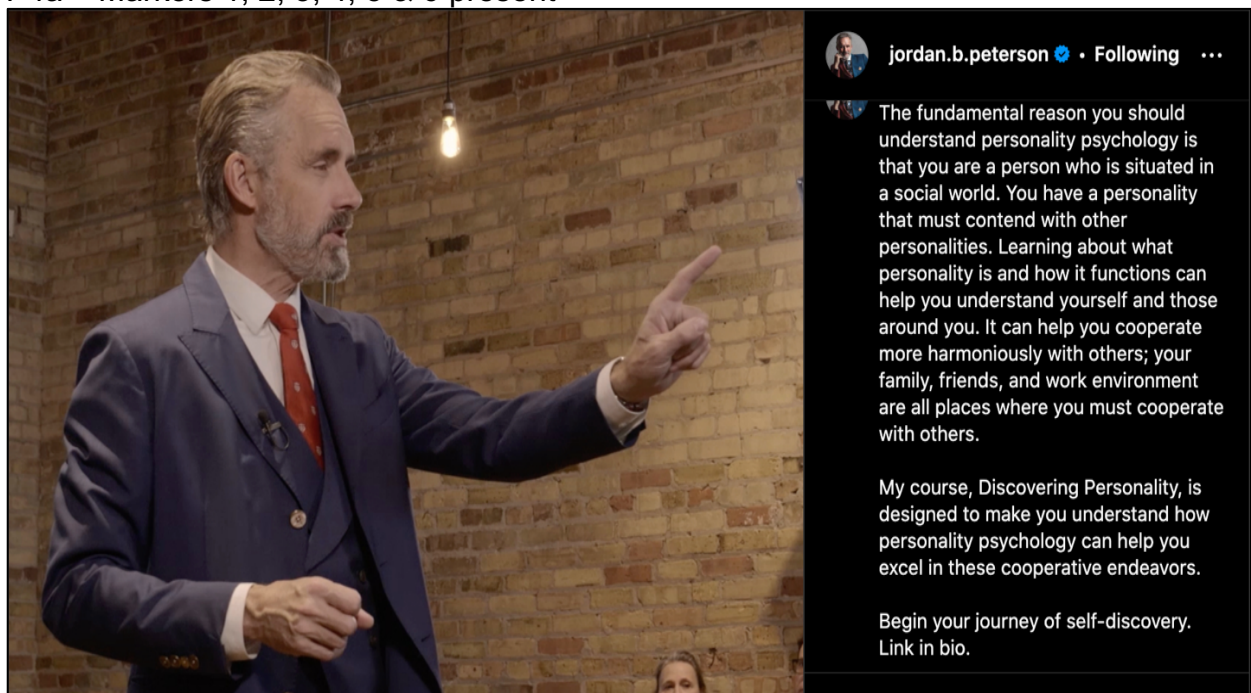




Peterson, Jordan, June 30 2020, *Repost from @mikhaliapeterson*, viewed 7/11/22, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CCDmVz1lhKe/>>.


July

P4a – Markers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6 present



Peterson, Jordan, July 14 2020, *The fundamental reason*, viewed 10/11/22, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CCI1GCaJ3vB/>>.

P4b – Markers 1, 2, 3 & 5 present



It's really hard to think. You have to be **trained like mad** to think. You have to be able to **divide yourself internally** into a couple of different people, and then you have to let those people have a **war in your head**.

jordan.b.peterson • Following ...


jordan.b.peterson • 157w  
And that means you have to develop characters who have opinions in great detail—opinions that might be contrary to your own. And then you have to withstand the tension of letting them have it out.

~ Read more at thinkspot: [bit.ly/war-in-your-head](https://bit.ly/war-in-your-head)

JULY 18, 2020

Peterson, Jordan, July 18 2020, *And that means you have to develop characters*, viewed 10/11/22 <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CCv7B6JJmKs/>>.

P4c – Markers 1, 2, 3 & 5 present



INDEPENDENT

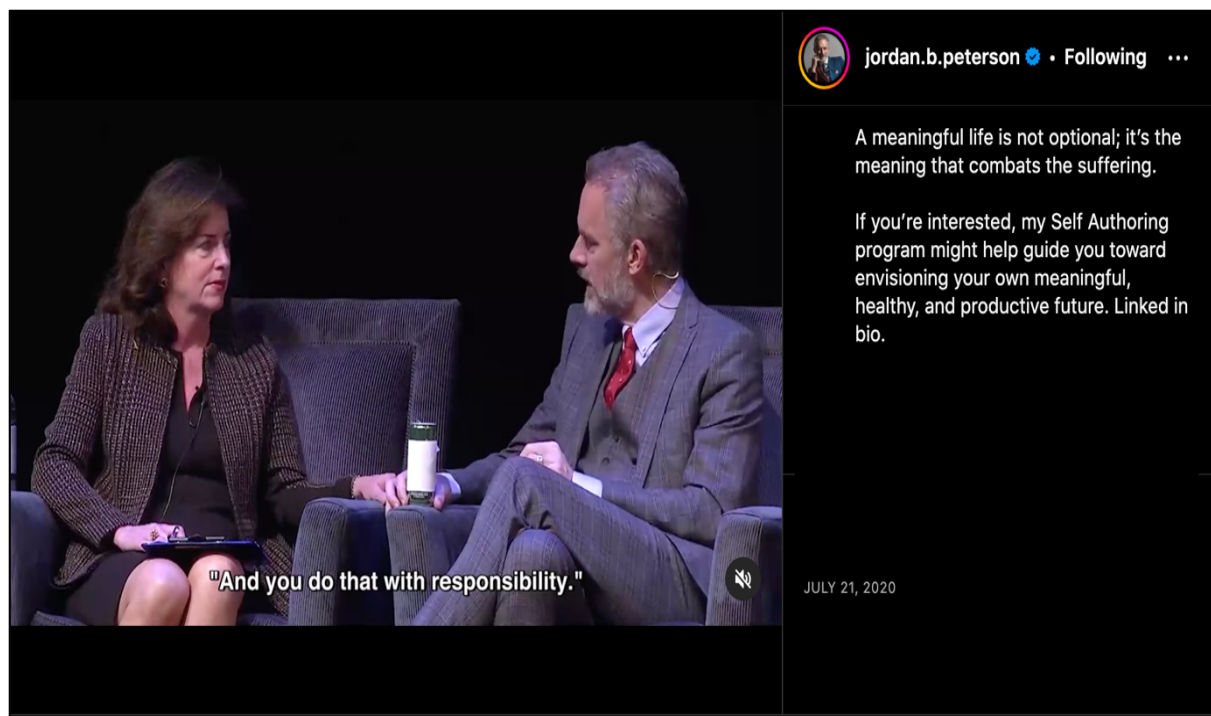
You know, you need a meaningful life.

jordan.b.peterson • Following ...

jordan.b.peterson • Edited • 157w  
There is an inalienable reality of finitude and suffering that characterizes people's lives, so it's not surprising that they become embittered and resentful. But that has to be forthrightly examined as deeply as possible before anything optimistic can emerge.

The proper antidote is the ethical way of life—and not only is it proper, but it is also your duty.

JULY 21, 2020



Peterson, Jordan, July 21 2020, *There is an inalienable reality of finitude*, viewed 10/11/22, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CC6AGtvpQ6T/>>.

P4d – Markers 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5 present

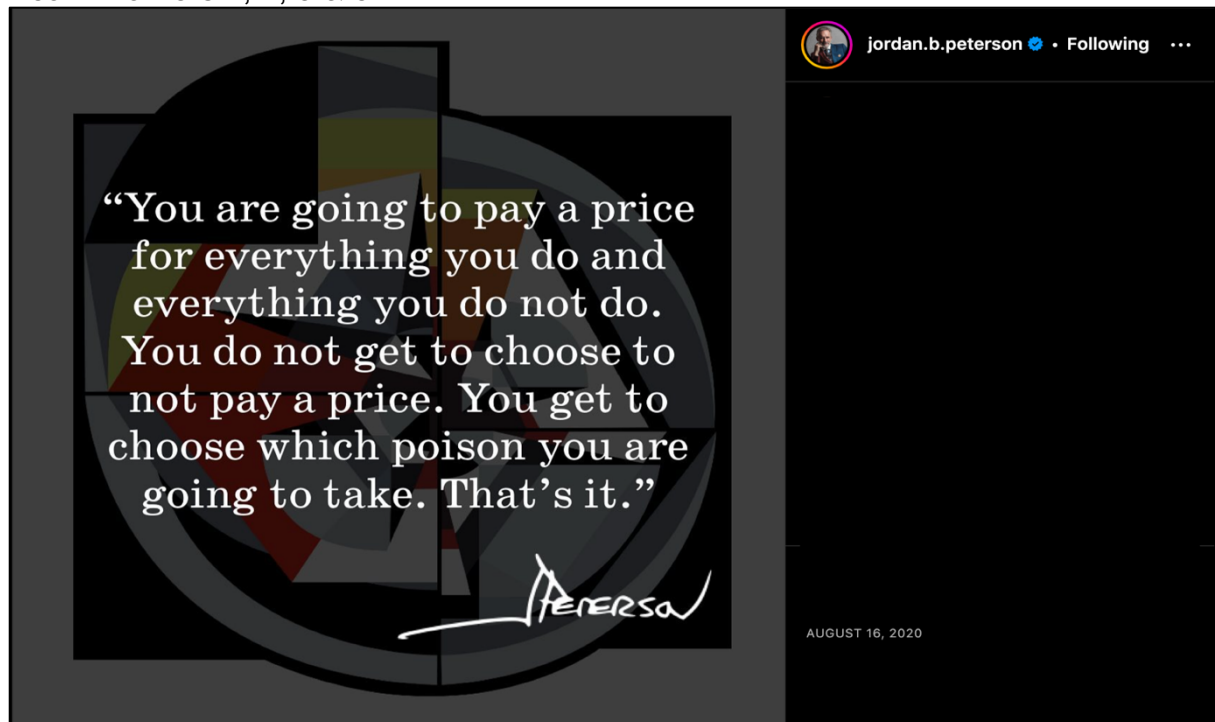


Peterson, Jordan, July 29 2020, *ADVICE for hyper-intellectual people*, viewed 10/11/22 <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CDMQ9mzJMYT/>>.



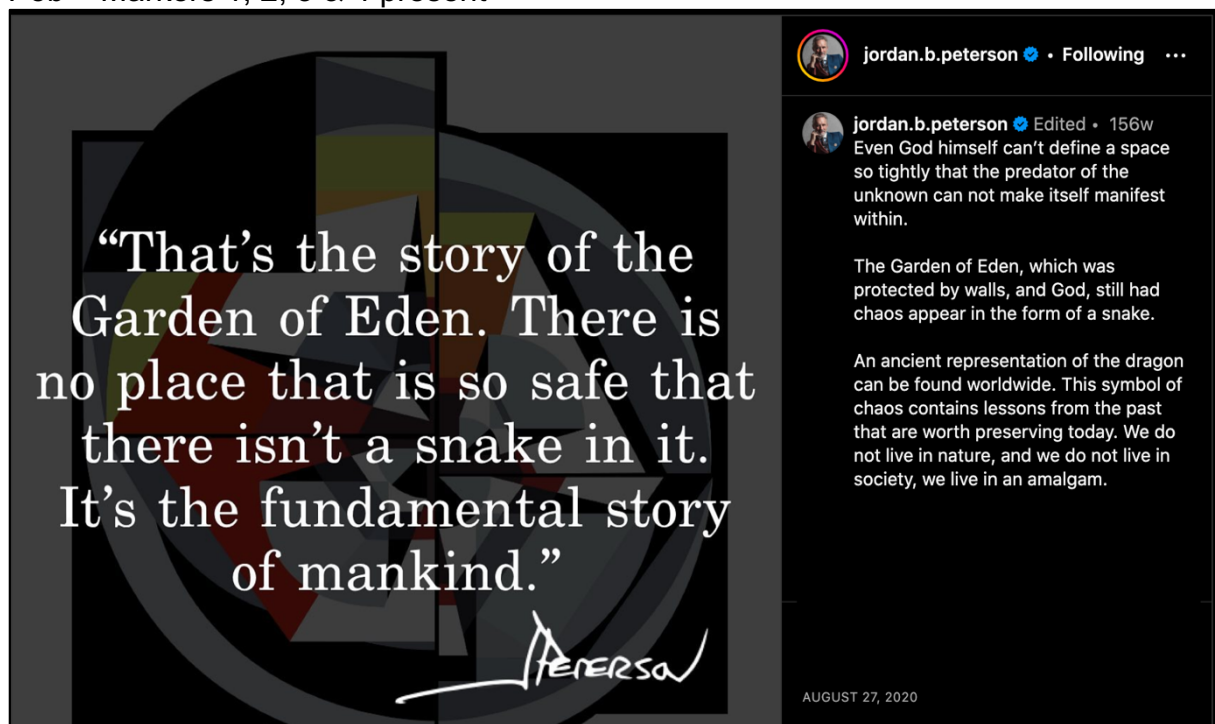
August

P5a – Markers 1, 2, 3 & 5



Peterson, Jordan, August 16 2020, *You are going to pay a price*, viewed 11/11/22, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CD8OF0Jp8Tf/>>.

P5b – Markers 1, 2, 3 & 4 present



Peterson, Jordan, August 27 2020, *Even God himself can’t define a space*, viewed 11/11/22, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CEXNqJ5Jg1O/>>.

P5c – Markers 1, 2 & 5 present



Peterson, Jordan, August 19 2020, *One thing you can do to improve your personality*, viewed 11/11/22, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CECIUIXJZxO/>>.

September

P6a – Markers 3, 4 & 5 present



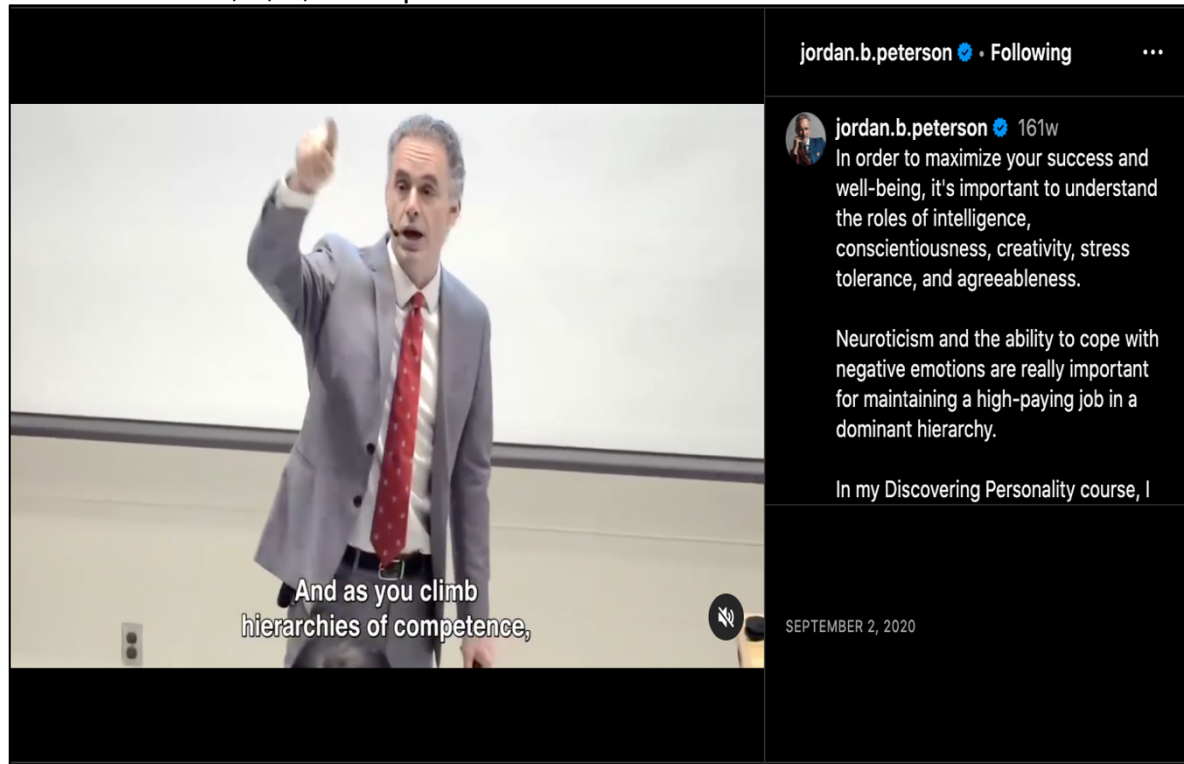
Peterson, Jordan, September 13 2020, *A harmless man is not a good man*, viewed 14/11/22, <[https://www.instagram.com/p/CFDZ\\_OulHtB/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CFDZ_OulHtB/)>.

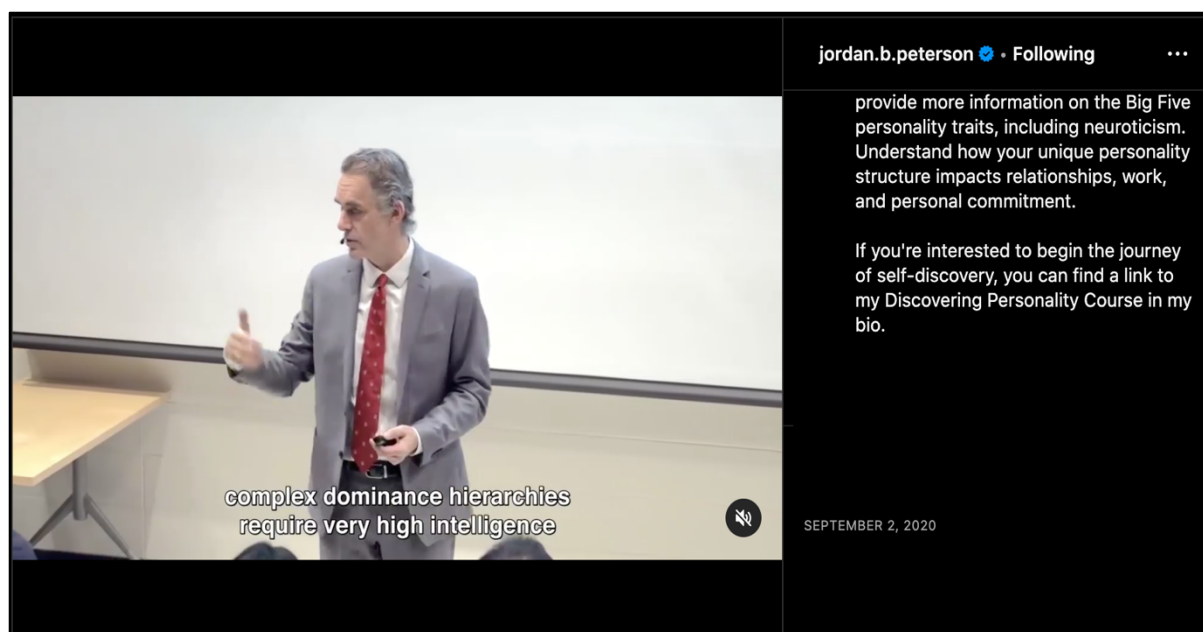
P6b – Markers 1, 2, 3, 5 & 6 present



Peterson, Jordan, September 27 2020, *If you do not say what you think*, viewed 14/11/22, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CFnAsprlb5b/>>.

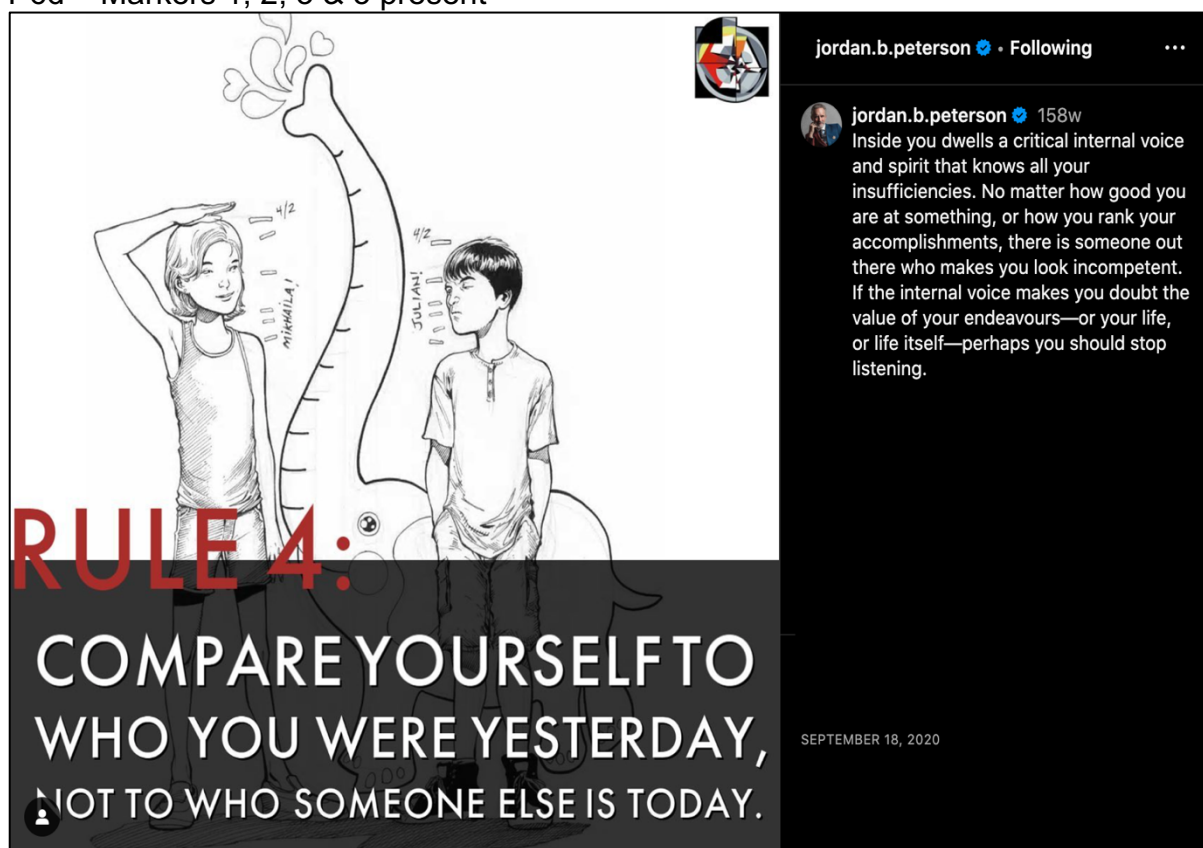
P6c – Makers 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5 present





Peterson, Jordan, September 2 2020, *In order to maximize*, viewed 14/11/22, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CEmPdOUF5H4/>>.

#### P6d – Markers 1, 2, 3 & 5 present



Peterson, Jordan, September 18 2020, *Inside you dwells a critical internal voice*, viewed 14/11/22, <<https://www.instagram.com/p/CFQhWndF2OU/>>.