

Toxic Work in Post-2008 Spain

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To my littlest love, Inés Lucille, for whom this dissertation almost was not, but because of whom certainly it is. I so badly wanted you to have a mom who Ph.inisheD.

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INTRODUCTION

In this environmental cultural studies dissertation, I study how contemporary cultural productions are debating, debunking, and diverging from the conceptual shortcomings of late-phase capitalist approaches to work in post-2008 Spain. Recently, a wave of Spanish narrative and films have been dialoguing — and in many ways lamenting — work’s current, extreme conceptual existence as culturally configured by the epochal hegemony of neoliberal financial objectives. As we will see, these cultural products voice concerns about how capitalist approaches to work produce toxic effects across the social, ecological, and emotional spheres: inequality is surging, interdependent relationships are suffering, nonhuman life is depleting, and experience of a working well-being has declined.

This project, then, is about firstly paying attention to the changing attitudes and increasing awareness to economic toxicity spreading within, but not limited to, contemporary Spain. Secondly, this project is about engaging with current Iberian debates that are expanding and redefining the limited concept of work under the neoliberal era in pursuit of a more sustainable and egalitarian future. To achieve this, this dissertation looks at how Spanish cultural products desire to disassociate work from neoliberal ideologies, to disarticulate work from its cultural and ecological inequities, and to recouple work with more inclusive and ecologically sustaining objectives. In other words, this thesis seeks to unravel the dominant cultural practices, philosophies, and powerful narratives that contribute to the toxic nature of neoliberal work and then rearrange them according to a socioecologically-conscientious, “future-oriented critical gaze”, as represented by post-2008 Spanish narrative and film (Beilin and Ares-López 4).

Recent scholarship across many fields has made invaluable contributions to the impact of late-phase capitalism on human and nonhuman life, yet no cultural studies project has specifically examined work. The only exception to this is Spanish (environmental) cultural studies scholar, Luis Prádanos, who wrote an article, from a pedagogical perspective, about the illogical and suicidal future of work. I will touch on this later in the introduction. Besides Prádanos' work though, many other literary and cultural scholars focus on capitalism in general. Those who do engage with work specifically tend to hold an economist's view (like ecological economist Óscar Carpintero, international political economist Cornel Ban, global economist and sociologist Arne Kalleberg, radical economic geographer David Harvey, etc.) or a philosophical one (like political sociologist Jorge Moruno and poet, essayist, political scientist and ecologist, Jorge Riechmann). Despite their works not precisely pertaining to my cultural studies approach, they, amongst others who appear in this introduction, guide my study and energize it in foundational ways.

So, for my project, methodologically, I have chosen three main works that formulate my environmental cultural case study of work: Director Alejandro Iñárritu's film *Biutiful* (2010), Elvira Navarro's novel *La trabajadora* (2014), and Miguel Brieva's graphic novel *Lo que me está pasando* (2015). All set in post-2008 Spain, these works discuss the human and the non-human as two ecotones in contact with capitalist work as the point of destructive intersection. Together, they visualize and/or articulate the severe problems with neoliberal work. In the process of doing so, they express an urgent need to recalibrate the inequities of work that are majorly contributing to the planetary crisis. But before this project can look at how these three cultural products are dismantling and redirecting the concept of work, the rest of this introduction first needs to present foundational definitions of work and explanations of key concepts that conceptualize and contextualize this dissertation in its entirety.

What is work?

What is ‘work’ anyway? To the modern mind, defining work may feel unnecessary or even trite. Its meaning and functionality are widely accepted, deeply seated, and narrowly defined by the hegemonic dominance of global capitalism. Yet, current monocultural consensus about work tends to obscure the historical fluidity and social relativity of the concept. In other words, work is and has always been an evolving concept, ever adapting to the conditions, restraints, and values of its time.

Michel Foucault’s theory of “epistemes” helps to elucidate this idea. In his book *The Order of Things*, he proposes that within any given epoch, there exists certain cognitive limits, or epistemes, that subjectively form (and limit) the way humans think about what knowledge is, how that guides them to perceive their realities, and how those perceived realities direct them to behave within a given society. Foucault elucidates “epistemes” according to a long metaphor about Diego Velázquez painting and an observer, whose viewpoints and relationships with the same object, “Las Meninas” produce different perspectives, understandings, and outcomes relating to that “classically-informed” object (1 - 18). In a modern sense, epistemes can elucidate and illuminate past and present norms across fields. A quintessential example would be the previously held sex/gender divide. Culture tended to regard sex/gender as one in the same; how one was biologically born as male/female was expected to determine their masculine/feminine roles in society. But then, distinguishing epistemological developments in the conceptualization of sex as a set of biological attributes and gender as a set of socially constructed behaviors and identities revolutionized how humans understood themselves, explained their view of their place in the world, and expanded the way they could act upon that perceived placement.

In the same way, epistemes explain and illuminate cognitive limits and behavioral norms surrounding work. Nearly everyone works or has worked, whether formally or informally, paid or unpaid. And for centuries, those people have approached their work according to the norms of their epochal limits, or epistemes, which continuously shape and re-shape the concept overtime. Epistemes play an integral role in delimiting binary economic categorizations of work like who is allowed to work / who is not, who is paid to work/ who is not, which work is desirable / undesirable, which work is essential / non-essential, and so on. As a result, epistemic iterations of work reflect transformative economic, political, social, or ecological circumstances and beliefs of the moment. As sociologist and global economist Arne Kalleberg writes: “Work also reveals much about the social order, how it is changing, and the kinds of problems and issues that people (and their governments) must address” (1 – 2).

When these problems, issues and shortcomings of work are framed within their contemporary context of a dual socioecological crisis, it becomes only reasonable to argue that a social revolution, like that experienced with the sex/gender divide, is urgently needed. Changing epistemic norms is the only logical path forward to escape the present civilizatory emergency brought forth by these problematic epistemic approaches to work.

Taking a brief detour into a few of work’s epistemic existences— specifically precapitalist work, industrial work, capitalist work, and neoliberal work (both economically and culturally) — maps how economic beliefs travel across time and space, crafting, tailoring, and molding a subjective and relative configuration of work along the way. Tracing such differences plots reference points for work, ultimately exposes how work today is ontologically entrapped by capitalist doxa and how those doxa inform, toxically, the epistemological shortcomings of the concept of (neoliberal) work in post 2008 Spain.

What is ‘precapitalist work’?

According to the public works of Spanish anthropologist and ecofeminist Yayo Herrero, work during precapitalist times used to encompass all the life-sustaining activities that protected the multispecies collective; work was as much an ecological dependency as a social interdependency. From the food and other elements that humans cultivated to the time they devoted caring for each other, the invaluable processes of work revolved around labors of care: care for the home, for the land, and for interpersonal relationships. Rather than being solely economic, Herrero reframes these processes as a vital anthropological condition, because they are “absolutamente esenciales para que pueda existir la vida humana y otras vidas no humanas también” (“no es posible” [8:44 – :52](#)). She concludes that these processes and relationships “no pueden ser expresados en términos monetarios” ([8:53 - :56](#)).

Interestingly, Herrero’s perspective of precapitalist work also aligns with our species’ unparalleled evolution. In his book *Sapiens: A brief history of humankind* (2014), renowned historian Yuval Noah Harari theorizes that the human ability to survive and to flourish can be ascribed to an unprecedented capacity *to band together* under real and imagined causes *and to cooperate* flexibly in both small and large numbers.

Harari exemplifies different epochal moments to illustrate his theory. In precapitalist times, he describes how the formation of hunter-gatherer communities was crucial in enduring the Ice Age. To protect themselves from harsh conditions, these communities stuck together and collectively divided up the work: foraging, household chores, and caring for the young and elderly. As a result, hunter-gatherers could spend their time in more varied and rewarding ways and were less vulnerable to starvation, poor diets, and disease (73). Harari writes, “The wholesome and varied diet, the relatively short working week, and the rarity of infectious diseases have led many

experts to define pre-agricultural forager societies as ‘the original affluent societies’” (49). Precapitalist processes and relationships like these, meaning human approaches to *collective* work, is how and why Harari believes that Sapiens have survived, evolved, and improved their quality of life. He contends it is also how they have come to, for better and for worse, “...rule the world, whereas ants eat our leftovers and chimps are locked up in zoos and research laboratories” (26).

Precapitalist approaches to work, as understood by Herrero and Harari, continued during the agrarian age when farming emerged as the main source of employment in Europe (Pollard 192). Workers, often bands of family members, labored six days a week from sunup to sundown to feed themselves, the country, and their wallets. In connection with Herrero’s and some of Harari’s ideas, work was viewed and performed as a directly life sustaining activity that required collective fealty. And because Catholicism, which was deeply rooted and nurtured throughout society at that time highly exalted the humble and hardworking pastor, farm work, as situated within the epistemes of precapitalist work, was characterized not just as a job but also as a dutiful labor of care and a noble vocation. Common discourse about work during this time lauded the ordinary life that the agrarian model of work provided. Though capitalist approaches to work were beginning to take root (specifically in the ecologically dangerous and disproportionate form of monocropping and labor exploitation), some still romanticized this era of agricultural work as “the good society” (Taylor, Berry, Thompson, [Warzel and Peterson](#), Wirzba).

Precapitalist work was far from perfect in many ways, and it should not be idealized; Harari reminds readers that social and medical conditions could still be harsh and unforgiving (49). Still, conceptualizations of work during this era were motivated, in part, by the material dependencies and social interdependencies surrounding labors of care. Such an expansive understanding and collective approach to work did aim to support community survival and to

improve the overall human condition. I propose the economic motto of this era could be “We look after our own”, because work was motivated by interdependent labors of care.

Therefore, in this dissertation, when I refer to precapitalist work, I am often signaling the life-sustaining dynamics that included but also exceeded the exclusive nature of capital-seeking objectives.

What is “industrial work”?

But with the onslaught of new technological instruments, agrarian labor practices became more efficient, food supply augmented, public health improved, the population increased, and agriculture became less profitable (Domenech and Rosés, Álvarez-Nogal and Prados De La Escosura, *Xunta* n.p.). Thus, capitalism in Spain, like in many other countries, was emerging in the form of industrialization as employment norms shifted. Farmers with “sus días contados” were drawn in from the fields into the factories for the chance for better or higher wages (Biglino Campos 35).

In contrast to the pre-capitalist agrarian era where workers were bonded by blood relations, during the Industrial Age work was primarily done by the individual alongside other, non-related individuals who were bonded together in labor solidarity. The words of various prominent economic philosophers— namely Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Emile Durkheim, and John Keynes— highly popularized this ideal. In *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) Marx and Engels encourage that working class solidarity would reconcile class struggles and class antagonisms that capitalism would inevitably produce in a wage labor society. They famously write, “WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!” (67). In *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893) Émile

Durkheim agreed labor solidarity would prevent class antagonisms, but he also thought it would foment social cohesion and advance society all together, too (3, 12, 23).

Then, perhaps inspired by society's growing desire for an improved working well-being, economist John Keynes proposed a new economic theory. In his seminal work *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (1936), he challenged the prevailing theoretical belief of capitalism that free markets and deregulation would advance society. When it came to work, he rejected that laissez-faire policies would secure full employment in society so long as workers were "flexible" with their wage demands. Instead, he asserted that free markets have no self-balancing mechanisms (i.e., rejecting Adam Smith's "invisible hand" theory). Conversely, Keynes thought that the government had a duty to intervene to ensure basic rights and conditions were legally set to protect the welfare of the State — and of the State's workers.

Throughout the post-war industrial era, several societies put Keynes' words into practice. Inspired by the economic aphorism that "a rising tide lifts all boats", governments implemented social safety nets, expanded public services, and guaranteed certain labor protections such as the 40-hour work week (Massey 5; Putnam 34). Economic historians have commonly described this era as the "Golden Age" due to the low rates of unemployment, inequality, public debt, and financial crises that it was able to achieve by negotiating with and on behalf of the middle class (Marglin and Schor 1). Labor solidarity, then, can be seen as a new iteration of collective approaches to work that aimed to support community survival and to improve the overall human condition.

In Spain, the popular rhetoric of labor solidarity took shape in a burgeoning worker's movement. In 1879, typesetter Pablo Iglesias founded the highly influential Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE). The following year he started PSOE's associated union and long-standing

powerhouse, the General Union of Workers (UGT). From then on, general strikes, trade unions, labor federations, and periodicals like *Solidaridad Obrera* gained enormous traction throughout the early 20th century as they fought to improve the working class's struggles ([see publications here](#) and figure 5 below). Thanks to popular belief and wide participation in labor solidarity, a passionate “cultura obrera” was economically, culturally, and legally constructed in Spain through worker-to-worker bonds (Ralle 50).



Fig. 5. On the left, the first issue of *Solidaridad Obrera* on October 19, 1907, titles its cover page cartoon “¡PROLETARIO, DESPIERTA!!”. The paper calls for workers to wake up and to fight their capitalist domination. The issue includes a list of aspirations and demands including a 6-day work week. On the right, the paper, during its “Época 2” circulation shows a cartoon where worker solidarity outweighs the powerful wheel of capitalism.

I argue that the commitment to labor solidarity of Marx and Engels, Durkheim and Keynes only deepened in Spain because of the 1936-1939 civil war and the subsequent four-decades-long autarkic dictatorship that outlawed various forms of labor organization. Paraphrasing political scientist Kerstin Hamann's words, perhaps this is because that which is illegal makes it more worth fighting for (38). Strikes, graffiti, protests, absenteeism, slow work habits, and other underground movements perpetually plagued the entire Franco rule, especially in its last 15 years (Fishman 91, 95, 126). In one (illegal) protest, which attracted over 100,000 Spanish workers, the slogans "Free Trade Unions" and "Franco No, Democracy Yes" communicated the passionate, steadfast belief that freedom was as much economical as political¹ (Gilmour 129).

When Franco passed in late 1975, finally, labor solidarity legally resumed through constitutional rights when the country transitioned to democracy¹. The immediacy speaks to how the rhetoric of labor solidarity etched itself over time into a deeply ingrained sacrosanct value of industrial work that was intertwined with Spain's collective sense of personal freedom and desire for a democratic future. Overall, across the entire tumultuous case of industrialization in Spain, the dynamic of work was informed by, really revolutionized by popular economic theories during that time. Its rhetoric rewrote the syntax of labor; it articulated that labor solidarity was not only for workers, but it was also for the government, too.

In sum, discourses around, at and about work pivoted society into a new social structure, altering the organization of human and governmental relations in both labor and life. Perhaps because of these horizontal and vertical dependencies, progressive economist Jared Bernstein's economic motto of work during this extended period is "we're all in this together" (3).

¹ In the Introductory Section of the 1978 Spanish constitution, Section 7 declares that individuals are free to join or not join unions, and their structures must be democratic (6).

Therefore, when I refer to “industrial work” in the dissertation, I am referring to i) the continuation and fortification of relational dynamics of work through labor solidarity and ii) an architecture of work under the emergence of capitalism that fought for and garnered worker protections as an essential pillar to the concept of work.

What is ‘capitalist work’?

Though capitalism as we recognize it today was building strength during industrialization, the extreme expansion of capitalist logic in the second half of the 20th century drastically limited work in scope to include only remunerated work — altering the social and biological underpinnings that had constructed the concept of work previously (Herrero). Socially, from this point on, the exclusivity of wage labor separated workers from each other. This mainly took shape in the segregation of men from women, who were predominately working in unpaid spaces of care as homemakers, wives, and mothers. Consequently, the various types of capital that were once shared more equally — monetary, professional, political, and social capital – were disproportionately redistributed amongst men. Women, on the other hand, were pushed further down and aside to the socioeconomic periphery as their work was increasingly devalued or invisibilized. As a result, an augmenting androcentric and individualist capitalist labor market financed a social hierarchy, establishing in new ways, for example, advantages for men and disadvantages for women.

It is true, even “fact” as classical political economist John Stuart Mill puts it, that women have nearly always been systematically disadvantaged in relation to men — ever since the primitive days. In his famous book, *The Subjugation of Women* (1869), he writes that a woman’s disadvantage began as a mere bio-physical difference that played out culturally: “from the dawn

of human society every woman was in a state of bondage to some man, because she was of value to him, and she had less muscular strength than he did” (3). It was under the rules, institutions, and legal frameworking of the capitalist society, though, that that unequal “physical” subjugation was converted into “a legal right, giving it the sanction of society” (3). In other words, under capitalism, women went from culturally “compelled” to “legally bound” to their state of socio-economic subjugation (4).

Spanish feminist economist Amaia Pérez Orozco details the social advantages and disadvantages unique to the capitalist labor market as:

... una serie de mecanismos que jerarquizan las vidas concretas y establecen como referente y máxima prioridad la vida del sujeto privilegiado de la modernidad, ... llamaremos el BBVAh: el sujeto blanco, burgués, varón, adulto, con una funcionalidad normativa, heterosexual. En torno a él se concentra el poder y los recursos se define la vida misma. (25, adding to María José Capellín’s original concept of “BBVA”)

To Orozco, the privileging of “BBVAh” working bodies has been made possible by the subjugation of women, in part, through the expulsion of labors of care from the economic sphere. Similarly, radical social scientist and autonomist feminist Marxist Silvia Federici argues that the devaluation and invisibilization of labors of care stands to benefit the male-dominated working class, who without women’s foundational, critical, and exploited work (or similar social services that capitalism flouts), would not be able to appear at work in the same capacity. Such “deceptive relegation” of feminine work as “private” or “personal”, conveniently locates Her work “‘outside’ of capital accumulation”, writes Federici (17). Consequently, the expulsion of feminine work beyond remunerated wages has naturalized exploitation as an economic model of behavior meant to be easily adapted and applied across the social (and ecological, as we will see)

spectrum (17). Ultimately, it serves as an indispensable component to the functionality of capitalism's individualist and androcentric design of work.²

In addition to social changes, from a biological standpoint, capitalist approaches to work also altered our species' evolutionary trajectory. For the first time in history, the objective of work changed. It strayed away from the collective activities that had previously strived to improve the human condition and to augment the probability of survival, as demonstrated by Harari's perspective about precapitalist work. Rather than pursuing increased ecological and social flourishing like in the past, from the industrial revolution and on, work began to prioritize capital accumulation over life³.

Philosopher Karl Marx famously bemoaned this unprecedented biological transition of the economy. Known as the theory of alienation, Marx warned that capitalist work (i.e., wage labor and the division of labor) would estrange humans from themselves, from each other, and from nature, producing species alienation. In his early manuscripts, Marx explains that man is organically and spiritually "a part of nature" ([n.p.](#)). And working apart from nature, meaning working per the social and ecologically destructive objective of capital accumulation, contradicted man's natural ecology by relocating labor outside of his biological essence. Marx writes, "(capitalist) labor is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature" ([n.p.](#) parenthesis mine). To Marx, the extrinsic nature of work reflected the problematic separation between humans and nature under capitalism. In *Capital*, he writes that this fraught relationship, predicated on progress and exploitation, threatens human and nonhuman vitality:

² This paragraph is informed by combining ideas from two of Federici's works: *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the politics of the commons* and her "Wages for Housework" entry in the post-development dictionary, *Pluriverse*.

³ This is the "capital-life conflict" that Pérez Orozco describes in *La subversión feminista de la economía* (57).

Capitalist production... disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and the earth...all progress in capitalistic agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the labourer, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time, is a progress towards ruining the lasting sources of that fertility...Capitalist production, therefore, only develops the technique and the degree of combination of the social process of production by simultaneously undermining the original sources of all wealth—the soil and the worker.” (vol. 1 637-638)

Altogether, Orozco, Federici and Marx’s perspectives provide essential contributions to the concept of capitalist work as a patriarchal and hierarchical system, socially and biologically divisive under today’s epoch. So, in this dissertation, when I say, “capitalist work” and “capitalist approaches to work” I am referring to 1) patriarchal dynamics of work stratifying the social sphere 2) the exclusive limitation of work to capital accumulation and remuneration and 3) the unprecedented biological deviation of work away from the material dependencies and relational interdependencies organic to the grander multi-species ecology.

What is neoliberal work, economically?

The economic hierarchy of work has only intensified with the recent onslaught of late-phase capitalism. Known as neoliberalism, this “born again” version of capitalism (to borrow Evangelical parlance) rose out of the embers of fiscal and cultural crises that were threatening capitalism’s hegemonic vitality in the last quarter of the 20th century. As an economic doctrine, neoliberalism aims to stimulate economic growth in terms of the GDP. This goal is enacted through extreme laissez-faire policies like massive privatization, unprecedented deregulation, and rampant disintegration of public services. While these policies may marginally increase the GDP (while at the same time augmenting a debt-driven economy), scholars have shown that they certainly augment poverty, unemployment, income distribution, health outcomes and other socially detrimental effects (Ball et al. 2013; Collins et al. 2015; Rotarou and Sakellariou 2017;

Ban 2016; [Ostry et. al](#) 2016). Consequently, scholars conclude that, in contrast to its touted goal, the neoliberal project as a reinvented or resurrected form of capitalism procures only two justifiable effects: 1) to enlarge the realm of the market to all spheres of life and 2) to redistribute wealth to the upper echelons of society (Ban 4, Harvey 29). Consequent to these effects, ballooning social inequality definitively characterizes this economic era⁴.

Work, under neoliberalism, looks like the “flexibilization” or “liberalization” of labor laws, meaning labor protections and regulations are laxed or tossed— along with social services that would support the unemployment and underemployment that flexibilization tends to exacerbate. The theoretical reasoning behind labor liberalization is that it is the individual’s job – not the government’s – to organize fiscal and social safety nets. Socially progressive economists have been quick to chide this reasoning. They argue that a lack of regulations often protects profits and not people. To them, because of this capital prioritization, neoliberalism constitutionally alters the social contract by privileging the welfare of corporations over the welfare of the people, declining the possibility for workers to lead a dignified life. In radical economic geographer David Harvey’s seminal work, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, he criticizes that under late-phase capitalism the role of the government is to use public resources “to create a good business climate rather than look to the needs and well-being of the population at large” (48). In progressive economic parlance, this perspective, as outlined by Harvey, is commonly debated as “rugged individualism” and “corporate socialism”. Corporations and businesses freely receive the benefits of the welfare state, while tax-paying individuals are expended, left with little to no assistance.

⁴ I owe this conclusion to my reading of Luis Prádanos’ article "The Pedagogy of Degrowth: Teaching Hispanic Studies in the age of social inequality and ecological collapse."

In the context of Spain, work has undergone such neoliberal transformations, arguably during the end of the Francoist regime, partially after the transition to democracy, and undeniably after the 2008 financial crash. This dissertation is mostly interested in the latter context and its extreme conditions and extreme consequences: In 2010, due to a mixture of fierce external coercion and a passionate domestic campaign led by conservative Mariano Rajoy, Spain fundamentally and neoliberally, rewired the dynamics of work. In political economist Cornel Ban's book *Ruling Ideas: How global neoliberalism goes local* (2016), Ban quotes that according to the memoirs of former progressive Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, Spain's fiscal stimulus plan in response to the 2008 crash was terminated not per fiscal needs but per "external political and economic coercion enforced via financial channels" (200). Ban lists pressure from international leaders (like a conversation with Joe Biden that "terrified" Zapatero) and coercion by the bond market and by the EU as the actual reasons for abandoning the Keynesian-like economic recovery plan in favor of austerity and other neoliberal policies that recapitulated work (200). Described by economists as "Spain's largest labor market liberalization" ever seen, the effects were catastrophic for human well-being (206). Per Ban's research, work was flexibilized meaning that laws were passed to make hiring of part-time (or contract workers) more feasible and firing of employers cheaper (indemnification laws were loosened). The laws also reduced labor union power, decreased public allocations for social benefits by 4% that could assist with underemployment and unemployment, lowered wages, and increased taxes (204 – 205). As a result, unemployment rates skyrocketed to unprecedented levels. Wages plummeted. Pensions disappeared. Welfare programs providing employment safety nets were cut. Millions took to the streets to protest, while hundreds of thousands were sent to

the streets to live. Precarious work—in the form of temporary work, part-time work, or no work at all — dominated the land⁵.

Sociologist Kalleberg defines precarious work as “employment that is uncertain, unpredictable and risky from the point of view from the worker” (2). More important to this dissertation though is how he nuances that precarious work, as dramatically experienced in post-2008 Spain, is *not unique* to neoliberalism, yet he argues that its *ubiquity is* (2). Spanish political sociologist Jorge Moruno corroborates the inescapable ubiquity of precarious work today in Spain: “El problema no es poder rechazar un trabajo precario, el problema es que existan trabajos precarios que no se pueden rechazar” (n.p.). In the past certain professions were known to be precarious, like creative careers. But today, precarity has extended to nearly all skilled and unskilled professions, scaling up and down the professional ladder, cornering workers into unstable careers that they cannot afford to “rechazar” (n.p.). Keeping in mind the unique ubiquity of precarity today, it can be concluded that precarity is not unique to a particular field, nor country, but rather to neoliberal approaches to work in the aggregate.

Precarious work under neoliberalism can often lead to what feminist theorist Judith Butler calls a “precarious life” or the “politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” (25). Butler explains this concept in her book *Frames of War* (2016). In it, she argues that in contemporary (Western) cultures, certain lives are politically “framed” as already lost to poverty, to unemployment, to poor living conditions, to illness, to imprisonment, etc. Therefore, these lives are portrayed as easily dismissible, and violence against them can be more easily justified. While Butler looks at how the Western media uses this tactic to gain support

⁵ See Instituto Nacional de Estadística “Encuesta a personas sin hogar” (2012) Available at: <http://www.ine.es/prensa/np761.pdf> for more precise numbers.

for war (by arguing the need to lose the ‘already lost’ so that ‘the living’ may live), I see her theory as applicable to neoliberal work as it politically frames certain lives as unworthy of dignified working conditions, and thus exposes them to violence of many kinds (precarious wages = precarious housing, health, environmental conditions, etc.).

And because neoliberalism views the burden and potential violence of a “precarious life” to be an individual’s problem — not to be intervened with lest break the social (and corporate) contract of the economic model — progressive economist Jared Bernstein has quipped that the motto of work under the neoliberal episteme is now “you’re on your own” (3). Such asymmetrical social, economic, and political violence through work that cuts humans off from the social and ecological interdependencies needed to lead a healthy life leads me to understand neoliberal labor ideologies as but an insidious euphemism for the prioritization of late-phase capitalism over human life.

What is neoliberal work, culturally?

Thinking about work and precarious lives as intertwined dialogues with scholars who have similarly pointed out that the neoliberal project is not just about reconfiguring economic policies; it is also about transforming *and* entangling the entire culture of work and life together. Neoliberalism’s financial objectives, productivity and growth, have altered the rhythm of life in general; they have converged worktime and personal time into one prolonged job shift. In his book *No tengo tiempo*, Moruno explains: “el tiempo vital se convierte en tiempo de trabajo disponible para el capital... Tiempo que no se tiene porque el trabajo se come a la vida, y la vida cotidiana queda subsumida bajo el mercado” (n.p.).

At the workplace, Moruno's words can be exemplified via the neoliberal obsession with capital accumulation that disproportionately fills time with left-brained activities "in ways that can be measured and registered in accounting systems" to justify payment (Berg and Seeber 72)⁶. Anything that falls outside of "hyper-rational and economic goals" — like chatting to a co-worker in the hallway, pausing to meditate or to sip some coffee, or going for a stroll around a nearby park — categorically falls to an "economy of waste", undeserving of remunerated or respected time (Berg and Seeber 83, Readings 175). As a result, many essential intelligences, essential to human well-being, are undervalued, such as the social, emotional, and ecological IQ. Culturally, then, neoliberal work is not only a social hierarchy; it is also an intellectual one too that privileges certain types of knowledges and activities (i.e., financial) that comply closely with its capital-seeking objectives.

At home off the clock, as Moruno's words indicated, neoliberal approaches to work "se come a la vida". Workers persist in excessive, plugged-in hours "Como un móvil que está perpetuamente enchufado" (n.p.). Even while not formally working at home, the productivity and growth culture of neoliberal work still leaks into the quotidian cracks. For example, more than ever before, writes journalist Julie Beck, leisure time is commonly 'spent' in productive, capitalist ways. This often takes shape in the form of hobbies that build skills, produce knowledge, and provide an itemized sense of progress (n.p.). In essence, hobbies add lines to a person's "experiential C.V.", or the collectable experiences that people labor towards to demonstrate their social worth and morally compliant neoliberal work ethic (Keinan and Kivetz 935). Even when "unplugged", workers continuously operate and execute cultures of neoliberal

⁶ See Margaret Thornton's explanation of how neoliberalism hyper-privileges left-brained activities in her article "Universities Upside Down: The Impact of the New Knowledge Economy". *Reconsidering Knowledge: Feminism and the Academy*.

work. Thinking through this transformative nature of work into the private sphere reveals how neoliberal work is a culture that workers live, not just an economic activity that workers do.

Because of these cultural shifts, the human existence under neoliberalism has been reducing to a limited social reality in which capital accumulation defines and motivates our time, our work — and some scholars would even aver —our species.⁷ Across time, philosophers have long debated whether *homo sapiens*, beings distinguished by their cognitive capacities, should be more accurately taxonomized as *homo economicus*, or beings distinguished by their economic activities. Political theorist Wendy Brown recently reinvigorated this conversation, revising Foucault’s original understanding of *homo economicus* within the neoliberal context:

To speak of the relentless and ubiquitous economization of all features of life by neoliberalism is thus not to claim that neoliberalism literally *marketizes* all spheres... Rather, the point is that neoliberal rationality disseminates the *model of the market* to all domains and activities — even where money is not at issue — and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors, always, only, and everywhere as *homo economicus*. (31)

Applying the perspective of Marx, *homo economicus* emblemizes an iteration of how “All history is nothing but a continual transformation of human nature” (Ollman citing Marx, 79). Contemplating society as a collection of *homo economicus* whose lives, inside and outside of work, are defined by their market activities draws attention to how neoliberalism exceeds economic activities contained within the workplace. It more closely resembles an entire “economy of life” that rules all realms and exchanges of life, as Spanish cultural studies and environmental humanities scholars Kata Beilin and William Viestenz assert in their introduction to the *Ethics of Life: contemporary Iberian debates* volume (xii).

⁷ I owe this thought in part to Spanish cultural studies and environmental humanities scholar Luis Prádanos’ ideas in *Postgrowth Imaginaries*. He argues that in the neoliberal ecology the human experience is reduced to a limited social reality in which capital accumulation, the driving activity behind work, is the central objective of life (11).

In sum, when I use the phrase “neoliberal work” in this dissertation, I am employing both the economic ideologies that configure work and the cultures of a productivity and growth that uniquely characterizes work *and* life today.

What is ‘toxic work’?

Besides social costs, the neoliberal conceptualization of work accrues enormous environmental costs, too. In a planetary context, the current model of work now destroys life instead of sustaining it. Its sacrosanct pillars of productivity and growth threaten the biophysical equilibrium of Earth by transforming its climate, diminishing its biodiversity and lastly by endangering the possibility for human (and nonhuman) societies to continue living in the future.

In one of his essays contained within *Un mundo vulnerable* (2000), Spanish philosopher and ecocritical poet Jorge Riechmann, citing the 2011 work from la Asociación Ambiente Europeo (AAE), details how human activity produces enormous amounts of single use plastics and other microplastics that make their way through the food chain, disrupt endocrinological processes of animals, alter environmental habitats, and threaten and exterminate a variety of species within human and nonhuman life. Riechmann frames that this specific example of dangerous economic activity is just one of “Los ejemplos del “fin de la naturaleza” (en este sentido) que podríamos aducir son innumerables...” (18-19). In one of his ecocritical poems, Riechmann laments the intensifying connection between economic progress and ecological destruction: “Esta danza macabra de nuestro tiempo ... / del cosmo al muladar, del ritmo a la ruina. No se detiene el progreso. Imperturbable, Dama Historia continúa avanzando sobre sus raíles de intestinos humanos” (81).

Along with facing a dire species extinction problem around the globe because of toxic work, Spain's energetic consumption is out of ecological control. It is estimated that its current ecological footprint is grossly over-consuming its own bioterritorial capacity⁸. In fact, writes Prádanos, "If all nations had the same ecological footprint as Spain, more than three Planet Earths would be needed to keep up with its material inputs and absorb its waste" (*A Companion* 9). Thus, the infinite growth paradigm essential to neoliberal work is not only ecologically unsustainable, but it is also a biophysical fallacy that induces death across a variety of life forms and landscapes, as darkly depicted by Riechmann's macabre words.

Similarly, Spanish ecological economist Óscar Carpintero worries about how nearly all ecosystems within Spain's territory are degrading. He suggests that society abandon the exclusive measurement of GDP as a means of determining the functionality of the economic system. Instead, he believes Spain should also think about "*el metabolismo de la economía española*," a means of societal analysis that investigates "los flujos físicos que atraviesan el sistema económico" (322). As much empirical as theoretical, *el metabolismo de la economía española* is configured based upon the interaction of biophysical, socio-institutional, and monetary realities meant to draw attention to the lethality threatening the future of contemporary society (321-322).

Prádanos further exposes the biophysical fallacy of late-phase capitalism that threatens humanity and Earth's future. Neoliberalism, he writes, is a "necrotic machine" because its constant growth is extinguishing life at an unprecedented rate. Within the context of a limited biosphere, its limitless metabolism cannot be sustained ("Energy Humanities" 27). He explains:

Neoliberal globalization generates and exacerbates the present ecological crisis. The ongoing economic and ecological crises are interconnected, because when the hegemonic

⁸ See Carpintero's *El metabolismo de la economía española*

economic system grows, it depletes the environment and when it does not grow, it becomes socially unsustainable (as we can see in Southern Europe these days). The problem arises from an economic system that exploits and commodifies both humans and non-humans as mere resources to trigger constant economic growth in the context of a limited biosphere. This creates an inherently impossible biophysical situation because economic growth depends on material and energy depletion. (“Pedagogy of Degrowth” 154)

From the perspective of an educator, Prádanos contends that continuing to teach students how to become competitive workers in such a necrotic, global market is illogical *and* suicidal (154, citing David Orr).

The ‘suicidal’ trajectory of toxic work in Spain — and around the world — fits within society’s interrogation into capitalism’s ecological ramifications: its causes, its effects, its duration, its scale. In 2000, Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer began this interrogation. They contended that we had definitively left the Holocene, the geological era of diverse human and non-human flourishing dating back since the end of the Ice Age⁹. Because of this, they proposed that our current geological era should now be named “The Anthropocene”. The new epochal name, literally meaning the Age of Man, suggests that prodigious humanity activity now rivals the power of any natural geological force upon Earth (17). Though geologists are still debating what to call our current era, the “Anthropocene” as a new linguistic frame of reference generated cultural acknowledgement of our species’ violent agency on Earth¹⁰. Yet, the “Anthropocene”, or the Age of Man, inequitably blames all of Man for the ecological crisis. As such, it fails to identify which man and which activities of man, such as toxic work, possess violent agency.

In 2009, Andreas Malm addressed this issue. He narrowed down “The Anthropocene” to “The Capitalocene”, blaming the capitalist man for our precarious epoch. Inspired by a

⁹ I am applying the definition that Anna Tsing used in her lecture titled “Feral Biologies”.

¹⁰ I owe this observation to Rosi Braidotti’s book *The Posthuman* (2013), in which she refers to humans as a “violent species” on Earth (65).

conversation had with Malm, environmental historian and historical geographer Jason Moore agrees and argues that capitalism is the primary agent that violently destructs nature. Not to be confused with capitalism— the mere economic and social system – Moore’s interpretation of “capitalism” references a “world-ecology”, the multi-faceted relations and dynamics that operate as a critical apparatus in the extinction of species, geographies and cultures through pervasive methods that transform capital, power, and nature (7).

I view toxic work as one of these pervasive methods, as its activity is inextricably tied to the decimation of many of the planet’s major systems: the biosphere, the hydrosphere, the atmosphere, and the cryosphere. The longer this style of work exists, the more rapidly it traverses the globe, and the deeper it settles into its new homes, the more intense the eco-systemic precarities of our time become. Leaning on the work of researchers like Crutzen and Stoermer, Malm and Moore, Herero, Harari, and Prádanos, never has humanity seen such apocalyptic ecological projections because of our very own work.

Work’s necrotic nature today — meaning the more work, the more that dies — evinces that work is materially toxic now more than ever before. Therefore, in this dissertation I propose the idea of “toxic work”, or the harmful economic activities that deplete life and environments. Toxic work is real and tangible in contemporary society; it can be seen pillowing within the urban smog of cities or wading within the indefatigable “*marea negra*” along coastlines.

In my cultural studies and environmental humanities dissertation project, I study this problematic nature of work in post-2008 Spain. While late-phase capitalism would argue that work’s shortcomings result from temporary crises (the financial crash, the pandemic, supply and demand conditions, etc.), I contend that work’s problem is endogenous. Examining various manifestations of “toxic work” in Spanish society and cultural products reveals work’s

epistemological insufficiency; meaning, since work no longer works for workers, nor for the environment, then the problem must lie with capitalism's rendition of work itself.

As I will show in the dissertation, the problems with work are as viewable in Spanish cultural products as they are in the smoggy air and dirty water that contaminates human lives and the multispecies world. Likely because of this, in contrast to Beilin and Viestenz's "economy of life", some scholars have even posited theories that approximate neoliberal work more towards what I would think of as an "economy of death". One comparative literature professor and economic philosopher, Warren Montag, proposes the idea of "necro-economics" or the interpretation that late-phase capitalism's laissez-faire market processes selectively let some die so that others may live (11).

Such dark cultural depictions and desolate scholarly debates about work in the 21st century have led multiple scholars to question if the world will soon exist without work — or without humans (Kolbert, Moruno, Rifkin, Srnicek and Williams, Susskind, etc.). Elizabeth Kolbert's book *The Sixth Extinction: An unnatural history* (2014) looks at evidence that suggests the world is on the verge of its 6th extinction, which is primarily fueled by human activity; Jorge Moruno's *No tengo tiempo* (2018) "surfea a golpe de aceleradas reflexiones una revolución geohistórica" that explores how "la lucha por la abolición del trabajo se haya acabado convirtiendo en una pugna por la significación, reapropiación y reconfiguración de la relación entre tiempo y vida" (prologue n.p.); Jeremy Rifkin's *The End of Work* (1995) hypothesizes that mass unemployment will be the number one issue in the 21st century, because the market economy will no longer be able to absorb the unprecedented amount of surplus labor that corporate capitalism creates; Srnicek and Williams' *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a world without work* (2015) argues that neoliberalism is not working. It forces millions into poverty and into underemployment (precarity).

Their book makes radical demands for a complex postcapitalist economy that will liberate humans from the inequalities that neoliberal work foments; Daniel Susskind's *A World Without Work: Technology, automation and how we should respond* (2020) believes that technological automation is threatening a variety of careers. Susskind offers techno-optimist solutions for a world where work can no longer be the center of human lives; Alan Weisman's *The World Without Us* (2008) makes an environmental assessment of what would happen to Earth if humans were to become extinct. The underlying tension that such examples of scholarship appear to present is that neither work nor humans can salubriously live while the other parasitically survives.

I explore this surmounting tension throughout the dissertation, pressing into its epistemological friction. Neoliberalism's epistemological narrowing of work relies on parasitic processes of extraction and exploitation of both human and nonhuman life and materials and paradoxical practices of global developmental, capital expansion and social exclusion to achieve its myopic financial ends. This problematic paradigm has become, relatively recently, the dominant approach to work in Spain (and nearly world-wide), and as Prádanos illuminates, is intimately intertwined with massive socioecological decimation: the marginalization of neoliberal critics, displacement, inequality, animal suffering and extinction, food insecurity, depeasantization, rural-urban maldevelopments, waste proliferation, soil depletion, water mismanagement, biodiversity loss, unsustainable energy use demands and a near total foreign fossil fuel supply dependency, political corruption, increased toxic exposures, and more. In other words, the economic gains of work under the neoliberal episteme can only be counted as "progress", "development", "modernization", or even framed as a "Spanish economic miracle", if such extreme costs are totally ignored, as Prádanos' work contends ("Introduction" 5, 13). The cultural dominance, normalization, fealty, and hegemony of neoliberal fantasies, philosophies,

imaginaries, and practices easily overwhelm and obscure these costs. However, it is critical to remember, once again, that it was not always this way. In an interview with one of this dissertation's primary cultural product creators, Spanish cartoonist and graphic novelist, Miguel Brieva, reminded me that the world can — and has — existed without capitalism, but capitalism cannot exist without the world. Capitalism is executing itself in the toxic execution of its own fantasy (14:00 – 16:50)! And toxic work is but one of its mechanisms for doing so.

Toxic Discourses and Toxic Work

Of course, toxicity is not only physical. It can be imperceptible and uncertain (Michelle Murphy's "sick building syndrome"), incremental and incalculable (Rob Nixon's "slow violence"), or in the specific interest of the rest of this introduction: metaphorical and rhetorical. Ecocritical pioneer Lawrence Buell frames the metaphorical and rhetorical form of toxicity as "toxic discourses" or the toxic rhetoric deriving from Western attitudes and capitalist values that have critical implications on human and nonhuman life as they rapidly spread across communities and contaminate our world (639). Though different from the material poisons infiltrating bodies and environments, the toxic discourses that circulate society are no less virulent.

Thinking about Buell's perspective, my understanding of toxic work then must also include the toxic ideas, values, and beliefs that we enact about work that ultimately harm our well-being. Scholars worldwide are already discussing and debunking toxic discourses surrounding work. Neoliberal frames like "freedom" (i.e., free market policies) and "flexibility" (i.e., precarity) are frequently studied and associated with financial, psychological, and mental decline in workers.

One sociologist is drawing attention to a less studied toxic discourse framing work: passion. In her recent book, *The Trouble with Passion: How searching for fulfillment at work fosters inequality* (2021), sociologist, Erin Cech found that capitalism persuades workers to inordinately prioritize passion over financial security. While seemingly innocuous (who wouldn't want to love their job?), her extensive data and interviews reveal long-term exploitative and discriminatory consequences for workers. Cech warns that gender, race, and class minorities are especially vulnerable to the nefarious side of passion work, as it encourages them to work harder, without extra compensation, to prove that they too belong where they have historically not. This population's opportunity costs are even pricier since they systemically originate from less economically privileged positions to begin with. Passion as a toxic discourse, then, speaks to neoliberalism's powerfully cunning ability to take sensible economic ideas and to pervert them for its own systematic advantage. Altogether, toxic work and toxic discourses reveal how toxic work is a rhetorical contaminate in society. It also shows the sophisticated reach of discourses around work, and how late-phase capitalism can use them to influence the institution of work in insidious, subversive ways.

The works that I will be studying in this dissertation, as outlined earlier in the introduction, in their own ways, animate aspects of the association between toxic discourses under neoliberalism (like freedom, flexibility and passion) and their consequent metaphorical toxicity.

The Fallacious Logic of Toxic Work

I contend that most, if not all, of the toxic effects of work under the neoliberal episteme are made possible by a common underlying logic predicated on the philosophical, biological,

ecological, and psychological fallacy of individualism. The recent, burgeoning field of environmental humanities unravels this fallacious logic. Scholars like Leonardo Caffo, Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, Stacy Alaimo, and Robin Kimmerer demonstrate the impossibility of neoliberalism's individualism in the environmental context.

Firstly, by favoring capital accumulation above all, neoliberalism foundationally positions humans in an apocryphal orientation as living and working apart from and above nature. Under this orientation, individualism and its right-hand anthropocentrism can be viewed as the true invisible hands that guide the way we work and think about work today. They determine who and what is prioritized as deserving a dignified life. Considering even briefly the innumerable overlapping crises in the neoliberal era because of this orientation, the neoliberal doctrine represents the most exaggerated expression of individualism that has historically existed; we cannot continue to be as individualist as we currently are *and* continue to survive. Theoretical philosopher Leonardo Caffo writes of this existential crisis:

lo specismo è il motore dell'economia" ... Il nuovo habitat in cui viviamo è un pianeta in piena 'crisi ecologica', una situazione che si verifica quando l'ambiente di una specie è cambiato in modo talmente radicale da destabilizzare la sua sopravvivenza (61 -62).

Caffo's ideas about the intersection between speciesism (the belief and practice of treating certain species, like humans, as morally important than others) and the economy (privileging human needs to an extreme so as to maltreat and endanger other beings and environments) speak to the dangerous dysfunctionality of individualism in an interconnected world.

Pioneers of the environmental humanities movement itself, Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing, have similarly sparked critical debates about "The Great Divide" or the dichotomous economic conceptualization that humans and nonhumans are independent entities (11). In her seminal work *When Species Meet* (2013), Haraway breaks down the "fantasy of human

exceptionalism” (or in author Miguel Brieva’s words, “la fantasía del individualismo”) by revealing the spatial, material, and temporal encounters that routinely take place between the human and nonhuman.

In conversation with Haraway’s original idea appearing in *When Species Meet*, Anna Tsing dialogues about “companion species” or the mutually beneficial interdependent relationships that make life on earth possible for a variety of beings (142). Like the carbon dioxide and oxygenic exchanges that take place between plants and humans, symbiotic companion species draw attention to how “species interdependence is a well-known fact — except when it comes to humans” (144). By exploring and contemplating these interactions, Haraway and Tsing’s works deconstruct anthropocentric underpinnings of contemporary binary modes of thinking that establish the illogical basis for the neoliberal episteme (11).

Biologically, Stacy Alaimo’s work in *Bodily Natures* (2010) takes an even closer examination of the interactions taking place between the human and nonhuman. To do this, Alaimo proposes the idea of “transcorporeality”, or the condition that bodies are always intermeshed and interacting with their environments. In essence, transcorporeality is the porosity that occurs between humans and nonhumans. In broad terms, it emphasizes the interconnectedness of bodies to environments by tracing the “often invisible but nonetheless material flows of substances and forces between people, places, and economic/political systems” (9). In this dissertation, the concept of transcorporeality helps to detect the far-reaching environmental consequences of late phase capitalist work. Specifically, it provides a critical reexamination into the toxic nature of work and the powerful social, economic, and cultural transcorporeal forces that manifest themselves across and within human and nonhuman hosts.

While Caffo, Haraway, Tsing and Alaimo's works provide interesting insights into the philosophical and biological fallacy of individualism, Robin Wall Kimmerer's writings decry individualism from an ecological and psychological perspective. In her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants* (2013), Kimmerer contemplates the stories of oppressed people and plants to show how distinct forms of intelligence and ecological practices are predominately ignored by Western cultural and economic patterns. Consequently, she believes that humans are suffering from "species loneliness" or "a deep, unnamed sadness stemming from estrangement from the rest of Creation, from the loss of relationship" (208 – 209). To repair these feelings of isolation, Kimmerer proposes that humans must renounce anthropocentric ways of thinking and reorient themselves back into a reciprocal relationship with earth and Her beings. Only by opening human cultures back up to the ecological sensibilities of the past may humans and nonhumans flourish again. Kimmerer's thoughts on species loneliness aid in my interpretation of contemporary cultural products in Spain that illustrate a withering interior well-being vis-à-vis anthropocentric approaches to work that ignore our environmental needs for interspecies companionship.

In this process of considering Kimmerer's theories, not only will I be applying a much needed traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) to Iberian Studies, but also, I, a Cherokee Nation citizen, will be utilizing my own indigenous perspectives to give space to anti-capitalist knowledge that encourages the economy to "become indigenous to place": to learn about its place, to honor its place, to care for its place, and to never allow its work to interfere with the multispecies ecology (216). In sum, Kimmerer's scholarship underscores the foundational idea that work should be (and used to be) beneficial not only for the human economy but also for the nonhuman. A return to past reciprocal relationships between humans and nonhumans offers a

reasonable first step towards a more resilient future to leave behind the past and present unreasonable dominance of toxic work and its ensuing ecological extermination.

Ecofeminism in the Economy

Overall, toxic work's lethal trajectory demands a proverbial U-turn. Returning to ecofeminist positions that undergirded work in the past could initiate this turn around. Political ecologist Christelle Terreblanche summarizes ecofeminism as the spelling out of "historical, material, and ideological connections between the subjugation of women and the domination of nature" (163). By connecting such networks of powers and disenfranchisement, ecofeminists disassemble the historically patriarchal ways of thinking and being that entammel and extort "othered" beings living and working on Earth, including but not limited to marginalized groups like women.

An ecofeminist approach to the economy as discussed by scholars like Herrero, Orozco, Puleo and Federici is inherently anti-capitalist. It applies ancient feminist wisdom with the goal of governing according to "criterios de justicia" instead of "criterios del mercado" (Orozco 22). By doing so, ecofeminist frameworks remind society that work existed long before capitalism; Prosperity was more than a salary and more than productivity. It was relational. Restoring its relational worth is both social and ecological.

On the one hand, socially, employing economic ecofeminist perspectives reinvigorates value back into the labors of care that are needed to help to achieve a more just and sustainable society in the future (Herrero). Labors of care — understood to be all that entails the reproduction of life from the social (maternity / paternity and other forms of familial care) to the

agricultural — are indispensable in generating the material conditions and interpersonal relationships needed to recuperate and revive a future worth living (Federici).

On the other hand, ecologically, ecofeminist perspectives disassociate work from the exclusive financial objectives of the neoliberal economy and instead recouple it with more inclusive objectives that consider both human and nonhuman life, in all its social and ecological diversity. The essential labors of care that nourish our relationships with others and with nature remind us of the inherent “interconnectivity of all life”, including within the economy, thus, they subvert the individualist logic that wage labor presumes within its role in the stratification of the social sphere and in the destruction of the ecosystem (Terreblanche 163). By modifying, restructuring, and reimagining the ways that the social, financial, and ecological order is conceptualized in the neoliberal era, a more egalitarian world of work that recognizes and honors natural interdependencies could become possible. In the words of Puleo, “es hora de ecofeminismo para que otro mundo sea posible, un mundo que no esté basado en la explotación y la opresión” (16). In the next section, I situate and utilize the theories presented in the introduction within contemporary cultural products dealing with work in post-2008 Spain.

Works about work: the filmic and narrative scene delimiting this dissertation

In response to a radically changing laborscape in Spain, unsurprisingly, a fervent onslaught of cultural products has emerged that vociferously bemoans the life precarity that neoliberal work foments. There are works ranging from docu-fiction-esque films (i.e., *Biutiful* (2010); *Hermosa juventud* (2014); *Techo y comida* (2015); and *El olivo* (2016)), highly critical public access *cortometrajes* (like “La pecera” (2011) and “La lista” (2011), perhaps semi-fiction-esque novels (like Jose Ardillo’s *El salario del gigante* (2011); Isaac Roca’s *La mano*

invisible (2011); Elvira Navarro's *La trabajadora* (2014); Rafael Chirbes' *En la orilla* (2016); Julio Fajardo Herrero's *Asamblea ordinaria* (2018)), to anti-capitalist and anti-austerity graphic novels (i.e., Aleix Saló's works from 2011 – 2013; Santiago Garcia's *Tengo Hambre* (2014); Miguel Brieva's *Dinero* (2008) and *Lo que me está pasando* (2015); Jorge Carrión's *Barcelona. Los vagabundos de la chatarra* (2015); Isaac Rosa and Cristina Bueno's *Aquí vivió* (2016); Laura Pérez's *Náufragos* (2018); Ana Penya's *Todo bajo el sol* (2021)). All these filmic and narrative works contour what I think of as an entire grouping of works about work, happening within but not limited to, post-2008 Spain.

I place these works together— not to engage in the difficult and complex debates about categorization or genre, like Spanish cultural film and narrative studies scholar Juan Egea tackles in his book *Dark Laughter: Spanish film, comedy, and the nation* (2013) — but as a way of situating the primary works of this dissertation within a specific sphere of the current vast scene of Spanish film and narrative. I align this logic with Egea's perspective and research. He writes that genres are not merely bound together because their works share a particular characteristic; their differences, similarities, and “criss-crossing” are unified through each of the work's ability to evoke “mutual illumination” on a subject matter, theme, or aesthetic (8 - 9, paraphrasing Wittgenstein and Cavell). Genre, he concludes, can be seen as a “cultural tool” that can “generate an audience” whose collective illumination on the matter is meant to intervene into a perceived social problem (11, *italics original*). While I am not declaring a genre of work, I do perceive these works about work in a similar fashion. They thematically generate and empower a conscientious audience to the shortcomings of work today within the context of a multilayered socioecological/socioeconomic emergency.

As mentioned in the beginning of this introduction, I have chosen three primary works from these works about work that serve as a cultural case study into neoliberal work: Iñárritu's film *Biutiful* (2010), Navarro's novel *La trabajadora* (2014), and Brieva's graphic novel *Lo que me está pasando* (2015). The works pertain in their own ways, in both differing content and form, to the questioning of neoliberal work as I understand it. While scholars have already been discussing, debating, and raising critical attention to these films and narratives individually, specific attention has not been unified under the theme of work itself. I engage with these critical conversations and steer the dialogue to further illuminate the social and ecological framework, imaginaries, practices, and paradigms relating to the socially undesirable and ecologically unviable concept of neoliberal work in particular.

Firstly, I will explore the film *Biutiful*, an ominous film about illness and the grim end of life of both humanity and the environment under capitalism. The movie has garnered, in addition to world-wide accolades, much scholarly attention. For instance, Spanish cultural studies and environmental humanities scholar Kata Beilin analyzes the film from the perspective of disquieting realism. To her, the movie's montage, motifs, and plot portray Tim Morton's interconnected "dark ecology", where silent and invisible processes drive humans and nonhumans to their environmental, social, and economic demise. Additionally, contemporary Iberian and Latin American Film, Literature and Cultural Studies scholar Benjamin Fraser studies *Biutiful* from the lens of urban crisis. He argues that the film's depiction of Barcelona as a "drab, grim city of labour inequality" full of tragic, marginalized characters reads against the far-reaching idea that Barcelona is a model capitalist city in Europe (20). Within this "dark underbelly" in which the film is set, Fraser sees that the rule of exchange-value dominates and destroys all relationships, effectively connecting and criticizing "the human costs of spectacular

urban modernity” (20, 21). To Fraser, *Biutiful* does not show off a desirable tourist town, rather “a city of the exploited” not worthy of reproduction (25).

Both Beilin’s and Fraser’s viewpoints that the Spanish Mexican collaboration *Biutiful* premiers a contemporary world of capitalist destruction, where environmental and social collapse are inevitable, brings attention to how the labor and life problems in this film are not just Spanish. They are widespread capitalist problems, affecting a mixture of locales and cultures operating within the limited financial objectives of neoliberal work. While beyond the scope of this dissertation, such acknowledgements invite further research into work as a shared, uneven, unjust, and differentiated globally distributed issue, a human and nonhuman crisis, to be explored across borders (a phenomenon theorists have coined as the new “international division of labor”)¹¹. For this project, I focus on the grim and dysfunctional reality of work as presented in the dire context of post-2008 Spain.

Following *Biutiful*, I delve into the literary scene. Predominantly representing this branch of works about work is Elvira Navarro’s *La trabajadora* (2014), a book inspired by current economic realities in Spain. The plotline follows a hardworking woman’s crushing experience in the neoliberal labor market. I situate my analysis of her story within current discussions taking place about the book and its criticism of capitalism, gentrification, and, of course, work.

The first main scholar who informs my viewpoint is contemporary Spanish film, narrative, and cultural studies scholar Susan Larson. She views *La trabajadora* as a hyperrealist, aesthetic response to the 15-M movement that ruthlessly critiques neoliberal objectives of cheapness and economic growth¹². In her article, “Trash as Theme and Aesthetic in Elvira

¹¹ I owe this description of the international division of labor to personal correspondence with Prádanos.

¹² 15-M was an unprecedented citizen’s movement in which millions protested the austerity laws affecting the Spanish working class’s quality of life.

Navarro's *La trabajadora*" she argues that as much in content as in structural style, the book treats the novel's protagonists, two female contemporary cultural workers, like pieces of trash, easily discarded by the global economy that is increasingly encroaching upon and consuming Madrid. While Larson acknowledges that the women's struggles are directly correlated to labor precarity, she takes a more urban studies perspective in the article, focusing on how the neoliberal project, in pursuit of profits, has degenerated the city's infrastructure, has exiled Madrid's vulnerable working class to its peripheral ruins, and has thus degraded them into redundant lives. They are like waste—there is too much of it and nowhere for it to go. Nonetheless, her research most closely aligns with my point of view, as it views the capitalist system within an economy of disposability, or what I think of as the "economy of death". I provide a more narrowed focus to Larson's capitalist perspective, viewing disposability and dysfunctionality from within the concept of work itself.

Similarly, Spanish Philologist Noelia S. García's [public access article](#) analyzes the consequence of neoliberal economics on the Spanish population and on the urban space of Madrid. Overlapping with Larson, García takes special interest in the normalization and of gentrification, both historically and in the novel, as a means towards procuring "la desaparición del exterior y traduciéndose en una sociedad pasiva, pero sobre todo individualista y solitaria" (n.p.). Throughout the article, she gives realistic context to how Madrid and its workers found themselves in their current precarious and passively subordinate situation, "La trabajadora es una novela que refleja el mecanismo de la creación literaria desde la construcción de historias que parten directamente de la realidad y la reconstruyen o reinventan" (n.p.). To her, the most important message of the novel is how the lack of rebellion and protest in the novel remarks of "la formación de una sociedad pasiva que vive ante la expectativa de un futuro incierto" (n.p.).

While I can see that passivity's present in the novel, that could lead to a reader focusing on and/or blaming the individual. Therefore, I rather inculcate the lack of labor change to capitalism's powerful capacity to persuade and to procure fealty to neoliberal approaches to work. All this considered, I, therefore, see the main character of *La trabajadora* as an ensnared victim of the toxic culture, narratives, and imaginaries of neoliberal work rather than a passive and voluntary participant in it. García's article helps me to elucidate this distinction.

And finally, at the end of this dissertation, I look at graphic novels, a resurgent medium that falls within works about work. Not to be confused with the traditional juvenile comic, the graphic novel as a "new horizon of adult comics" is an inventive literary genre that grapples with social discontents of the times (García 226). Anti-hegemonic in content, its characters often embody subaltern voices that shatter official positions of the state, the dangerous metanarratives from above. Because these voices are fictional yet based on current injustices, they break free of their societal-holding cage and sneak into formal discourse from which such voices have been previously barred. A renowned comics artist himself, Santiago García has been among the first to notice the graphic novel creeping into and influencing "sophisticated" debates, he calls it a medium that "appears to know no limits" (182, 279).

In this dissertation I focus on one graphic novelist: Miguel Brieva. An artist certainly ignoring limits, his iconic, innovative, and uniquely structured works have been stirring up trouble for the contemporary capitalist society. His criticism covers a gamut of problems such as the psychological impact of unemployment and underemployment, the nature-culture divide, the social and environmental consequences of consumerism, and the power of technology and mass media over our behavior and imagination. Though all themes are of incalculable value, this

dissertation takes specific interest in Brieva's contributions to the concept of neoliberal work, especially as it appears in his graphic novel *Lo que (me) está pasando* (2015) (*LQMP*).

To Benjamin Fraser, Brieva's *LQMP* can be viewed as a political object of the *quincemayista* (15-M) tradition of post-2008 Spain. Fraser views *LQMP* as a "protest-comic", where Brieva's nontraditional organizational structure challenges the individualist and alienation practices that dominate the neoliberal period (57). Fraser argues that with "a bit more mental work", *LQMP* teaches the reader to recognize and to decipher the intercalated relationships that exist between content/form, social/political/economic and artist/reader (48).

Hispanic cultural studies scholar Ana M. López-Aguilera touches on this point as well. In a critical review of *LQMP*, she asserts that Brieva's negative portrayal of labor and social inequity serves to "bring politics back into people's everyday lives" (70). The idea of increasing political engagement circles back to Fraser's article, in which he equally contends that the book's anarchic nature forces readers to "question the way that not only artistic but also social, political, and economic discourses are constructed" in Spanish life (48). In the dissertation, I examine how both Brieva's form and content function to reorient the human self within a grander social collective, one that recognizes a need for interconnectedness, as seen in past epistemic approaches to work.

Altogether, I look at works about work and the economic criticism arising from those works. In doing so, this project corroborates Spanish author Isaac Rosa's assertion that "trabajo, trabajo, trabajo... sin duda el asunto que, hoy día, supone la mayor preocupación para los ciudadanos de nuestro país" (back cover). When Rosa says "trabajo", though, certainly he means "el trabajo neoliberal" as it has come to dominate his time.

While in this section I have defined and outlined the filmic and narrative scene of work as I see it, in the next section I will specify how I theoretically and analytically traverse these primary works throughout the dissertation.

Overview of the Dissertation

Chapter One, “Toxic Work”, focuses on how neoliberal approaches to work are producing necrotic effects in bodies and environments in post-2008 Spain, as seen in contemporary Spanish film. My primary object of study is Director Alejandro González Iñárritu’s recent film *Biutiful* (2010), a visual narrative that magnifies the far-reaching material consequences of toxic work today. This is seen, I argue, through the film’s portrayal of its ailing protagonists, marginalized workers and Barcelona itself.

Of all the marginalized workers, I look most closely at the main character, Uxbal, who was recently diagnosed with terminal cancer. He works a series of odd jobs in frantic pursuit to save money for his soon-to-be surviving children. But the more he works, the more viewers witness toxicity metastasize; death and decay, correspondingly, advance within him and all around his surroundings. Labor is literally lethal across a variety of environments. By spotlighting work’s material, ethical and economic relationship in the socio-environmental context, *Biutiful* illuminates how toxic work is bringing human and nonhumans to the same sickly, epochal end through a modern and faulty labor design.

Through this moribund plotline, I explore how capitalist work acts like a disturbing spectacle that contaminates an entire economy of death. Through the lens of scholars like Stacy Alaimo, Karl Marx, Warren Montag, Kata Beilin and Luis Prádanos, I trace that economy of death to the transcorporeal network of environments of organisms and ideas, imagined and real,

material and invisible, that deteriorates a variety of life forms. Under this logic, the story of Uxbal (and other marginal workers') death(s) ceases to be a tale of an individual suffering from cancer and difficult working conditions. Rather, the moribund storyline situates toxic work within the grander necrotic character endogenous to the epistemic powers of the neoliberal economy. As such, chapter one serves to foundationally demonstrate how contemporary cultural products like *Biutiful* desire to disassociate the dysfunctionality and decay of work from its toxic neoliberal ideologies.

In Chapter Two, "Neo-nomos at Work in Elvira Navarro's *La trabajadora* (2014)", I expand my understanding of "toxic work" to the discursive. I now explore how cultural products are raising a critical eyebrow to the subversively persuasive use of passion in the labor market. Following Cech's research, I examine the rhetorical side of toxic work through a one-on-one interview with author Elvira Navarro and an analysis of her metonymically titled novel, *La trabajadora* (2014).

The book follows the unraveling of Elisa, a copy editor and accomplished writer, whose living conditions and well-being are deteriorated by her determination to follow her professional dreams. Unlike common meritocratic neoliberal fantasies that push that hard work will eventually pay off, ultimately, Elisa's passion work never does. Trapped in poverty, she suffers a total disillusionment from both her career and her city. As she is pushed to the outskirts of society, Navarro's words in the novel and those said to me directly connect one's belief in passion to toxic work's continued capacity to cartograph vulnerable workers, like women, into the literal and proverbial margins of life, all the while exacerbating ascriptive inequalities and insulating patriarchal capitalist dominance.

As mentioned earlier, various scholars, artists, domains, and disciplines worldwide are noticing how neoliberal policies surrounding work (paid vs. unpaid work, flexibilization of the labor market, deregulation, privatization, etc.) exasperate the precarious life, both socially and ecologically. Among these, Cech's research on passion to increase workers productivity reveals the powerful rhetorical reach of discourses about work at play in the economy. With this in mind, the novelistic discourse of passion within *La trabajadora* functions to establish a rhetorical model for toxic work. For instance, wanting to love one's work is a reasonable desire for Elisa. Yet, ubiquitous neoliberal rhetorical appeals have intercepted this reasonability and powerfully persuaded her to choose passion and a precarious life over stability. I see this as a contemporary addition to Aristotle's three rhetorical appeals of Logos (appeals to reason), pathos (appeals to emotion), and ethos (appeals to ethics). So, on top of logos, pathos, and ethos — I conceptualize this new rhetorical appeal underpinning *La trabajadora* as *neo-nomos*, or neoliberalism's masterful art of economic persuasion. Thinking through *neo-nomos*, both in the Iberian context and as verbalized in Elisa's disillusioned language in the novel, may suggest that society desires to disarticulate inculcated inequities — like passion — from neoliberal approaches to work.

Chapter Three, "Lonely Work", examines the emotionally toxic side of neoliberal work. Distinct from a lack of passion, this chapter focuses on how the emotional decline of workers can be ascribed to a lack of environmental connection. To do so, it approaches Miguel Brieva's ecocritical and anti-capitalist graphic novel *Lo que me está pasando* (2015) to see how neoliberal approaches to work are portrayed as propagating devastating feelings of species loneliness, the despair that is triggered by the separation of humans from nature, in its workers. Once these feelings are explained and established through vignette analyses, this chapter then examines how unethical engagements with nature exasperate worker species loneliness, and how reinvigorating

more honorable and ecofeminist approaches back into work help to remedy lonely work. Like Chapter Two, this chapter's analysis is also complimented by a one-on-one interview with Brieva.

The graphic novel, *Lo que me está pasando* (2015), which is set a few years beyond the initial shock of the financial crisis in Spain articulates the profound consequences that result from the individualist culture of neoliberal work — and flips this reality on its head. The graphic novel doubles as a diary for an unemployed young person, Víctor, a formally trained geologist, who emotionally struggles to relate to a decaying social and material world during the context of overlapping crises. As he bounces around from employment to unemployment, his feelings of helplessness, isolation, and “species loneliness” intensify as he fails to find ethical ways of interacting with nature at work. Lonely work, again the emotionally deficient activities of neoliberal work, wear him down. At his rock bottom, the book turns itself around as Víctor realizes he must grapple with the individualist shortcomings of lonely work. Inspired by more ecofeminist approaches to the economy, Víctor decides to rekindle his relationship with nature at work. In doing so, he disentangles the individualist culture of capital-seeking objectives from work and instead recouples it with the social and ecological networks that are needed to sustain life. As such, lonely work is dismantled, and work is reorientated within a grander multi-species collective.

All in all, Brieva's vision offers an eco-narrative of how to incorporate economic approaches that work alongside, instead of against and isolated from, nature. As we will see, Víctor radically opposes and vociferously refuses to participate in the “species lonely” social and ecological atmosphere that neoliberal ideologies tend to foment. Alternatively, he imagines and enacts new collective approaches to work that are rooted in material and relational

interdependencies. As such, Chapter Three questions what is deemed epistemologically acceptable as “work” by opening a space that expands the concept towards a more equitable and sustainable existence for humans and beyond. Ultimately, Brieva’s work reevaluates and reinvigorates an amplified meaning and functionality to neoliberalism’s limited concept of work, deconstructing the concept as a homogenous domain for the future of Spain. Instead, his works imagine a new, interconnected semantic ecosystem, through which an expansive understanding and value of work can be spread.

Now let’s get to work!

CHAPTER ONE: TOXIC WORK AND THE DETERIORATION OF LIFE IN *BIUTIFUL* (2010)

This chapter looks closely at how neoliberal work is producing necrotic effects in bodies and environments in post-2008 Spain, as portrayed in contemporary Spanish film. My primary object of study is Director Alejandro González Iñárritu's film *Biutiful* (2010), a visual narrative that exposes the toxic consequences of work today. As a reminder, I conceptualize these historically specific consequences as “toxic work”, or the harmful economic activities that now deplete life and environments under the neoliberal episteme.

Biutiful disturbingly primers this depletion. Set just a few years after the financial crash of 2008, the film is temporally situated in a state of ruin. Spectators witness this ruin, not through protests or politics, but through the film's dying and decaying protagonists. I see these protagonists as both the marginalized, peripheral workers — workers caught outside the mainstream economy — and the city of Barcelona itself, whose desperate experiences with toxic work drive them all to their terminal end.

Biutiful begins at this ending point. It starts with a terminal prostate cancer diagnosis for its main character, Uxbal. Uxbal is abruptly forced to confront what will become of himself — and his soon-to-be-surviving children, of whom he is the sole caretaker. An already frightening confrontation, Uxbal's predicament is even scarier as his life is all but stable or safe. An informal (or “illegal” as dubbed by the neoliberal labor framework) worker by trade, Uxbal is a hustler. He works on the fringe of Barcelona's economy to provide for his family. He manages under-the-table relations in sweatshops, on the streets, at construction sites, and with police. He also has a rare metaphysical gift of communicating with the dead, which he also commodifies into work. To save money, he is filmed jumping subway turnstiles. In essence, Uxbal works the city — albeit on the

city's and the economy's margins. But as his final days are inching frighteningly close, Uxbal decides to channel his career criminality into one more altruistic, final mission: to save up as much money for his children before the spirits come to claim his life and steal their father (and his income) away.

Sadly, though, Uxbal's honorable mission takes a disturbing turn. The city, i.e. his neoliberal environment, starts to work him back — and necrotically so. The more Uxbal works and the harder he hustles, the more that toxicity metastasizes. Death and decay advance within him and all around him at an alarming speed: His own gruesome symptoms intensify; other peripheral workers, with whom he has relationships, are killed or exiled; Barcelona gets darker and sootier, both in ambiance and plot, as if toxic work is taking the vitality out of it, too. The film swivels around this human and nonhuman destruction, pivoting from one fraught and failed socio-economic interaction to the next. Through this fatalistic lens, spectators come to sadly realize that all these peripheral workers' most pressing task is not only to make money; it is also to learn how to fatally fight and fall in an unfair and unwell neoliberal environment. Focusing on this intertwined, inextricable, and interdependent flow of toxicity between workers and the environment in the film exposes the necrotic character of toxic work: how it operates like a lethal force, a pernicious contagion, exterminating and infecting lives and bodies at an uncontrolled and unprecedented scale and speed.

As mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, Iberian cultural studies scholars Kata Beilin and William Viestenz perceive the economy's complex material entanglements that bleed across lives, borders, and limits as a “neoliberal economy of life” (xii). Their conceptualization of “new spatial collectivities” makes way for understanding neoliberalism as a physical actant in society, not just one within its own delimited economic sphere. Comparative literature and economic philosopher Warren Montag makes a more damning declaration of neoliberalism's

physical agency in society. He argues that late-phase capitalism's laissez-faire market processes selectively allow for some people to die so that others may be permitted to live. He calls this discriminate process "necro-economics" (11). I draw from Beilin, Viestenz and Montags' systemic thinking when examining the necrosis in *Biutiful*. I interpret the film's depiction of neoliberal work's enfeebling and destruction of lives and environments like an economy of death, reminiscent of these scholars' ideas. I trace this economy of death via the flow of economic forces — imagined and real, material and immaterial, visible and invisible — that permeate lives, borders, and limits, effectively evaporating the fallacious and illusory nature-culture divide on which toxic work is empowered.

The idea of tracing the flow of economic forces across divides as a means of deconstructing anthropocentric, binary modes of thinking (like the nature-culture divide) comes from environmental humanities scholar Stacy Alaimo's book *Bodily Natures* (2010). In it, she proposes the idea of transcorporeality, or the porosity that occurs between humans and nonhumans. Transcorporeality, in broad terms, emphasizes the interconnectedness of bodies to environments. The concept describes the "often invisible but nonetheless material flows of substances and forces between people, places, and economic/political systems" (9). Beyond other ecocritical views like Lawrence Buell's notion that "humans are biocultural creatures" and Pamela Moss and Isabel van Dyck's argument that environments are "socially negotiated space[s] inclusive of its material aspects", Alaimo's idea of transcorporeality shows how cultural, economic, and even social forces can have material anchorings in bodies (Buell *Writing* 2; 746). Consequently, Alaimo's concept increases the proximity of nature from something inertly "out there" to something residing actively 'right here' within our material selves, reminding that nature and culture are inextricably interrelated (4).

Transcorporeality heightens awareness to the negative consequences of the proximal and intimate connection between humans and nonhumans, too. It does so by shedding a critically necessary negative light on the “potent intersections” that take place across bodies when, for instance, materials are administered without exacting care in the world. Alaimo explains: “material agencies cannot be adequately predicted nor safely mastered”; she writes that the unpredictable evolution of other beings and materials “have far-reaching and often unforeseen consequences for people, species and ecologies” because things and bodies are always “in constant interchange with the environment” (21 – 22). Alaimo explores this phenomenon in her book through chemical sensitivity and environmental illness that results from “ostensibly harmless chemicals” being released in the environment that ultimately still “provoke extreme physical reactions” (24). Alaimo applies transcorporeality beyond chemical exposures, too. Various chapters in her book explore other potential “actors”, including but not limited to, economic systems, sociological hierarchies, medical, scientific, or technological innovations, and political and legal institutions (2, 9 32, 47, 51). Considering these wider-reaching applications, transcorporeality expands into a methodological tool, with that allows for “rich, complex modes of analysis”, new ways of tracing “unpredictable and unwanted” connections and exchanges in as they flow and permeate across domains, spheres, environments, bodies and more (3, 2).

In *Biutiful*, I apply transcorporeality in this broader methodological sense to neoliberal work. I analyze neoliberal work as if it were an agent being released into the world without exact care. The film shows that as neoliberal work is released and enacted across its cinematic society, it fails to remain in the economic sphere alone, provoking “far-reaching and often unforeseen consequences for people, species and ecologies” (21). These consequences are largely toxic, reminding spectators that economic activity can likewise “never be disentangled from the material

world” (24). To demonstrate this point, I scrutinize the economic entanglements in the material world of the film – the harmful substances and powerful forces— particularly as they manifest in the film’s dark setting, mise en scène, montage, and overall moribund storyline. Pressing into this all-encompassing darkness and tracing its entanglements to neoliberal approaches to work, indicates, convincingly and constantly, the necrotic environmental context in which the movie’s economic tale of neoliberal labor is doomed.

Beyond demonstrating that work can embody a necrotic character, this chapter also interprets the film’s all-encompassing darkness as a broader cultural articulation of a desire to disassociate work from its systematic dysfunctionality and decay. To support this interpretation, I look at marginalized characters, including but not limited to Uxbal, and their doleful experiences with working on the periphery. When I say working on the periphery, I mean that these characters work on the literal geographic (outside the city’s center) and figurative economic fringe (outside formal work) of Barcelona — which is a surprising perspective to provide spectators, who are more likely accustomed to seeing Barcelona’s sunny and booming city center on bright display in cultural productions.

In an interview with *The Guardian*, a perplexed interviewer asks Director Iñárritu where he even found such dark places and people, “Is this Barcelona? I hardly recognize the place!” (3:44 - :46). Iñárritu immediately responds, “You could have just turned your face and your eyes a little bit to the right, and you will see that. It’s not so difficult” (3:44 - :53). Iñárritu explains that in every European city, these stories exist: “you just have to want to look”, you have to be “a little bit away from the tourist trap and the post card kind of things” (4:03 - :11). However, he acknowledges that the kind of community portrayed in *Biutiful* is often living as an invisible society, but only because society “pretend[s] they are invisible” (4:33 - :36). His choice to bring

their stories out of obscurity and into the cinematic light draws attention to how these communities are disproportionately “exposed to limited situations, and they are exposed to exploitations and abuse” (4:36 - :43). For the second half of this chapter, I lean into Iñárritu’s illumination of the marginalized, peripheral workers’ disproportionately dark experiences with toxic work. In doing so, the chapter ends its discussion by illuminating an overall design flaw with the necroeconomic system of neoliberal work, a design that appears to physically and selectively strike down socioeconomically vulnerable workers, and how that striking down is empowered by their near-invisible labor status.

Transcorporeality and the cancerogenic nature of neoliberal work

To begin, I first apply Alaimo’s concept of transcorporeality — again, the porosity between human and nonhuman bodies — to emphasize the interconnectedness of toxic work and doomed environments and bodies in *Biutiful*. To accomplish this, I look at the film’s dark setting, montage, mise en scène, and the cancerogenic conditions present, literally and figuratively, within Uxbal and Barcelona.

Biutiful’s setting is surprisingly and eerily dark, as has noted several environmental humanities scholars alike¹³. The film consistently shades its shots in blue, brown, gray, and black hues, setting a moody and ominous tone for the overall production (see this reflected later in figure 2). Contemporary Iberian and Latin American Film, Literature and Cultural Studies scholar Benjamin Fraser’s work interprets the reasoning behind this unexpected color grading of the film. Fraser sees the dark depiction of Barcelona, a notoriously sunny and sparkly tourist center, as a cinematic strategy meant to read against the neoliberal trope that Barcelona is a model capitalist

¹³ See the works of Kata Beilin, Kathleen Honora Connolly, Maria DiFrancesco, and Benjamin Fraser.

city in Europe (20). To him, Barcelona is more so “a city of the exploited” whose financially and socially struggling characters inhabit a bleak environment, mirrored in the “drab pallet” of the film, “perhaps to emphasize the lack of opportunities that exist for his marginalized urban characters...” (26 -27). Because of this, Fraser (and likely also the Mexican-Spanish production team who elected for a dark color grading) believe that Barcelona should not be viewed as a shiny, vivacious city for the globalizing neoliberal economy to revere and to reproduce elsewhere (25). To the film and to Fraser, Barcelona is a “drab, grim city of labour inequality”, full of unbalanced exchange-value dynamics that destroy nonhuman and human lives together (20). Though he does not use Alaimo’s transcorporeality explicitly, Fraser’s work connects the grander energetic character of the city to the economic forces that are extracting life and resources across bodies and environments.

Like Fraser, many scholars across a wide range of fields have been seriously critiquing the unsustainable, extractive nature of capitalism — albeit more explicitly. For one, energy studies scholars — like Óscar Carpintero, Imre Szeman, Dominic Boyer, Adam Carlson, Luis Prádanos, Kata Beilin, and Sheena Wilson — have all contributed significant research that calls out the energetic impossibilities of late-phase capitalism. Their work articulates how the current economic system depends on the constant, unsustainable, overconsumption of resources to maintain its own economic sustainability. This paradigm is commonly referred to as “infinite growth” or “necrotic growth” because the more capitalism expands to survive, the more it destroys, threatening its (and other’s) survival. This oxymoronic economic condition has entered an extreme juncture due to the present environment crisis. Yet, as ecologies are increasingly declining at an unprecedented scale to ‘fuel’ and to “feed” extractive capitalism’s “*metabolismo*”, thankfully, even more attention is being drawn to the “falacia de la lógica del crecimiento económico constante en una biosfera

limitada” (Carpintero 322, Prádanos, “Decrecimiento o barbarie” 77). Because of this augmenting attention, it has become widely acknowledged from scholarly to popular culture that late-phase capitalist activity, i.e., neoliberal work, is undeniably and materially “relacionado con la degradación Ambiental” (Carpintero 55).

That degradation is strikingly acknowledged in *Biutiful*’s setting. Its dark and desolate depiction of Barcelona not only illuminates environmental devastation, but this surprising depiction also can speak to how late-phase capitalist activity takes place at different rates and different scales in differing locales around the world. Certain geographies are, in fact, more responsible than others for the global ecological decline, namely large “developed” cities, like Barcelona. In his book *Creating Regenerative Cities*, Herbert Girardet evinces that urban spaces – like Barcelona—, while occupying a small percentage of nature’s surface area, inversely, leave behind a massive ecological footprint that far exceeds their own terrestrial existence. He calls modern cities “entropy accelerators” because they dramatically diminish the resources they depend on while consuming them at an alarming speed (68). The case of Spain is no different. According to recent scholarship in energy studies, it has been estimated that Spain’s energetic usage is three times bigger than its bioterritorial capacity — which it can be reasonably inferred that most of that usage comes from its own modern “entropy accelerators”: its cities (Prádanos, *Postgrowth Imaginaries* 153). With this context in mind, suddenly, the dark and desolate environment of Barcelona in *Biutiful* does not seem so surprising after all. The economic consequences of late-phase capitalism are logically pictured materializing in the city, a major culprit of ecological decline. Thus, the dark color grading of the film’s setting forges a transcorporeal viewing of the neoliberal economy with the environment.

Beyond color choices, the film's mise en scène is dark and disturbing, as well. Ominous flocks of black birds, haunting ghosts, creeping fungi, dead animals, manslaughter by accidental lethal atmospheric exposure, graphic symptoms of metastasizing illness, and an overall disturbing decay all overwhelmingly and repeatedly arrange, appear, and amalgamate a disconcerting mise en scène (see figure 2)¹⁴. I see these pervasive elements of the scenery as a way of exposing the pervasive economic practices that claim a toxically powerful presence in the film. Of the same mindset, Beilin thinks such a setting creates an overall sense of disquieting realism, a *desencanto*: “a feeling of dissatisfaction with the experience of newly achieved political and economic freedom as well as consumerism that turned to addiction, now, perhaps not disconnectedly, expresses concern with environmental, social, and economic crises” (90). The disconcerting elements of the film speak to capitalism's silent and invisible economic processes and practices, which, to Beilin's interpretation, are driving humans and nonhumans to their civilizatory end (91). In fact, Iñárritu confirms this apocalyptic interpretation. In an *Amazon Prime* interview, he says *Biutiful* tells the story of “life observed from the ending point” (2:43 - 2:46). That life's ending, as the mise en scène indicates, is both the film's workers and the city.

Finally, in addition to the setting and mise en scène, an apocalyptic montage also contributes to the film's dark environment. For instance, one dark, recurrent transition shot appears time and time again in the movie. In these brief shots, just a second or two at a time, spectators are shown a factory's ominous smokestack. Each time the scene is shot, though, the smoke billows out faster, thicker, and darker than before. Interestingly, these shots are not a part of the film's narrative; however, they still have an important communicative role in the film. Their repeating presence relays to spectators the inescapable smoky character of the entire contemporary

¹⁴ Many of these arguments were first inspired by Kata Beilin's Iberian Crisis seminar in which *Biutiful* was discussed at length in connection to the environmental crisis on the peninsula.

civilization in which the economy, and this story, takes place. And just as the transitional shots cinematically connect the film together, technically stitching one scene to the next one, they also symbolically remind spectators of the way that this smokey character similarly stitches together all components of life today under the neoliberal economy of death.

Furthermore, this sooty messaging underpins the lives of the film's working characters as they struggle to survive, both economically and environmentally. For example, as Uxbal laboriously searches for work, running from one job to the next, the thickening smoke forebodes that he will soon be the one burned up by the combusting, unfettered neoliberal economy increasingly infiltrating and engulfing him and his surroundings. Alaimo's work reinforces this idea that transcorporeality reveals the interconnectedness between bodies and environments, like Uxbal and Barcelona, exposing the presence of nature inside his physical self. Such connections, she writes, "underline the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from 'the environment'. It makes it difficult to pose nature as mere background..." (2). In the film, the sooty messaging also transcends posing as mere background. The smokiness, the material presence, acts as an active foreboding of the dark direction that neoliberal work is taking its characters.

So far, transcorporeality has emphasized the interconnectedness of late-phase capitalism and the environment. Now, using transcorporeality to look at Uxbal's cancer takes this link a step further, illustrating the porosity between capitalism, nature — *and* working-class bodies. In her chapter "Eros and X-rays: Bodies, Class and 'Environmental Justice'", Alaimo displays how transcorporeality can reveal an unpredictable and unwanted chain of events, like how environmental and bodily connections can reveal how the biological and the social are codeterminately and materially interconnected (27). Her arguments serve to evince how "material

effects of the economic systems” present, undeniably, within working-class bodies (28). To support this claim, she exemplifies how a worker’s biological systems respond and react to work. Citing Richard Lewontin and Richard Levins’ book *Biology Under the Influence* (2007), she quotes:

The conditions under which labor power is sold in a capitalism labor market act on the individual’s glucose cycle as the pattern of exertion and rest depends more on the employer’s economic decisions than on the worker’s self perception of metabolic flux... thus, it is not too far-fetched to speak of the pancreas under capitalism or the proletarian lung. (28)

In other words, the idea that the capitalist pancreas forms from overwork or financial stress or that the proletarian lung arises from carcinogenic exposures (like at rubber, plastics, aluminum, or other manufacturing plants), to Alaimo, prove “the penetrating physiological effects of class (and racial) oppression, demonstrating that the biological and the social cannot be considered separate spheres” (28). It also, of course, reiterates her basic concept of transcorporeality, that “the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world” (2). Alaimo’s work characterizes that intermeshing— the physical illnesses running rampant in working-class bodies— as particularly malignant: “Capitalism, likewise, devastates humans and nature alike, extracting economic value and leaving a wasteland behind” in both (35).

This malign intermeshing of humans and nature persists in *Biutiful*. Not only does the film depict Barcelona as a capitalist wasteland through its dark, decaying, and deathly ecology, but it also draws the same sickly picture flowing into working-class bodies, too, in particular with Uxbal’s. As pictured below, Uxbal’s MRI visualizes his own toxic wasteland, his cancer-ridden insides occupying his body:

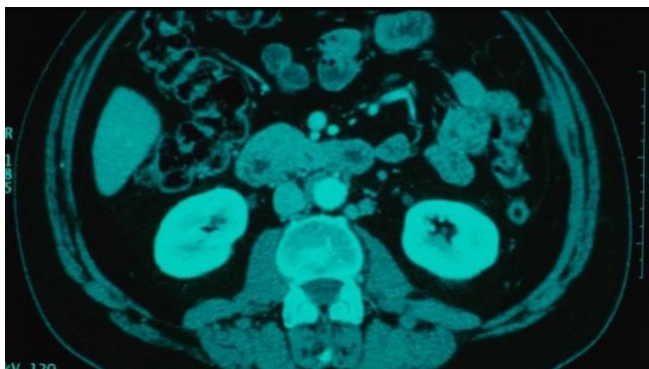


Fig. 1. Uxbal's sickly insides are shown in neon, reflecting the unnatural, human-aggravated condition from which he suffers (00:35:48).

The MRI pictures his interior bubbling with malignancy, his illness actively suppurating. This suppurating emblemizes how invisible toxins at work in society exist just below the surface, in need of revelation, diagnosis, and treatment (which, ironically, rely on capitalism's own toxicity-exposing innovations, like MRIs, radiation therapy, or the cytotoxic medications of chemotherapy to reveal, to diagnose and to treat)¹⁵. Of course, in the film, Uxbal's toxicity has reached a fatal phase, though, so it reveals itself in visible, exterior ways, as well. Uxbal's urine has become bloody, he vomits in the streets, and he suffers dizzy spells. Yet, despite the obvious external metastatic condition of his entire body (not merely a "capitalist pancreas" or a single "proletarian lung"), he does not stop to rest. He continues to desperately work, working himself, quite literally, to his death. To repeat and underscore this connection plainly, I see this to articulate that the more Uxbal works in the film, the more his illness progresses, and his death approximates. His working-class body is intimately intermeshed within his toxic neoliberal environment; he is trying to economically and physically survive in an unsurvivable economic and physical context.

¹⁵ I owe this connection to discussions with Kata Beilin. See her article "Die and Laugh in the Anthropocene" for further analysis on the connection between darkness, cancer, and environmental crisis (92).

Below in figure 2, I summarize this entangled malignancy. I compile still frames that communicate the shared darkness, decay, and deaths transpiring across working-class bodies and environments in *Biutiful*. Together, these images highlight the material flows between capitalism, nature, and working-class bodies.



Fig. 2. Though the still frames are taken from throughout the movie's entirety, when put together they appear to be a coherent sequence due to the connectedness of their theme, dark hues, and aesthetic design that alternates between close and wide shots of decay.

Compiling these images — that show the pollution, fungi, death, toxicity, and black birds that commonly symbolize death and bad omens— shows how the terminality taking over Uxbal's body is reflected in Barcelona, too. In essence, the images coalesce to portray a virulent connectedness. Throughout the film, as neoliberal growth practices intensify — expressed through the labor that undergirds the industrialization, urbanization, exploitation, competition, and cheapness pervading the film—, the system's toxic entanglements are internalized by the human

and nonhuman body. Illness, fungal growth, and necrosis are all recurring experiences throughout the film that highlight vulnerability, porosity and structural changes occurring at the multicellular level— theoretically and literally, economically and biologically. The human body is intimately – and perniciously – enmeshed in its surrounding toxic environment. To repeat, Alaimo says, “... the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world... the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’” (2). Viewing these elements from within the lens of transcorporeality draws spectator attention to how malignant economic practices of work can mutate the bio-physical bond between bodies and environments. Their compositions have been radically altered, darkened, and sickened, as seen in these images and in Uxbal’s MRI.

The small-scale images from the film, when placed together as seen in figure 2, come together to visualize a wider panoramic shot of the large-scale consequences of transcorporeality. Pollution, atmospheric changes, chemical toxins, and environmental asphyxiation — common biproducts of modern-day work — emerge as a shared feature of an interconnected human/nature existence. Like Uxbal’s cancer, such necrotic ties illuminate to spectators that the current neoliberal ecology of work carcinogenically interferes with the organisms and ecosystems that constitute the world’s very own vitality. In essence, the film shows humans and the nonhumans as equally and relationally infected by their shared economic condition. That condition is one of toxic captivity, wherein the dominant economic rule sentences both humans and the environment to an untimely, sickly, and epochal end.

This cinematic feeling of captivity offers forth interesting characterizations of the environmental destruction that neoliberal work can foment (and thus it evokes a desire to disassociate those features from the concept of work overall in pursuit of another, healthier world). For instance, interestingly, the word ‘captivity’ often captures a sense of imprisonment, inactivity,

idleness, even inertness. However, *Biutiful* characterizes ‘captivity’ not as the *state* of going nowhere but rather as the *action* of heading somewhere. Motion and change are key leitmotifs associated with the toxic dynamics of work in the neoliberal society that houses *Biutiful*. The protagonists of the film, who are presented in this chapter as both Uxbal and Barcelona, are constantly construed as being worked on, under construction, in motion towards more work¹⁶: scaffolds are filmed covering the facades of buildings as Uxbal walks by (chemotherapy invisibly and toxically “at work” in his own body, too) (see figure 3)¹⁷; cranes are shot invading the city sky (see figure 4), taking over, possibly morphing into, the spires of *La Sagrada Familia* (see figure 5). I interpret all the construction as a metaphor for neoliberal work’s constant motion forward, its “necrotic growth” and “infinite growth” that is often obscured in the name of “economic progress”: key pillars to practices of work under late-phase capitalism¹⁸. Human work, depicted here via the skyscraping cranes intermingled with the Catholic church, is portrayed as the economic deity of society. Its activity is believed to be able to save all in need, and Uxbal is a faithful follower until the very end, chasing capital, his savior, until his final moments.

¹⁶ Kata Beilin’s article “Die and Laugh in the Anthropocene” talks in depth about depictions of “work in progress” as it specifically relates to the Sagrada Familia (95).

¹⁷ In the film, a construction shot is immediately followed up by Uxbal’s chemotherapy treatment (01:04:26). The juxtaposition of the two types of “toxic work”, both believed to be agents of salvation, provide a thoughtful moment to consider what work does to bodies and to environments, invisibly and visibly.

¹⁸ Patel and Moore, in fact, see that capitalism derives its name from the practice of “value in motion”, that is the back-and-forth transformation between money and commodity production (101).



Fig. 3. (01:03:21)



Fig. 4. (00:35:37)



Fig. 5. (01:03:36)

These shots focus on the environment in which Uxbal finds himself, often making the city itself the protagonist (antagonist?) of the scene. The perspective allows spectators to question the powerful darkness encasing and interacting with Uxbal's story.

However, as the film heartbreakingly concludes, the “teocracia mercantil” of neoliberal work manipulates the human and the nonhuman world towards a destination that is anything but a

desirable development (Pérez Orozco 32). The cranes, that resemble a grotesque economic monster consuming all within its path, presage of a subverted eschatological ending, where rather than saving the world, the economic deity is the very one who devours it¹⁹. Per the movie, all work constructs in the end, paradoxically, is not “progress” but a “deconstrucción ecológica” (Berardi 11). The film’s tragic storyline and ending clearly connects and inculpates neoliberal work for the decay on Earth and in working-class bodies, like that of Uxbal.

Biutiful’s critique of toxic work’s consequences connects to other environmental cultural productions’ that similarly lament the intensifying connection between activities of progress (like neoliberal work) and environmental destruction. For instance, in his collection of ecological poems titled *Cántico de la erosión*, Spanish poet and sociologist Jorge Riechmann describes it as such: “Esta danza macabra de nuestro tiempo ... / del cosmo al muladar, del ritmo a la ruina. No se detiene el progreso. Imperturbable, Dama Historia continúa avanzando sobre sus raíles de intestinos humanos” (81). The necrotic nature of both work’s dark setting and cancerogenic narrative in *Biutiful* reflect this “danza macabra de nuestro tiempo”: the toxic intersections between the economic/cultural and the environmental/human. Even one trailer for *Biutiful* likens the film to an “ominous dance with death” ([2:18 – 2:20](#)). Such a macabre revelation “entails a rather disconcerting sense of being immersed within incalculable, interconnected material agencies that erode even our most sophisticated modes of understanding” (Alaimo 17).

Cinematically, the construction shots above function to transition the cinematic narrative through this proverbial “danza macabra”. Symbolically, they also mark work’s toxic transformation taking place across civilization. In connection with the recent pandemic society, below the surface — beyond the symbolic scaffolds forming the artifice of progress in these still

¹⁹ This was inspired by Oscar Carpintero’s research on *el metabolismo de la economía española*.

frames— the film reveals a deep, metastasizing illness, a malignant, undulating growth that does not just affect Uxbal's body as seen in his MRI, but rather it also mutates the entire social and physical world towards “after nature”, or where the sick world humans inhabit is the artificial one that they have politically, socially, and economically created that “determine[s]” the shape of the Anthropocene” (Purdy 45)²⁰. Like the uncontrollable cellular growth infecting Uxbal's body, cancer serves as metaphor for the way that neoliberal work's infinite growth paradigms eradicate life in a variety of hosts and environments²¹. Correspondingly, Green political economist John Barry diagnoses that the ecological decline experienced today signifies that society has entered the “cancer stage of capitalism” (“Climate Change” 129).

In addition to ecological poetry, contemporary Spanish graphic novelist, musician and vociferous critic of late-phase capitalism's environmental consequences, Miguel Brieva, also draws similar conclusions to Barry. For example, on June 12, 2019, Brieva posted a satirical medical report vignette to his public Instagram, seen below in figure 6. In it Brieva mocks the pathogenic nature of late-phase capitalism, “sensacional hallazgo; se confirma la sospecha... No es un sistema económico, el capitalismo es una enfermedad” ([n.p.](#)). He then lists individual physical and mental “síntomas” along with environmental ones like “destrucción de las condiciones de habitabilidad del planeta” ([n.p.](#)). Like *Biutiful*, Brieva's vignette illustrates the transcorporeal, toxic reach, the “danza macabre”, of late-phase capitalist activities into the well-being human and nonhuman environments.

²⁰ Although Purdy uses the term the “Anthropocene”, the age of prodigious human activity that acts like a geological force upon Earth, later she specifies that she means the “neoliberal Anthropocene”, which would approximate her interpretation closer to the Capitalocene, the geological age of prodigious late-phase capitalist activities that destructs Earth.

²¹ I owe this thought to Kata Beilin who urged me to think about the connection between cancer and the city.



Fig. 6. Brieva's vignette visually mimics a retro medical infographic in which he warns of the contagious and virulent nature of capitalism today. The basic color grading and simple organization, which contrasts his more well-known style, communicates with clarity, and in doing so, delivers a sense of urgency in the message.

This metaphorical thought and/or thematic warning of a kind of carcinogenic capitalism mutating the world, of which Alaimo's, Barry's, and Brieva's work details, seems to be encapsulated within the perplexing title of Iñárritu's movie in which what once was – or maybe should have been – a *beautiful* world has now been altered and poisoned into something *Biutiful*. While, of course, this title could merely represent the Spanish phonetical spelling of the word, the strange orthographic change could also nod to the fundamentally changing written code of nature, the shifting dynamics through which we relate, interpret, interact and work toxically against the world (Beilin, "Die and Laugh in the Anthropocene" 94).

Furthermore, the bizarre orthography of *Biutiful* could also warn of the invisible but powerful mechanisms that are mutating what society believes about the neoliberal labor market: how it behaves to institute those beliefs, and how those behaviors can change the physical composition of both beings and environments at unprecedented speeds, unnerving forms, and

alarming scales. As Beilin puts it: “*Biutiful*’s” mutation in spelling reflects the mutations carried by all the literal and metaphoric process portrayed in this film” (94). She then connects those mutations to Rob Nixon’s idea of “slow violence”. Nixon differentiates slow violence, in comparison with other forms of violence, as the destruction that ensues often invisibly and gradually across time and space (2). If slow violence is often invisible, it results that also the culpable and the victims go unnoticed and unmarked: “In the long arc between the emergence of slow violence and its delayed effects, both the causes and the memory of catastrophe readily fade from view as the casualties incurred typically pass untallied and unremembered” (9). However, Iñárritu’s film does not allow for the violence to go unnoticed; rather, the movie portrays grotesque images of death, decay and illness across an array of beings.

Uxbal and Toxic Work: detailing the necrotic character of neoliberal work

In the past section of this chapter, I traced the interconnected material consequences of neoliberal work in environments and working-class bodies in *Biutiful*. In doing so, not only was neoliberal work exposed as a toxic agent being carelessly released into the atmosphere, but it was also linked to malignant biological and social co-determinancy in “working-class” bodies, too²². In a more general sense, this toxic relationship established neoliberal work as a powerful economic and carcinogenic actor in the film that accelerates decay and death in both the human and nonhuman.

²² The phrase “working-class bodies” is in quotation marks here, not only to signal back to Alaimo’s research on material effects in what she calls “working-class” bodies, but also to create pause and reflection with the terminology. Juan Egea pointed out that in the neoliberal labor force, “working-class” is somewhat “imprecise in this new distribution and conceptualization of labor” in *Biutiful* where experiences of *manteros* and sweatshop workers are paramount to questioning the concept of neoliberal work as a whole.

In this present section, I take a more specific approach. Remembering that Alaimo said that the human body is always intermeshed in its environment, I look more closely at that “intermeshing” to further detail the necrotic energetic character of neoliberal work. To do so, I scrutinize Uxbal’s personal experiences with neoliberal work, particularly the corporeal impact of work on his body, as symbolically depicted in a few short scenes.

In Alaimo’s words, looking at the impacts of “working-class” bodies “provokes us to question what the body of the worker can reveal and who is socially positioned to articulate those revelations” (27). Interestingly, Uxbal is certainly not in any kind of social position to reveal much: he resides on the bottom of the social hierarchy, in the working class, and even on the lower end of that working class, as the style of work that he does is exiled to the periphery of the formal neoliberal economy (in fact, as we will soon see, none of the jobs presented in the film take place in Barcelona’s center — neither economically nor geographically. I discuss this in more detail later in the chapter). Yet, by nonetheless focusing on his work and suffering, the film provides him, and by archetypal association the working-class too, with the very centrality that he lacks, at least per the neoliberal working order. With this in mind, looking at Uxbal’s intimate and injurious “intermeshing” with neoliberal work, which is normally overlooked or invisibilized by the peripheral status of his kind of work, i) exposes conceptual dysfunctionalities inherent to the design of neoliberal work and ii) magnifies the working-class desire — or maybe even physical necessity — to disassociate that dysfunctionality from its necrotic energetic character.

First, Uxbal’s obsession with capital accumulation leads to crushing corporeal consequences. Across his seminal works, Marx warned that wage-labor, the predominant type of work in a capitalist society, would inevitably become the defining principle of the entire capitalist epoch (171). He forebodes that in capitalist work, work exceeds its position as the “predominant

activity” and “becomes the operative motive” of the entire system of capitalism, alienating the human’s existence. Luis Prádanos might also agree with Marx’s prediction. In his book *Postgrowth Imaginaries*, he argues that in the neoliberal ecology the human experience is reduced to a limited social reality in which capital accumulation, the driving activity behind work, takes over as the central objective of life (11). This centrality constitutes Uxbal’s entire plotline in the film. After receiving his terminal diagnosis, he, bizarrely, does not try to spend his final days in peace. He does not dedicate his remaining time to his family. He does not seek any formal services of care. Instead, he frantically pursues capital accumulation via wage-labor. By the end, his desperate pursuit of money, his “operative motive” to relentlessly work, define and destruct his final days on Earth. In this sense his environment has truly influenced his end-of-life; He cannot mentally “unmesh” himself with the all-powerful neoliberal cultures in which he lives, works, and, ultimately, dies.

A close reading of a short scene near the beginning of the film outlines this painful predicament. For context, Uxbal has just picked up an odd job in which he communicates between the dead and their surviving relatives. In the scene, Uxbal is visiting the trapped ghost of a young boy, Luis, to help his spirit pass on in peace to the afterlife. Uxbal succeeds, but when he tries to report back to the parents, he is interrupted by the histrionics of the mother who screams in a rageful fit of tears for Uxbal, “un desgraciado ignorante” (her acrid words), to leave (00:12:50 - 52). The father attempts to pass Uxbal a couple of bills for his work, and in an extreme closeup shot of what should have just been Uxbal’s hands accepting the payment, his intimate space is invaded by both the father’s hands giving and the mother’s hands tugging at the euros (see figure 7).



Fig. 7. Again, the scene circles back to the discussion about the hierarchical nature of wages, and the complicated social and financial web that determines the conditions of work, 00:12:27 - 00:13:04)

The moment is a fleeting montage, yet when paused, as seen above, is a full-frame, statue-esque image of three hands clenching the bills, with Uxbal's buried at the bottom. The intense proximity of others' hands positions Uxbal in a game of social and financial tug of war, all the while exaggerating the fixed hierarchical nature of what and who it entails for Uxbal to acquire just a little bit of money. In this neoliberal dynamic of work, the toxic pursuit of capital accumulation, his MO, functions as a misleading principle that steers Uxbal away from fulfilling social connections with his family and instead physically pummels him: it causes him to lean towards harmful financial interactions in which he is crushed both by other humans and by his own desire for more money. Furthermore, this scene also depicts the powerfully heavy forces that completely engulf and totally weigh down working-class efforts. Here, Uxbal's ability to come out on top, to "make it" and to survive appear all but impossible; he is playing a game of numbers where he is outnumbered and dealt the losing hand.

While Uxbal is suffering from cancer, I also think that he is infected with what could be thought of as *capitalmyopia*: what I perceive as the inability to see beyond immediate capital, even when gaining such capital harms oneself. The self-destructive idea of *capitalmyopia*, surely an environmental consequence born from the extreme extractive culture of neoliberalism, connects

to Belgian engineer and economist Bernard Lietaer's definition of money²³. He asserts that money has morphed from a historical material object, like gold, that can be touched and held to a more intangible contemporary concept of "frozen desire": a limitless "process of wish and imagination" where the object of desire is forever out of reach but infinitely fueling the capitalist civilization (42). To Lietaer, because money is desire, it means different things to different people, and therefore, it has powerful impacts on individuals and communities (42). Likewise, the impacts of such limitless desire have far-reaching social consequences for Uxbal who wishes and imagines money to protect his children from his inevitable passing. While an honorable desire to provide for his kids, his "frozen desire", his limitless want to imagine their secure future without him, causes him to go to radical lengths that end up harming others and himself along the way (as is the extreme case with the undocumented workers' tragic death, to be discussed later). Even Uxbal's spiritual mentor, Bea, suggests that Uxbal's troubles are karma for him selling out and cashing in on his spiritual gift to communicate with the dead, which, in her opinion, was not his to commodify. For Bea, the perpetual desire for money in the neoliberally specific context of constant commodification trespasses life's ethical, and sacred, limits around work.

It is necessary — and fair to his character— to qualify Uxbal's financially-dominated choices. Despite the downfalls of *capitalmyopia*, Uxbal feels working, despite his waning ability, is the best he can do for his children. After all, he does manage to save a year's worth of money for them. Up until the spirits come to claim his life, spectators see him hiding bits of money away into a sock in a drawer. Like a child would, the act woefully underscores his portrayed innocence before an economic system that makes workers desperate for money and work — even in, or especially in, the most extreme of emotional circumstances. Both a victim and a participant in the

²³ I owe the application of Lietaer's idea of "frozen desire" to an independent study under Kata Beilin's instruction.

woes of capitalism, for Uxbal, life and death center around money and work — just as the powerful forces of neoliberalism have engineered it to be. Director Iñárritu comments on Uxbal’s character complexities in his interview with *The Guardian*, “At the end, it’s [*Biutiful*] a story of a simple man in a very complicated and complex world, and that world is colliding through his journey... it’s not as straightforward as it seems.” (1:23 - :41). Uxbal is *Biutiful*’s tragic (anti?)hero “fighting against corruption in society and corruption within himself, literally and physically” (3:25 - :31). An attempt at a modern take on the genre of tragedy, spectators watch his failing fight against corruption take place through problematically powerful connections between wages and “working-class” bodies.

Beyond exterior crushing and smashing, neoliberal work centrifugalizes Uxbal’s interior, too. This is seen in moments when Uxbal is *not* working yet is still wandering around searching for work and money. In these scenes, spectators of the film watch him walking the streets, traveling to and from, looking around, walking along bridges while staring off into the darkness. He is constantly shown in a perpetual state of motion, all by himself. These lonely shots serve to reinforce Uxbal’s constant lack of footing and effete inertia; he never seems to arrive anywhere nor spend his energy well on anything despite always being on the move— like a hamster on a wheel. He is misguided and trapped within his neoliberal environment. Eventually, this energy expenditure leads to a total alienation and fragmentation of his sense of self, in the Marxist sense²⁴.

Before I present this scene that symbolically remarks of his alienation and fragmentation, I turn to urban design scholarship to help pre-contextualize its significance. Scholar Tunde Agbola described the urban poor as “transients in a perpetual state of relocation” (ch3. Loc. 17 n.p.).

²⁴ I am using the term alienation in the Marxist sense. He proposed the theory of alienation for capitalist societies in which Man becomes estranged from aspects of their self (their human nature) as a result of living in a society that is socially and economically stratified.

Similarly, Romina Andrea Barboza dissertation studies “la cultura mediática” where cinematic “nomadismo”, e.g., characters like Uxbal who wander around on film, indicates a deeper “progresiva deslocalización” from local society (538). Thinking about Agbola and Barboza’s ideas, I see Uxbal’s constant search and failure to find more money and work as “progressive delocalization” from his local economic and social society — and from his own sense of self, too.

This personal “deslocalización” is clearly visible in one scene where Uxbal is moving alone from a sweatshop to a strip club towards the end of the movie. In a cinematic plot and technique parallelism, this brief yet impactful moment is disorienting for Uxbal — and for the spectator. Director Iñárritu triggers this visceral reaction by opting to film with a less stable, handheld camera that produces a kind of cinematographic, existential vertigo. This vertiginous unsteadiness can be experienced via the overwhelmingly confounding elements of distortion: the sequence begins with a total immersion in darkness as the camera shakes and revolves around Uxbal’s head, then his feet are seen floating over a fence in search of the ground, then fragments of his body are revealed in a streak across the screen as if being spit out by a centrifuge as he walks across the sidewalk garishly lit by neon signs, which is only further complicated by the fish-eye lens that contorts the entire field of vision and causes Uxbal’s body to morph in and out of the mirrors of the shops in the background. The effect strongly suggests he is being subsumed into his capitalist surroundings, bit by bit (see figure 8). This scene remarks of how an obsession with capital accumulation via neoliberal wage work operates like a centrifuge, spinning out, alienating, and fragmenting one’s sense of self.

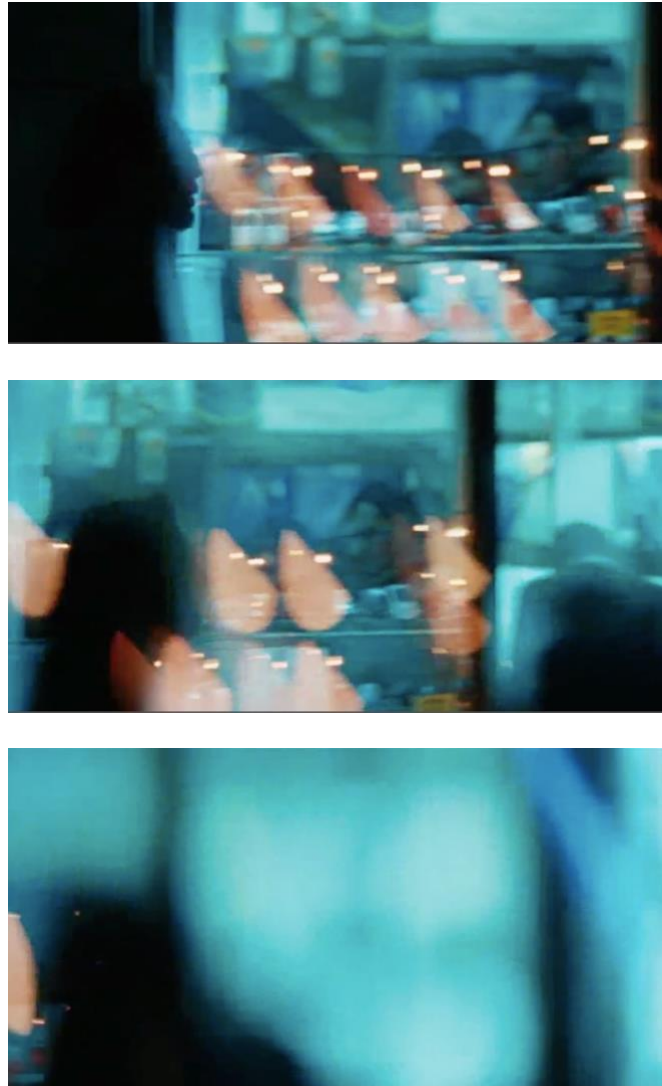


Fig. 8. The lack of focus from the camera speaks to the blur between life and work, in which the confusing neoliberal environment allows for one to easily lose his or herself, 01:37:39 - 01:37:41)

Looking at this scene from an economic standpoint reveals even more energetic details about neoliberal work. In the orthodox Marxist labor theory of value view, the economic value of a good or service is determined by the total “socially necessary labor power” needed to produce the said good or service (*Capital* 39). Marx conceptualized labor power in units of time, i.e., “unit labor-costs” that functioned as an individual commodity to be bought and sold in a “free and fair

market” (39). But 19th century radiochemist Frederick Soddy thought energy, i.e., “the economy of energy flows” was an important factor excluded in Marx’s calculations of the value of labor. Soddy saw that in any job there is an expended “energía laboral” or a certain amount of “energía utilizada en realizar trabajos” (Carpintero 51, paraphrasing Soddy in *Matter and Energy and Wealth, Virtual Wealth and Debt*). For Uxbal, the amount of “energía laboral” required to be able to carry out his work objectives — to save enough money for his kin before he passes — is incalculable. His body is lost to his surroundings before he can get to where he is going; again, the more Uxbal works, the more physical degradation he experiences. Marx postulates: “capitalist labor... burns them up as if they were a fuel and leaves the individual worker that much poorer” (Ollman, again paraphrasing Marx, 137). In this context, the above sequence forbodes of how the current concept of work under late-phase capitalism, specifically the toxic intermeshing of working bodies in that environment, will cost Uxbal all his energy, his own existence.

In connection to Marx’s claim that work “burns up” the individual, I return to the repeating transitional shot of the factory smoke to further underscore the “intermeshing” between work, nature and bodies. Each time the shot repeats on the screen, it symbolically increases its toxic output, reflecting the more Uxbal works, the closer he approximates towards his own combustion (see figure 9):





Fig. 9. (01:53:56 and 01:19:12, respectively)

The first image is a still frame from the final instance in which the factory spires are shot. They are spewing their thickest smoke at any point in the film, communicating how the centralization of toxic work has radical material implications for Uxbal and Barcelona. In contrast, the second shot shows the first time they are filmed before Uxbal has been diagnosed with terminal cancer, before his “frozen desire” to relentlessly work and save money took over his existence. Here, toxic work is not yet a primary force in his life, which is reflected by how the spires and their lack of smoke appear merely as a background reflection to Uxbal and his children.

In sum, these short scene analyses of Uxbal’s working story and his “working-class” body enlighten spectators to how work, the active force fueling capitalism’s infinite growth / capital accumulation MO forward, is no longer functional nor desirable when its energetic processes “hace disminuir el bienestar” of the working (Carpintero 55). Additionally, these scenes also reflect an idea stated in the introduction of this dissertation: Just as Uxbal’s existence was threatened by work, similar realizations and/or depictions of work in the 21st century have led multiple scholars to question if the world will soon exist without work — or without humans²⁵. The underlying tension being that it seems neither can salubriously live while the other parasitically survives. To

²⁵ See the works of Kolbert, H.T. Odum, Rifkin, Srnicek, Susskind and Weisman for example.

hone in on one of the main arguments of this dissertation, work has become biologically degenerative, a necrotic mechanism under the neoliberal episteme.

Remembering Yayo Herrero's work, work was not always this way. Historically speaking, it used to predominately function to propel human and nonhuman life forward. That being said, there were still periods of time when this was not the case for many. For Beilin, neoliberal work was not the first time in which work necrotically mutated²⁶. It is true that many forms of work that predate neoliberal work, like indentured servants, slaves, sharecroppers, and other exploited or forced wage workers. They all historically emblemize a similar degenerative deviation in work, too. In fact, public affairs researcher, Raj Patel, and historical and environmental geographer, Jason W. Moore, narrate that these specific forms of ecologically degrading work (indentured servants, slaves, sharecroppers, etc.) have been prevalent across time and space in Spain, specifically, stretching and extending across "histories of exploitation" and adapting and traveling down "longer circuits" of existence (91).

The words of contemporary civil rights lawyer and author, Michelle Alexander, help to contextualize the continuous dysfunctionality of work across time. In her book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the age of colorblindness* (2010), she writes that discriminate policies do not go away; they merely "morph, evolve, and adapt to changes in the political, social, and legal context over time" (15). Though studying mass incarceration, Alexander's theory nuances the problematic status of neoliberal work: while it is distinct from earlier forms of work fraught with inequities and injustices, neoliberal work marks a contemporary morphing of old unjust economic approaches to work. Those old approaches can be seen as merely "zones of experimentation in strategies of labor control" that have allowed for work to modify itself so that it may adapt to and

²⁶ This was stated to me in a personal communication with her.

mold more tightly to political, social, and legal changes (Patel and Moore 101). In other words, neoliberal work has found a path to continue threatening human and nonhuman survival in new sophisticated ways.

Working on the Periphery: design flaws of undocumented, extralegal, and informal work

In their book *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: a guide to capitalism, nature, and the future of the planet* (2017), Patel and Moore study capitalism's dependence on cheapness and its effect on nature's past, present, and future. They argue that the contemporary world has been, and continues to be, shaped, transformed, governed, and ransacked by seven large scale systems of capitalist cheapening: cheap nature, cheap money, cheap work, cheap care, cheap food, cheap energy, and cheap lives. Patel and Moore narrate how cheapening is an essential process critical to capitalism's survival. By economic design, cheapening is needed to temporarily fix capitalism's endogenous financial crises, which are structurally brought on by the perpetual need to lower costs to maintain or to increase profits. This critical process of cheapening, though, the authors carefully explain, is not about securing a low-cost bargain. Rather, cheapening— which encapsulates common neoliberal practices like bottom-lining, wage theft, and profiteering, for example — is a “short-term strategy”, a practice of violence, and a transmutation of human and extrahuman relationships, that accrues steep long-term biophysical, social, economic (for some), and cultural costs (22). The authors trace how these variegated costs dramatically diminish lives and ecologies, demonstrating how cheapening functions like a powerful weapon targeted to “control a wider web of life” (3).

Patel and Moore expose how and why cheap work came to rule the earth under capitalism. They write that capitalism classified workers as “societal” or “nature”. These classifications had

varying functions. Firstly, they orchestrated remuneration/nonremuneration. Workers deemed “societal”, such as soldiers, administrators, and sailors, were formally “charged and paid through a cash nexus” (94 - 95). However, the amount of work produced through this cash nexus depended on “much greater flows of work outside that nexus” (95). In other words, the profits produced by societal workers fully depended on the unpaid labor of others working outside the cash flow. Under a commodity system, that unpaid labor, i.e., “the greater flows of work”, most commonly indicates workers who capitalism had insidiously categorized to “nature”, such as women, nature itself, and colonies. Due to this categorization, these workers were designated to work, without compensation, outside the cash nexus — yet fully supporting it. As such, their unremunerated categorization functionally guaranteed steady profits for societal workers, a principal Marx explains as “surplus value”, or the excess value produced by laborers over and above the wages they are paid²⁷. Keeping these “nature” workers’ labor cheap (or free), aka cheap work, was and is how capitalism, by design, exploitatively (dys)functions. Patel and Moore describe cheap work as “capitalism’s most sinister accounting tricks”, an “audacious act of frontier bookkeeping”, “ongoing theft”, and sheer “appropriation” (94).

Unfortunately, cheap work... worked (speaking in surplus value terms), and it set a precedent for labor power exploitation of human and extrahuman relations to serve as a fundamental logic to capitalist work (93-95). That logic was one in which “every act of producing surplus value depends on a great act of appropriating human and extrahuman life beyond the cash nexus” (95). In a

²⁷ Patel and Moore also interesting point out that capitalism not only relies on cheapening but also on continuous cheapening, because labor and production costs are almost always increasing: laborers demand fairer conditions, resources become scarcer and more expensive to retrieve, demand increases, energetic production costs increase, etc., Because of such increasing costs, profits tend to shrink over time (95). This poses a further design fault of neoliberal work, highlighting its unsustainable and unequitable structure.

contemporary context, this means that cheap work's exclusionary and exploitative design practices continue to be a critical component of approaches to work today under neoliberalism. It persists by permitting some workers to be paid within the cash nexus and others to not. Looking at *Biutiful*, I conceptualize workers caught outside this contemporary cash nexus, as "peripheral workers", not only because they fall outside the mainstream economy as I defined earlier, but also because they fully support it with their cheap work. Building upon Patel and Moore's understanding of cheap work, this section will show not only how peripheral workers' labor is cheapened and devalued by design, but how it also inordinately subjects them to consequences of toxic work.

To begin, it is important to point out that in the film toxic work does not just affect Uxbal's body. It metastasizes throughout society, infecting, weakening, and sometimes even lethally exterminating other vulnerable bodies. These vulnerable bodies are not random, though. Just as they are interconnected with each other from a plot standpoint, so too are they interconnected from an economic one: their peripherality. Considering this connection, these working-class characters suggest that they represent an entire *class* of vulnerable bodies, bodies housed within characters who share similar socio-economic and ascriptive disadvantages, that are commonly cast outside the cash nexus and into the peripheral zone of cheap work. Their shared socio-economic disadvantages, that often intersect with race, class, and gender, appear to stem from a lack of systemically endowed defenses that exclusively derive from working in the formal economy, ultimately impairing their class's ability to properly ward off the physical consequences of *toxic work*. This present section, then, examines a few of the film's peripheral workers — namely the undocumented, extralegal, and informal workers. Looking at their disproportionate suffering with toxic work provokes a constructive discussion about the cheap design flaws latent to neoliberal work today.

First, the use of terms like “undocumented”, “extralegal”, and “informal” need to be clarified. I prefer these terms over the culturally-dominate and sometimes derogatory, “illegal” and “unemployed”. That is because terms like “illegal” connote wrongdoing, but that wrongdoing is subjective to the neoliberal episteme, which inconsistently and discriminately legalizes and illegalizes work, often along ascriptive lines. Therefore, utilizing the term “undocumented” and “extralegal” more neutrally signals a flaw in the current legal system rather than within the human. Secondly, I prefer “informal” workers to describe certain workers, like care workers, because “unemployed” would invalidate the work that they do perform, albeit often unremunerated. And lastly, it is important to remember that these terms overlap but are not always interchangeable. For instance, informal work can be both extralegal (e.g., sex work, drug dealing, etc.) or legal (e.g., care work, under-the-table contract work, etc.), legal work can be formal or informal, but extralegal is only informal.

These neoliberally specific limitations to work outline how workers can find themselves more vulnerable to toxic work. Since these kinds of work are most often denied formal recognition by the neoliberal economy — even while they form irrefutable yet invisible, financial foundational strength to the formal economy (as explained through Patel and Moore’s “cheap work”)— workers caught within this confusing framework of legality/extralegality and formality/informality often find themselves without the social (and other) safety nets that formal work would have otherwise typically cast out for them. Here lies the undocumented, extralegal, and informal workers’ vulnerability to *toxic* work as to be demonstrated in *Biutiful*: marginal workers can often suffer marginal conditions while cheaply working on the margins of neoliberal work.

Undocumented immigrant workers physically suffer in the movie. Some suffer less than others (they are beaten in the street or imprisoned), and others suffer more than most (they are

killed). All these characters, though, suffer, physically, in some capacity, due to *toxic work*. One of the more fortunate, yet still quite unfortunate, characters who suffers but does not die is Ekweme. Ekweme is a friend/manager of Uxbal, and an undocumented Senegalese immigrant who left his home country in search of better work. The better work that Uxbal has negotiated for him with the corrupt police is selling contraband on the streets of Barcelona. Despite this under-the-table agreement, though, the undocumented working immigrants are still dramatically and publicly beaten and arrested by the police (for allegedly selling illicit products that were not agreed upon). In this chaotic arrest scene, Ekweme, along with the other undocumented immigrants, is chased off the main street. He and the others flee via side streets and other nondescript alleyways, police chasing, handcuffing, and beating them along the twisted way. Iñárritu shoots the pursuit from a variety of shaky angles, like from within a bumpy and lurchy car and from on top of the backs of people running away (0:39:11- 0:40:45). Screams, honks, sirens, car crashes, random collisions, and the diegetic steady beat of a drum intensify the urgency that spectators feel to which authorities seek to expel the city center of immigrants without work permits — and it seems to suggest, to inflict their violence upon them. In contrast to this frantic scene, Ekweme is later filmed within the firm and steady walls of a prison. Iñárritu's camera angle choices here are now more traditional and easier to follow: a medium shot of the outside prison walls, then an establishing shot within the visitation area of the prison, followed by a close-up between Ekweme and his wife, Igé. The sequence is seamless, suggesting that with the immigrants beaten and locked away, all is settled and stitched back into its proper place, at least per the neoliberal working order (01:13:32 - :48). *Toxic work* has done its work: the Senegalese workers are injured and/or locked away, working no more.

Uxbal feels awful. Though namely a career criminal himself (at least per neoliberal framing), all he desires from life and work is a share of human decency and dignity²⁸. Because of this core desire, Uxbal feels responsible for Ekweme and his family's looming economic fate. He decides to make amends in the only way he knows how under the cultural and economic dominion of neoliberalism: with money²⁹. In this short sequence, lasting barely a minute, Uxbal enters Ekweme's home after the arrest to offer his wife monetary condolences, since she is now left without her husband's income to support their family. When Uxbal enters the house, though, the physical ambiance in combination with the anamorphic shot of the camera constructs the impression that Uxbal is descending into a subterranean compartment of society. The walls are earthy, weathered and textured like that of a cave, and the camera's medium wide shot cuts off the ceiling and floor, giving the claustrophobic sensation that the walls are crashing down on Uxbal and Ekweme's family (see figure 10).

²⁸ Throughout the film Uxbal constantly, and so exasperatedly, demands table manners of his family members even while sharing cheap and expired dinner together. He repeatedly goes above and beyond to do right by others: he lends Igé and her baby his apartment, he visits Ekweme in jail and negotiates on his behalf to the police, and of course, dedicates his final days to trying to make sure his kids are taken care of financially. To Director Iñárritu, a key lesson in Uxbal's journey is while he is falling to the depths below, he has to learn how to do so with dignity ([The Guardian](#)).

²⁹ I owe this thought to Hispanic Urban Studies scholar María C. DiFrancesco, who astutely points out in her article that though a victim of neoliberalism, Uxbal is also complicit in it as well, often relating to others primarily through money.



Fig. 10. The delapidated conditions of the house, that literally form the foundation of Barcelona, suggests a poor foundation to the city's "dark ecology" and neoliberal economy of death (01:01:45- 01:02:28).

The cinematic pressure seen above mimics late-phase capitalism's ability to push down so hard on the lower classes that they are forced to inhabit an inferior socio-economic existence. That existence is illustrated physically in these scenes via the street arrests and beatings, the prison, and the subterranean home. These places and moments serve to remind spectators of the unjust way that neoliberal labor ideologies exclude aliens, like Ekweme, from the mainstream economy, criminalize them for the work they can find, subject them to poorer working conditions that may physically harm them, proffer subpar wages and limited (if any) welfare benefits, condemn them to substandard housing and/or jail, all in all, threatening their overall well-being.

For many spectators who are accustomed to living and working within the legal constraints of work in the current neoliberal era, Ekweme's work/life troubles may appear normal. The labor regulations, prohibitions, and consequences he encounters have been significantly normalized under the framework of neoliberal work that allows/disallows certain types of work. However, the film nuances the discussion about the legality of work by sensitizing spectators to the toll that migrant work can take on a human life. One scene achieves this in particular: in an emotional

exchange with his wife in prison, Igé, Ekweme begs her to stay in Spain after his imminent deportation despite their blatant economic disadvantages in Spain. He reminds her that her demoralizing work of butchering chickens in Spain is better than no work at all in Senegal. The heart wrenching discussion, in which spectators realize Ekweme and Igés' inhumane living and working conditions are better than that of their homeland, sheds empathetic light on the dark contradictions between capital and labor that often are overshadowed by the sparkly façade of neoliberalism, emblemized in the film by the shiny, sentry-like skyscrapers that tower over this film's struggling characters, absorbing all the light themselves and casting darkness onto those working below.

The complicated Senegalese experience with work provokes thoughts about the complicated legal status of work under the neoliberal economic framework. Under this framework, interestingly, goods, products, profits, cultures, ideas etc., are all routinely permitted to permeate global borders in the name of free trade. Yet, workers, like Ekweme and Igé, are denied that same economic mobility. Undocumented migrant workers, quite literally, have less economic rights than goods and objects. In this sense, neoliberal work functions as a territorial epistemology. It arranges and executes contradictory legal imaginaries by cartographing workers into a confusing composite of legal and extralegal territories. In doing so, it empowers *toxic work* to disproportionately exploit and to hurt these vulnerable workers, like the undocumented, who have become vulnerable due to those very cartographic legal powers of the neoliberal labor market. As seen in the film, the undocumented vulnerabilities are intimately correlated to their shared ascriptive qualities, whose predetermined factors and socio-economic outcomes are highly associated with the unequal and often incoherent neoliberal labor laws³⁰.

³⁰ I owe this thought to Walter Mignolo's ideas on "border thinking".

Next, the Senegalese are not the only undocumented working immigrants in *Biutiful*, nor are they the only characters whose stories draw attention to toxic consequences under neoliberal work. There are Chinese immigrant workers who do as much, too, though they are exponentially less fortunate than the Senegalese. In this subplot, which is arguably the film's most deplorable and extreme representation of toxic work, spectators horrifically witness *toxic work* drive these undocumented workers to their deaths.

The background is as such: Like with Ekweme, Uxbal works as a liaison on behalf of the Chinese immigrants. He, extralegally, arranges them work at a sweatshop. Uxbal's job is ironically, to ensure (and to entangle) the survival of both the informal (Chinese) and formal workers (the employers), both economically and physically. Uxbal, as spectators see, miserably fails in this endeavor. The scene is set as such: the sweatshop is located down below the city pavement. Here, the Chinese immigrants have been working and living in this basement, literally and figuratively providing the backs on which the 'thriving' economy above resides. In these quarters, there is little ventilation and even less warmth. The shabby conditions expose the cracks in neoliberal approaches to work, both questioning and foreboding of work's foundational (lack of) strength and (ill)well-being. Uxbal, again, desires decency for the undocumented workers. The frigid working conditions for his (more or less) immigrant employees at the sweatshop upsets him deeply. He demands money from their mobster-like employers, so he can buy heaters — a short-term fix to the problem. The bosses reluctantly, but stingily, agree. Uxbal then purchases the cheapest ones he can find so that the workers can sleep more comfortably. However, the morning after installing the heaters, a manager descends into the basement to wake up his employees, only to find every single one of the undocumented workers had suffered fatal carbon monoxide exposure. Uxbal's dear

friend, babysitter, and a recent mother herself, Lili, is amongst the horrifically deceased. Uxbal's despair is ineffable. His sobs are gut-wrenching.

The most glaring reading of this gruesome scene elicits questions of socio-economic and ecological injustices wound up in neoliberal approaches to work, i.e., cheap work. For instance, the workers' deaths draw attention to how toxicity can start off as an intangible idea but then can manifest materially in the bodies and environments that receive the enactment of those ideas. In this case, the intangible idea was the neoliberal pursuit of cheapness, seen via the employer's stingy mandate for inexpensive heaters, and the execution of that cheap idea ended in the physical execution of the workers by lethal chemical exposure. Cheapness, the film shows, though an idea, can be materially lethal for some while immaterially (i.e., financially) beneficial to others. This web of cheapness, that is always meant to "control a wider web of life", haggled the undocumented workers to death, effectively producing a very real economy of death. As seen, radical cheapness accumulates radical costs. These peripheral workers paid for Uxbal's short-term strategy with their lives.

In sum, the sweatshop workers' deaths create an extreme cinematic representation of the conceptual shortcomings of neoliberal work; it reveals the extent to which *toxic work* can ultimately poison and eliminate vulnerable laborers, like the undocumented. The following still frame of their bodies washed up on the beach visually connects the extreme relationship between workers' deaths (seen via their bodies) and their neoliberal context (represented by the iridescent skyscrapers in the backdrop):



Fig. 11. The shot of bodies, water, and the neoliberal city objectify the encroachment of toxic work upon human and nonhuman environments (01:52:41).

Next, in addition to undocumented workers, extralegal workers are depicted as physically vulnerable to toxic work, too. This is certainly the case for another perceived peripheral worker, Marambra, Uxbal's thin and zany wife, who suffers from bipolar disorder. Marambra claims to work legally as a masseuse, though she is never filmed working as such. Instead, she is filmed exclusively in connection to extralegal sex work, though this is implicitly suggested and open to interpretation.

I interpret that Marambra sex works based on the film's innuendos, insinuations, and implications. For one, her work uniform, a white masseuse blouse, appears in two scenes. In the first one, she is naked in bed with Uxbal's brother, apparently just having had sexual intercourse with him (00:19:31). Circus-like music blares in the background and wine sloshes around. Marambra jumps on top of him and jokes she is going to give him a bit of a Thai massage (00:21:05 – 00:21:10). After upsetting her, though, she leaves abruptly, grabs her white blouse, buttons it up, and goes to pick up her kids from school. Later, she tells Uxbal she was able to get them because a 'client', referring to Uxbal's brother, had canceled on her (00:30:26). Then towards the end of the film, her white blouse appears again. Uxbal gets home in the middle of the night. He is startled

to find Marambra apparently having just arrived, too. She smokes out a window, still in uniform, to which Uxbal gently doubts, “No sabía que dieras masajes a las 3 de la mañana” (01:25:10). She replies softly, “Me asustaste”, registering but not discrediting his doubt (01:25:14).

These innuendos all, carefully yet multivalently, intertwine allusions of sex with symbols of work (her work blouse, the double-entendre of the words “client” and “Thai massage”). To me, the ambiguous word play around sex and work serves to carefully hint at a culturally clandestine profession whose extralegal existence under neoliberalism must not be explicitly spoken about, but rather must be verbally danced around and partially covered up, for socio-economic acceptance and survival, respectively. It is important to note, however, that not all scholars agree that Marambra sex works (Kata Beilin for one thought maybe she just engages in extramarital relations; Iberian Gender Studies scholar Catherine B. Ross thinks that Marambra’s clothing merely “suggests prostitution, or at least a lack of decorum” (190)). Nonetheless, even a more conservative interpretation would likely agree that the ambiguity around sex and work should at least cause spectators to question Marambra’s income stream, just like Uxbal does.

Even though I interpret that Marambra sex works, the difficulty in pinning down her work precisely complements her incomplete characterization of a person who is hard to categorize in general³¹. She does not fit neatly, fully, or traditionally within any role (motherhood / wifery), condition (intemperance / mental health), or status (legal/extralegal work) in the film. While this character ambiguity could generate excellent discussion for a liminal life all around, this section focuses specifically on the consequences of toxic work that come from viewing her peripherality in connection to extralegal sex work.

³¹ I owe this thought to Kata Beilin, who in an email to me, first mentioned Marambra as an “incomplete” character. I also owe the idea that she does not embody traditional motherhood to Catherine B. Ross’ article “Defining Mother’s Place in Barcelona: Women in *Biutiful* (2010)”.

A few years ago, I conducted an interview with a US lawmaker, Melissa Sargent, as a part of an investigative journalism team at *The Wisconsin Watch*. The project was called “The Cannabis Question”, and it inquired into the potential dangers and socio-economic injustices surrounding the legalization of cannabis in the US Midwest. When asking Sargent about her experiences with danger, cannabis, and disproportionate social inequities, she provocatively silenced the room of reporters by retorting, “Listening to people's stories and bringing those forward, I very quickly realized that the most dangerous thing about marijuana in Wisconsin was that it was illegal” (Personal Interview, January 2019). While this chapter is certainly not discussing the legalization of illicit drugs, this conversation came to mind when considering Marambra’s story with ‘illegality’ and work. What if the US Lawmaker’s sentiment about safety and illegal drugs also applied to safety and ‘illegal’ work? What if the most dangerous part of something “illegal” is actually the illegality itself? In the context of work, that would suggest that ‘illegal’ work is dangerous because, like illegal drugs, it goes unregulated, uninspected, and unprotected — not because the work itself is indomitably dangerous.

Interestingly, *The Harvard Civil Rights – Civil Liberties Law Review* touches upon this idea. The article “To Protect Women, Legalize Prostitution” (2019) argues that legalizing sex work could bring safety, security, and dignity to a (mostly female) demographic that has been economically, socially, and culturally denied such protections (n.p.). Historically, sex work has long been dangerous for both health and safety reasons. The profession suffers from abnormally high rates of sexual assault, physical abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, sex trafficking and even death. And because this work is illegal, many sex workers cannot go to the authorities for help for fear of being arrested themselves. Such lack of legal protections further inhibits their ability to do their job safely. Legalizing sex work, in turn, could mitigate some of the job’s dangers, the article

contends. Imposing strict regulations, constructing comprehensive support systems, and reallocating law enforcement resources through increased tax revenues, for example, could not only improve the internal working conditions but could also foster positive externalities as well, like the cultural destigmatization of the job, which would likely increase workplace safety in of itself, too. In sum, this article concludes that “illegal” work, specifically sex work, is especially dangerous because it is illegal; alternatively, it would be safer, if not safe overall, particularly for women, if it were legal. Until then, though, sex workers continue to mostly operate in the shadows, and those shadows provide covert cover that insulates the extralegal industry in a mixture of both positive (alternative income opportunities for economically excluded or disadvantaged women) and negative ways (increasing susceptibility for worker mistreatment and endangerment).

I interpret *Biutiful*'s depiction of Marambra's extralegal career and its toxic consequences through the lenses of the US lawmaker and *The Harvard Civil Rights Review*. By their same logic, Marambra's working storyline does not end by the dangers of her work itself. It does not conclude in death like so many other marginal working character's stories do; she does not suffer lethal carbon monoxide exposure, nor does she endure any physical harm from or by her clients. In fact, her job is not once depicted as an inherently treacherous career (maybe even frivolously so) — which is certainly an irregular cinematic take on the profession (e.g., sex workers are often the subject of special victim unit crime shows). Her story does not end by the dangers of her work itself but rather by the dangers encircling the *extralegality* of her work. Her job is not portrayed as dangerous; conversely, the peripheral status of her job *is*. She is depicted as working off in the distance, a distance that is as much figurative as literal, and that distance allows for a darkness to toxically take over her mind and body until she can work no more.

For one, Marambra's extralegal work takes place far away from the mainstream economy, and that distance is shown to endanger her well-being. For instance, scenes of her working extralegally most often take place in the privacy of her run-down apartment, as if her mental illness and extralegal work mandate her to hide away from public life. Further underscoring this point, is the location of her apartment, and by extension, her workplace. Though the apartment appears to be located in a populous area, spectators can infer that it exists outside of the city's main (or at least preferential) service grid, because electricity does not reach the home consistently. In one scene, Marambra frantically stresses that "La luz va y viene cuando le da la gana" (0:58:34 – :37). As Marambra buzzes around, as if electrified herself, she erratically rambles about throwing out the fish in her freezer out because it has "congelado y descongelado como treinta veces" (00:58:26 - :29). Later, when her children eat, she smokes instead, assuring them she is not hungry.

In another apartment scene, Marambra stares out a window in the middle of the night in awe of what she thinks are stars. Uxbal despondently reminds her that they do not live somewhere with such a view, they live far enough away to gaze upon the center, but close enough to still be amongst the light pollution. What Marambra's mind perceives as stars, Uxbal gently corrects to be a misfiring of her "sistema nervioso", as if her mind inhabits its own personal and erratic electrical grid (1:27:49- 0:52). He hangs his head and exits in sad resignation. The imaginary stars are as far from her reality as the sparkly opportunities of the mainstream neoliberal economy that exist beyond her window; Marambra inhabits a distant and disconnected societal stratosphere — mentally, geographically, and economically. She can only dream of the other distant realities, like visiting the Pyrenees mountains, which she romantically mentions often towards the end of the film as her disequilibrium surmounts. Uxbal knows, and spectators get the sense too, that Marambra has reached her capacity to cope with her peripheral, unstable life. Soon after this scene,

Marambra is hauled away to a mental institution for bipolar treatment. The film ends her story here.

These scenes are short but profoundly revealing of the dangers of marginalized, peripheral work. In the first scene, I perceive Marambra's inconsistent access to basic modern services like dependable energy that keeps her food safely frozen to represent the rhizomatic reach of *toxic work* into vulnerable lives, like those of the mentally ill and the extralegal workers. According to a 2018 article by Spanish social scientists Verde-Diego et al., the authors explored the familial impacts of the financial cutbacks implemented by the Spanish neoliberal government after the 2008 crisis. One effect discussed was “energy poverty” ([n.p.](#)). Citing the journalism work of FACUA, an estimated 1.4 million Spaniards suffered cutbacks in electricity supply by the state, which resulted in an “alimentary crisis” ([n.p.](#)) (and in perfect neoliberal fashion, privatized food banks and soup kitchens emerged to fill the new commodifiable space created by the neoliberal austerity measure). Marambra's substitution of nicotine for food could reflect an attempt to suppress her appetite in reaction to the alimentary crisis. It could also indicate disordered habits. In fact, European public health researchers have discovered a significant rise in mental health disorders since the 2008 crash. In their article “The Mental Health Risks of Economic Crisis in Spain: evidence from primary care centres, 2006 and 2010”, Gili et al. found the most severe consequences of mood, anxiety, somatoform, and consumption disorders to be in Spain, with the most serious of those cases to be found amongst the unemployed ([n.p.](#)). Considering that the neoliberal use of the term “unemployed” encompasses extralegal workers, I can see Marambra's energy and food poverty to be intimately interwoven with her fringe labor and declining psychological condition. It can be extrapolated then that for her, like many other Spaniards in society as Gill et al. demonstrated, that

the instability that can accompany extralegal work can ultimately take a physical toll on the body — and a chemical one on the mind, too.

The type of transcorporeality I am seeing and utilizing here — the economic flow into Marambra's life — is different from the physical transcorporeality that terminates Uxbal and the undocumented immigrants. Hers manifests invisibly as a bipolar electrochemical reaction to the surmounting pressure from the toxic conditions that labor extralegality puts on one's peripheral life. That pressure creates dangerous cracks. In a labor world legally and illegally constructed, peripheral and vulnerable workers, like the extralegal and mentally ill, are more likely to fall through those cracks that are more prevalent on the fringe of the society where the formal economy's eyes are not accustomed to being or looking (remember Iñárritu's words, "you just have to want to look" at this invisible community). In a crises-ridden neoliberal economy, those cracks look a lot more like canyons, at least for Marambra, whose work seems to have pushed her off the edge into the depths of a faraway darkness, disappearing from work, her family, and the rest of the film all together. To me, this consequence speaks to the multifarious ways that neoliberalism can render certain types of work, specifically cheap work, that fall outside its limited formal, legal, and remunerated scope — like Marambra's informal, extralegal profession — as dangerous and toxic in a multitude of ways. Such a "peculiar" finding aligns with Alaimo's position that transcorporeality is "theoretically provocative and politically potent" as it can "recast our most basic understandings of self and world as separate entities" (4).

So far, the undocumented and the extralegal working bodies have been portrayed as especially vulnerable to toxic work. The last type of vulnerable working body from the film I would like to examine is an informal worker, Igé, who is disproportionately suffers ascriptive disadvantages because of toxic work. As a reminder, Igé is the wife of the undocumented

Senegalese worker, Ekweme, who was chased off the Catalan streets and imprisoned. Though Igé works formally in the factory butchering chickens, she is mostly filmed working informally as a caretaker, watching her own children and those of Uxbal. Initially, Igé and her informal work take a more tertiary role. She appears working a few times throughout the film, mainly to compliment or dramatize others' stories. Eventually, however, her work evolves into a more primary role, taking up and occupying more visual space and narrative autonomy. This transformation mimics, I argue, a suggestion made by the film: that the informal work, particularly that which women primarily do, deserves to be in the center light. It deserves to have an economic arc as well, out of the neoliberal darkness and into a more inclusive, formal light.

As mentioned, Igé and her informal work make limited appearances throughout most of the film. She emerges here and there throughout, mostly in reaction to other primary and secondary characters' pivotal moments. Contemporary Spanish Literature and Film scholar Maria DiFrancesco describes Igé's apparitions as spectral, embodying a "ghost-like status" (33). To support this descriptor, she details one odd scene where Igé picks up Uxbal's kids from school. Rather than meeting the kids and taking them by the hands as many other caretakers customarily do, Igé lurks behind at a strange distance near an iron fence, popping out at the kids and hiding again behind the bars. The entire scene, although endearing, intimate, and playful, is, in fact, a little spooky, a little graveyard-like.

From the perspective of work, I would build on DiFrancesco's analysis by saying that the scene depicts Igé as clearly, *physically* human; she does not possess the ghost-like physicality like other ghosts in the film. At the same time, though, she is depicted as not quite totally *socially* human, because her rules of engagement with society are unnatural and odd. Neoliberal labor laws prevent her from a normal, proximal participation in society; she feels uncomfortable caring for

the kids in public. Her informal status (and, likely, her undocumented status) make it more socially and economically acceptable for her work to go unnoticed, to stay on the outside, to wave from behind an iron fence, like a ghost at a cemetery, no longer sure of how to integrate into the world around it.

DiFrancesco-sees this kind of separateness depicted in Igé's work (and Ekweme's) as a social commentary on the "statelessness" of undocumented immigrants who are forced to live and work invisibly, haunting the foreign society from afar but still residing within (citing *Specters of Marx* 101). Her idea is certainly supported with Ekweme. He lives in a hidden kind of existence behind the concrete walls of the prison, one that still exists within Barcelona physically, yet at the same time is distinctly apart from it, socially. Similarly, I also see Igé's shadow-y economic presence as a social commentary on the critical labor that informal workers, particularly care workers who are predominately females, provide to society in exchange for being formally unremunerated, invisibilized, and even dehumanized back.

Igé's particular contribution to cheap work is what Patel and Moore call "cheap care" (111). Cheap care is the systematic exploitation of care work and/or reproductive labor, what the authors define as "the work of caring for, nurturing and raising human communities" (116). Patel and Moore summarize that across history, human and extrahumans have cared for each other in diverse material, emotional, and biological ways (117). With the origins of capitalism, though, that care work was strictly rearranged and reduced to the female and unpaid domain, amplifying capitalism's tendency to create binaries, and empowering its capacity to discriminately categorize people and natures into them. As a result, binary modes of thinking dominate — like "Society-Nature, Man-Woman, and paid-work-unpaid work", making society view wage work as the only "real work" while unseeing the care work done by women "that makes it all possible" (116). Care

work makes the entire system of waged work possible, because “Without unpaid work, especially care work, wage work would simply be too expensive” (116). Capitalism depends on the free or underpaid, invisible labor of women, like that provided by the phantomic Igé.

The dehumanization of Igé and her cheap care work goes beyond spectral, other-worldly depictions. Mundane moments minimize her and her work, too. Returning to the scene where Uxbal descends underground into Ekweme’s home after his arrest to offer Igé money encapsulates one of these more mundane moments. As Uxbal enters, the camera zooms in to focus on a Igé. However, her body is not fully shown. She is radically simplified to a pair of hands stirring a pot of food and washing clothes (see figure 12):



Fig. 12. The visual synecdoche provides a frame through which we can consider labor the reduced value of labors of care in the neoliberal episteme (01:01:47 – 01:02:08).

This mundane moment mirrors the more common ways that the informal work that mostly women do is most normally reduced in existence and value in the neoliberal episteme. Alaimo’s introduction in *Bodily Natures* addresses the entanglement between dehumanization, women, work, bodies, and nature. She writes: “Human corporeality, especially female corporeality, has been so strongly associated with nature in Western thought that it is not surprising that feminism has been haunted not only by the specter of nature as the repository of essentialism, but by, as

Lynda Birke puts it, ‘the ghost of biology’” (44). In other words, Western cultural beliefs about women and work have long haunted feminism by curtailing her opportunities; these beliefs reduce and restrict the female body, identity, and work to her biological reproductive capacity alone, deeming and damning a woman’s reproductive work to be her “natural” or “essential” calling. Women have remained caged in this biological essentialism, because how can one fight the powerful socio-economic cultural forces that construct and contain her supposed “nature”? Alaimo turns to “queer biology” to push back against this unjust cornering (citing Hird’s work 5). She reminds her readers that nature, like culture, is malleable — not static. There is not one biological ‘natural’ way to behave, as is evident in the behavioral evolution of many kinds of species across time. Additionally, nature is not purely normative, either. It is full of “naturally queer” biological examples. The dominance of cellular intersex and asexual reproduction, for one, defy any plausible notion of biological essentialism and/or determinism. Alaimo concludes that to “truly outcast the twin ghosts of biology and nature” — that is, women’s supposed biological destiny to reproduce and to rear — society must “endow them with flesh, to allow them to materialize more fully, to attend to their precise materializations” (6). Only then can culture “grapple with the apparent and seemingly apparitional materializations” of female corporeality (6). In *Biutiful*, focusing on just Igé’s hands alone, as they are performing care work in the darkness underground, reduces Igé’s physical essence to the care work her body provides, the “bracketing the body to its biological function alone” that Alaimo protests in her book (5). The shots — the underground character of the workplace and visual synecdoche of her hands working — speak to how toxic work negates Igé’s full economic and corporeal existence as a living being worthy of a dignified materialization on the land and environment that she inhabits and works.

But then, Igé and her work slowly climb the ranks from a tertiary to a primary role, as if *Biutiful* is responding directly to Alaimo's call. As the film advances, her presence magnifies and expands, giving space for Igé and her work to materialize more fully. She starts to appear more often, more fully, less spectrally, and for longer durations. Her character, work, and personal decisions begin to centralize, too. Her decisions now autonomously act as their own determinants of the plot's direction, rather than a mere reaction to other characters. For instance, near the end of the film, when Uxbal decides to leave Igé the money he saved for rent, spectators watch her seriously toil with whether to fulfill his wishes to care for his children or to flee the country. A dramatic scene at a train station relays the weight of her decision, a decision that is depicted as hers alone to make, not a patriarchal economy's to biologically demand and economically invisibilize. Eventually, Igé does decide to stay, a decision that likely radically changes Uxbal's children's lives. She foregoes her dark underground apartment and ascends into the light of Uxbal's above-ground one to assume her new role. In just this one act alone, the nature of Igé's work transforms from invisible to visible, peripheral to central, spectral to corporeal, and unpaid to paid. Because of this, I see this as the film's symbolic granting of warranted visibility and dignified existence back to women and the care work that they critically provide to society. Given that the health of the neoliberal economy is dependent on the fixed, free, and ghost-like invisible labor of women, interpreting Igé's working story arc through the prism of an evolving, malleable queer biology honors the transformative nature of nature — and work! — in a radical refusal of toxic work that keeps some kinds of informal work unseen and unremunerated.

In this section, the undocumented, extralegal, and informal workers' corporeal vulnerabilities to toxic work overwhelmingly overlapped and intersected with their shared ascriptive qualities. They all suffered in some capacity from the discriminate distribution of

neoliberal work: that is, work that is salaried, formal, and legal. Acknowledging their shared experiences with toxic work, and how those experiences intersect with race, class, and gender, suggests that these workers' vulnerabilities are not random but are by "cheap" design (Patel and Moore). Analyzing that design scrutinizes neoliberal work as a modern, and faulty, product of design.

In his book *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (2018), anthropologist Arturo Escobar contends that the hallmark of modernity is not the sole prevalence of design itself (infrastructures, cities, foods, medical technologies, landscapes, virtual realities, education, etc.) but is design's new ontological relationship with the world and the lives in it (3, 26). Escobar posits that most objects and elements of modern culture are designed to imagine new social roles, to create new ways of being (4). In other words, in the act of designing the world, the world designs humans back (4).

I view work in the film as a reflexive design, too. Work was depicted as toxically organized, and, reflexively, so too were bodies (and environments). In the act of designing a toxic economy, toxic bodies were fabricated, too. The reflexive design of work implicates more than material anchorings, though (Alaimo). It directs back to social biological implications as well. For instance, in the film's overall storyline the opportunity to secure work (meaning, the possibility to secure living wages, the ability to obtain the skills and education desired by employers to secure said wages, and the chance to be born in a society where salaried work is widely and legally available to the pursuant, etc.) is largely reflective of one's biological and "moral luck". Moral Luck, defines philosopher Thomas Nagel, remarks of the significant aspects of what someone does in life (or biologically, who someone is, where he/she is born) that are largely beyond his or her control, yet still are subjected to moral judgement by society in the aggregate (59). Iñárritu's portrayal of this

peripheral world of work, where the main characters are biologically and morally “unlucky” at work (and consequently judged by the judicial system at large), despite being hardworking and gritty, scrutinizes the design failures of work within the neoliberal project in Spain. These peripheral workers’ work is shown supporting the nuclear economy yet is shown being denied a concomitant central existence.

In this sense, the dysfunctionality of work across a variety of scenarios in the film rejects the notion that work is temporarily failing due to any financial crisis or personal failure, as capitalist rhetoric often contends. Rather, work appears to be an intentionally (or oxymoronic, properly, as Patel and Moore would likely contend) malfunctioning element, an economic dysfunctionality by design, emerged within the grander “crisis civilizatoria” (Del Río n.p.). Making this same conclusion, Escobar writes, “The contemporary world can be considered a massive design failure” (33). Confronting the design failures of neoliberal work, and thus the world, would demand a challenge to what society deems culturally acceptable as “work” by expanding “work” to spheres beyond the formal and would necessitate a serious reckoning of human relationships with their material, ethical, and economic relationships within the current socioenvironmental context (Orozco). Reconciling these two demands could begin to ameliorate the necrotic architecture of toxic work today and the economy of death that consequently and discriminately ensues in and around vulnerable bodies and environments.

The End of Uxbal; The End of This Chapter

This chapter investigated how Director Alejandro González Iñárritu’s recent film *Biutiful* (2010) places the human and the non-human realm as two ecotones in contact with neoliberal work as the powerful, transcorporeal point of destructive intersection. Toxic work was shown flowing

into and out of the economic sphere, invading and infecting environments and bodies in unexpected, unprecedented, and unparalleled ways.

First, this chapter traced toxic work's dominion in the film's overall decaying environment in which *Biutiful*'s story was contained. A dark and deathly setting, montage, and mise en scène were all carefully connected to neoliberal work's transcorporeal capacity to permeate borders, spheres, and domains — in a carcinogenic capacity. It was shown terminally invading and sickening a variety of life forms and elements that constituted the entire environment of the film: the land, the skies, the city, the animals. Interestingly, that environment did not serve as a mere passive stage, though; the background, i.e., the sickly environment, was depicted as an active pathogen that was intimately intermeshed with human bodies as well. This was particularly analyzed through Uxbal, whose cancer-ridden insides reflected neoliberalism's tendency to leave toxic wastelands behind inside environments *and* bodies alike. That potent intersection of late-phase capitalism, nature, and working-class bodies in the film outlined the grander necrotic character of neoliberal work: how it extracts life and resources from all in its path. In *Biutiful*, as the city and characters advanced forward, death, decay, and destruction surmounted, warning of a complete “deconstrucción ecológica” to come (Berardi 11). The city and its working characters, symbolic of neoliberalism at large, were held captive to neoliberalism's oxymoronic condition of necrotic growth, and that imprisonment was sentencing them both towards their own imminent death.

While Uxbal was the main character who fatally fell to toxic work, other marginalized characters suffered and fell, too. The movie filmed how other workers, specifically workers on the periphery of the formal economy, namely the undocumented, the extralegal, and the informal, inhabited and worked within marginalized, uninspected, underserved, and under protected spaces.

As such, they were disproportionately vulnerable to toxic work, because their peripherality landed them literally and figuratively far from the safety and security of the exclusive mainstream neoliberal economy. Acknowledging the connection point between these characters' labor marginality and the emanating darkness taking over their lives brings attention to the "dark underbelly" that often resides within ostensibly advanced modern neoliberal cities, like Barcelona (Fraser 20). Furthermore, looking into the marginal spaces into which the film shows these marginal working characters ghettoized, chides the socio-economically design of neoliberal work that endangers and depresses certain classes of people, often in line with the type of work they (are formally permitted or not permitted to) do — which is also often in line with their ascriptive vulnerabilities. Illuminating these stories illuminated a cultural desire to disassociate neoliberal work from such dysfunctionalities. Iñárritu confirms this interpretation and intention of the film, "It's just that. I just turn the camera, and I just integrate them [marginal working characters and communities] into the fabric of the dialogue of the film. That's it." ([4:45 - :51](#)).

In his book *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the end of civilization* (2015), Roy Scranton grapples with the perils of our changing world. Comparing his experience as a soldier in Iraq who believed himself certain to die, Scranton narrates the coming to terms with the grim realities of human continuance during an ecological crisis that imperils not only political and economic infrastructures but also the entirety of civilization. His book tales "the human soul coming to know itself and its mortality" as it begins "in the deepest primal relationship with the Earth's climate" (25). I see *Biutiful* as a story like this, as a way of coming to terms with the ecological (un)likelihood of human fate, in an environment disfigured by the toxic practice of neoliberal work that functions like a geological force of nature³². The point of telling such a

³² This is building on Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer's concept of the Anthropocene.

somber story, Scranton says, is to work “to create a sense of collective humanity that exists beyond any one place, life, or time” (25). Coming together, recognizing our humanly doom, he concludes, may very well in fact be the path towards liberation.

Thinking about this path towards liberation in *Biutiful* directs me towards the final scene in this film, which as a bookending scene, also serves as the opening one, too. In this moment, Uxbal is dying; he is exiting his urban environment and entering a metaphysical forest. Here, he is reunited with his late Mexican immigrant father, eternalized as a young man (see figure 13). His father, a ghost, who represents both Uxbal’s past and imagined future, asks Uxbal, “¿Sabes que hace poco aquí no había nada, solo agua salada?” (02:16:40). He then imitates sounds of the water and the wind, envisioning the sound and landscape as it existed before nature was invaded by the environmentally destructive neoliberal work. A rare occurrence in the film, Uxbal smiles at the past, while taking a definitive step forward in a new direction.



Fig. 13. (02:16:45).

This simple and quiet scene adds significant temporal and spatial layers to the narrative—an existence “beyond one place, life, or time” (Scranton 25). Considering that this cyclical scene is the opening and ending scene, the movie seems to respond that the only way forward is to go

backwards, to find solace in a new way of interacting with the environment whose future looks a lot like a ghost from the past; something as geographically, temporally, and epistemologically far from the current necro-economic reality of neoliberal work. Only then does Uxbal question a new ecology of labor and life, a neoliberal after-life, “Qué hay allí?” (02:17:56).

CHAPTER TWO: NEO-NOMOS AT WORK IN ELVIRA NAVARRO'S *LA TRABAJADORA* (2014)

Wanting to be passionate about one's work has historically been a reasonable human desire. Yet, sociologist Erin Cech's recent research unveils that today's neoliberal labor market has produced an exploitative and discriminatory side to professional passion seeking, poisoning past reasonability. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative research, Cech's work discovered that passion seeking in the labor market— what she coins TPP or The Passion Principle — plays a broad role in sociodemographic differentiation and inequality. In her words, TPP can often help to “perpetuate occupational segregation by gender and race/ethnicity” while also likely serving “as a conduit for the reproduction of class privilege and disadvantage” (34). As she delves into mechanics of such ascriptive consequences, her work poses critical implications for the current economic context; it serves to warn the neoliberal worker that passion-seeking today should be confronted with cautious consideration, especially for those who already experience socio-economic or socio-demographic vulnerabilities.

Thinking about Cech's research in the contemporary Spanish context, it is important to note that the neoliberal project has jettisoned many economic regulations and social protections out the window, discarding the safety nets that once prevented Spanish workers from free-falling below. Yet, despite the riskier economic atmosphere with which these workers must now contend, capitalism continues to encourage workers to prioritize passion over financial stability— to seek passion over decent pay. This economic rhetoric of passion appears prolifically across recent Spanish cultural products, persuading workers not only to choose but then to also love their precarious life. As an insidious result, capitalism can gain long-term, momentous profits for itself

at the expense of the workers. Such costs are often uneven for workers, hitting minorities and socio-economically vulnerable populations the hardest, as Cech's research has demonstrated.

So, in this chapter, I investigate this theory: how late-phase capitalism can intercept a seemingly reasonable economic idea, like professional passion, can pervert it for its own systematic advantage, and then can push vulnerable workers to the proverbial and literal periphery of life. I theorize this process as a rhetorical appeal that I name "*neo-nomos at work*": the contemporary art of economic persuasion in the neoliberal context. *Neo-nomos at work* is inspired by the three Aristotelian modes of persuasion: ethos (an appeal to ethics), pathos (to emotions) and logos (and to logic). In addition to these three classic appeals, I argue that society must now contend with a fourth rhetorical appeal: "*neo-nomos*". *Neo-nomos*—a combination of Greek work *neo*, meaning new, and the partial derivative of the Greek word *oikonomia*, meaning economy (*oikos* "household" + *nomos* "management") — represents a nuanced mode of toxic persuasion for which workers, especially socio-economically vulnerable ones, should be equipped to detect under the powerful neoliberal episteme.

To be developed throughout this chapter, I argue that *neo-nomos* operates within the neoliberal labor market as a "toxic discourse", or the dangerous and unsuspecting metanarratives that vulnerable workers believe and enact to their own demise (my application of Lawrence Buell's theory). By looking at *neo-nomos* and toxic discourses together, I expand my understanding of toxic work to the discursive and metaphorical realm, expanding conscientiousness to the harm that unfettered capitalism can ensue across domains and dimensions in its current episteme.

As a reminder, Michele Foucault introduced the idea of epistemes. To him, epistemes are the historically specific cognitive limits that subjectively form the way humans think and act in

society during a certain time or epoch. Epistemes can present across a variety of modes: technological epistemes can alter the way humans perceive, say, travel and tasks during their era. To a human living before the aviation era, traveling abroad could be a monumental and even mystical endeavor, undertaken with only the upmost planning and care. To a global worker today, a red eye could be banal and barely thought about. Political epistemes can normalize wars and violence and coup d'états; medical ones can desensitize or sensitize society to mass illness or prolonged lifespans, influencing the goals and activities one aims to achieve in their day-to-day life. In this chapter, I argue that *neo-nomos at work* is not only a rhetorical appeal that characterizes work; it is also an economic episteme shaping the neoliberal era.

I approach this argument via three main questions that guide the chapter: i) How do contemporary Spanish cultural productions participate or not participate in the discourse of professional passion as it exists in its toxic *neo-nomos* form? ii) What does this participation (or lack thereof) say about epochal approaches to work under the neoliberal episteme on the Iberian Peninsula? And iii) how do these approaches affect the meaning and functionality of the concept of work?

To answer these questions, I look at contrasting cultural products circulating throughout post-2008 Spain. I examine works that do and do not participate in the discourse of professional passion. Firstly, I present a best-selling book series and hit Netflix series, *Valeria* (2014 and 2020), which lionizes professional passion in the neoliberal labor market. By looking at a few scenes, *neo-nomos* is detectable in both aesthetics and plot. To anchor the fictional show *Valeria* in reality, though, I pair my analysis with common advice about career making decisions as offered across several economic self-help books recently published in Spain such as *Adiós, Finiquito. Hola, Libertad: Cómo escapar de la trampa de 9am a 5pm, encontrar tu trabajo soñado y conquistar tu*

felicidad (2021) by José Vale, *Sonríe los lunes. Las 8 claves para ser más feliz en el trabajo y en tu vida* (2014) by Luis Ríos and Luis Pita, *Empleo infinito: Consigue mejores trabajos, más satisfacción profesional y más ingresos, hasta donde tú quieras* (2021) by Sergio Farré Guerrero, and *La felicidad en el trabajo y en la vida: la positividad como inspiración laboral y personal* (2016) by Santiago Vázquez. These works clearly articulate professional passion in its *neo-nomos* form. Then, the remainder of the chapter will focus on a contrasting novel that does not participate in the neoliberal fan fiction that is professional passion: *La trabajadora* (2014). This realistic book, that the author Elvira and Navarro and I discussed in a one-on-one interview as hovering somewhere between “autoficción” and “docu-ficción”, censures the current epistemic reality of work. Moreover, it caustically connects work’s shortcomings to outdated economic discourses, like passion, that can deceive workers into choosing a precarious life. Thematically, both primary works *Valeria* and *La trabajadora*, are tied together by female protagonists who are seeking risky writing careers. Methodologically, sociologist Erin Cech’s research on passion work cross-stitches them together, providing a frame from which their storylines can be compared.

Theoretically, this chapter analyses these cultural products from multiple theoretical lenses. First, I utilize a historical lens. Karl Marx, Charles Taylor, Aristoteles and others ideas serve to situate passion within its developmental timeline. By constructing a chronological timeline I show how economic passion has currently deviated from its more benign, historical intentions. Then, conceptually, I rely primarily on ecocritical scholar Lawrence Buell’s theory of “toxic discourses” to help articulate the mechanisms that allowed for economic passion to historically and surreptitiously deviate. I complement the historical and conceptual theories by providing economic context, too. I do this by including current economic data, specifically as it maintains to women, in order to root the TV series and the book into the neoliberal episteme’s financial reality. And

finally, I interpret the economic data through a feminist lens with help from the scholarship of Amaia Pérez Orozco, Lidia Falcón, Victoria Sendón de León, Heidi Hartmann, Yayo Herrero, and Kate Millet. Their work helps to elucidate the economic inequities that disproportionately socially inform one's chances at succeeding in professional passion. Altogether, the historical, conceptual, economic, and feminist theories work together to amplify and to illuminate the pervasive, profound, multifaceted, layered, and ultimately, dichotomous, economic messaging of professional passion present within *Valeria* and *La trabajadora*.

Combining these two pools of economic beliefs — *Valeria*, a zealot for professional passion and *La trabajadora*, a total apostasy — creates an interesting clash of ideas. It provides an opportunity to view how these works intersect and what those intersections debate regarding the institution of work as a malleable and culturally influenced concept. Furthermore, these works reveal that attitudes about work are diversifying (or perhaps polarizing!), as Spanish cultural products' economic IQ contemplates the present inequities that neoliberalism foment through toxic work.

The Rhetoric of Passion

The penchant for professional passion is pervasive in post-2008 Spanish society. Its rhetoric widely circulates in popular media and print. For example, in the 2014 best-selling literary saga by Elisabet Benavent and its corresponding 2020 Netflix adaptation, *Valeria*, the eponymous character and aspiring writer is in complete crisis. Broke and bored, Valeria's life hinges on passion. Should she find stable pay and stick to her flatlining marriage? She could leave behind her poverty and forget about her Imposter Syndrome if she gives up her passion of writing. Here is Valeria's face when a museum offers just that: a job with a fixed schedule and pay (see figure 1).

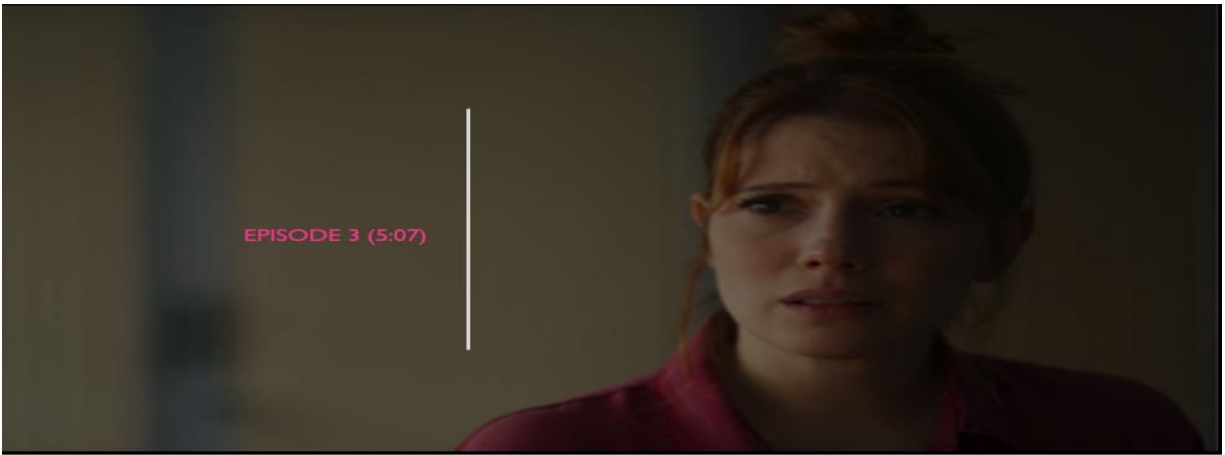


Fig 1. Valeria stares, distraught, at the prospect of a predictable and reliable job. The close-up shot blurs the background, elucidating the painful emotion on her face.

Alternatively, should Valeria continue to pursue her precarious writing career and give in to a steamy extramarital affair afoot? She could finally conquer her Imposter Syndrome head on. She could freely write (and more importantly to *freely be her*) no matter the risky economic or emotional consequences for herself and her marriage. An affair could be exactly the muse she needs to inspire her book and set off sales. Here is Valeria's face when she initially rejects the museum job and dives into a passionate extramarital affair (although she eventually begrudgingly accepts the job later).



Fig. 2. Valeria happily turns down the job offer. The background is still blurred, but her expression has clearly changed.

To Valeria, the conflict between unpaid, *passionate* work and paid, *boring* work is a matter of an entirely thrilling or an entirely insipid life. As viewers expect Valeria buckles in for the thrill. She decides to write an erotic novel, one she occasionally refers to as a thriller (Episode 1 and 2). Interestingly, the genre that Valeria (the character) chooses to write is the same genre of the book *Valeria* itself. This overlap, namely its metafiction, emphasizes to its readers and viewers that one has a powerful authorship in their own lives, too; workers can “write” their own success into their realities if only they are brave enough to make their passionate dreams a reality. The type of workers the show and the book aim at, of course, are females. The female narration of Valeria “hooks” the female reader/viewer/worker, so that she too can contemplate her own economic problems and navigate possible solutions via the path of a similar character with whom she may easily identify and aspire to mimic (paraphrasing Arcoya [n.p.](#)).

With the decision made to write, Valeria is still broke but no longer bored. The series quasi-complains about her self-elected precarious situation. The following still frames illustrate

Valeria's struggles in writing her book (See figure 3). In chronological order, as pictured above, Valeria exasperatedly deletes a paragraph, dramatically throws down her pillow, and slams shut her laptop — all within the vibrant background of a well-decorated apartment and to the epigenic beat of an energetic soundtrack:

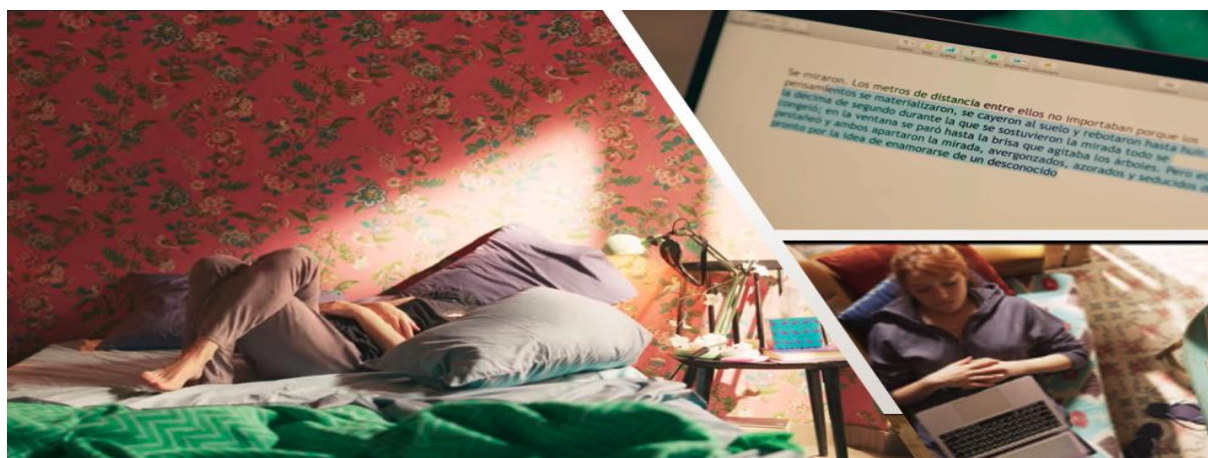


Fig. 3. The short sequence rapidly cuts to different spaces in her apartment, providing portrait-like moments of the life she has curated for herself (Episode 1, 02:02 - :32).

Though meant to bemoan her troubles, truly, this scene positively animates her economic status as peripherally privileged. The scene, in its own way, lauds how her unique career positions her to have too much time thinking creatively in her beautiful apartment — one that is situated nicely, and surprisingly, in Madrid's city center.

It is important to point out that a struggling writer like Valeria would never be able to afford such a place in 2014. In 2014, when the plot of this story was written and situated, jobs in general (like the museum job) — let alone dream jobs (like writing) — were often a statistical improbability. The number of Spaniards suffering long-term unemployment was up 500% compared to pre-2008 economic numbers. And the case for young millennials, like Valeria, was even worse (Ban 207). Unemployment rates among Spanish youth hit nearly 60% the very year

the novel was published (ILO [n.p.](#)). As a likely result, evictions reached an all-time high then, too. 65,000 Spaniards lost their housing, the majority of which were related to unpaid rent (as opposed to unpaid mortgages) (*Statista* [n.p.](#)). Despite these economic conditions, Valeria fantastically enjoys a home most can only dream of for their future or reminisce of their past.

With this context in mind, though short, the scene sells a grandiose idea about professional passion: it depicts Valeria's work as not just a job but as an entire lively aesthetic that dreamily colors and emotes her home, work, and life. Viewers are tempted to "buy into" her choice to inordinately prioritize passion. Though the series makes clear that she has no money, the scene still flashes a disproportionately fashionable lifestyle. In moments like these, professional passion is treated as an emotional product that is advertised, bought, and sold by Valeria, and ostensibly viewers, repeatedly throughout both the cinematic — and literary series. Lara Sánchez San Juan writes in her dissertation that *Valeria* the novel also relies heavily on "Product Placement", the embedded marketing of ideas and objects, to brand Valeria's career and life choices as trendy, desirable, and sophisticated (50). Thus, *Valeria* is not only visual and rhetorical storytelling for entertainment; it is also economic marketing for emotionally led, not economically driven, career decisions.

Apart from a few blog/vlog reviews and a couple of academic contributions, critics and scholars alike have relatively disregarded *Valeria*³³. To me, this makes sense. *Valeria* does not proffer any new or critically interesting angles about work or life; it fits the norms and

³³ Manatalah Soliman's dissertation *Framing of Female Leading Roles in Drama Series on Video Streaming Platforms* (2021) studies common characteristics embedded within female protagonists. *Valeria* serves as one of her case studies. While she finds interesting (and unfortunate results), Valeria's career choices take little focus in her project; Marta Sedano Simarro's dissertation *Preproducción de una serie de ficción: En los zapatos de Valeria* writes of the process of book to film adaptation. While this brings up interesting points about emerging creative influences between the creation of film and text, this is beyond the scope of my argument; and finally, a slew of reviews discuss the aesthetics of *Sex and The City* elements and characters present in this Madrid-set series.

conventions of common economic discourse today. And this is exactly what makes *Valeria* appealing for this project and what makes it so ravenously consumable by society.

To much interest of this chapter, *Valeria*'s reception has been ecstatic. As of 2022, over two million people had read *Valeria* the novel (Penguin Random House [n.p.](#)). Of *Valeria* the series, critics dubbed it "Netflix's sexiest TV show yet" ([Dray n.p.](#)). It even beat out the anglophone powerhouse that is Hollywood streaming on Netflix, earning a coveted Top 10 slot on the platform ([Capps n.p.](#)). So, while academia and critics have tended to shy away from *Valeria* because of its mass market and status quo characteristics, I see *Valeria* as a great representation of which economic discourses and models prospective workers have broadcasted to them as worthy and valuable professional pursuits. The epistemic discourse about work broadcasted within *Valeria* is that passion should be pursued no matter the economic or personal limitations of the day.

I believe *Valeria*'s receptibility is propped up by a proclivity for professional passion circulating widely within print society, as seen with economic self-help books of the day. When searching "*autodesarrollo*" and "*trabajo*" on Amazon.es, the first three pages yielded many results that were all instructing workers to pedestal passion in their career making decisions (see figure 4). One of the first results was *Adiós, Finiquito. Hola, Libertad: Cómo escapar de la trampa de 9am a 5pm, encontrar tu trabajo soñado y conquistar tu felicidad* (2021) by recently unemployed author José Vale. In his introduction, Vale informs his readers that he grew up working in agriculture, switched to technology, and when he was let go, he decided to pursue his real passion: writing this book on employment and passion. In the synopsis, Vale proposes that his book is for those who want to "transformar en profundidad su vida" (n.p.). To do so, he advises that you need to "encontrar el trabajo de tus sueños" (n.p.). Leaning on Confucius' ancient words ("Encuentra

un trabajo que ames y no tendrás que trabajar ni un día en tu vida”), he contends that to achieve happiness “la más importante es progresar en un trabajo significativo” (n.p.). Vale advises to ignore caution and to go after one’s professional passions no matter the obscure prospects of the field. He quotes Joseph Campbell in his opening chapter, “La cueva a la que temes entrar contiene el tesoro que buscas”, tempting the incalculable emotional wealth that passion work can yield (n.p.).

Other query results, like *Sonríe los lunes. Las 8 claves para ser más feliz en el trabajo y en tu vida* (2014), opens her book claiming that what people who suffer with depression on Sunday evenings have in common is that they do not have “un trabajo ideal” (n.p.). No matter the type of employment that one has, authors Luis Ríos and Luis Pita offer “8 estrategias para **amar** nuestro trabajo”, believing that finding emotional fulfillment at work has superlative importance (n.p. bold mine). Though a slightly different but related argument, Sergio Farré Guerrero’s *Empleo infinito*, like several other self-help books, encourages its readers to pursue “flexible” work so they can “liderar tu vida profesional” (n.p.). Here, “flexible” positively frames the precarious passionate pursuit.

And finally, in *La felicidad en el trabajo y en la vida: la positividad como inspiración laboral y personal* (2016), former human resources employee Santiago Vázquez, in a nutshell, declares that the key to happiness in life is to find and to treat work like a “Fuente de felicidad” (n.p.). He urges the importance of dedicating one’s life to things that he or she loves, ultimately concluding passion’s powerful capacity to overtake the entire institution of work: “plantear el trabajo como una fuente de felicidad es una auténtica revolución” (n.p.).



Fig. 4 The brightly colored book covers similarly transmit a lively aesthetic like that of *Valeria*.

Unlike *Valeria*, these self-help books are not best-sellers. They are also rarely empirical and often independently published, too. But more important than their questionable quality is their certifiable quantity. Their message of “find something you love and go for it!” is ubiquitously preached across the genre; their individual arguments nearly match the other’s, which suggests these books are attempting to commodify a desirable economic trend into purchasable words for their own personal gain.

Together, cultural products like *Valeria* and recent self-help books reflect common economic discourse informing work in post-2008 Spain. Furthermore, how the works fervently engage with the rhetoric of passion — often at the expense of financial reason — reveals how contemporary economic discourses and products have diversified our concept of work to not only be a financial institution but an emotional one as well, where wages and wealth, ideally, come second to inner prosperity.

Passion and Satisfaction

Like the smile that stretches across Valeria's face in figure 2 and the smile across the cover of *Sonríe los lunes* in figure 4, society similarly beams for passion. Recent studies found that many workers who prioritize passion are satisfied. One found that about 90 percent of humanities graduates are happy with their lives and careers, despite lesser pay and higher levels of precarity and unemployment compared to more lucrative business and STEM fields (Jaschik [n.p.](#)). Two-thirds of those graduates reported deep interest in their work. They described their employment as their "ideal" job, suggesting passion successfully guided them to contentment ([n.p.](#)). In Spain, several researchers have found that academics are content with their precarious positions. In two separate studies, Catalan academics on a one-year and a three-month contract respectively, yet equally, described themselves as "lucky" to work in a field they loved (Castillo and Moré 141 and Schwaller 39).

Studies like these reveal that by and large, passion is not just a metaphorical trope bought and sold within plots and arguments of tv series, novels, or self-help books. Real people are happy customers, too. On the other hand, these studies also show another more nefarious side: that the discourse of passion may encourage prospective workers, and especially young ones, to seek careers that they love in exchange for financial instability. This exchange, which largely benefits capitalism, exemplifies a beguiling trap that neoliberal approaches to work can achieve to secure its economic objectives of cheap labor and total economic fealty.

The Problem with Passion

Wanting to be passionate about one's work may seem immediately innocuous or even beneficial to the individual (for who would not want to be enjoy the work they are doing, especially when, in the capitalist society, it occupies most of our lives? And studies show that passionate

workers are satisfied in any case.). But Sociologist Erin Cech warns that passion has a nefarious side, too. In her book, *The Trouble with Passion: How searching for fulfillment at work fosters inequality* (2021), Cech argues that passion-seeking can be exploitative. Her data shows that when jobs call for workers who deeply desire to make it in their field, employers often — knowingly and deceptively— are ensnaring long-term underpaid and unpaid labor by preferentially hiring people who will, quietly, tolerate more work for less money (64, 157, 191, 206). UCLA’s recent job posting for a lecturer for *z-e-r-o* pay illuminates the extreme to which passion believes itself capable to entice and entitled to exploit in the neoliberal labor market (Hiltzik [n.p.](#))³⁴.

Cech defines this exploitative scenario of passion “The Passion Principle” or *TPP*. To her, *TPP* is the relatively new culturally dominant belief that passionate self-expression and personal fulfillment should be the central guiding principle in career decision making amongst, but not limited to, college-educated workers. Under *TPP*, workers prioritize their personal sense of meaningful employment, even if it means sacrificing stable work, healthy mental states, and living wages and life conditions for extended periods of time. Cech’s theory on *TPP* as a new dominant neoliberal trend ripples across the Atlantic. In a study of Spanish, Italian and Norwegian workers, sociologist Anna Simola found that passion seeking was normalized for young, highly educated workers. She found that these prospective workers often sought opportunities that could promise “self-realization, self-development and self-fulfillment, rather than economic gain or social mobility” (2). The result, Simola found, was an unequal socioeconomic distribution of wealth and stunted mobility for these workers.

Cech warns that in addition to being exploitative passion can also be discriminatory. For instance, some can afford to be unfairly and incommensurately compensated in precarious pursuits.

³⁴ Kata Beilin directed me to this job posting.

Many cannot. As one could expect, the socio-economically privileged can afford passion work. In Cech's words, the passion-privileged are those who "already enjoy the greatest economic, racial and gender" advantages and have sufficient financial resources ("safety nets") and social capital ("springboards") to be able to successfully parlay precarious work into a fulfilling lifelong career (9, 25). For those who are not amongst this privileged group — which is the majority — passion can reproduce socioeconomic disadvantage, occupational inequality, and segregation more broadly (12). Cech explains that gender, race, and class minorities are especially vulnerable to passion work, as it encourages them to work harder, without extra compensation, to prove that they too belong where they have historically not³⁵. Their opportunity costs of passion are even pricier since they systemically originate from less economically privileged positions to begin with. In other words, mostly the privileged can afford to "pay their dues" in precarious pursuits, and this sociodemographic represents to whom it pays off to do so.

Cech and Simola's research valuably demonstrates the potential trouble with professional passion-seeking in the labor market. But *TPP* can also further allow for a broader critical questioning of work. Contemplating *TPP* as a as a theoretical frame presents a new "cultural schema" through which we can contemplate the meaning and function of not only passion work but also that of our limited and culturally determined concept of work in general, as it is discursively influenced in neoliberal societies, including but not limited to Spain (Cech 4). In this way, passion as an economic discourse may be enveloped within a wider web of beliefs that

³⁵ In a 2014 article by Janelle Ross and National Journal, they found that Black college graduates were unemployed at 12.4%. Conversely, all college graduates were only unemployed at 5.6% ([n.p.](#)). The following year another article in the same magazine by Emily DeRuy and National Journal published that "Graduate Degrees Can Help Narrow Underemployment Gap Among Races" ([n.p.](#)). Though the article was written optimistically ("Racial disparities in underemployment decline as education levels rise"), my understanding of these two articles together is that People of Color must work harder, or be higher skilled, to gain entry to where they have been historically excluded.

function to promote certain workplace processes “that help to uphold existing unequal economic and social structures” (163). For me, I see these processes belonging to a rhetorical facet of toxic work, to which the remainder of this chapter will be dedicated.

Toxic Discourses and Toxic Work

In chapter one, I proposed the idea of “toxic work” or the harmful economic activities that deplete life. Toxic work was mainly viewed in physical, tangible ways; its necrotic consequences were traced to declining bodies and environments as seen in Director Alejandro González Iñárritu’s film *Biutiful* (2010), which graphically plotted our capitalist approaches to work with our society’s inevitable approach towards death. Viewers saw that the more that Uxbal worked, the more that his body failed, and his surroundings suffered. The dark and desolate film spoke to the epistemological insufficiencies of the concept of work today and its capacity to threaten human and nonhuman life on Earth.

Toxicity, in its most easily identifiable form, is physical. But like Uxbal’s cancer that was only detectable under magnetic resonance imaging, some kinds of toxicity require a different instrument to see them in their various existential forms. After all, toxicity can be imperceptible and uncertain (Michelle Murphy’s “sick building syndrome”), incremental and incalculable (Rob Nixon’s “slow violence”), or in the specific interest of the rest of this chapter: metaphorical and rhetorical. Though different from a replicating cancerous cell, metaphorically, the toxic words that circulate throughout society are no less virulent. They possess a similar power to infect, to reproduce, and to spread metastatically across hosts like any other infectious disease. A different instrument is required to help detect this insidious articulation of toxicity.

Ecocritical pioneer Lawrence Buell provides that instrument. In 1998, Buell sparked a new conversation that has since expanded the way that we conceive the poisonous reach of capitalism today. He wrote that toxicity, although obviously material as many fields had already pointed out, can also have less tangible, discursive origins³⁶. Buell coined this prism through which to view toxicity “toxic discourses” (639). Toxic discourses, he wrote, derive from Western attitudes and capitalist values that can have critical implications on human and nonhuman life as they rapidly spread across communities and contaminate our world. Through “toxic discourses,” Buell connected how late-phase capitalist thoughts, values, and beliefs can inform our behaviors and harm society and the environment at large. Considering both Buell’s and Cech’s perspective together, toxic work then must also include the toxic rhetoric of *neo-nomos*, like passion, that workers enact to their own demise.

Passion, per se, is not always toxic. Yet, its dominance and pervasiveness as an economic discourse today is cause for critical concern. Work is an effective way through which economic thoughts, values and beliefs can easily spread around the world, because nearly everyone works, whether formally or informally, paid or unpaid. And for centuries, people have sought to work according to the style, fashion and demands of their “episteme” and epoch, moving around and bringing with them their cultural beliefs and discourses about how and why work should work (Foucault 183)³⁷. Taking a brief detour into the epistemic discourse of passion maps how economic

³⁶ Buell noted that as we approached the turn of the recent century, society was becoming increasingly alarmed at the extensiveness and pervasiveness of toxicity in the industrial and modern culture. Chemical, medical, and environmental disasters were spectacularly calling for immediate and pressing attention worldwide. As a result, attention on more subtle forms of toxicity, like the metaphorical and rhetorical, continued to disperse undetected, falling to the capitalist culture’s distracted wayside.

³⁷ In his book *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault explains that in any given epoch, there always exist certain cognitive limits, or epistemes, that subjectively form the way humans think and act in society (183).

beliefs travel across time and space, crafting and tailoring the meaning and functionality of work along the way.

The (Benign) Discursive Origins of Passion

The debate over meaningful “work” vs. the less-desirable “labor” dates back centuries. An early recorded debate over work vs. labor appears in precapitalist times when Aristotle studied the axiological status of work. In *Politica*, he conceptually distinguished “work” from “labor”, dividing different types of economic activity into a social hierarchy. On the bottom tier was labor. “Labor”, he wrote, was undesirable physical activity, like craftsmanship and slave labor. In contrast, “work” was a more contemplative or cerebral action, like political action (1253b30 – 33, 1254a20-b25). To him, work was a vocation that reflected a prestigious social standing, because it was a “noble action” that created “happiness” amongst and for its citizens ([Miller n.p.](#)). Work ideally produced a beneficial social and emotional experience.

During the dawn of modern economics, Adam Smith, the denoted father of capitalism, similarly conceptualized labor as the mere “toil and trouble” necessary to acquire life’s necessities and conveniences (*Wealth of Nations*, 30). To Smith, labor was a monotonous but essential task. Later, during the industrial revolution, Marx and Engels contributed an even more pessimistic view of labor than Smith’s. Rather than just being a nuisance as “toil and trouble” suggests, Marx and Engels wrote that labor would have devastating consequences for the individual:

Owing to the extensive use of machinery and to division of labor, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine, and it is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack, that is required of him. (17)

The authors equate losing one’s individuality through monotonous (production-based) labor to losing oneself, one’s essence, one’s own humanity.

In his book *Capital* (1867), Marx details even further his conceptualization of capitalist (production-based / industrial) labor. Recognized today by economists as “The Labor Theory of Value,” Marx explains that labor not only reduces the human to a machine but that it also extracts valuable lifetime from the worker while reducing his or her wages over time. In addition to Aristotle’s critical thoughts, Marx criticized capitalist labor as producing class stratification, species alienation (the degradation of the human mind to an animal-like condition through labor³⁸), and overall environmental decline (*Capital* 1867). Overall, across a variety of ideological climes, sentiments about labor were in negative consensus and an ideal conceptualization towards a more individualized approach to work was in motion. Aristotle, Smith, Marx and Engels’ asynchronous debate delineates how toxic industrial conditions, both at work and in the air, connected with a centuries-long discontentment with labor.

Furthermore, the fear of becoming a machine-like laborer eventually overlapped with a cultural movement that was similarly steering work towards a new romanticized existence. An artistic response and an expression of shifting cultural and economic values, the era of romanticism assigned a new prestigious value to “heroic” (i.e., passionate) work done by individualists and artists. Individualists and artists who could afford to escape the malignant and mundane tolls of the proverbial and literal factory life were portrayed as economic saviors whose unique, impassioned work had the power to redeem the individual’s, and thus, society’s quality of life. A pendulum response to the woes of uniform industrial labor, work under romanticism found

³⁸ Hannah Arendt similarly connected the division of labor/work to animal degradation. In her study, she taxonomically divides humans into different species per the kind of work that they do. For instance, the human “in its fabricating capacity” is the *homo faber* (139 – 173). Meanwhile the *homo laboran* denotes a human engaged in cyclical, monotonous work. To her, these human workers exist in close approximation to animal activity because they are in a state of perpetual imprisonment due to the style of work in which they incapable of escaping (42).

meaning in freedom, individuality, and a renewed cohesion with nature (Taylor 362). The individual was exalted as the new moral and spiritual authority as his or her personalization of work could reorient him or her in a deeper consciousness and self-awareness that the “toil and trouble” of industrial work had failed to liberate (Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 30).

In his seminal work *The Sources of Self*, philosopher Charles Taylor tells us that which is considered morally good in the West is that which rewards meaning, fulfillment, and dignity into the human experience (4). Romantic conceptualizations about work — hinging on individualism, liberty, autonomy, and passion — can be viewed as a sensible intent to restore moral good. The reinvigoration of meaning and dignity through passion into the institution distinguished labor from work by enlivening the economic experience.

From this point on, passion became a desirable objective for work. Even towards the end of Romanticism, some Romantic ideals were being debated and discarded, but ideals about individualized work were not. Even John Stuart Mill — a highly influential philosopher and a strong critic of government “autonomy” (free market approaches) — stayed faithful to work’s newfound purpose. In 1850 he wrote:

There is nothing laudable in work for work’s sake...Yet, even in the case of the most sublime service to humanity, it is not because it is work that is worthy; the worth lies in the service itself, and in the will to render it... (27)

Economic passion’s survivability could also connect to how passion as a principle is entangled within Christian narratives that predominately circulate throughout the West (Prothero 74). The basic storyline is as such: Adam and Eve commit the “original sin” sentencing humanity to moral depravity. But then God intervenes. He sacrifices his son to save humans from themselves. If humans accept the sacrificial gift, they are redeemed. However, they must continue to “fight the good fight” throughout their lives on Earth, meaning they must relentlessly struggle against their

sinful, “original”, inner self in attempt to mirror God’s goodness and righteousness. If they succeed in “keeping the faith”, they eventually earn eternal life. Struggle, sacrifice, and arduous labor are sacrosanct ideals that fed and nourished the survivability and desirability of passion.

This Western, culturally dominant cosmovision intertwines with the dominant capitalist cosmovision, too. The Christian-influenced society often believes that humans are inherently flawed (their “original sin”), and that they must always be fighting, struggling, and progressing towards something better (“to fight the good fight”). This belief is detectable in the socio-economic worldview. Anti-capitalist artist and writer Miguel Brieva’s relatively recent Instagram cartoon reminds me of this connection. In it, he depicts how, what I see as the current Judeo-Christian-Capitalist mythology, teaches humans that they are worse than what they are, and that they must continuously progress in life, especially towards “la mera reproducción del capital” ([caption n.p.](#)). The message disseminated is that humans must search and find the good life, both spiritually and financially. In true Brieva style, the image is inundated with words, mimicking the overwhelming experience of humans living and working under the persuasive rhetorical mechanisms of the neoliberal episteme. As seen in the image, those mechanisms, pictured in blue, are depicted as antithetical to humanity’s true, original, nature (pictured in red). Such a polar experience today, he illustrates, places humans in an impossible position that increasingly leads to declining mental health.



Fig. 6. Brieva's cartoon articulates how our understanding of self is messily wrapped up in a Capitalist rhetoric that keeps us working hard "ser el mejor" with the ultimate objective of "el dinero es lo más" (Instagram).

Not just passion, but also professional passion, fits well into this religious paradigm woven into the western, capitalist fabric. The Christian passion for struggle and sacrifice per the promise of eventual reward is adopted and transformed into the capitalist society (And Cech's research would contend that this is a trap, a false translation). Economic discourses, such as TPP, similarly promises if an individual struggles and relentlessly works towards his or her goals, he or she will eventually be rewarded. While most major religions today have more to do with ritual than religion, Christianity differs in this way. Its principal preoccupation is faith and belief (Prothero 71). In the workforce this looks like workers, discontent with their current condition, believing there is something better for them beyond. Already accepting of the notion of endless struggling and suffering, there is faith in the promise that their professional pain will be rewarded greatly in the end. So, while it may seem economically ludicrous to prioritize passion over security, Cech's *TPP* can be viewed as an expression of an all-encompassing faith that things will work out in the

end, even if secular conditions should persuade otherwise. Afterall, the Western worker has long heard of individual responsibility and the passion to continue pushing.

When Passion Goes Toxic: “neo-nomos” in context

In sum, passion’s origins can be traced across centuries. The historical debate for meaningful work, romantic values that exalted individual expression and freedom, and contemporary Christian influence on economic culture all trace passion’s benevolent discursive origins. The ideal of passion fits —sensibly and reasonably— within the desire to better economic conditions and experiences.

Yet, passion’s sensibility, reasonability, and benevolence, I argue, have recently been undermined. The unregulated extremes of the economy today has empowered neoliberalism to take reasonable ideas, like professional passion, and subvert them into something toxic, as Cech’s uncovering of the dangers of *TPP* models. Without labor regulations and other economic protections that existed prior to neoliberalism, professional passion can be wielded against workers and can push them towards the very thing that exploits them. Under such conceptualization, passion can embody a toxic discourse, a late-phase capitalist thought, value and belief that informs our economic behaviors and harms society at large (Buell 639).

Since *TPP* is a rhetorical form of toxicity, we can expect it, by nature, to be convincing, insidious, and beguiling as it appeals to our financial needs, our cultural values, and our emotional desires. Neoliberalism’s powerfully cunning ability to take sensible economic ideas, like passion, and to unsuspectingly pervert them for systematic advantage presents a nuanced mode of persuasion for which workers should be equipped to detect. As mentioned earlier, I have proposed that in addition to Aristotle’s *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* modes of persuasion, that there is now a

fourth rhetorical appeal at play in today's society. I have named this fourth appeal as “*neo-nomos at work*”: or the economic art of persuasion under neoliberalism. As a reminder, *neo-nomos* is a neologism deriving from the Greek work *neo*, meaning new, and the partial derivative of the Greek word *oikonomia*, meaning economy (*oikos* “household” + *nomos* “management”). Neo-nomos at work gives a name to, and thus, exposes, a toxic mode of economic persuasion for which socio-economically vulnerable workers should be equipped to detect and to defend themselves against the all mighty, neoliberal episteme.

Contrasting Common Discourses of Passion in *La trabajadora*

In the first half of this chapter, *Valeria* and self-help books clearly participated in the discourse of professional passion. Valeria's upbeat nature — from the music to the colors and the unlikely plot itself — portrayed passion as a positive pursuit, worthy of following at all costs. Desperate for money and bored with her monotonous relationship, Valeria decides to stay true to her passions. The series ends as such: she has an affair, writes a best-selling novel, and celebrates the captivating life she has always wanted and has now miraculously achieved — despite the economic odds in Spain during this time. The conclusion that *Valeria* leads its reader and viewership to make is that passion, applied across professional and personal domains, is a panacea for financial and emotional woes.

The sampling of self-help books recently published in Spain anchored *Valeria's* narrative within common cultural discourses circulating throughout society. Similar economic themes that were ingrained in Valeria's career pursuits— like passion, love, and flexibility— appeared left and right across the genre. Together, *Valeria* and the economic self-help books outline conventional wisdom guiding and tailoring epistemic approaches to work under neoliberalism. But looking at

current labor market conditions, Cech's theory of *TPP*, my proposal of *neo-nomos* and toxic work could suggest that *Valeria* and the self-help books can be equally consumed as works of fiction and/or economic fantasy. Recent scholarship unveils how the exaggerated preference for loving one's job can have deleterious financial and social consequences.

Alongside the academic research, cultural productions are raising a critical eyebrow to passion's toxic side too, effectively aiding in the detection of *neo-nomos* at work in society. Elvira Navarro's novel, *La trabajadora* (2014), is my primary example. The short but dense novel follows the unraveling of Elisa, a female copy editor and accomplished writer, whose living conditions and well-being are deteriorated by her determination to follow her professional dreams. Unlike common cultural fantasies that push that hard work will eventually pay off (like *Valeria* who eventually secures the rare and coveted book deal, thus prizing the push for passion), ultimately, Elisa's passion work never pays off. Trapped in poverty despite working more than full-time, she suffers a total disillusionment from both her career and her city. Her story raises conscientiousness to how toxic work and toxic discourses have the potent capacity to convince, cajole and cartograph vulnerable workers, like women (or young people, minorities, etc.), into the literal and proverbial margins of life. To trace this phenomenon, I examine how passion at work toxically functions as a discriminatory mechanism that can exploit workers (but especially women and other vulnerable populations) in the contemporary *escenario de trabajo* in Madrid, as portrayed in the novel.

If *Valeria* and the self-help books are a mix of fiction and fantasy, then *La trabajadora* is a dose of realism and nostalgia. In a conversation with the author, Elvira Navarro, she discussed with me her inspiration for the book. Growing up, her middle-class parents always afforded to live in city centers. But after completing her own doctorate and even publishing a few of her own stories, she surprisingly found herself in a different position. For financial reasons, she was forced

to relocate to a working-class neighborhood, Carabanchel, located outside of Madrid's city center. There she endured a peculiar "baile de compañeras de piso" in and out of her apartment that she could barely afford. Even though she was working relentlessly at an editorial during this time (circa 2008 – 2009), her employer was undergoing an acquisition, and she, like other contract workers, suffered long stretches without a salary. Unlike her parents' past where it was "relativamente sencillo poder pagar un alquiler", for Navarro, she felt that "llegó un momento que me vi la imposibilidad en mantener ese estatus, ese nivel de vida. Tenía la sensación de que [el trabajo] me desclasaba hacia abajo" (01:36-:43; 03:25 - :34). Without the hustle and bustle that the center of an international city offers, Navarro would spend her time walking around her fringe neighborhood, contemplating, like many other young workers, how the "paisaje" of work in Madrid was changing "de una manera peligrosa" (2:25 – :28).

Despite these fundamental changes in contemporary society, Navarro felt that economic discourse was still promoting outmoded narratives about the limitless possibilities of work, if only an individual wills it enough into existence. Like the arguments in the self-help books, Navarro thought that under neoliberal discourse "todo parece una cuestión de gestión, si gestionas bien o mal. Todo es una responsabilidad de uno; no hay más en el universo que el propio sujeto, que el propio sujeto genera su realidad (20:42 - :59). To her this was misleading. Though she had the skill and will, she encountered a different, more rigid reality. She was experiencing that such economic discourses were ignoring the systemic, political, and economic powers that were preventing individual workers— even highly educated, hardworking and passionate ones like her — from earning a dignified living. Work no longer conceptually corresponded to present discourse nor past realities, at least as it had existed for her parents. She was doing everything right but still struggling. *La trabajadora* is a conscious attempt, in Navarro's words, to "contrastar la situación de Elisa con

ese tipo de discursos” and in effect “redefinir el concepto [of work] a través del personaje Elisa” (21:31 - :34; 10:07 - :16).

Today, in 2022, Navarro acknowledges because of both the financial and viral crises, society has clearly been grappling with forming an ideal definition of work: what work should look like and what rights workers should have. In her words, “La crisis ha ensanchado los significados, los ha dinamitado, en fin, los han redefinido” (12:48 - :55). But in 2014, the year the book was published, this debate “no estaba tan claro” (12:58 - 13:00). Then, the idea of “el trabajador o la trabajadora” was still culturally entrained “en el imaginario [que] remite un contexto obrero... a una fábrica”, along with all the rights, protections, and lifestyle affordances that the industrial revolution had fought for and achieved — but had since been dissolved (9:10 - :48). Navarro wanted her book to align with contemporaneous movements like 15-M, because she believed “la clase obrera” as a concept needed to be modernized and updated to “definir las condiciones laborales actuales puesto que no estamos en una sociedad industrial” (12:20 - :26).

Navarro wanted to play with this economic dissonance to “deshacer este concepto [del trabajo] tan ligado a la fábrica, o a la clase obrera como tradicionalmente concebida” (9:44- :54). So, rather than depicting a worker at a business or factory, the cover of *La trabajadora* illustrates a woman in her new dimension: working at home, living in a scant apartment, and suffering psychological duress (see figure 7):



Fig. 7. The cover of *La trabajadora* pictures a single woman working at home.

As seen above, rather than positioning Elisa, *La trabajadora*, within a busy factory alongside other workers, the cover places her within a listless room, alone. She appears to be sitting in a dark place on the outside of society, which we know to be Carabanchel, gazing longingly towards the bright inside, Madrid's city center. The darkness penetrates her home and even her own body, suggestive of the gloomy disposition Elisa finds herself located within, both emotionally and geographically (and financially if one considers the bareness of her room). As she hugs her knees, a sense of helplessness and despair is emitted, which per the title, readers know pertains to the transforming nature of work in post-2008 Spain.

When I asked Navarro how *La trabajadora* connects or does not connect with her other works, she gave me two explanations. Firstly, she thought that *La trabajadora* most directly dialogues with another short novel of hers, *La ciudad feliz* (2009). Winner of the 25th Premio Jaén de Novela for its intimate portrayal of a new and disturbing social reality in post-2008 Spain, *La ciudad feliz* follows an immigrant family working in a local Chinese restaurant. There,

the immigrant family is paid “a destajo”, meaning only completed work (as opposed to time-based or salaried work) is compensated as a means of increasing worker performance and efficiency. Dissatisfied with work and culturally disoriented, the family struggles financially and psychologically. Out of this struggle, Navarro develops a story of the reverberating difficulties that can stem from having an opposing cultural understanding about work and family than that of the contemporary Spanish culture and economy. Like Elisa, for these immigrants, the mismatch of their financial expectations translates into psychological distress too, revealing how “Todo pasa por el trabajo, digamos que los efectos pasan por la economía...” (Navarro 14:36 - :40). In general, Navarro sees that *La trabajadora* and *La ciudad feliz* deal with the theme of work: how to work to survive and how work negatively affects relationships with others and with the self.

Secondly, Navarro thought that *La trabajadora* suits her overall literary style. The book, like her others, spells out a character's highly personal, emotional world, taking the narrative angle of “no desde afuera hacia adentro, pero desde adentro hacia afuera” (16:12 - :15). This lens allows her books to offer internal recourse for the external problems spreading across Spanish society. This is where my analysis of her novel centers, on tracing how Elisa’s belief in the discourse of passion, in its toxic rendition articulated through *neo-nomos*, traps her in financial and emotional distress.

Though the toxic rendition of passion can hurt any demographic, undoubtedly, I am particularly interested in how it is portrayed in this realistic novel as being especially painful for women. Before doing a close reading of a few scenes, it is first necessary to take a brief look into a woman’s historical economic context and her contemporary financial circumstance that, I argue (in accordance with Cech’s research), heightens Her vulnerability to TPP and deepens the reading of Elisa’s story.

Historically, the meaning and function of work within many capitalist countries around the world radically transformed in the 21st century to include only remunerated work, a dramatic aberration from past norms. As outlined in the introduction, Herrero's research explains how this change especially impacted women, whose work, which is primarily done in spaces of care, became decidedly unpaid under capitalism. Consequently, the various types of capital that were once shared more equally amongst both men and women were redistributed predominately to men. Women, on the other hand, were pushed to the socioeconomic periphery where their majority has resided ever since. Such an inferior historical position in the economy makes the pursuit of passion even more risky, as she negotiates a patriarchal system in addition to increasing life precarity under neoliberalism.

In a contemporary context, a woman worker still faces certain economic parameters, namely a distinctly gendered floor and ceiling, which also entrench her vulnerability to *TPP*. While equality in the workforce has made significant strides in Spain since the 70s (and continues to make improvements), work remains a primary instrument through which women are discriminated against. Today, working women still have a lower floor to start with and a shorter ladder to climb out from. Firstly, compared to men, women are the poorest in both the world and Spain.³⁹ Even when women have higher levels of education and skill, they are still paid lower than their male counterparts. El centro de estudios de economía aplicada (FEDEA) recently released a study that analyzed the contemporary Spanish female's economic status. The study found that despite women overall having more education, they suffer discrimination in

³⁹ In her article "Feminismo en tiempos de crisis" (2014), feminist Lidia Falcón reported that "El reparto de la renta en España es del 18% para las mujeres y del 82% para los hombres" (360). According to OXFAM international, in 2021 they found that the majority of the world's poor are women. They attribute their inferior economic position to low wages, lack of access to decent work, unpaid care and domestic work, and longer workdays ([n.p.](#)).

employment, salary, and access to leadership positions (Conde-Ruiz and Ignacio Marra 2016). In a public article written by J.S. González, he summarized the main data points of the study. He wrote that women are “mejor formadas”, have “menos trabajo”, “sufren más desempleo” and “empleo de peor calidad”, are “peor renumeradas” and “sobrecalificadas”. Citing the study, González quotes, “Un mayor porcentaje de mujeres que de hombres están sobrecalificadas para el puesto que ocupan” ([n.p.](#)). Other data, like that published from *Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas*, similarly reported the wage gap between men and women in Spain has persisted across recent decades, varying slightly per sector and age, despite women’s increased participation in the market and their higher levels of education and training. In the case of “variable wages” in Spain, like the job Elisa holds in the novel, one study found that women were paid up to 37% less than their male colleagues who held the same position ([De Lucio et al. 131 - 147](#)). Secondly, when considering the extra domestic, care, and “culture” work”, as I would call it (the extra responsibilities, duties and recruitment that women are sometimes prescribed to at work to provide mentorship and support to other minority populations on behalf of their employers), that largely falls on women, women work longer days and as a result are more likely to suffer from emotional and psychological distress (like Elisa does)⁴⁰. The longer days that women work compared to men has been coined and popularized by sociologists Anne Machung

⁴⁰ For a conceptual reading on the subject see Ramón Ramos Torres’ book *Cronos dividido: Uso del tiempo y desigualdad entre mujeres y hombres en España* (1990). Regarding the extra “culture work” that women do at their jobs, the concept is just beginning to be explored. I draw my epistemology from recent public articles such as but not limited to Audrey Williams June’s “The Invisible Labor of Minority Professors” ([n.p.](#)) and Patricia Matthew’s “What is Faculty Diversity Worth to a University” (*The Atlantic*) that draw attention to the way women, especially women of color, provide invisible labor on behalf of their institutions (for instance in recruiting, mentoring, DEI work, etc.) for which they are not paid nor promoted. In some cases, the articles outline how these women professors were even penalized for this extra work, since it was not categorically counted towards their tenure review yet detracted from other areas by which they *were* evaluated. For reading on the psychological and emotional impacts of the extra responsibilities women have at home and at work see the work by Sprague-Jones and the UN’s “The World’s Women’s 2020” report.

and Arlie Russell Hochschild as the “second shift” (4). The authors explain that even though both men and women experience this second shift, women tend to shoulder most of the responsibility. In fact, according to the United Nation’s recent report *The World’s Women 2020: Trends and statistics*, the study found that on an average day, women world-wide spend about three times as much time on unpaid domestic and care work as men do (4.2 hours vs. 1.7). The disparity was especially severe in some regions. In Northern Africa and Western Asia, women spend up to seven times more on these activities than men and in Pakistan up to eleven times more. In 2006, a two-step survey was conducted in Spain about this second shift. The respondents were first asked what kind of division of labor would be the ideal family model. 64% of women and men expressed that an equal division of domestic and care labor would be ideal (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas). Next, though, the survey inquired about recent use of time. It found that a significant unequal division of labor remained in the respondents’ households, disproportionately falling on women, despite their previously expressed sentiments (Dominguez-Folgueras, 2012; González y Jurado, 2009). Altogether, this is the lower floor that women begin their careers from. This could explain why the novel is named *La trabajadora* instead of *Elisa*. Though a personal story, it could also be metonymically interpreted as gendered disenfranchisement.

When it comes to escaping financial precarity, women, again compared to men, have a shorter ladder to climb out from, too. Women have fewer career choices over all as they are largely excluded from various occupational fields (“horizontal discrimination”). Studies have found that when women do manage to achieve horizontal access in large swaths, the field is then “feminized”, meaning it is subsequently devalued and underpaid, implying that the work society

values is that which is done by men⁴¹. Women also have fewer mobility opportunities, as they are widely looked over for leadership positions (“vertical segregation”), which might make the process of “paying dues” of *TPP* even more risky for women. In addition to the economic discrimination at play preventing women from advancing horizontally or vertically in their careers, women workers also face the barrier of sexism. Women, for their biology and physical appearances, are perceived as less intellectually competent than men, especially those who are perceived as pretty and those with a higher voice register⁴². Because of these reasons and more⁴³, the process of passion-seeking may be even less justifiable for women. The extra burden it presents can be a surmounting weight on top of their already uniquely inferior economic condition. This is the historic and contemporary ceiling a woman’s ladder struggles to touch, let alone shatter.

Passion Exploits

With this economic context in mind, *La trabajadora* recounts passion’s surmounting weight through a series of exploitative and discriminative events in Elisa’s labor market experiences. Firstly, the discourse of passion exploits her, both during her training and during her

⁴¹ See the public writings by Cain Miller in 2016 or Traister 2016. See also the studies by Light et al. 2022; Marín Cardona, 2017; Ordóñez Yraolagoitia, 2015; Ministerio de Sanidad, Servicios Sociales e Igauldad, 2014; De Lucio et al. 2012; Alba 2000; and Reskin and Roos 1990. Feminist Tova Leigh recently wrote in an Instagram post “our patriarchal society regards certain types of work as more important than others, and it is usually roles traditionally played by men. Examples include manual labor and physical work, fighting in wars, hunting etc while roles traditionally played by women (like looking after the kids) are seen as less valuable.”

⁴² See the works of Eagly et al. (1991), Ibáñez Pascual’s (2010) and Veronica Ruecert (2019).

⁴³ For further reading about gendered economic discrimination in Spain see the following studies: Barberá, et al. 2011, Biencieto López et al. 2009; Bonet 2004; Cáceres Ruiz et al. 2004; Catalá 2015; Charles and Grusky 2005; Spain’s CIS 2006 survey; Domínguez-Folgueras 2012; Falcón 1996 and 2014; González and Jurado 2009; Ibáñez Pascual 2008; Iglesias Fernández and Llorente Heras (2010); the INE’s current wage gap statistics; J.S. González’s public article from 2016; Kwan and Trautner 2009; Marín Cardona 2017; Millet 2016; and The UN’s “The World’s Women’s 2020” report.

career as an editor and writer. She dedicated most of her early life towards a costly pursuit of logophilia. Piecing together fragments from the novel, readers can construct an outline of her twenties: college, a master's degree, a long-term internship where she competed against more than eighty, likely unpaid, interns in hopes of obtaining a short-term contract (which she secured three separate times), a work-study in Paris where she trained while living impoverished off a “beca mínima”, and finally, she entered, yet did not complete, a doctoral degree (Navarro 67). After a decade of low-paid training to “make it” in her beloved writing and editing field, now in her thirties, Elisa has only encountered *more* precarity in her career — despite working for a well-known publisher, Grupo Editorial Término, located in Madrid's vibrant urban center. Here she works around the clock editing best sellers alongside other passionate workers of the erudite cultural and intellectual industry. On the side, she works even more, publishing her own creative writing projects.

Yet, despite the preponderance of evidence suggesting that Elisa has “made it” in a creative field (e.g., her glamorous field, her doctoral studies, her discipline at work, her successful writing career), none of it is enough to secure her a place in Madrid's middle class (paraphrasing Larson 91). In fact, her financial situation only worsens the longer she works towards her passion. Elisa's situation takes a dramatic turn when her publishing group converts her into an independent contractor, a “colaboradora externa” (46) — a common trend in neoliberal societies that seeks to “flexibilize” and thus “cheapen” the labor market. As a result, she works even longer, more excruciating, unpaid hours, takes on extra responsibilities, does not seek higher compensation, and does not complain, believing in general that she “no tenía derecho a estas prerrogativas” (54). Rather than search for more dependable employment in another field,

Elisa remains faithful to her belief in professional passion and the struggles that come with it⁴⁴. Consequently, she suffers an increasingly unstable emotional and financial well-being, presenting serious opportunity and emotional costs, just as Cech has cautioned.

Elisa's choice to remain steadfast in a precarious career that she is passionate about makes understanding *TPP's* exploitative nature vague. Even Cech addresses that the pursuit of fulfilling work is ethically nebulous. She contends that society might deem passionate, precarious careers a kind of "elevated exploitation", because it is work that is personally elected and brings satisfaction to the worker (as touched on previously). Nonetheless, Cech concludes that, for her, passion work is still unpaid labor that benefits the employer and costs the laborer, exemplifying the definition of exploitative labor.

Even if the reader is unable to agree with Cech's conclusion, Elisa's autonomous choice, i.e., her personal election, to *choose* a passionate career is also problematized in the novel. Choice is depicted as intertwined within the rhetoric of *neo-nomos at work*, the economic art of persuasion, that revolves around and within her circumstance. Through such entanglements, the distance between personal and professional autonomy are made to be metaphorically ambiguous, which helps to acknowledge the pervasive nature of passion and *neo-nomos at work*.

Consider the following scene where Elisa's personal and professional autonomy are threatened. To cut costs, the publishing house turns off the heat and then takes away Elisa's office space. Elisa starts working at home: a truism that quickly subverts to "living at work" for her, a paradigmatic experience shared by remote workers in the current pandemic society (Rauhala et al. n.p.). Elisa begins to suffer panic attacks and can no longer write, because the computer screen

⁴⁴ At one point in the novel, Elisa does ask her roommate for a job in another field. However, Elisa does very little to pursue this fleeting idea and abandons it all together, rather quickly.

triggers her of her endless, exhausting workload. Like the frigid office she used to work in, Elisa now feels the cold permeating her new home and workspace, too:

El hielo que se pegaba al cristal (y no en los bordes, sino en el centro del cristal), como una araña dantesca que hubiese sido lanzada desde la calle y se despanzurrara poco a poco, había dejado, al fundirse, un surco que tornaba arenosas las formas de quienes subían la cuesta. (50)

As exemplified in this moment, the cold serves as a harrowing leitmotif for the far-reaching labor environment in contemporary Madrid that can be felt invading private and public spheres of life alike, (“y no en los bordes, sino en el centro del cristal”). Throughout the novel, the cold repeatedly distresses Elisa and forebodes of her socio-economic expulsion from the mainstream economy and her inevitable downfall (“...como una araña dantesca que hubiese sido lanzada desde la calle y se despanzurrara poco a poco, había dejado, al fundirse, un surco que tornaba arenosas las formas de quienes subían la cuesta”). She worries about the cold at the office. She worries about it at home. So often she worries about the cold in direct reference to her flailing finances that I interpret the frigid air as a way for Navarro to emphasize the ubiquity of uncontrollable, tough labor conditions and the economy’s ability to reach its ostensibly ‘invisible hand’ into her private life and to visibly turn it into a slippery, sandy slope.

The metaphorical cold (meaning the permeating, indefensible powers of the neoliberal economy) defies the meritocratic values of hard work, education, and autonomy that Elisa repeatedly states in the novel that she felt she was passionately and faithfully abiding by. Again (and relatable to the pandemic society), Elisa compares the ‘cold’ economy to a virus, diagnosing the unnaturally toxic conditions that a belief in neoliberal approaches to passion work produce at home and at work:

Aquel invierno en que retrasaron los pagos, no obstante, fue virulento; por todas partes encontraba un hilo que se adhería a las superficies de una manera que contradecía las leyes de la naturaleza, como si un relente cuajado se negara a disolverse. (47)

Elisa's internal reflection, quoted above, reveals how she felt that her current financial circumstance was contradicting everything that the economy had preached to her as the normal rules of the game, "las leyes de la naturaleza". When speaking to Navarro in our interview, I asked her if Elisa was aware of the trickery that the economic discourse of passion can ensue. She responded, "ella sí está consciente... de todos esos discursos motivacionales (lo de 'win-win', de 'negociación') ... todo un discurso que todo parece una cuestión de gestión, si gestionas bien o mal, que todo es una responsabilidad de uno" (20:00-:52). Because Elisa was doing everything in her to financially survive yet was not experiencing any "win-win" scenario, Navarro says Elisa finds herself "al borde de la locura sin integrarse en ese todo" (24:54 - :57). "Ese todo" being buying into the logic that placed her "al borde" in the first place. (Interestingly, Navarro's words, "borde de la locura", also connects back to Brieva's thoughts expressed via his Instagram cartoon, "EL POR QUÉ DE TANTO MALESTAR MENTAL" (refer to figure 6)).

Though Elisa is aware of the toxic side of passion, or *neo-nomos at work*, unfortunately she still concludes that her work is "autoexplotación laboral" (113). Instead of inculcating *neo-nomos*, the grander cultural and economic appeals at powerful play, as Cech' research would support, Elisa, in effect, fully blames herself for her economic failures, falling victim once again to neoliberalism's dominant acceptance of personal responsibility in the pursuit of passion. By arriving at this conclusion, Elisa is not only exploited financially but also mentally. As such, readers can contemplate the overlap of personal and professional 'autonomy' as multiple aspects of life are exploited — and gaslit— through *neo-nomos*. For instance, "work is not exploitative", capitalism tergiversates, "you are exploiting yourself through work". The same tactic can be spotted in other common capitalist tropes that rewrite the reality of work's inequalities: "Millennials are not exploited; they are entitled" (paraphrasing D. Thompson's article [n.p.](#)); or "Do

what you love and you will never work a day in your life” euphemizes “do what you love and you will work every day of your life” (paraphrasing [Warzel and Peterson n.p.](#)). Another example of displaced blame and reality is Spanish Philologist Noelia S. García’s analysis of Elisa. She thinks that her acceptance of the normalization of neoliberal conditions has created “una sociedad pasiva e individualista que no es capaz de organizarse... quizás sea esta la consecuencia más contundente que se refleja en la novela” ([n.p.](#)). Like Elisa, it seems that García inculcates the individuals instead of the powerful system at large. The examples of gaslighting capitalism, i.e., strong iterations of *neo-nomos*, are likely innumerable.

Though extreme, Elisa’s conditions are verisimilar; they parallel the extreme conditions of work today. With growing neoliberalism and its eroding labor protections after the 2008 crash, employees are expected to work passionately, even when it costs them financial, physical, and mental well-being. Meanwhile employers are increasingly less invested in their employees and are increasingly less liable⁴⁵. Whether a worker advances, is well, or has stable housing, is of little contractual concern to the employer (e.g., Elisa). Unfortunately, these two polarizing ends of the bargain — worker devotion, employer detachment — have distally migrated even further today. As has been ever elucidated and boldly underlined by the current pandemic, public parlance surrounding the lack of worker protections in face of lethal conditions has asserted that now employers do not even seem to care if their employees die ([Coleman n.p.](#)). To quote the 2021 Pulitzer Prize winner for Explanatory Reporting, Ed Yong analyzes the significance implicated behind such radical sentiments. He writes that COVID-19 is an assault on a country’s body and “...a referendum on the ideas that animate its culture” ([n.p.](#)); in other words, the mass death that

⁴⁵ Again, see Cornel Ban’s book to see how work was “flexibilized” for employees like reducing their costs for firing workers and Kalleberg’s article that outlines how employee expectations and devotion have augmented.

has taken place under the recent pandemic has further normalized toxic conditions of work under the neoliberalism episteme.

Though a different context, Carmentxu, Elisa's boss, could symbolize a kind of referendum of the toxic, asymmetrical ideas about work normalized in post-2008 Spanish culture (that perhaps prepared the path for the normalization of death under the pandemic). A successful and hardworking editor in chief of the company, Carmentxu eventually "sufrió un ictus y se despidió" (Navarro 154). Her termination for a near-death experience seems prescient of the current, unbalanced social contract where employees are as "redundant" and "disposable" as trash (Larson 102, citing Bauman); in a like manner, Elisa plainly observes that "Carmentxu no era nada más que una empleada..." (Navarro 102). In Carmentxu's case, exploitation is not merely about taking wages but also about taking health from vulnerable lives, too. As such, the exploitative side of passion work fits within toxic work, the rhetorically and figuratively harmful work that benefits capitalism and hurts, in this case, women workers.

Passion Discriminates

The discourse of passion is also discriminatory for Elisa. A female of middle to lower class status, Elisa quickly experiences "socioeconomic disadvantage, occupational inequality, and segregation more broadly" because she sticks to prioritizing passion over financial security (Cech 12). Throughout the novel there is little to no evidence of financial or social capital for Elisa; Though highly educated, Elisa does not have sufficient resources to maintain her writing career or low-paying copy-editing job: she is not the sociodemographic population that TPP rewards. Her fixation on her roommate Susana's appearance "de tipo nórdico" — her skin color "con la piel de un color parecido al de la seda cruda" and blonde hair — could serve to juxtapose

Elisa's own physical appearance, possibly formulating insight into her own awakening feelings about her seemingly pre-destined economic status (Navarro 49); Elisa's comparative solitude when she witnesses Susana Facebook-ing with her Dutch boyfriend Janssen— "Me sentí sola cuando encendí mi ordenador; no había nadie que me acompañara de esa manera. Miré mi Facebook insuficiente y frío" — remarks of her lack of safety nets, a growing understanding of its connection to economic survival, and a reiteration of the metaphorical cold disquieting her life (82, emphasis mine); and her gender — a central identity to her, the style of independent contracting work that she more or less chose, and her life as exemplified in the title *La trabajadora* — all entrench her vulnerability to TPP⁴⁶.

Such vulnerability quickly materializes in the novel. As mentioned, her troubles begin after she is converted to an independent contractor. Her payments trickle in months late or not at all due to the company's purported economic hardship. The cold radiators at the office corroborate the company's claim: "Me acerqué al radiador para comprobar que, en efecto, estaba frío" (64). Meanwhile office gossip — detailing other employee's demands for business class seating, a suite at the Palace hotel, and a private chauffeur for personal travel — suggests misappropriation and/or the neoliberal proclivity to abundantly redistribute wealth to the top echelons of society by discriminately cheapening the bottom's resources. In illustration of this proclivity, in contrast to the luxury of these rumors, Elisa notices her saccharine tea at the office tastes "a chicle de limón" (64)⁴⁷. A more serious — and discriminatory — consequence though

⁴⁶ When I say the style of work that she chose, I am referencing that Elisa works as an interdependent contractor to continue pursuing her passion of writing. In a public article in *The Atlantic*, Annie Lowery writes that gig work (often the overarching umbrella of independent contractors) are more likely to be women, more likely to be Black or Latino, more likely to be young, and more likely to suffer wage theft ([n.p.](#)). I imagine that many workers opt for gig work so that they can have more "flexibility" to pursue their passions. Independent contracting, gender, and wage disparity go hand in hand.

⁴⁷ See David Harvey's seminal work *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2007).

is when soon after, Elisa is forced to leave her rapidly gentrifying neighborhood of Tirso de Molina, no longer able to afford her rent. The city's Sociedad Pública de Alquiler locates her a 400 Euro/ month, run-down apartment in the peripheral neighborhood of Aluche, or "MADRID SUR" (45); the signs remind her she no longer lives in Madrid but somewhere peripheral that requires a distinctive, identity marker. Much like the pejorative hyphen designated for racial identities, she is no longer a "madrileña" but a "madrileña del sur"⁴⁸. Her fealty to passion work has officially exasperated her economically inferior identity as a female by placing her literally on the fringes of society, a contemporary continuance of her gender's historical legacy.

One scene exemplifies how her move to Aluche highlights her gender's historical legacy of inhabiting the economic margins: After the move, Elisa's economic self-sufficiency dwindles even more. She reluctantly takes up an idiosyncratic roommate, Susana, to help make ends meet, though it does little to alleviate her stress. She still penny pinches, even down to sharing a pot of homemade coffee with Susana. Elisa begrudgingly notes the scarcity of her own private resources and the frustration at having to share them:

...cuando algunas tardes, al llegar del trabajo [Susana], me sorprendía haciendo café. No podía no invitarla, y acabé optando por la cafetera grande. En mi caso, eso tenía como resultado beberme tres tazas en lugar de una. (55)

Regardless of all the hard work that Elisa does, it cannot supply enough stability to be able to enjoy life's basic necessities (like housing) or pleasures (like coffee). Elisa, like the innumerable working women before her, is not commensurately compensated for her labor.

While women may be more desensitized or conditioned to accept unfair payment arrangements, essayist and cartoonist Tim Kreider thinks that financial unfairness is normalizing for most middle- and lower-class workers, gender aside, in the post-2008 context. He opines, "one

⁴⁸ For more information on hyphenated identities and "the syntax of belonging" see *Hyphen* (2021) by Pardis Mahdavi.

thing that has changed in the last decade is that financial incentives for work have mostly evaporated”; “hard work”, he writes, is “less like a virtue than a propaganda slogan, inane as ‘Just say no’” ([n.p.](#)). Kreider’s phrase “a propaganda slogan” coordinates with Cech’s words about passion “loving your job is a capitalist trap” ([Cech n.p.](#)). Both descriptions are conceptual attempts to describe the “inane” rhetorical appeals like “passion” and “hard work” that capitalism routinely employs against its working class. In other words, society is already suspicious of *neo-nomos* at but has lacked a clear and consistent name to identify it — and the labor power to stop it. But with changing labor dynamics in the pandemic society coupled with more workers joining the female’s historical struggle to secure her own housing and food, maybe wage equality in the workforce is finally getting a more unified, forceful push onto the docket. Spain’s recent passing of both the Equality Plan and the Equal Pay Decree in 2020 computes with this thought process (Wisenberg Brin [n.p.](#)).

More important to the analysis of the coffee scene detailed above though is how the moment underscores how allowing oneself to be manipulated by toxic discourses can highlight gendered inequities. For one, Elisa taking a roommate and sharing her coffee in order to still afford her passionate career retells the century-long story of gendered economic discrimination, but in a modern rendition. For women, work, as it has been culturally and legally constructed over time, has made independent life difficult to achieve. Low wages, lack of wages, or total economic exclusion, has ensured that women remain dependent on higher (or merely additional) wage earners. Their dependency has often been met through patrilineal inheritances or through succumbing to the societal push to marry — or, in Elisa’s case, to platonically partner with Susana. Patriarchal dominance in politics and the economy has used such dependency to justify women’s discriminate wages, assuming women do not need the institution of work to fully

support them financially⁴⁹. The result reflexively deepens both women's economic dependency and thus patriarchal dominance at large⁵⁰. Considering this, passion may further perpetuate capitalist work's hegemonic design.

Spanish film, narrative and cultural studies scholar Susan Larson argues that the entire purpose of *La trabajadora* is to tell these very stories "...of the everyday women being left behind by Spain's austerity economy" (101). Cajoled into the economic and geographical periphery of Madrid, the women are subjected to the "whims of the ever-changing labor market" in a city "that keeps changing the rules" (100). Larson contends that as they are discarded from the tourist centers and gentrifying neighborhoods, the novel's female characters' lives are recast as fragile and disposable objects, much like urban waste, undeserving of space where the neoliberal project resides (92). Ultimately, Larson concludes these women's stories provoke the question of what the urban periphery actually is. If most of Madrid's citizens live in the periphery, then isn't the city center an urban imaginary, after all (97)?

⁴⁹ This paragraph is based on Rebecca Traister's 2016 book *All the Single Ladies: Unmarried women and the rise of an independent nation*. The book provides a historical overview of how the interplay of work and marriage have been designed to undermine women's independence. Traister traces both cultural norms and legal precedent (like "coverture") across the centuries to show how society has discriminately distributed wages and work for women.

⁵⁰ For women in hetero relationships, Heidi Hartmann explains the reflexive nature of marriage and economic discrimination for women. She writes that their gendered labor marginalization "perpetuates men's material advantage over women and encourages women to choose wifery as a career... women do housework, childcare, and perform other services at home which benefit men directly. Women's home responsibilities in turn reinforce their inferior labor market position" (Hartmann 16 – 17). This works to provoke a wage differential that "... will aid in *defining* women's work as secondary to men's at the same time as it necessitates women's actual continued economic dependence on men. The sexual division of labor in the labor market and elsewhere should be understood as a manifestation of patriarchy which serves to perpetuate it" (19). In other words, women's work is less economically valuable and therefore prevents them from being the primary worker in a hetero marriage. This systemic problem ensures staying home is a more viable option for women than for men. Other studies, like those written about by Alexis Coe, similarly confirm that marriage benefits males and disadvantages females.

The women's struggles lead Larson into questions of urban studies. The women's struggles lead me to question the dysfunctionality of work and to listen to the women's responses to the toxic discourses in the novel. For Elisa, she starts to grow increasingly aware of the economic manipulation at play and begins to confront the toxic rhetoric designing passion work. Analytical by trade, she examines her words—the ones she writes, the ones she edits, the ones she believes— and concludes that she has imprisoned herself through the toxic discourse of passion “...me acongojaba la sensación de haberme encerrado en aquellas palabras” (61). Like Navarro once did herself, Elisa wanders the city in an attempt to make sense of her changing urban and labor environment in which she finds herself enclosed. Her remapping of the city leads her to take solace with her neighborhood's old crumbling prison, with which she identifies: “... podía observar cómo echaban abajo la antigua cárcel, ante cuyas piedras me quedaba un buen rato, pues aquella desolación me resultaba consoladora” (47); The post-2008 austerity laws that were designed to “free up” the marketplace was supposed to liberate her from labor troubles. Yet, following the discourse of passion under neoliberal conditions has only knocked her down into rubble herself, just like the prison.

The realization changes her perspective about work and invites readers to do so, too. As Elisa suffers a mental breakdown, she identifies the powerful rhetorical forces at play that have led her to her current circumstance. Elisa's roommate, Susana, tries to cheer her up. She places Elisa's “obras completas” around her, erroneously thinking passionate professional requiems would bring solace to Elisa's emotional troubles (89). But it irritates Elisa more by reminding her of the economy's convincingly toxic rhetoric she had prescribed to in the first place. Elisa, exasperated, reads the actions of Susana “como si fuera un manual de autoayuda” (89). The brief yet momentous scene connects Elisa's awareness of ostensibly “autonomous” career choices, like

editing and writing, to the persuasive economic rhetoric, *neo-nomos*, circulating in printed society. Similarly, in another moment, Elisa's psychologist proudly asks her if she is a writer. Elisa emphatically declares, "No tengo vocación" (96). She has identified and rejected such virulent rhetoric—convincing logic of vocations and professional callings—that placed her in his office in the first place.

Identifying and rejecting toxic rhetoric leads Elisa to also acknowledge the discriminatory effects of professional passion in the neoliberal context. As the story comes to an end, for Elisa, TPP creates a total life and work disillusionment. She cannot ignore the persuasive rhetoric circulating and pervading society's margins. We watch her journey towards this conclusion, as she travels around Madrid, recalibrating the world of work around her each with each step that she takes around the city:

Cuando me interné por una de esas calles de nuevo vi que de algunos balcones salían cables que robaban la luz. No eran muchos, desde luego, lo que no impidió que retornara la agobiante, por inverosímil, idea de que había movimientos de carácter subterráneo capaces de modificar el escenario mental que yo tenía de la ciudad... (117)

Her observation of the city's power to light or to obscure her perspective allows readers to also acknowledge and to confront the inescapable dependencies some workers are subjected to and conditioned to endure. Correspondingly, Elisa challenges those normalized conditions, those we deem acceptable as brightly broadcasted by culture, no matter how ubiquitous and loud their existence: "también el que leía en los periódicos o veía en la televisión y en Internet. Se trataba de una idea difusa, o más bien de una simple desvaída intuición que me inquietaba" (117 - 118).

Spanish feminist Victoria Sendón de León's words could articulate why the pervasive rhetoric surrounding work unsettles Elisa. She writes that "la cultura es un proceso plurifacético de comunicación" in which its rhetoric "es siempre un refuerzo de la codificación establecida"

(186 - 187). Sendón de León describes the “codificación establecida” with which Elisa is likely contending as:

La retórica intenta convencer con un razonamiento pervertido que presupone sin cuestionar las reglas del juego de la ‘realidad’, lo ‘irreversible’, el ‘orden’, la ‘naturaleza humana’, la Convivencia pacífica, el ‘Estado’, la ‘jerarquía’, la ‘ley’, lo ‘razonable’ y mil fórmulas más que el hombre occidental ha asimilado como ‘lo bueno’... **El día de la mujer trabajadora habría que gritar contra el tipo de trabajo establecido.** (187, bold mine)

Sendón de León’s understanding of culture as a system of patriarchal rhetoric provides a gendered perspective of *neo-nomos*. The powerful words that circulate and cajole workers are often those that reinforce patriarchal rules, reason, laws, and norms. To not question the words of such a “codificación establecida” is to not question for whom those words function to protect. For this reason, Sendón de León encourages women workers to resist “la Convivencia pacífica” by speaking out against “el tipo de trabajo establecido” (187).

This is exactly what Elisa’s story does. Her disillusionment with the codified rhetoric of passion (which she repeatedly references throughout the entire novel) and thus, capitalist approaches to work, aligns her with the non-hegemonic reasoning that is needed in order to undo the “razonamiento pervertido” that is *neo-nomos* in the economy (187). Considering this, Elisa’s identification with other disenfranchised people in Spain makes more sense. At first when she began living in Aluche, she was wary of the “gitanos” in her neighborhood, a group of purported hooligans driving around in their truck, vandalizing the city in their excess time. From a safe distance, she now observes:

El camión se alejaba dejando un reguero de fibras de cartón, de olores a pasto quemado y a muebles desgarnecidos. Ellos eran apenas sombras asomando de la chapa azul. La madurez los había envuelto en una discreción que me gustaba, aunque solo de lejos. (58)

Their shared geographical segregation to Aluche, economic peripheral status, and their enlightened refusal to yield to the world of toxic work constructs an avenue of mutual understanding and

respect. Work, in its own codified ways, has equally discriminated against them as a minority class of workers, and they know it.

Toxic discourses around work and work's discriminate design disadvantages vulnerable populations in the novel, as seen with Elisa and as inferred with the "gitanos" who are cast to the outskirts of the city together. But the book is titled *La trabajadora* after all, not *El trabajador*, not *Los trabajadores*, and not *Elisa*. Hence, the title signals that the book tells a metonymic *woman's* story in the labor market. While the female worker's "lower floor" and "shorter ladder" has already been situated in statistical terms, it is worthwhile to address how professional passion can be a more dangerous, discriminatory pursuit for women than for men, systemically speaking. After all, according to NSCW data, women are more likely than men to be employed in precarious work in their passion (Cech 134). Yet, it is still true and obvious that men can suffer the consequences of TPP, too. Just like any other worker, female or male, pursuing passion over financial security can have long-term costs. But the context of a woman's diluted power and agency, as felt with Elisa's perpetual helplessness and despair, articulates the problematic nature of work as it is currently discriminately designed and patriarchally distributed today.

Work, in its capitalist inception, is patriarchal. It was designed by, designed to serve, and designed to empower men⁵¹. And power in a patriarchy, Feminist Kate Millet famously writes, is exclusively male:

our society.... is a patriarchy. The fact at once if one recalls that the military, industry, technology, universities, science, political offices, finances — in short, every avenue of power within the society, including the coercive force of the police, is entirely in male hands. (25)

⁵¹ See Traister 2016 for a historical overview of work with a contemporary perspective.

Millet's definition of a patriarchy reminds us that nearly all careers of influence and affluence are dominated by men: the military, the police force, industry, technology, academia, science, politics, finance, etc.⁵². So, while being disempowered through professional passion work may seem like a universal possibility if not condition (work is a limited resource that cannot serve all equally), Millet's understanding of patriarchal capitalism as an overarching, male-dominate power structure dissolves such an illusion.

For work, under the economic and political dominance of men, can be wielded, advanced, and tweaked to their needs, as has been done since work's inception. When an individual man does not get a job, he still has powerful social, financial, political, and economic capital arranged in his collective favor. Centuries of this accumulated power aid him in navigating His expansive world of work. Yet, women lack that same systemic power to economically bounce back if dismissed from or when looking for work. And per the bigger picture, in contrast to men, women lack the political representation to modify their working circumstance. They cannot directly combat inequitable labor policies or advance equitable labor laws that directly inform their inferior position. They need the advocacy of men to wield such legal changes. Due to such power poverty, women cannot disempower men as an entire gender as men can and have disempowered women. Overall, women have less social capital, ("springboards"), financial capital ("safety nets"), and political capital (gavels, I would add to Cech's metaphorical list) to traverse a more limited world of work (Cech 9, 25).

⁵² Spain had one ephemeral, political exception to this list. In December of 2019, the acting prime minister Pedro Sánchez appointed 11 female ministers (out of 17), making Spain for the first time, yet for a moment, the world's most female-centric government. This was swiftly reversed with the rise of the far-right party, Vox, whose ministry appointments only complied with the minimum parity of 30%, as established by law (García Valdivia [n.p.](#))

Ibram X. Kendi, historian and director of the Center for Antiracist Research at Boston University, studies systemic inequities. His research helps this project to understand the perpetuated gendered discrimination at play with professional passion. In his seminal work, Kendi influentially clarifies the difference between racist acts and a racist system:

When someone discriminates against a person in a racial group, they are carrying out a policy or taking advantage of the lack of a protective policy. We all have the power to discriminate. Only an exclusive few have the power to make policy. (18)

The quote clarifies his understanding of what (systemic) racism is and is not⁵³. Per his words, his definition of racism discredits ideas like “reverse racism,” because minority populations lack the policy or power to execute racism at the systemic scale necessary to constitute “racism”.

While seemingly unrelated, thinking of Kendi’s research as a model for how power structures discriminate, it becomes possible to interpret work as an economic policy through which gendered inequities can also be engendered, adjudicated, and executed. Applying Kendi’s theory, policies around the distribution of work have discriminate or antidiscriminative characteristics. Since professional passion does not help to bolster women’s economic position, according to Kendi’s theory, it should be examined critically for discriminatory effects against women.

The resolution to Elisa’s story examines the discriminatory effects of professional passion for women. Elisa’s labor conditions reach a critical inflection point. She knows she cannot survive as is. So, she approaches Susana who works, stably, as a teleoperator. In hopes of insulating herself from the invading, icy economy — “Para protegerme del frío” —, Elisa begs Susana for a job (68). Susana swiftly shuts her down, thus, splintering whatever economic solidarity could have existed between them. The tension in their relationship only balloons when on top of her economic security, Susana also garners creative success with her own true passion: mapmaking. Susana’s

⁵³ In his book, Kendi defines racism as systemic. Therefore, “systemic racism” is a semantic pleonasm.

artistic accomplishment puts the final nail in the women's moribund relationship. Elisa, threatened by the perceived competition for passion work, kicks Susana out of the apartment, effectively sabotaging both of their financial well-being and exasperating their economic vulnerability. With an increase in housing expenditures, Elisa can no longer afford Madrid's cheapest apartment. In an act of financial survival, she is forced to move in with her male friend, Germán. The act solidifies her dependency on male wages. Of Susana, the reader knows no more. *La trabajadora* trails off on this caustic and bitter note. The women's conclusion to professional passion shows how the discourse can function to keep women divided, dependent, and disadvantaged — just as Cech's, and in a way Kendi's, research warns. I interpret Elisa and Susana's "break up" not as the end of their economic conflict but rather as the continuance of labor discrimination in the neoliberal society. Elisa astutely remarks, "Era una despedida capciosa. No pude evitar el miedo de que su marcha no supusiese la clausura de nada" (149). Navarro comments on the ending to me, reminding me that the book was never meant to be a "cuento de hadas" (23:40 - :42).

I understand the women's split as the continuance of labor discrimination, because it insulates hegemonic power. In this conclusive scene, Elisa, already well-aware of the toxic side of TPP, treats salaried work as an exclusive and competitive resource limited to the elite few (maybe even justifiably so). Her defensive response to kick Susanna out of the apartment only serves to reinforce patriarchal dynamics of work. It "creates solidarity and interdependence among men and enables them to dominate women" (Hartmann 11). We see this when Elisa's desperation around professional passion and the angst that its wages are limited redistributes portions of her independence to men, as happens when she is forced to move in with Germán. In the end, for Elisa, patriarchal capitalism, through its discourses and cultural values, like passion, shapes and utilizes

work to protect its own gendered power, “Ya que los hombres solo pueden salir ganando con el triunfo del feminismo frente a la explotación” (Falcón 1, 2014)⁵⁴.

Interestingly, Germán is amongst the few individual males named in the book: there is Fabio, who appears to be Susana’s sex work client; and Claude, an unqualified Frenchman (who does not even speak fluent Spanish, notes Elisa) who, in a patriarchal act of “interdependence among men”, replaces editor Carmentxu after her unmerited dismissal (Hartmann 11). These men, in their own ways, possess financial or social power over the women. Not to mention, Germán, Fabio and Claude mark the one degree of separation between women and money, archotyping if women want wages, they must earn them through subordinate work to men. When I mentioned this economic pattern to Navarro, she replied, surprised, “Quizás inconscientemente tengo ese modelo... es probable que tengas razón” (26:55 -27:12).

The only men in the story who defy this logic are the group of “gitanos”, who are composed of at least some males, yet are not named individually. Their ambiguous presence in the book falls somewhere between background, setting and character. The “gitanos” unpredictably float in and out of Elisa’s peripheral vision, waffling between constant presence and forgotten absence. Their unclear status in the book reminds readers of the elusive exclusivity of capitalist work. Returning to the introductory framework of this dissertation, salaried work privileges only those who precisely embody what Spanish economist and ecofeminist Amaia Pérez Orozco calls a “BBVAh: el sujeto blanco, burgués, varón, adulto, con una funcionalidad normativa, heterosexual” (25, adding to María José Capellín’s original concept of “BBVA”). One must not only be male, but the right kind of male for work to work in one’s favor. The triumph of the

⁵⁴ “Triunfo”, as it is represented contextually by Falcón, is used more closely to mean “derrota”.

“BBVAh” man over Elisa, Susana, Carmentxu *and* the “gitanos” reveals the extreme specifics to which work can advantage and disadvantage with the aim of entrenching patriarchal normativity.

La trabajadora’s insight to the discriminant experience of work yields consideration of the conceptual shortcomings of work. Looking at the women’s male-capital dependencies and the gitanos overall exclusion questions the limited status of work and its discriminate distribution of salaried work in the neoliberal era (Herrero [15:30](#)). By looking at passion’s guiding powers in Elisa’s life it becomes possible to see how *neo-nomos* can render an entire class of workers dependent in toxic ways. And on top of that toxic dependency, capitalism can sneakily persuade us to love our precarious circumstance. Prominent Spanish Feminist Lidia Falcón presciently wrote in the 90s that the capitalist society had recently:

convirtió a las clases trabajadoras europeas y norteamericanas... en una masa amorfa compuesta de individuos que no se reconocen como clase, y mucho menos como clase explotada, y que ya no identifican a la patronal como el enemigo de clase, sino que incluso, en ocasiones, la han visto como aliada política. (12, 1996)

As Falcón’s words convey, the dissonant alliance between workers and capitalism through their economic fealty to capitalist values, examined in this essay as passion, marks yet another way that *neo-nomos* lays psychological stake in unsuspecting and discordant ways.

Passion changes the escenario del trabajo (femenino) in contemporary Madrid

In conclusion, Elisa’s experience with work permitted a close look at how economic discourses, like passion, in contemporary society can function to exploit, to discriminate, and to reproduce ascriptive inequalities. While the pursuit of passion may appear to be highly individualistic, idiosyncratic, and ‘autonomously’ chosen, Cech concludes that “they are fundamentally rooted in the structural positions and environments people inhabit” (5). Those environments in the novel, I have argued, have been influenced and informed by *neo-nomos*: the

art of economic persuasion that convincingly constructs values, beliefs, and actions in the neoliberal episteme.

Political theorist Wendy Brown, whose contemporary conceptualization of humans as *homo economicus* (the reduced configuration of humans as market actors), discussed in the introduction of this chapter, similarly poses that neoliberalism possesses a persuasive power over life, too. In her book *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's stealth revolution* (2015), she writes that neoliberalism exceeds a set of economic policies, a phase of capitalism, or an ideology. Rather, neoliberalism conceives “an order of normative reason... extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life” (30). To her, neoliberalism is a “rationality” that brings about “a new model of economic conduct” into these dimensions (34). One form of this new conduct has been explored through the enactment of *neo-nomos* that spurs some workers into toxic work.

While not always toxic, *neo-nomos* in *La trabajadora* envisaged a bigger picture of the potential perils in the current *escenario del trabajo* in Madrid of the neoliberal episteme, the “order of normative reason” spreading across dimensions: socio-economically, culturally, conceptually, and geographically. I will recap these different perils now to summarize this chapter's answers to its guiding questions: i) how does contemporary Spanish society, as expressed through cultural products, participate or not participate in the discourse of professional passion?; ii) What does this participation (or lack thereof) say about epochal approaches to work under the neoliberal episteme on the Iberian Peninsula?; And iii) how do these approaches affect the meaning and functionality of the concept of work?

Firstly, socio-economically, it may be easy to discredit passion's inequities for writers like Elisa since they willingly enter a known precarious career. However, remembering the scholarship

of Sociologist Arne Kalleberg outlined in the introduction of this dissertation reminds readers that while precarity is not unique to neoliberalism, its ubiquity is. Unlike the past, precarity today has extended to nearly all professions. This means that precarity is not unique to a particular field, like Elisa's creative writing, nor locale, like Madrid, but rather to neoliberal approaches to work in the aggregate. Spanish Philologist and Literary Critic Rosa Benítez Andrés similarly agrees of this new dynamic of work in her analysis of *La trabajadora*:

En este sentido, conviene no perder de vista el hecho de que la violencia y la injusticia social no se ejercen contra el parado, sino también contra el trabajador... este es, por tanto, junto a la nueva organización del trabajo, uno de los asuntos centrales de Navarro. (201)

Furthermore, Kalleberg's research underscores that besides precarity's ubiquity in the neoliberal era, society's push *towards* precarity is also unique and unprecedented. *La trabajadora* draws workers' attention to how through discursive frames like passion, flexibility, individualism, freedom, callings, etc. — underlying messaging of *neo-nomos* embedded within the cultural products explored in this chapter and in the introduction — capitalism can manipulate workers into loving their precarious conditions for its own benefit by logically appealing to sacrosanct cultural values, especially values that have been developed, nuanced, and inculcated over the course of history.

This chapter has tracked the cultural value of passion back to centuries of logical and convincing rhetoric. From an Aristotelean debate to Romanticism, passion has been gaining traction and momentum, making workers today more likely to be attracted, and more susceptible to, its appeal. While all workers should be wary of this power, Cech's research and *La trabajadora* showed that socioeconomically vulnerable workers should be especially cautious. Given their inferior position within the economic hierarchy established by the capitalist conceptualization of work, passion can often exacerbate ascriptive inequalities, as was the case

for Elisa (and Carmentxu). In a broader sense, these women's stories drew attention to how work functions in a highly privileged way, disuniting and disenfranchising socio-economic minorities (as was the case with the *gitanos*).

Culturally, the participation of passion has appeared in contrasting ways, exposing conflicting perspectives about work under current neoliberal conditions. As mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, work has been entering a new conceptual existence, notably since 2008 and then again since the start of the pandemic. With minimal regulations and unprecedented economic power, neoliberalism has expanded the institution of work to inhabit a broader, but more questionable, realm (in but not limited to Spain). Shows like *Valeria* and prominent self-help books in Spain romanticize that realm as a vibrant world of work that offers the possibility for diverse forms of prosperity. These cultural products participated in the discourse of passion in a highly optimistic, and at times even delusional, manner.

Conversely, *La trabajadora* refuses to participate in such fan fiction. It instead espouses a much more cynical tone: it describes passion-seeking as a dead-end career where along the way workers may lose both their happiness and the opportunity to earn money. Elisa's misfortunes as she journeys through the world of work serve to voice and to emphasize these conceptual shortcomings of labor. In short, her struggle to obtain *any* form of prosperity — social, emotional, fiscal — through passion speaks to the difficulty, or in some cases the impossibility, for work today to embody both a financially and emotionally fulfilling institution, at least in an equitable manner, and at least under the increasingly unregulated neoliberalism. Furthermore, Elisa's eventual disillusionment with work could even connect to contemporary society's as well, namely the prodigious job dissatisfaction within the pandemic society. Though still calculating the effects in Spain, ripples of "The Great Resignation" suggest that work may have reached what I think of as

“peak passion”, where passion’s inordinate and toxic elevation over well-being can no longer be sustained — at least not without significant questioning.

Conceptually, combining the rhetorical appeals from *Valeria* and self-help books with those found in *La trabajadora* provided productive opportunities to lean into this kind of questioning: to contemplate conflicting ideas surrounding the meaning and functionality of the institution of work today. *Valeria* and the self-help books believed work was an extension of the self, an opportunity for internal fulfillment. Per their stories and logic, no amount of passion was too much, and no consequence in pursuit of passion was too severe. Alternatively, in *La trabajadora*, Elisa ultimately came to believe that work should provide dignified wages. Per Elisa’s viewpoint, no amount of passion was worth sacrificing wages (In the novel she romanticizes leaving behind writing and working instead in a stable career like her roommate Susanna, a telephone operator). What do these antithetical perspectives disclose about epochal approaches to work under the neoliberal episteme? And how do these approaches provoke society to reconsider the meaning and functionality of the concept of work?

I see that this point of friction — one cultural product believing in passion at all costs and the other denying passion at all costs — exposes their common error of linear thinking. In both scenarios, the maximum (passion or stability) is equally sacrosanct⁵⁵. Similar conceptual concerns

⁵⁵ In his book *How Not to Be Wrong: The Power of Mathematical Thinking* (2014), mathematics scholar Jordan Ellenberg explains the trouble with such linear thinking, the problematic nature of believing that the course of prosperity is infinitely in one direction. Linear thinking — such as “more passion good, less passion bad” (graphing in a straight descending line from northwest to southeast; see figure 8 that visualizes this mode of thinking) — ignores where one already is, one’s current position with passion in the labor market (paraphrasing Ellenberg 24). For instance, graphically speaking, a worker may already be in the northwest quadrant of passion, experiencing great amounts of fulfillment. In this case, augmenting passion may come at an unjustifiable and unnecessary expense to financial stability.

can be read in public works, too. In her editorial piece “The Future of Work Issue: The Age of Anti-Ambition”, Noreen Malone wonders too if we are undergoing an economic revolution, a transition to a new, future world of work that paradoxically resembles past economic prioritizations. Rather than progressing down a path where emotional and financial wealth collide,



(Fig. 8, Ellenberg draws a graph, depicting a recent public argument in the US that depicts high taxes, like in Sweden, as undesirable, and low taxes, like in the US, as desirable (22). As seen, “the highest point on a line segment — the maximum prosperity, in this example — has to be on one end or the other. That’s just how lines are. If lowering taxes is good for prosperity, then lowering taxes even more is even better” (23). The logic works the opposite way as well. If the line slopes in the other direction, then “no amount of social spending is too much. The optimal policy is Maximum Swede” (23).

Replacing such simplistic thinking, Ellenberg contends, is essential to assessing situations more accurately. Rather than approaching a problem linearly, he argues that thinking non-linearly, as the Laffer Curve would do, draws more analytically reasonable conclusions. The Laffer Curve, which resembles a typical bell curve, is pictured in figure 9. As seen, unlike the linear thinking on the left drawing, the Laffer

Curve requires consideration of the relationship between two concepts, such as passion and financial stability. Pushing one concept too far in one direction is graphically undesirable. Rather, the two concepts should move proportionally towards the center, avoiding extremes. The middle, i.e., the apex of the curve, marks standard normal distribution, meaning that the ideal course of prosperity for passion and finances



(pictured as “USA” and “Sweden” in Ellenberg’s graph) lies somewhere in the center.

(Fig. 9, In contrast to the linear graph, Ellenberg’s drawing of the Laffer Curve suggests that prosperity lies “at a point more Swedish than America, but less Swedish than Sweden” (22, 23).) In non-mathematical terms and in terms of this chapter, this means that work, ideally, should maintain a sensible balance between emotional and financial prosperity. Neither concept should completely sacrifice the other; neither should migrate too far from the other on the proverbial Laffer Curve. Per the Laffer Curve, there is such thing as prioritizing passion too much and prioritizing money too much. *Valeria*, the self-help books, and *La trabajadora* articulate each of these graphic extremes well. Furthermore, the Laffer Curve reminds of the inherent fluidity of work in general, and how its conceptualization is always dependent on relational realities within its current episteme.

Malone thinks we are reversing down an old, familiar, and purely financial road. She writes, “Work is mainly, really, about making money to live. ... the future of work might be more like its past than anyone admits” (n.p.). Similarly, in a public article by Cech, she advises that workers should “diversify our meaning-making portfolios” instead of relying solely on the single “tempestuous” institution of work to fulfill our lives (n.p.). The popularity of the Cech’s words — as seen prolifically across *The New York Times*, *Harvard Business Review*, *Time*, *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, *The Atlantic*, *Forbes*, and *NPR*, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Podcasts, and blogs like *The Professor is in*— may be testing out antidotal discourses to toxic work. This new rhetoric, as verbalized in these articles and in Elisa’s disillusioned language in the novel, may suggest that society desires to disarticulate passion — and its inculcated inequities — from work.

Looking at professional passion through *neo-nomos* arms workers with a theoretical framework from which they too can participate in such disarticulation. The lens, eventually adopted (though unsuccessfully) by Elisa in the novel, helps to re-read dominative economic narratives of society from a more critical viewpoint. Take the works from the introduction of this chapter. First there was *Valeria*. Applying *neo-nomos* to the series allows viewers to see Valeria’s triumph over precarity as it is: a work of fiction that is not grounded in socioeconomic reality. *Valeria*’s (delusional) optimism obscures the labor market’s grim conditions (while also fortifying the longevity of economic discourses that Navarro felt were outdated and misleading).

Then, there are the self-help books that lionize passion work as the preferable professional path in life. In *Empleo infinito*, the book encouraged “flexible” work, because it is supposed to help one “liderar tu vida profesional” (n.p.). Applying *neo-nomos*, readers can unwrap “flexible” as a rhetorical repackaging of “precarious” to consider the negative impacts of such work, especially for those who experience vulnerable socioeconomic demographics. And revisiting

Sonríe los lunes and *La felicidad en el trabajo y en la vida*, *neo-nomos*, exposes that the positive-thinking advice the book disseminates is that one's individual thoughts can magically overpower the economic and political policies set against the worker's favor. *Neo-nomos* would interpret these self-help messages as framing problematic features of work as individual problems, often punitively. According to the current economic self-help genre, workers need to change the way they think about and imagine work, instead of changing the reality of work itself.

And finally, geographically, disarticulating the inequities of work pertains to working *madrileñas*, specifically. The social inequities that these working women experience is critical per their contemporary locale. According to a 2014 social and financial study by the Ministerio de Sanidad, Servicios Sociales e Igualdad, Madrid remains one of the most unequal places for women to work (33 - 41)⁵⁶. In this chapter, the seminal words of various feminist scholars across time, such as Amaia Pérez Orozco, Lidia Falcón, Victoria Sendón de León, Heidi Hartmann, Yayo Herrero, and Kate Millet, helped to draw an epistemological framework to perceive how the women worker's position, both historically and contemporarily, remains unequal. With this in mind, *La trabajadora*'s illustration of Elisa as a woman worker could be seen as an outline of a "caricature of the real relation of women's work to their pay" in which her gendered identity espouses her to being the poorest and most vulnerable participants in the economy (Wolf 50)⁵⁷. In Spanish feminist and author Margarita Nelkin's words, "la empleada es... la más indignamente explotada" (71). As Elisa wanders the indignant urban scenario of work, like Navarro once did too, readers can trace her steps as an attempt to understand that persistently

⁵⁶ The autonomous community of Madrid was found to have the greatest inequality (socially and economically) for the women. In contrast, the communities that observed the greatest equality were Murcia, Ceuta y Melilla, Canarias, and Andalucía.

⁵⁷ See previous listed studies or refer to Lidia Falcón's discovery that "El reparto de la renta en España es del 18% para las mujeres y del 82% para los hombres" (360, 2014).

inferior orientation within Madrid today. Ultimately, Elisa's economic defeat through professional passion details the permanence of employment fragility for women in a precarious *and* virulent epoch – literally and figuratively, socio-economically, culturally, and geographically. Her story warns that while passion has evolved to be a sacrosanct ideology of capitalism for *all* workers, its toxic form is an especially heightened experience for socio-economic minorities.

In sum, while scholarship has paid particular attention to neoliberal policies that have exasperated the precarious life, Cech's research on passion and its present analysis within *La trabajadora* broadens the scope to impugn the insidious cultural powers at play that similarly, if not more cunningly, articulate unequal conditions of "toxic work" today, the rhetorically and figuratively harmful work that benefits capitalism and hurts workers. Ecocritical scholar Lawrence Buell (quoting Kai Erikson's "A New Species of Trouble") describes toxic discourses, like passion, as "different" from other forms of toxicity (17). He cites and writes, "They have no [distinct] frame" (temporally or spatially), they are invisible, there is no secure sanctuary, and they surpass the capacity of science to specify physical, let alone emotional risk (18). Throughout this chapter, identifying such insidious, invisible toxicity directly challenges the cultural tendency to paint a pretty picture of passion that directs workers to pursue passion *no matter what*. Instead, recognizing the toxic side of passion reveals labor marginalization as a product of design and exposes how it can fortify hegemonic power when taken too far. In doing so, it becomes possible to reconsider our culturally determined value and concept of work that keeps vulnerable workers, like women, fettered to the financial edge in the contemporary work scenario of Spain.

Overall, the destructive trajectory of capitalist work today demands a proverbial U-turn. I will contend that returning to ecofeminist positions that undergird work could reinvigorate value back into labor could help to achieve a more just and sustainable society (Herrero). To achieve this return, ecofeminist perspectives argue that the limited concept of work must first be disassociated from the financial objectives that define the neoliberal economy and instead be recoupled with that which is considered good for both human and nonhuman life, in all its social and ecological diversity. As such, an egalitarian world of work could become possible. This chapter, through *La trabajadora*, began the disassociation, or disarticulation, of *neo-nomos* and its stealthy financial agenda from work. The next chapter will look at works that through opposition to neoliberal work attempt to recouple economic activity with a more holistic, ecological, and social prosperity.

CHAPTER THREE: LONELY WORK IN MIGUEL BRIEVA'S *LO QUE ME ESTÁ PASANDO* (2015)

Chapter One and Two of this dissertation examined the theories of “toxic work” and “neonomos at work” as they manifest physically and rhetorically across post-2008 cultural products in Spain. Through an analysis of film and novels, it discussed the dysfunctionality, decay and disparities that are tied to neoliberal approaches to work today. In this chapter, I examine an emotional facet of toxic work: *lonely work*. I define *lonely work* as the emotionally deficient activity of remunerated work in late-phase capitalist societies that causes feelings of “species loneliness”, or the emotional suffering that takes place when a species is estranged from other beings.

To begin, neoliberalism produces and exasperates loneliness. Scholars ascribe this phenomenon to a variety of reasons. When socioeconomic researchers Juan Díez Nicolás and María Morenos Páez studied loneliness in the contemporary Spanish society, they not only asserted that “La soledad se ha convertido en uno de los problemas más relevantes en la actualidad”, but they also attributed notable increases in loneliness to recent “cambios socioculturales y económicos” (4). While I certainly agree with their empirical study, I argue that loneliness is resulting not from general sociocultural and economic changes but rather from the specific neoliberal approaches and practices of work itself. I contend that because of late-phase capitalist conceptualizations of work, workers are experiencing a limited social, intellectual, and ecological reality⁵⁸. It is because of this constricted reality, I posit, that loneliness has become a defining feature of neoliberal work and thus the neoliberal working experience.

⁵⁸ Again, this idea is in part inspired by Luis Prádanos’ argument that in the neoliberal ecology the human experience is reduced to a limited social reality in which capital accumulation, the driving activity behind work, is the central objective of life (11).

The limited social reality under neoliberalism negatively impacts the innate human need for relationships. Human sociality has helped our species to develop and to survive across various times and epistemes (Cacioppo and Patrick, Harari). In fact, a broad range of scholars across various fields have even found strong associations between longevity and relationships, meaning the more socially engaged a human is, the longer he or she will, very likely, live (e.g., Cacioppo et al., Holt-Lunstad et al., Luo, Ye et al., Waldinger et al. and Vaillant et al., etc.). With this in mind, not only has sociality helped humans to survive in the past, it also acts as a positive health determinant, too.

Unfortunately, neoliberal work has acted as a negative health determinant; workers today are lonelier than ever before — and that is not only because of the recent COVID-19 pandemic ([Seo n.p.](#))! As Jared Bernstein quipped with his neoliberal work motto “you’re all on your own” (YOYO), work has shifted from a collaborative approach under the industrial era (where the government’s goal was achieving collective economic prosperity) to an individualist one under late-phase capitalism (where the government’s goal is to shirk risk upon the individual through public defunding and tax cuts. Workers are encouraged to parlay tax cuts to “optimize” their own efforts, will, and needs) (7, 40). In the neoliberal YOYO structure, Bernstein writes that “the economy does fine; the people do not” (6). All on their own, they are cut off from their social networks and safety nets, where the individual worker’s challenges often exceed his or her own agency in overcoming systemic challenges (30): the loss of public systems and institutions like pensions, minimum wages, overtime regulations and paid leave, for example, often leaves workers alone to fall to market failures and social inequities. This ultimately can lead to exasperated feelings of loneliness — and thus, deleterious socio-economic and health outcomes.

On top of these harsh individualist policies, neoliberal work, is also, of course, inherently socially divisive. As spelled out in the introduction, work under neoliberalism dramatically delimited itself in scope to the financial sphere alone (Herrero, Orozco Pérez). As a result, remunerated work separated workers from each other. This mainly took place via women from men, and “BBVah” from all Others⁵⁹.

Beyond socio-economic demographics, social separation has weakened relations at the workplace, too. The neoliberal “weaponizing (of) loneliness” has meant a fracturing of co-worker solidarity through legal and political campaigns that procure union disenfranchisement. Protections like minimum wage, anti-wage theft, hour regulations, paid time off, safety laws, and of course, the right to organize are undercut (borrowing and more broadly applying Rodham Clinton’s theory in *The Atlantic*). Remembering that unions are a constitutional right in Spain, attempts to dismantle union power translates to finding creative, circuitous circumventions. For example, Mariano Rajoy’s post-2008 labor reforms legally “flexiblized” the labor market, which was intended to treat widespread unemployment. However, the reforms only increased *temporary* and *part-time* contract work in Spain, which is of course, precluded or weakened such workers from union protections procured for regular employees. Out of this deregulation, the infamous “gig economy” or *la economía de las “chapucillas”* has squeezed into this legal gap. Workers have long worked gigs throughout history. However, the neoliberal gig economy of today tends to refer to new tech-enabling, platform-based odd-jobs where workers are hired as independent contractors, or “*colaboradores externos*” (Elisa of *La trabajadora* from Chapter Two was a non-tech iteration of this kind of work). While neoliberalism has exalted the gig economy as a bonus

⁵⁹ This is signaling back to Amaia Pérez Orozco’s concept of “BBVAh: el sujeto blanco, burgués, varón, adulto, con una funcionalidad normativa”, heterosexual, which added to María José Cappelín’s original concept “BBVa” (25).

opportunity for flexible earnings, evidence shows that under this kind of freelance work, workers' rights, remuneration, and relationships have been meaningfully undermined. Their peripheral employment status, denoted legally as a de facto contract, independent, or self-employed worker, has reduced access to public benefits (like social security), guarantees for fair payment, working-time limitations and work leave, protections for work-related accidents or damages, and collective bargaining agreements⁶⁰. As a result, workers, even those working primarily or full-time within this kind of economy, are isolated not only from fair work in general but from other gig workers specifically, too, who are all also busy working their own "independent" freelance world. These workers exemplify the "you're all on your own" motto that Jared Bernstein characterizes of the neoliberal work culture. In sum, both the neoliberal restriction of work to waged work alone and the dismantling ("flexibilizing") of rights and regulations exemplifies how neoliberalism has augmented socio-economic divisions, perpetuating loneliness.

Secondly, the intellectual environment in the neoliberal era is constricting and isolating as well. Referring again to the introduction of this dissertation, neoliberalism's obsession with capital accumulation causes a hyper focus on left-brain intelligences and activities that better serve its economic goals⁶¹. Other emotional, spiritual, or ecological intelligences are either ignored or categorized as an "economy of waste" (Readings 175). This means that relational activities at work, like taking a break to walk in and mediate with nature, would not be justifiable for

⁶⁰ See Borja Suárez Corujo's article, "The 'gig' economy and its impact on social security: The Spanish example" (2017) for further details.

⁶¹ In his book *The University in Ruins* (1997), humanities professor Bill Readings argues that the structure, role, and work done at the university is rapidly corporatizing. Professors must "externally justify" their daily activities, fields of study, and research lines in accordance with the financial objectives with the neoliberal society. Readings implies that because of this new culture in the academy, left-brain intelligences — the more logical, objective, and linear-like modes of thought — are exclusively valued. Consequently, right-brain intelligences — the creative, emotional, and less orderly activities — are exiled as irrational and financially irresponsible. Readings concludes that the corporate culture of the academy emblemizes, and problematizes, the corporate culture at large.

remuneration under neoliberal norms⁶². As such, it is possible to see how neoliberalism’s “hyper-rational and economic” approaches to work isolate the individual worker in his or her daily activities, increasing loneliness. Furthermore, epidemiological evidence of loneliness has been proven to increase cognitive decline, too. This can provoke premature mortality rates — alienating cognitively, and sometimes fatally, the worker (Berg and Seeber 83, Brooks and Murthy interview for *The Atlantic*, YouTube [12:40 – 14:21](#)).

And lastly, as the distance between workers and nature dramatically expands, the ecological reality of the neoliberal worker has shrunk, too. In the past, industrial work rapidly accelerated ecological harm. Yet, the hierarchical and patriarchal design of neoliberal work has even more so intensified environmental damage. This has been achieved through normalizing the reorganization of society through the subjugation, depression, and even discarding of ‘lesser’ ‘Other’ beings, like nature and non-human life, which is deemed economically inferior by the market (think back to Patel and Moore’s ideas on capitalism’s binary categorizations of remunerated “societal workers” and non-remunerated “nature” workers that organized “cheap work”, explored in Chapter One). Neoliberal practices like extreme resource usage, overdevelopment, human overpopulation, and the industrialization of livestock, enforce this economic reorganization of life and work, thus perpetuating The Great Divide, or the fallacious belief that humans live separate from nature. Such practices push nature further to the periphery of human existence by both eradicating species and hoarding and tucking away livestock and other

⁶² This thought was heavily influenced by Riyad A. Shahjahan’s article “Being ‘Lazy’ and Slowing Down: decolonizing time, our body and pedagogy”. In it, Shahjahan writes that the neoliberalization of work, argued in the case of academia, has produced self-enterprising individuals solely interested in enhancing their human capital. Economic rationality operates as the overarching frame for understanding, evaluation, and governing social life” (488). Shahjahan calls for resistance to such forms of work by re-embodiment other intelligences to “dismantle hegemonic knowledge systems that privilege the mind” (489).

beings into unnatural proximities and conglomerations. Organizational changes like these augment opportunities for viral, bacterial, and other pestilence risks to multiply, to mutate, and to more rapidly disseminate. Consequently, neoliberal work's organizational ecology dangerously threatens nonhuman and human survivability.

Not to mention, from a cultural perspective, positive perceptions of nature are altering as neoliberal work misconfigures the relationship between humans and nature. Unethical economic engagements with nature, like the industrialization of livestock that manufactures illnesses, have not only divided humans from the biological networks and ecologies that have nourished multi-species life for millennia prior, but they have also instigated feelings of loneliness by undermining biophilia, or the belief that humans possess an innate social and emotional need to be among and with the nonhuman world (Wilson 1)⁶³. Whether one believes in biophilia or not, the fact remains that humans and nonhumans need one another to survive, if only from an organic chemistry perspective (think gas exchange cycles). Yet, neoliberal work has majorly ignored and/or threatened this need, blockading and/or endangering workers from essential multispecies connections. Spanish professor, poet, and ecologist Jorge Riechmann diagnoses the multispecies relational misconfiguration taking place under neoliberalism: “El mundo está enfermo de soledad” (*Futuralgia*, 420).

Given all these social, intellectual, and ecological transformations of work under the neoliberal episteme, workers are lonely, even despite, and maybe even because of, working. Therefore, I propose that the specific kind of loneliness that neoliberal work produces in its workers is not the typical circumstantial loneliness that arises from being separate from other

⁶³ Wilson makes the argument that it is now more common that humans regularly encounter nature as pests (like rodents in concrete-dominated cities) or as pesty-behaving (like crazed seagulls conditioned to being fed by humans). As a result, biophilia is less common, and biophobia, moreso (n.p.).

humans; rather I contend that this type of loneliness reflects a systematic, multispecies experience that ancient and contemporary philosophers commonly refer to as “species loneliness”: a deep, unidentified despair that arises from estrangement from nature, from a loss of interspecies relationships⁶⁴. I conceptualize this phenomenon and its relation to neoliberal work as “*lonely work*”: the emotionally deficient activity of remunerated work in late-phase capitalist societies that causes feelings of species loneliness.

Contextualizing Lonely Work within Miguel Brieva’s *Lo que me está pasando* (2015)

Though not explicitly named, lonely work is visible in recent Spanish cultural products. These products are depicting neoliberal approaches to work —the workers, the workplace, or the work itself— as inherently species lonely. Such productions include but are not limited to graphic novels like Miguel Brieva’s *Dinero* (2008), *Memorias de la tierra* (2012), and *Lo que me está pasando* (2015), and Albert Carreres’ *Andando* (2011); books like Rafael Chirbes’ *En la orilla* (2013) and José Ardillo’s *El salario del gigante* (2011); films and documentaries like *Biutiful* (2010), *Hermosa juventud* (2014), *Techo y comida* (2015), *El olivo* (2016) and *Carrícola, pueblo en transición* (2018); ecocritical creative and/or non-fiction writing like Jorge Riechmann’s poetry and various public articles⁶⁵; grassroots movements like [Transition Towns](#), [ecovillages](#), local currencies (Conill et al. 217), educational and agricultural Co-ops and the Degrowth movement⁶⁶;

⁶⁴ This definition derives from Robin Kimmerer’s definition, which I will parse out in more detail later in this chapter.

⁶⁵ See articles like “Employees Are Lonelier Than Ever” from the [Harvard Business Review](#), “The Hidden Toll of Remote Work” from [The Atlantic](#), “Informe España 2020: la soledad en España crece un 50%” from [Comillas: Universidad Pontificia](#), “La soledad del trabajador globalizado” in the magazine [Sociología del Trabajo, Trabajo y Vida](#), and various others exploring the idea of “la economía de la soledad”.

⁶⁶ See writings like Juan Del Río’s *Guía del movimiento de transición: cómo transformar tu vida en la ciudad* (2019) and Luis Prádanos’ “Degrowth and Ecological Economics in Twenty-First Century Spain: Toward a Posthumanist Economy” in *Ethics of Life: Contemporary Iberian Debates* (2016).

and even ecological performances like “[‘Crisantemi’: Concierto para el bioceno](#)” from the QueLi Quartet in Barcelona (2020). Interestingly, many of these works specifically display an intersection between loneliness, work, and the environment.

To this point, this chapter seeks to explore this intersection as a means of drawing attention to the perception of *lonely work* in Spanish culture. To do so, I first will pinpoint how *lonely work* differs from loneliness in general, how it is inextricably tied to the separation from nature. Such a distinction helps to identify how the protagonists of the econarratives explored in this chapter are only able to overcome *lonely work* by reconnecting with nature.

These aims are primarily executed through Miguel Brieva’s graphic novel *Lo que me está pasando* (2015). *Lo que me está pasando*, referred to throughout the remainder of this chapter as *LQMP*, is set a few years beyond the initial shock of the financial crisis in Spain. The graphic novel doubles as a diary for an unemployed young person, Víctor. Víctor utilizes his diary as an attempt to make sense of what the late-phase capitalist society is doing to his economic and emotional well-being. A 32-year-old formally trained geologist, he once had economic aspirations of working alongside rocks. However, the crash of 2008 abruptly – and vertiginously — siphoned that outlandish dream back into a confusing neoliberal reality. In this reality, the labor market does not need nor value his environmental sensibilities. He finds himself mainly unemployed, occasionally underemployed, consistently cut off from nature, and perpetually species lonely. The graphic novel’s central tension revolves around Víctor’s desire to overcome these feelings and to reconnect with Others – both in work and in a multispecies ecological context.

In an interview I conducted with author Brieva, I asked him where the narrative of *LQMP* had come from. His previous work had been mostly one-off social satire pieces, which he himself described as “salvaje” and “de humor negro” (personal interview 50:00). In contrast, *LQMP*, while

remaining true to his fragmented style, premiered an obvious narrative that, surprisingly, closed its curtains with an undeniable dose of social optimism. Brieva nodded. This was a new direction for him. A few years had gone and past since 15-M, the impassioned anti-austerity movement in Spain, and he felt that the Spanish people were beginning to “desmotivarse” (48:30). He was fearful that for all the “creatividad”, “ingenuidad”, and “energía” that the movement had created, it “no sirvió para nada” (48:40). He decided something had to change. He was done with satirical writing. He wanted to transmit a more motivating, positive story. That way he could didactically generate thoughts, metaphors, and visions of other possible realities: “Tenemos ya mucha experiencia por dónde no debe ir. Entonces, aquí tenemos pistas por dónde sí debe ir y puede ir: que es lo sostenible, que es lo que es igualitario” (51:23 - :34). One possible reality and creative endeavor of Brieva’s that I explore in the book is Víctor’s positive experience going from “*lonely work*” — again, the emotionally deficient activity of remunerated work in late-phase capitalist societies that causes feelings of species loneliness — to *multispecies work*. I introduce *multispecies work* as an inclusion of both the remunerated and nonremunerated activities that respectfully interact with nature and its beings. To be shown in *LQMP*, *multispecies work* remedies *lonely work*.

Iberian and Latin American Cultural Studies scholar Benjamin Fraser picked up on Brieva’s creative and didactic motivations. In his article, Fraser offers an analytical overview of the book by studying it as a political object of the *quincemayista* (15-M) tradition of post-2008 Spain (As a reminder, 15-M stands for the 15th of May, a date when an unprecedented citizen’s movement began in which millions protested the post-2008 austerity laws that deteriorated the Spanish working class’s quality of life). Fraser views *LQMP* like a “protest-comic,” where Brieva’s nontraditional organizational structure challenges the individualist and alienating

practices that dominate the neoliberal period (57). Fraser argues that with a little bit of “mental work”, *LQMP* teaches the reader to recognize and to decipher the intercalated relationships that exist between content/form, social/political/economic and artist/reader (48). Parallel to Víctor’s arch, the graphic novel equips the reader to ‘protest’ isolationism by reorienting the self within a grander social and ecological collective, one that recognizes the need for interconnectedness and critical engagement. Ultimately, as Víctor grapples with work, so too does the reader. Suddenly, the scribbled in “me” illustrated on the cover title *Lo que (me) está pasando* takes on a new metafictional dimensionality (see figure 1).

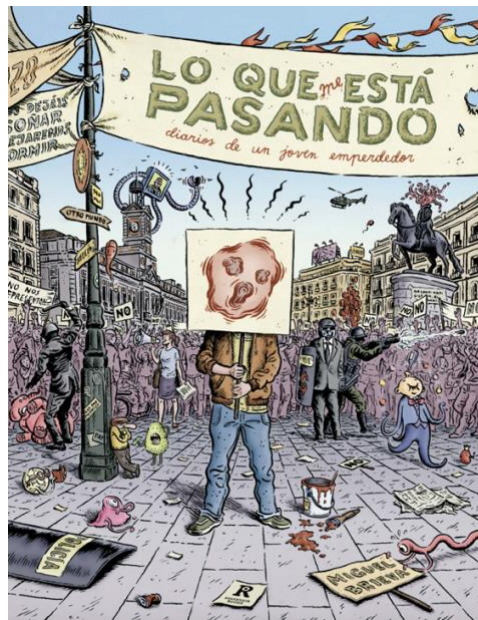


Fig. 1. The cover displays a scribbled in “me”.

Brieva corroborated Fraser’s analysis in our interview, too. He stated this his overarching desire was to make readers question what we accepted as normal or real in society — a motif that appears within Víctor’s imagination, his dreams and his confusion with the way work works under capitalism. Subsumed within wanting to challenge normality, Brieva wished to instantiate that “No

nos pasa nada a cada uno de nosotros. Todos *nos* está pasando a *todos*.” (Personal interview 16:52 - :57). In an echo of environmental humanities epistemologies, Brieva explained to me:

Y, por lo tanto, cualquier solución solo puede ser colectiva. Es justo lo contrario de lo que hoy en día se considera verdadero: el individuo que lo puede todo... Es toda una fantasía, es una locura realmente. (16:52 – 17:22)

For Brieva, *LQMP* ‘protests’ widely accepted economic norms, like individualism and isolationism, that to him, have no place in a sustainable, multispecies reality where the future of work must reside.

Along similar political lines to Fraser’s viewpoint is an article by Hispanic Cultural Studies scholar Xavier Dapena. In it, he looks at the power of political imagination in *LQMP*. Dapena traces different symbolic, imaginary fragmentations that appear in Víctor’s mind — his conversations with rocks, plants, and ghosts — and shows how these ‘hallucinatory’ figments lay out a new reality, one that resists the neoliberal framework of precarious work, individualism, and commercialization of Life⁶⁷.

Reading Dapena’s work speaks to a statement that Brieva kept repeating throughout our interview: “Vivimos en un mundo al revés” (42:42). Brieva enumerated several scenarios where what should be normal — was not — under the dominant neoliberal rule. He said, for example, that society esteems toxic, narcissistic leaders who chase riches, yet we disregard the poor and those who are not work-a-holics, “Y probablemente son la gente más sensata, más sensible, más humana” (43:12). His main objective with the novel was to subvert disconcerting realities like these, to subvert that which is thought of as fiction, that which is considered crazy, that which entwines the entire “web of life” that is capitalism (Moore 13 – 14). Again, refer to figure 1 that shows the cover of *LQMP*. Notice the crazy and unrealistic aesthetic. Yet, Brieva is visually

⁶⁷ The capital “L” represents broader understanding of life that include and exceed human or Western-dominant conceptualizations.

communicating that this is, in reality, how crazy and unrealistic he views the current neoliberal society. He hopes that his readers will come to recognize and lament this subversion as he does. In this chapter, I partake in this subversion recognition via Víctor's journey with *lonely work*. I point out how initially under capitalism, Víctor experiences a limited social, intellectual, and emotional dimensionality of work that causes his species loneliness (Prádanos). Once he eventually reconnects his economic activities with nature (what I conceptualize as *multispecies work*)—a domain not typically or normally appreciated under neoliberal approaches to work—his understanding of work dramatically flips, and his species loneliness dissipates.

In sum, both Fraser and Dapena's scholarly contributions form vital connections between artistic, social, economic, and political themes that appear across the formation, visuality and narrative of this graphic novel. However, the scholarship tends to stop with anthropocentric conclusions; they settle on the idea that the book's primary concern is to centralize politics in life, to improve human connectedness and socio-economic change. The ending of Víctor's journey where he joins a league of economic protesters in the urban plaza, as seen via the cover's convincing representation of 15-M, would certainly support this viewpoint. These conclusions are valid and important for understanding *LQMP's* push for connectedness within the context of 15-M.

This chapter extends these conclusions by suggesting that *ecological* connectedness, not solely *human* connectedness, is ineliminable to Víctor's reckoning with *lonely work*. Confronting the tension between species loneliness and multispecies connectedness is a crucial obstacle that Víctor must overcome to successfully reconceptualize employment – and his own social existence – during a fraught period of overlapping crises; it formulates his entire narrative existence from being a young boy who cherishes his odd relationship with rocks, to becoming a geologist, to

seeking out employment that works deferentially with nature, to finding his place amongst a diverse ecology of beings in the final vignette of the book. I intervene with current scholarship by reading *LQMP* from within an ecological lens, one that has yet to be duly incorporated.

Species Loneliness and Reciprocal Pairs

Before looking at *LQMP*, first it is important to closely define species loneliness as it manifests today. For this, I lean into forest biologist and indigenous ethnobotanist Robin Kimmerer's book, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge, and the teachings of plants* (2013), which contemplates the old philosophy of species loneliness in relation to contemporary economic conditions⁶⁸. Drawing from allegorical stories of plants and oral legacies of Indigenous peoples, Kimmerer explains that in the 20th century humans constructed economic and cultural fortresses that barricaded humans from nature. Humanity's intimacy with nature, which was once based upon reciprocal work and symbiotic relationships, she argues, is now predicated on commodification and exploitation. As a result, as current approaches to human work intensify, species loneliness, or the "deep, unnamed sadness stemming from estrangement from the rest of Creation, from the loss of [interspecies] relationship", has become a defining characteristic of the capitalist epoch (Kimmerer 208 – 209).

Kimmerer's work obviously derives from a different academic tradition than the cultural and literary focus of this dissertation. Because of this, it would have seemingly made more sense to primarily pull my environmental theoretical framework from scholars like Spanish ecofeminists Alicia Puleo, Amaia Pérez Orozco, and/or Yayo Herrero who at times explicitly or other times

⁶⁸ In academia, Michael Vincent McGinnis is often attributed with coining species loneliness in his book *Bioregionalism*. However, the philosophy is a native paradigm and therefore, I prefer Kimmerer's writings.

implicitly reference Indigenous ways of thinking. Even Raj Patel and Jason Moore's work could have appeared more obviously environmentally connected to the Iberian Peninsula (they compare the history of Columbus and Capitalism to Indigenous ways of working, for example). However, Kimmerer's work on Traditional Ecological Knowledges (TEK), unlike the forementioned scholarship, is one of the few highly influential contributions to Indigenous studies written by an Indigenous person. This draws me to utilize her work for a few reasons. Firstly, her work is a primary source on TEK, and therefore, embodies a more impactful and appropriate "situated knowledge" that embraces "bottom-up" ways of knowing (Haraway). Secondly, her work appeals to me for personal reasons. It teaches modern natives, like myself, who have been assimilated into the neoliberal culture and estranged from our ecological roots, how to reclaim our indigeneity despite a contemporary capitalist context. To do so, she teaches how to "become indigenous to place" again: to learn about its place, to honor place, to care for place, and to never allow work to interfere with our sacred multispecies ecology (216). Though not Indigenous, in many ways, Víctor shares this similar "becoming indigenous" journey as he seeks traditional ecological restoration. And finally, embracing indigeneity segues into Kimmerer's most ambitious and admirable goal of promoting ecological repair for *all* modern citizens, not just natives. She attempts this through her scholarship, creative writing, and public talks that apply TEK to alternative communities in hopes of repairing multispecies relationships to secure a more resilient, regenerative future for all. Spain is certainly posed as one of these alternative communities in ecological disrepair. Its devastating exceptionalist and exclusionary economic beliefs and practices, in combination with its specific geo-spatial and climactic vulnerabilities, desperately require radical philosophical, epistemological, and socio-economic interventions if it so wishes emancipation from the imminent

civilizational emergency it is currently facing⁶⁹. Kimmerer's work employs these radical interventions. It tackles faulty and flawed perspectives, like those that view humans and their economic activity as dominantly superior to all Others, by urging that the world's ecological—and emotional — decline originates from humanity's apocryphal orientation as living and *working* apart from and above nature. In addition to the massive extinction and massive inequality this perspective promotes, it also produces and magnifies species loneliness, too: "as our human dominance of the world has grown, we have become more isolated, more lonely" (209). For these reasons and more, Kimmerer, emerges as my primary theoretical framework for this chapter.

It is still worth mentioning that like Kimmerer, other noteworthy environmental humanities scholars have also commented on humanity's erroneous self-elevation above and self-separation from nature. Pioneering ecofeminist Donna Haraway describes this false sense of ecological separation as the "fantasy of human exceptionalism" (244). To her, believing such delusions directly aggravates earth's current and future existential vulnerabilities. Haraway's work attempts to articulate the interdependencies between species and environments to challenge "the systemic pathology of a species disconnected from the conditions of its world" (Wright 278). Similarly, ecofeminist Val Plumwood interprets the present capitalist economy as predicated upon an "illusory sense of independence from nature" which misleads humans away from their connections with other life forms (foreword). Posthumanist scholar Leonardo Caffo also describes the economy as anthropocentric. He sees it dividing multispecies life forms away from each other, dangerously "falsando la percezione della biodiversità" / "falsifying the perception of biodiversity" (13, my translation). Ecocritical author/artist and central cultural narrative voice of this chapter, Miguel

⁶⁹ Spain's particular vulnerabilities to the climate crisis were briefly discussed in the introduction of this dissertation. For additional, detailed reading, see pages 8-13 in Luis Prádanos's "Introduction: Spanish Environmental Cultural Studies" within *A Companion to Spanish Environmental Cultural Studies*.

Brieva, also sees human's delusional position apart from nature like Haraway. What she described as the "fantasy of human exceptionalism" he describes as "la fantasía del individualismo; no hay individualidad" (Personal interview 17:01). In fact, his graphic novels, as this chapter will demonstrate, visualize how a hyperfocus on the self as a distinct entity from the entire ecological community—a principal concept that underpins current approaches to work — foments isolating consequences across the entire multispecies collective, including but not limited to, species loneliness.

In alignment with other scholars discussed throughout this dissertation, such as Yayo Herrero and Noah Yuval Harari, Kimmerer's understanding of species loneliness argues that work was never intended to work this way; humans and nonhumans are biologically designed to intimately interact, to support, to care for other species, to "never damage Creation, and never interfere with the sacred purpose [work] of another being" (211). In other words, Kimmerer urges that beings are meant to work together symbiotically. She frames this kind of labor of care as a "reciprocal pairing", or an interspecies interdependency grounded upon mutual exchange to promote the flourishing and ensure the survivability for both (45). Throughout her book, Kimmerer demonstrates that these interdependencies can manifest biologically (e.g., through the oxygen and carbon dioxide cycle), emotionally (e.g., that restored sense of connection and sensitivity that buds when working alongside or within nature), or even intellectually (e.g., the ecological learning that takes place when one cares for and pays attention to another species' existence). In sum, reciprocal pairs are a biological design, a culture of care — and to TEK, a multispecies obligation:

Each person, human or no, is bound to every other in a reciprocal relationship. Just as all beings have a duty to me, I have a duty to them. If an animal gives its life to feed me, I am in turn bound to support its life. If I receive a stream's gift of pure water, then I am

responsible for returning a gift in kind. An integral part of a human's education is to know those duties and how to perform them. (115)

As visible in this quote's regard of water as a being, it is worthwhile to note that TEK understands the idea of "species", "beings" and "life" more expansively than Western epistemological norms. For example, Kimmerer's tribe, the Potawatomi people, define "beings" as anything that is "animate" or "imbued with spirit" (55). Under this TEK framework, Kimmerer linguistically reframes rocks, mountains, water, fire, land, medicine, songs, instruments, stories, food, and more as "nonhuman persons" in contrast to the English "objects" (55 – 56). I will be utilizing Kimmerer's wider understanding of "nonhuman persons" in my textual analysis in this chapter, given that Brieva's main character, Víctor, relates to nature, specifically rocks, in a more traditional rather than Western way. Meaning, I will be looking at *LQMP*'s rocks as beings, nonhuman persons — and not objects — as they do in fact interact with Víctor in an animate way.

I apply Kimmerer's theories on nonhuman persons and reciprocal pairings in this chapter for a few main reasons, because they offer restorative effects for humanity and beyond. Firstly, viewing many beings, objects, and things as animate, nonhuman persons remind humans of their "kinship with all of the animate world", thus fostering interconnection, an antidote to species loneliness (56). Secondly, reframing objects from an "it" to a "who" recognizes the individuality of beings on the earth, augmenting empathy and recalibrating multispecies relational dynamics and exchanges:

The taking of another life to support your own is far more significant when you recognize the beings who are harvested as persons, nonhuman persons vested with awareness, intelligence, spirit—and who have families waiting for them at home. Killing a who demands something different than killing an it. When you regard those nonhuman persons as kinfolk, another set of harvesting regulations extends beyond bag limits and legal seasons. (184)

As explained above, TEK approaches to reciprocal pairs undermine the hierarchical, capitalist logic of exploitation and hyper-consumption that has asymmetrically contributed to current climate calamities by reorienting the interspecies relationship. In Kimmerer's words, "Indigenous ways of understanding recognize the personhood of all beings as equally important, not in a hierarchy but a circle" (385).

And finally, reciprocal pairs also represent an integrative forms of knowledge that combine multispecies forms of intelligence often ignored by Western cultural patterns. Kimmerer explains that per TEK, humans are said to be the youngest inhabitants of Earth and therefore, have the most to learn from other species (9). Humans, like all species, she further elucidates, are limited to their own biological knowing capacities. Listening to and learning from other beings stretches the breadth of human knowledge (This can be exemplified in burgeoning scientific fields such as biomimesis, biomimicry, permaculture, etc.). So, reciprocal pairs cultivate a different kind of intellect, what Kimmerer refers to as a "new species of knowledge, a new way of being in the world" (47). She calls for capitalist cultures to embrace this "cross-pollination" of knowledges — the scientific with the indigenous — because, again, it counteracts species loneliness by reconnecting humans to their more holistic, ecological roots — and counteracts the exclusive valuing of hyper-economic, left-brain activities exclusively valued by neoliberal financial norms (47). And this is precisely what is seen in Miguel Brieva's *LQMP*.

A Species Lonely Life and Environment in *LQMP*

Miguel Brieva's *LQMP* exemplifies the intricate relationships between reciprocal pairs, species loneliness, and the conceptually fantastical approaches to neoliberal work by drawing attention to the broader range of exchanges between beings that affords or affects the entire lonely

web of life under late-phase capitalism today. To start, the graphic novel clearly establishes a reciprocal relationship between Víctor and nature. In one sequence, readers are taken back to Víctor's childhood, long before he became an employable adult under capitalism. Here readers are introduced his respectfully emotional and intellectual way of interacting with work and nature. In this moment, Víctor is fondly remembering a childhood game he used to play a “strata detective” with rocks (see figure 2):

Cuando era niño ... recuerdo haber mantenido largas conversaciones con piedras. Siempre tenían algo interesante que contar... Jugaba a ser detective de los estratos, un especialista en investigaciones lentas como el mundo... Así 98 años aquí. (miércoles 27 n.p.)

Accompanying these peculiar and interesting words, the vignette illustrates young Víctor playing “detective de los estratos”. As seen in the figure below, his eyes are wide and excited. He is touching the rock, talking with it, learning from it, interacting with the rock as if it were his childhood best friend. He appears active, intellectually engaged and emotionally content. I interpret this as a reciprocal pairing between Víctor and the rocks, as they engage in respectful interactions. This early representation of such a multispecies relationship (seeing the rock as a species per Kimmerer's definition of life as “beings imbued with spirit”) helps readers to understand Víctor's ideal sense of work that works alongside and not against or above nature.



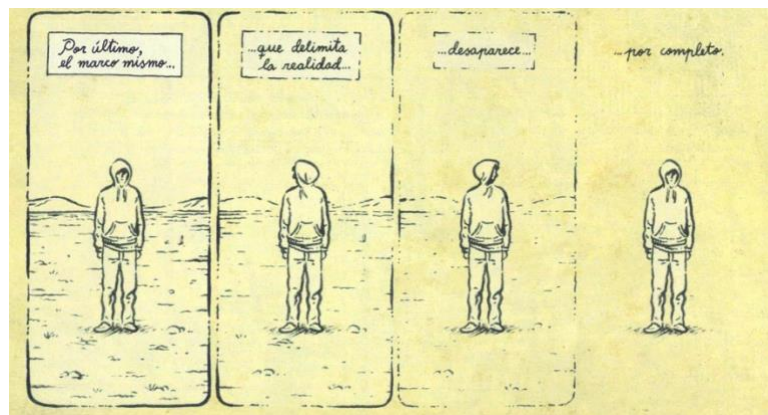
Fig. 2. This scene marks one of the very few in the entire novel in which Víctor appears inspired, engaged, and active alongside rocks (miércoles 27 n.p.).

Considering this above vignette where Víctor plays “detective de los estratos” it should be unsurprising to readers to discover that adult Víctor eventually dedicates himself to the field of geology, a formal economic channel through which he could enact his working relationship with nature. In this manner, Brieva has awarded Víctor’s rocks animacy, suggesting, like Kimmerer, that nonhuman persons and their reciprocal pairings with humans can play an integral role not only in human emotional well-being but also in their intellectual formation as a career-seeking adults. Recognizing Víctor’s preferred ecological approach to work through the lens of a reciprocal pair nourishes a diverse form of knowledge relating to work — one that honors objectives beyond profits and capital— both for the reader and for Víctor.

However, Víctor’s reciprocal pairing —and subsequently his emotional contentedness— is impacted during adulthood when he enters the neoliberal labor market. As discussed in this dissertation’s introduction, conceptualizations of employment under late-phase capitalism dramatically limited themselves in scope to include wage labor alone, often cutting off humans from the interdependencies critical for multispecies survival (Herrero). In the post-2008 labor market, employment opportunities were even further limited as austerity measures shrunk available jobs by putting an extreme emphasis on profits over life (see this dissertation’s introduction for details and specifics). For Víctor, geology was one of these devalued and limited-opportunity fields of work. This is the context in which the graphic novel situates adult-aged and employable Víctor.

Like many Spaniards during this time, Víctor vacillates between unemployment and chronic underemployment, with each job consistently drifting him further from nourishing

multispecies relationships and overall economic and emotional satisfaction. Various vignettes portray his misery. In contrast to happy, young Víctor imagining himself working as a rock detective, now, these vignettes no longer picture Víctor and rocks together. Instead, readers often see Víctor alone in his newfound economic, emotional, and ecological solitude — a stark contrast to his childhood aspirations. The figure below illustrates this theme of recurring solitude: He is seen solo, staring off into the expansive, void distance; he is shown grabbing his knees in a desperate, near fetal position, highlighting his vulnerabilities; in other vignettes, he is drawn to the side of, underneath, above, insignificant to, walking away from, or merely out of place with nature. In essence, Víctor appears ecologically estranged — and lonely (see figure 3):



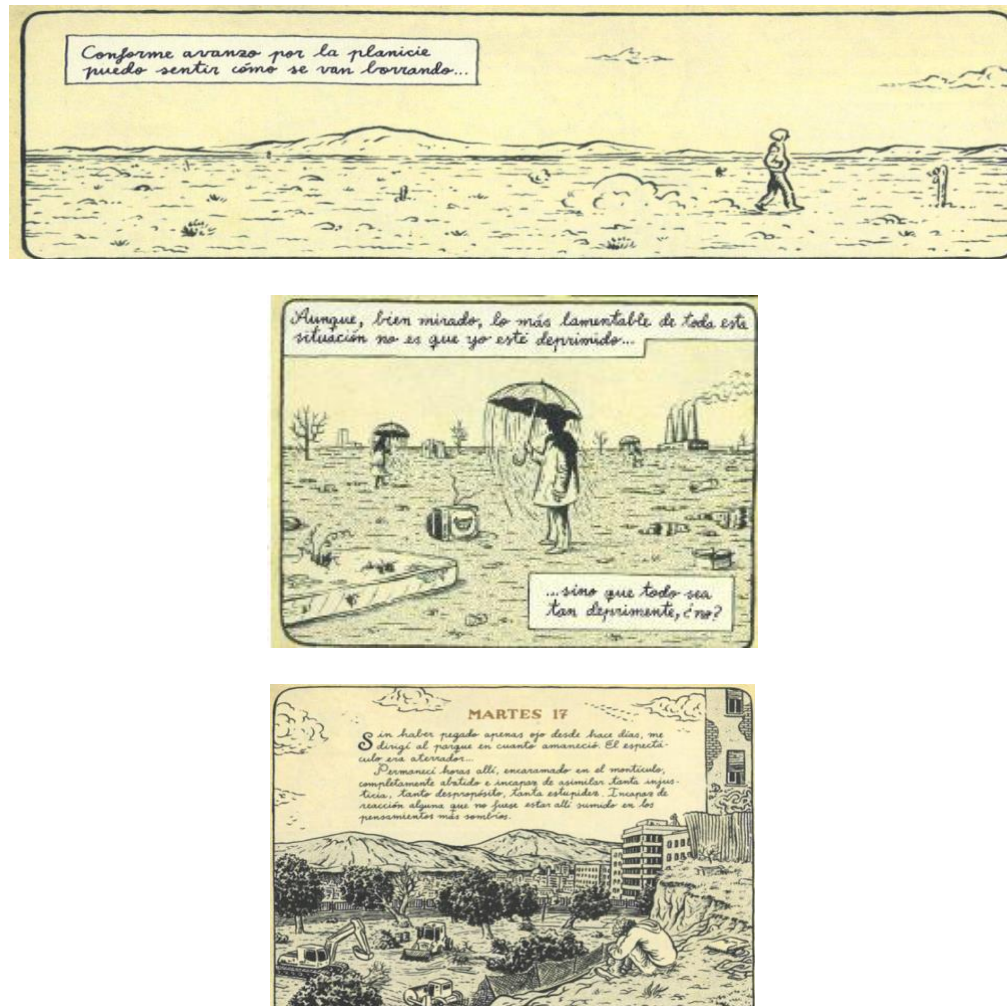


Fig. 3. Víctor appears in a vastly different situation compared to his earlier childhood days. He appears solo, dejected, and purposeless (lunes 25 n.p.).

A close look at the first vignette in the figure above (the flipbook-like sequence), elucidates Víctor's newfound emotional turmoil, his onset of species loneliness because of his separation from nature in the labor market. The first few quadrants of the vignette portray Víctor watching his environment as he once knew it dissipate and "desaparece" into the past (lunes 25 n.p.). He looks left and right, apparently trying to make sense of the long-gone past and the near future that

will seemingly exist without the opportunity to work alongside rocks. He visibly struggles to absorb this new reality where he is all alone. Not even nature remains; the background, though a landscape, is nearly empty, void of any beings. Throughout the sequence, Víctor never takes a step in one direction nor the other, yet the world around him continuously takes steps towards desolation, shown by the forward movement of the images. As he is displaced into this vacant future, seen by the progressive emptying of the background, Víctor feels a total separation from nature is all but ensured “por completo” (lunes 25 n.p.). He settles into his solitary and dejected stance by the last empty quadrant — an utter illustration of species loneliness.

Visually, the disappearance of boundaries in the last quadrant of the vignette represents Víctor’s increasing despondent awareness to both his own isolation and the destruction of nature. I interpret this sequence as a nod to capitalist work’s increasing inability to recognize a multitude of environmental, emotional, and temporal limits, even when surpassing them launches the social, economic, and ecological existence forward towards emotional and ecological vacuity. The inertia towards the last quadrant of nothingness warns Víctor — and the reader— that humanity’s current economic practices will inevitably deprive our species and others of the rich interdependencies and mutually beneficial work that have kept a vibrant ecology a possible reality in the past. Interestingly, the vignettes pictured in figure 3 are also generally monochromatic. Such a color scheme appears analogous to the monocultural onset of individualist economic ideologies that inhibit humans from fully integrating themselves and their work into the vibrant multispecies ecology. As such, these vignettes portray individualism not just as an economic principle that divides humans from nature, their collective “reciprocal pair”, in the workforce; but it is also a lived, isolating, and species lonely reality that insidiously shades the entire panorama.

Take for instance the following vignette that underscores the species lonely reality that transforms his environment. Víctor is standing at the precipice of a cliff, but the cliff is not composed of earthen materials (see figure 4); it is constructed of man-made paper, a scene that Brieve satirically describes as “basu-raleza” (sábado 7 n.p.)⁷⁰. Víctor stands there, gazing out at the ocean, as if longing to remember what it might have felt like to share intimate reciprocity with a more ‘natural’ Earth, a geological time before work terraformed the labor landscape⁷¹. He imagines a cliff “compuesto de roca” instead of a “vacío” of “trillones de impresos, informes, prospectos y memorándums”. The cliff, composed of work’s artificial byproducts (i.e., the immense waste from late-phase capitalist work), forms the economic fortress that Kimmerer talked about. As seen here, the hegemonic approach to work in contemporary Spanish society has restructured Víctor’s world by preventing him from working with rocks – and nature – in a professional capacity, effectively destabilizing his footing on Earth and exacerbating his species loneliness. Víctor’s own destabilization also mimics the ecosystem’s, reflecting once again the intricate and organic connection points that exist within the multispecies collective. Caffo summarizes the dangerous ecological destabilization that the anthropocentric economy (predicated upon the “fantasy of human exceptionalism” or the “la fantasía del individualismo”) creates and that Víctor himself feels:

⁷⁰ This is perhaps suggestive of Environmental Historian Marco Armiero’s proposed term, the “Wastocene”, where the world is terraforming into a heap of trash. The “politics of waste” produces “wasted people” and “wasted spaces” in which an underlying narrative of consumption and disposability toxifies both society and the environment (2014, 2017).

⁷¹ This thought and vignette dialogues with Jedediah Purdy’s post-natural theory of *After Nature*. “After Nature” proposes that humanity no longer lives on the periphery of nature; that the world we will soon live within is the one that we humans have made and altered (Introduction). Similarly, José Prenda writes for *contrainformacion.es* that “en este planeta solo existe una realidad, una naturaleza... La dualidad humano-naturaleza, lo que solemos llamar. Natural frente a lo considerado artificial, representa una dialéctica falsa al presuponer la existencia de dos realidades” (n.p.).

Il nuovo habitat in cui viviamo è un pianeta in piena ‘crisi ecologica’, una situazione che si verifica quando l’ambiente di una specie è cambiato in modo talmente radicale da destabilizzare la sua sopravvivenza. (“The new habitat in which we live is a planet in plain “ecological crisis”, a situation that is declared when the environment of a species is changed in such a radical way as to destabilize their own survival” 61 – 62, my translation)

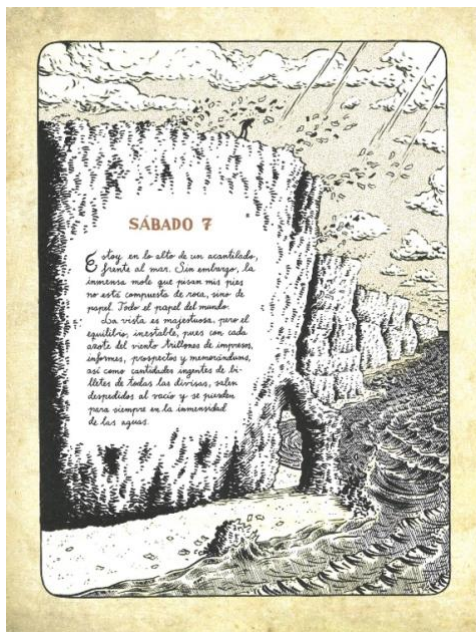


Fig. 4 Víctor confronts the emotional margins and the physical transformations of nature in the 21st century. Kata Beilin also pointed out that additionally this vignette seems to, intentionally or unintentionally, dialogue with the soon-to-be brief existence of Man before their inevitable yet artificially constructed ecological collapse (sábado 7 n.p.).

Furthermore, a close visual interpretation of this vignette through species loneliness reveals how the emotional condition alters Víctor’s sense of self in an ecological and economic context. For instance, the scene is pictorially and textually reminiscent of Spanish Romanticism, an aesthetic movement in which maudlin antiheroes were depicted bemoaning the collapse of former cultural values. Pictorially, Víctor’s metaphysical despair, illustrated by his solitude and his anxious peer over the cliffs, similarly stems from a shift in cultural values. As the culture of capitalist work transforms the biophysical and social world he inhabits, he senses the cosmic

injustice of being a seemingly powerless individual before the omnipotent forces that render him and other unemployable people under late-phase capitalism as superfluous and solitary. He senses doom below his feet.

Analyzing the image – the overall landscape, in conjunction with Víctor's posture – could recall of Romantic aesthetics, like the quintessential works of Leonardo Alenza y Nieto's satiric *El suicidio del poeta romántico* (1839) and *El mono ermitaño* (1840 – 1845) (see figure 5):



Fig. 5. The anachronistic reference embedded within this contemporary genre takes the reader back to the dawn of Víctor's problems: a defunct culture of individualism.

In the above 19th century paintings, Alenza makes fun of the individualist attitude that accompanied the artistic and literary movement or Romanticism in which humans took their right to individual liberty so far as to commit suicide – their ultimate, extreme, and ironic interpretation of freedom that led to anything but individual liberty. In the paintings, Alenza exaggerates their piousness to such defunct ideas: the reclusive monkey and the Christian savior-like figure function to embellish the era's ridiculousness, wherein their belief system surrounding themselves and their cosmovision led to a choiceful and avoidable death.

Though this specific graphic novel does not directly relate to 19th century religion, per se, the vignette of the artificial cliffs does speak to the cultural and environmental transformations occurring because of an intensifying and ludicrous devotion to the economy⁷². As Víctor looks over the edge, fretting his circumstance, artist Brieva satirically warns of the choiceful death that humanity is approaching as their extreme individualism pushes nonhumans and humans to the edge of their own life. Typically, paintings of Spanish Romanticism exhibit deep colors of moodiness (blues, blacks, browns) that reflect profound soul searching. Here, the whiteness of this vignette does not communicate the same kind of soul searching. Instead, it parallels the emptiness that Víctor encounters as he explores the shrinking margins of nature's existence — and his own economic and emotional dynamicism— within the 21st century labor market.

Lonely Work: “bullshit jobs” and “killability” in *LQMP*

The close readings of the past few of vignettes showed Víctor suffering from species loneliness within his depleting natural and labor environment; his suffering related to *not working* because neoliberal austerity measures had eliminated his opportunities to work alongside his reciprocal pair: rocks. Next, this section will look at vignettes that speak to Víctor's experiences with species loneliness *while working*, a manifestation of *lonely work* (As a reminder, *lonely work* is the ecologically and relationally deficient activity of remunerated work in late-phase capitalist

⁷² In his article “Hacia una cultura de la sustentabilidad”, Jorge Riechmann cites environmental writer and activist George Monbiot on the religious culture of neoliberalism: “El capitalismo es un cultomilenarista, elevado al rango de religión mundial. (...) Igual que los cristianos imaginan que su Dios los salvará de la muerte, los capitalistas creen que los suyos los librarán de la finitud. A los recursos del mundo, aseveran, les ha sido garantizada la vida eterna” (n.p.).

societies that causes feelings of species loneliness). This is important because it speaks to how *lonely work* pervades both unemployment and employment.

Anthropologist David Graeber's book, *Bullshit Jobs* (2018), problematizes the lack of meaning that can exist within neoliberal employment. He writes that during a time when most of the world's wealth is controlled by a select few, they also control what kind of work is labeled meaningful/important or pointless/useless to society. The result is that many endure "bullshit jobs", or the meaningless activity of remunerated work in capitalist societies that causes social, political, and even emotional harm, such as depression and anxiety (3, 5, 120, 235-236, 242). Graeber details that these wide-ranging consequences stem from "a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence, even though as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case" (3)⁷³.

Víctor endures "bullshit jobs" in the graphic novel. First, he endures unjustifiable economic activities, i.e., "bullshit jobs" per Graeber's definition. When Víctor becomes desperate for work and connection, he visits an unemployment officer. The officer places him in a series of unsatisfying, meaningless, "bullshit jobs": passing out pamphlets, taking customer service calls,

⁷³ In connection with Graeber's interpretation of meaningless neoliberal work, it is important to nuance that "bullshit jobs" could not only pertain to obviously meaningless activity, like passing out pamphlets in a street (as we will see soon); it also describes essential work that is devalued by society so as to portray it unimportant and meaningless. For example, neoliberal approaches to work, which disproportionately rely on capital accumulation, often deem critically important jobs as unimportant — at least per their wages. These jobs include low-level, unskilled operations and services, and labors of care often performed by women, that maintain the infrastructure of entire sectors, fields or even society (and the environment) itself. Thinking through this nuance could potentially broaden the definition of "bullshit jobs" to both i) the meaningless, unjustifiable economic activities and ii) the essential jobs that neoliberalism's financial objectives have (financially or socially) cheapened as meaningless, despite their undeniable societal importance. I would like to think of these as "societally-deemed bullshit jobs". There was evidence of this facet of work in LQMP, but they did not fit within this chapter. Further investigation is welcomed and invited.

and providing janitorial services in an empty airport. Víctor is often forced to (unsuccessfully) pretend that they are all important jobs. The social harm incurred is, of course, precarity and devaluation. The jobs also evoke emotional harm for him, too. At work, Víctor continues to suffer from frustration and species loneliness, because these jobs fail to offer him the ecological and emotional dimensionality he yearned for as a reciprocally paired geologist — yet another example of *lonely work* under neoliberalism. His lonely experience at work also supports my assertion that that it is not just the absence of work that is making Víctor lonely and discontent but rather the absence of multispecies work. In other words, it is *lonely work* itself, that is persisting his emotional despair.

The following moment of a “bullshit job” captures how Víctor’s limited job opportunities under austerity measures trigger his negative feelings. The following vignette pictures when he is sent to work as a janitor at an empty airport. The diary entry begins with a wide-shot illustration of a large, already sterile hallway. A man is pictured, alone, wheeling along his suitcase across sparkling clean floors (see figure 6). It is Víctor’s (pointless) job to maintain this already highly maintained facility.



Fig. 6. The diary entry and image create an optical illusion that man is being funneled into a narrow existence of work and Life (domingo 8 n.p.).

Víctor writes of the scene:

El hombre moderno se halla atrapado, en definitiva, en un laberinto hecho a su medida, al haber aceptado dócilmente no ser más que una mera variable en una gélida ecuación que tiene al infinito y, por tanto, a cero. (domingo 8 n.p.)

The quote emotes Víctor's isolation. He feels trapped at his job, at least per this kind of "bullshit job", created by neoliberalism: "El hombre moderno se halla atrapado, en definitiva, en un laberinto hecho a su medida...". Not to mention, his cold description of the airport job also summarizes the current algid status of the economy. Humans created this modern economy themselves (seen via the airport and airplanes themselves), are now working by themselves (seen via the symbolic depiction of the solo businessman) and are headed nowhere desirable (seen via the circuitous hallway). Furthermore, the numerical language of Víctor's diary entry plays on commonly debated feelings about economic calculations (i.e., "una gélida ecuación") that often freeze out the emotional, social, or ecological dimensions (i.e., "una mera variable") in neoliberalism's profit-obsessed computations (as seen in exclusive measurements like the GDP).

Expanding on this point, scholars contend that economic concepts like the GDP fail to account for externalized consequences. For example, according to Joseph Banyuls and Albert Recio, in late 2010, unemployment in Spain hit its highest level in over a decade, rising to 20.3%. Youth unemployment was even worse at 41.6%, which placed the country in one of the most economically dire situations in all the EU (200). An intense austerity movement swept the country. Through intense privatization, deregulation and disintegration of state welfare programs, the effect of neoliberal policies in Spain was continued labor strife and the redistribution of wealth to the upper echelons of society. However, per Banyuls and Recio's compilations, economic analyses quickly reported an improving laborscape and a rising GDP in the country. This was not received

as unanimously accurate for the conclusion captured only a fragment of the reality. According to Cornel Ban's research, most new jobs that were created out of austerity were precarious or temporal by nature. For those who were fortunate enough to be employed, they were mostly underemployed: 10 million workers held precarious labor contracts and 90% of new job creations were short-term contracts (207). So, while it may have bolstered the country's GDP, the reports did not recognize the persistent emotional and economic difficulties that Spanish workers were still experiencing. In short, these reports failed to identify externalized human consequences, much like the economy's blindness to the existential loneliness that Víctor endures at work in the novel.

To emphasize, it is not just a lack of human connection that is making Víctor species lonely at his workplace in the airport (which would be a logical conclusion drawn from the scene above where humans are the typical airport inhabitants). Considering his diary entry above, I perceive his perspective on work as lamenting the economy's exclusion of the entire multispecies dimension, not just the human. For Víctor, the economy's never ending mythical economic ideations and calculations ("ecuación que tiene al infinito") / drives the multispecies existence into both a physical and emotional nothingness ("a cero"). The vignette below supports this interpretation where readers see that Víctor's species loneliness (expressed as "estaba abandonado") is inherently tied to the future of the planet: "con destino al fin del mundo" (figure 7). The images and words together capture the essence of *lonely work*: the economic activities that lack organic connections due to the human-designated modes that dominate work and deplete the connectivity of life today. In this airport sequence, *lonely work* is pictured in connection to species the exclusively-economic atmosphere that humans have artificially constructed.



Fig. 7. *Lonely work* leads Víctor through a lonely world (domingo 8 n.p.).

In the following job, *lonely work* persists even when an ecological connection is present, pushing the reader to think about the many ways in which the economy engages with the environment ethically and unethically. Figure 8 below pictures the unethical engagement with nature that Víctor experiences while working another temporary “bullshit job”. In this vignette, he is passing out paper pamphlets, what he sadly calls “árboles seccionados en formatos cuadrados y cubiertos con inscripciones” that he knows “nunca, nunca, interesaron a nadie” (miércoles 27 n.p.). He quickly notices, unsurprisingly, that all the pamphlets end up discarded on the street, forming in his eyes, a completely unnecessary and sorrowful “cementerio de troncos” (miércoles 27 n.p.).



Fig. 8. The imagery of his feet on top of nature mimics humans' orientation as working above nature (miércoles 27 n.p.).

Víctor's mourning reflects his ecological conscientiousness that extends into the economic realm. He sees how *lonely work* unethically misconfigures his relationship with nature and his own emotional well-being. His sorrowful dissatisfaction stems from the way work functions as an instrument of human exceptionalism that renders the trees around him — killable. In her book *When Species Meet*, renowned ecofeminist and posthumanist scholar Donna Haraway qualifies that killing other beings forms a natural part of Earth's ecosystemic realities. It is how different species survive individually and how the multispecies collective maintains its fragile balance on Earth. However, the act of "making beings killable" — Haraway distinguishes — is when the labor of killing reaches unprecedented proportions and crosses a moral, ethical, and environmental line (80). For instance, when humans make other humans killable, it is condemned as genocide. Haraway contends that the same logic applies to the non-human world. Once humans make animals (or per this chapter's posture: nonhuman persons) killable for profit and gain that becomes exterminism, which violates the principles and obligations that sustain a multispecies environment (78). So, not only is Víctor's "bullshit job" of passing out pamphlets futile, but it also alters his

reciprocal pair with nature in an unscrupulous way. It transforms a multispecies relationship from one of symbiosis and mutual flourishing to one of “killability”. Furthermore, wastefully passing out pamphlets perpetuates Víctor’s own species loneliness by reminding him of the deadly trajectory that neoliberal approaches to work course (“cementerio de troncos”). The useless and careless resource usage of his job reflects how contemporary economic practices existentially threaten, not only say for example the declining forests of Spain and those around the world, but also the futurities of the entire multispecies ecology. *Lonely work* endangers the ecological, the emotional, *and* the temporal. Ecofeminist perspectives, such as this one by Haraway, help to critically establish a theoretical commonality of unjust and unequal subjugation amongst beings, human or nonhuman, animate and inanimate.

Lonely Work at Large

Strikingly similar images ridiculing *lonely work* interestingly appear across recent fictional and nonfictional cultural products in Spain, too: in director Juan Miguel del Castillo’s largely crowd-funded docu-fiction film *Techo y comida* (2015), in another of Miguel Brieva’s graphic novels, *Memorias de la tierra* (2012), and in an archival image from the 15-M movement (2011)⁷⁴. Together, these images underscore the widespread nonsensical, lonely nature of neoliberal approaches to work in post-2008 Spain, as explored in *LQMP*.

Firstly, the fiction film *Techo y comida* (2015) is set in 2012 at the height of the financial crisis. It realistically documents a single mother, Rocío, who struggles to keep a roof over her and her son’s heads. Unemployed for more than eight months despite leaving CVs all around town, she does everything she can to find employment. She, like Víctor, struggles to cope with the

⁷⁴ I owe the comparison of *Techo y comida* and the archival image to Juan Egea, whose seminar on the Iberian Crisis in 2020 illuminated such connections to me.

cruelness of labor precarity in the post-2008 era, only finding temporary relief from an unemployment officer's temporary placements. In one scene, pictured below in figure 9, Rocío is employed to pass out pamphlets while wearing a sign that reads "COMPRO ORO". The juxtaposition inherent to her "bullshit job" is garish, contextually, and visually. She, the employee, is desperate to earn even a little bit of money, meanwhile her employer is literally buying gold, during a financial crisis. The majuscule text and neon color blocking of her placard both ridicule and overwhelm her penurious position.

This uncomfortable contrast is further intensified when, ostensibly, her estranged parents happen to walk by and catch glimpse of Rocío working. Embarrassed or maybe desperate to not interact with them, she flees her designated spot on the street. Her boss sees her 'defiance', and consequently, she is quickly fired. Rocío throws the pamphlets on the ground in her boss' face, runs away, and destroys her "COMPRO ORO" sign, leaving, like Víctor, a "cementerio de troncos" of sorts behind (refer back to figure 8). The scene's ending remarks of *lonely work* in contemporary society: Rocío is alone, as discarded and devalued by neoliberal work as the trash on the street.

Furthermore, interestingly, most of the story about Rocío, is about her working, alone. There are only peripheral characters that float in and out of her story line. This, in combination with her struggles, makes me think back to Bernstein's motto on neoliberalism: "you're on your own". In this capacity, Rocío does not only remark an aesthetic resemblance to Víctor's *lonely work* experience, but a social one, too.



Fig. 9. Rocío's boss yells at her to stop looking so miserable and to “alegras esta cara” before later firing her in this scene (00:14:07). Her “bullshit job” appears meaningless, wasteful, and harmful, requiring her emotional subordination along the way, too.

A similar image appears in another one of Miguel Brieva's graphic novels, *Memorias de la Tierra* (2012). Set in the distant future, the book begins with a narration by an extraterrestrial "cosmoetnógrafo" named Zuth (6). Through a series of images that he/she collected from Earth, Zuth recounts how Earth — and all the beings inhabiting it — came to their existential demise. From space, Zuth shares his 'cosmoethnographic' study that delineates how humans entered "un trance hipnótico colectivo y autoinducido" that caused them to work, to consume and to destroy Life in ridiculous, cognitively dissonant ways. In one sequence, the extraterrestrial narrator dreams a "planetaria pesadilla" (n.p.). In it, he passes a worker who, like Víctor and Rocío, is working on the streets with a publicity sign hanging on his body. This person's reads, "se vende alma con cuerpo o sin él" (see figure 10). The worker's business attire underneath the sign connects neoliberal approaches to work (emblemized by the professional clothing) to the ludicrous, lonely messaging that is disseminated through extreme prioritizations of capitalist-driven work over life; After all, the vignette illustrates the worker completely by himself — and pawning off that self for capital, too. For this fictional worker, the vignette sardonically points out how the meaningless activity of neoliberal work will not only alienate him from nature or society, like it did for Víctor and Rocío respectively, but it will also eventually cost him his own essence, too. This is *lonely work* to a satirical extreme.



Fig. 10. The capitalist characterization of *lonely work* portrays meaningless activity that costs him his individuality (seen via the suit), his own connectedness and dignity (selling his soul) (n.p.).

And finally, the archival image shown below records a reminiscent visual taken from Spain's famous 15-M in which millions protested the post-2008 austerity laws. As a reminder, Spain fundamentally “flexibilized” work to the severe detriment of the worker (see this dissertation’s introduction for further details on the public expenditure cuts and the labor acts passed). Figure 11 captures a moment during this movement in which 15-M protesters criticized their devastating experiences with neoliberal work. Like in *Techo y comida* and *Memorias de la tierra*, here, two protestors hold up “se vende” publicity signs. And again, like the previous fictional cultural products, their signs read, “Se vende trabajador, sueldo mísero, condiciones indignas” and “se vende estado del bienestar” – sentiments expressed by Víctor in *LQMP*, too (see figure 11).



Fig. 11. The 15-M archival image displays a satirical “se vende” sign ridiculing the reality of work under neoliberal conditions ([Images from Flickr](#). Their retrieval was inspired from 2020 seminar discussions taught by Juan Egea).

Together, the above “se vende” images from the film, graphic novel, and 15-M archive cohere a critical thematic of neoliberal work. They reflect the pervasive feelings of loneliness that “bullshit jobs” can elicit in the post-2008 Spanish labor market. From Rocío’s chagrin to the workers advertising their souls, bodies, and well-being for wages, the images communicate how meaningless work can make workers feel like vendible objects, divested of their complex emotionality.

Political philosopher and literary theorist Michael Hardt’s idea of “affective labor” helps to understand the potential power behind these “se vende” images. Hardt defines affective labor as work that “produces social networks, forms of community, biopower” (96). In the production and reproduction of this affective labor, “collective subjectivities are produced and sociality is produced — even if those subjectivities and sociality are directly exploitable by capital” (96 – 97). In these images the sociality produced is the shared experience of vendibility and devaluation. Hardt admonishes that this is the downside of affective labor: it conglomerates “capitalist accumulation and patriarchal order” (100). From this perspective, the sociality produced is one of capitalist oppression, stifling individuals and social classes alike. Illustrated in Brieva’s “se vende

alma con cuerpo o sin él” vignette, to Hardt, affective labor’s production of oppression can even reconstitute the soul: “Where the production of soul is concerned...we should no longer look to the soil or organic development ...but rather to today’s dominant economic forms” (97).

Conversely and optimistically, Hardt concludes in his article that the same sociality produced by affective labor can also be a pathway towards liberation (100). The sharpening conscientiousness construed by the shared sociality can “present an enormous potential for autonomous circuits of valorization” (100). It can help to harness collective power within oppressed groups. I detect this potential liberating power in the “se vende” images. The affective labor they illustrate interrogates a problematic kind of retail culture present across lonely labor today. The “se vende” images question what neoliberal labor is producing (e.g., affective labor: social networks, biopower, etc.), what laborers are selling (e.g., their time, well-being, essence, etc.), who is purchasing, and what are the consequences of this “retail” culture, per se?

The workers in Juan Miguel del Castillo’s *Techo y comida* (2015), Miguel Brieva’s graphic novel *Memorias de la tierra* (2012), and those protesting in the 15-M archival image (2011) all seem to be contemplating these questions via their discontentment with neoliberal work. In fact, their retail culture interrogation leads the characters (or viewership/readership) to seek out alternative pathways. *Techo y comida* ends with Rocío and her son evicted. The final scene watches them walk away from their home, tossed out with the trash along the road (see figure 12). It is evident that the two are not seeking out alternative pathways in this scene; they were obligated to leave. This is not a liberating portrayal of affective labor. Yet, the largely crowd-sourced film, which is free to watch online, is likely intended to reach and to inspire the average citizen to fight for liberation on behalf of people like Rocío and her son — who are archetypically as average a citizen and as vulnerable a victim as their viewership.



Fig. 12. Rocío and her son are seen walking away, nearly blending in with the trash on the street (01:32:49).

Then, Zuth from *Memorias de la Tierra* ends his story instructing human readers on how to inhabit and work within the world more ethically in hopes of avoiding the catastrophic future he/she has witnessed in his ‘cosmoethnographic’ line of work (see figure 13). And lastly, some scholars, like



Fig. 13. In this vignette “Instrucciones para habitar el mundo”, the relationship between text and image speaks to the many pathways available towards liberation. The plethora of words that the visual

space contains mimics the many possibilities out of the current crisis. This rhetorical strategy, a bombarding of words, requires the reader to “zoom in” and dedicate more channeled attention to these potential solutions (n.p.).

urban studies scholar Ibán Díaz-Parra and human geographer Jaime Jóver-Báez, argue that 15-M was “one of the most relevant milestones in the new cycle of mobilisation initiated in Europe” (680). The anti-austerity movement “allowed room for alternative projects in conventional politics, a gap used by grassroots activists to go beyond their usual spheres and scales of action” (691). Effectively, this meant —in the least attention to and at the most, changes in — labor rights, housing problems and other public services within State politics (691). So, while the affective labor experienced was oppressive, workers were able to direct their unrest towards institutional changes (see the newspaper headline in figure 14 for an example). In fact, remember that Brieva mentioned in our interview that 15-M inspired *LQMP*, in part. He wanted to tap into the antagonistic spirit of the movement, to wake citizens up again to the injustices that had yet to be eradicated from the Spanish reality.



Fig. 14. Seven historians discuss how the 15-M movement dynamized the political atmosphere by affecting the two-party political system, raising awareness to corruption, facilitating change in housing and labor, and in general, making citizens “less resigned to losing everything” ([n.p.](#))

In sum, these differing cultural products connect a widespread, shared experience of *lonely work* at large in post-2008 Spain. They also suggest a growing societal interest to acknowledge the emotional sphere within the economic⁷⁵.

The (de)Evolution of Work: Overcoming species loneliness and lonely work in *LQMP*

Like the workers from these cultural products, Víctor’s loneliness and discontentment with work similarly steers him to seek out alternative pathways of labor liberation, mainly through a reconnection of the economical with the ecological. To demonstrate this change of course, this section will first establish that Víctor specifically suffers from feelings of species loneliness. These feelings are distinct from depression and/or loneliness in general, and they do not derive from mere unemployment (as they occur whether he is working or not). They stem from a disconnection from nature at work and in life — befitting of Kimmerer’s definition of species loneliness. Once this distinction has been clearly settled, this section will then analyze vignettes that show how Víctor’s reconnection with nature, mainly through revived attention to his relationship with rocks, helps him to divaricate his understanding of work away from dominant neoliberal conceptualizations. In the process of doing so, readers watch Víctor’s species loneliness dissipate and the contentment

⁷⁵ The visual analysis of “se vende” similarities across genre was directly inspired by Juan Egea’s 2020 seminar. In it, he proposed that contemporary cultural products of Spain possessed similarities, what he called the aesthetics of the Iberian crisis. He showed images of dumpster diving, for example, that persisted across post-2008 fictional and non-fictional genre. Additionally, the readings on “cultural studies” he provided me indelibly informed my approach to this section, if not, the entire chapter’s project.

he once experienced when he ‘worked’ alongside nature as a young “detective de los estratos” revive. Finally, this section discusses how Víctor’s restorative journey with work, intertwining with ecofeminism, carries with it critical implications that undermine *lonely work*— ultimately playing a didactic role in the devolution of the neoliberal concept of work for both him and for Brieva’s readership.

To begin, when considering the dejected and distraught vignettes presented in this chapter thus far — him staring off in nature, him unmotivated at work, him standing over a cliff made of trash — it might be possible to perceive Víctor as depressed, not species lonely. In fact, Víctor’s own therapist in the book diagnosed him as such. She tries to prescribe him medications, but Víctor knows that pharmacology cannot fix the systemic issues he is enduring, “lo más lamentable de toda esta situación no es que yo esté deprimido... sino que todo sea tan deprimente, ¿no?” (miércoles 27 n.p.). He is aware of the mismatch between his desire for intimate social connection and the shortcomings of his immediate labor environment. This mismatch prevents him from engaging meaningfully with his natural and social surroundings. To him, medication cannot cure this problem, because it does not foster more connection.

Therefore, this denotes loneliness, not depression (This interpretation could add a new perspective to the findings of recent studies on the Iberian Peninsula that have reported rising levels of ‘depression’ because of the economic recession (Chaves et al.)). In their book *Loneliness: Human nature and the need for social connection* (2009), social neuroscientist and psychology scholar John T. Cacioppo and science and medicine editor and author William Patrick explain how loneliness differs from depression. According to their work, depression and loneliness are “two distinct dimensions of experience” (83). Depression is how “you feel, period”, while loneliness is “how you feel about your relationships” (83). Depression evokes

apathy, which causes humans to lean into their isolation, while loneliness is “nature’s alarm for survival” that prompts humans to “affiliate”, to “reconnect”, “to rejoin the group or pay the price” (1 - 4). While there are times that Víctor certainly feels apathetic, the central theme of his diaries revolves around his pursuit for reconnection. He is working through how to restore his reciprocal pairing with nature through work and rocks. (This pursuit, interestingly, also registers with Kimmerer’s didactic goal of her book, too: “I try to work through the equations of reciprocity and responsibility, the whys and wherefores of building sustainable relationships with ecosystems” (123-124)).

Throughout the novel, we see Víctor desire to “rejoin the [multispecies] group” (Cacioppo and Patrick 1-4). He wants to overcome his species loneliness by restoring his reciprocal pairing with rocks. Readers see this effort via vignettes in which Víctor habitually turns to rocks to help him grapple with his experiences with work and/or a lack of work. These moments take place via full-page taxonomical panels of rocks that appear throughout Víctor’s diary entries. These vignettes often depict an imaginative species of rock accompanied by a literary aphorism that offers Víctor support, helping to fill the emotional void he feels in the neoliberal economy that ignores the knowledges of Others, because it is predicated on individualism and human exceptionalism. Víctor listens to the rocks’ wisdom, just like he once did as a child. In doing so, Brieve nourishes a more diverse form of knowledge and a broader approach to work.

The excerpted image below portrays an example of this process. This full-page vignette illustrates a multidimensional rock, one with both human and nonhuman characteristics. It is taxonomically labeled “Malaquita delirens” (viernes 13 n.p.). The literary quote it cites—“La realidad no es más que una alucinación colectiva” — encourages Víctor to see beyond the limited perception of his current surroundings (citing Frank Zappa, viernes 13 n.p.). To me, this interaction

typifies the “new species of knowledge”, the “cross-pollination” of knowledge that Kimmerer referred to with reciprocal pairs: Nature (a being per TEK knowledges) pushes Víctor to address his limited knowing of work by adding in other intellectual dimensions. By honoring each other’s existences and needs, the rocks and Víctor consider one another to improve their and each other’s well-being and overcome his species loneliness. The two embody, what Kimmerer describes as “a mutualistic symbiosis, a partnership in which both members benefit from their association” (270). In her book, Kimmerer exemplifies this symbiotic relationship through an allegory of alga and fungus. She writes:

Symbiosis enables the alga and the fungus to engage in a reciprocal exchange of sugar and minerals. The resulting organism behaves as if it were a single entity, with a single name. In a traditional human marriage, the partners may change their names to indicate that they are a unit. Likewise, a lichen is not named a fungus or an alga. We name it as if it were one new being, an interspecies family, as it were: rock tripe, *Umbilicaria americana*. (270 – 271)

Like *Umbilicaria americana*, Víctor and the Malaquita delirens have embraced a “shared architecture,” defying the individualist and anthropocentric culture of the neoliberal labor market that depends on keeping nature and the economy separate to abscond its biophysical (and emotional) depletion of the planet (271).

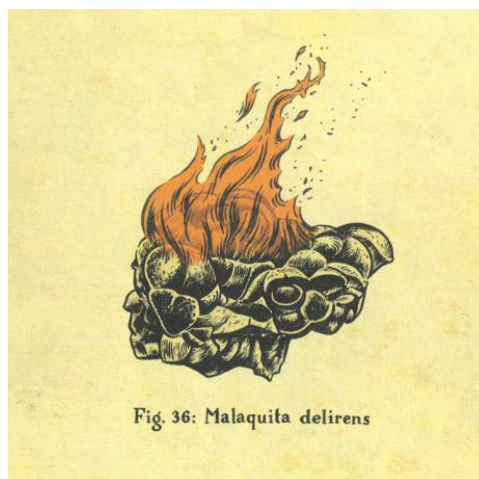
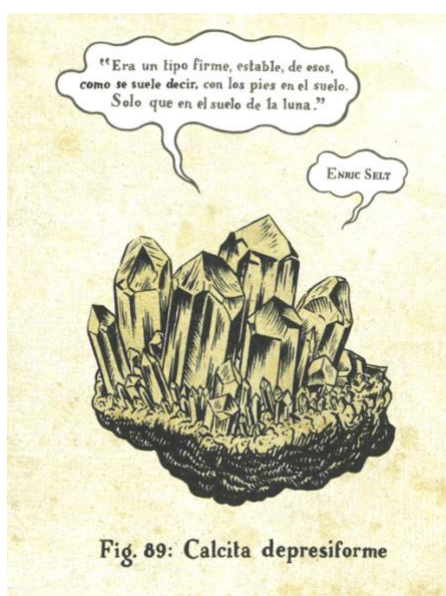
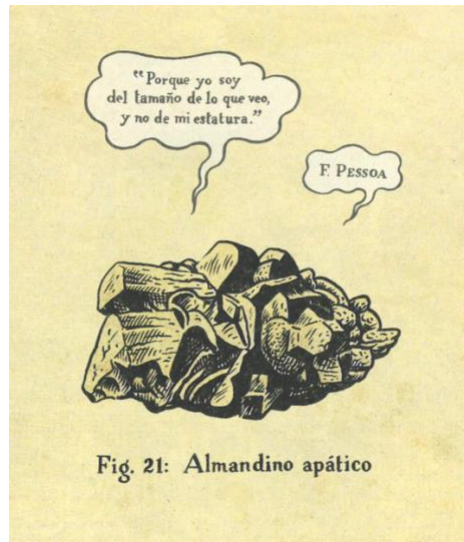


Fig. 15. Malaquita delirens sets the human-nature binary on fire (viernes 13 n.p.).

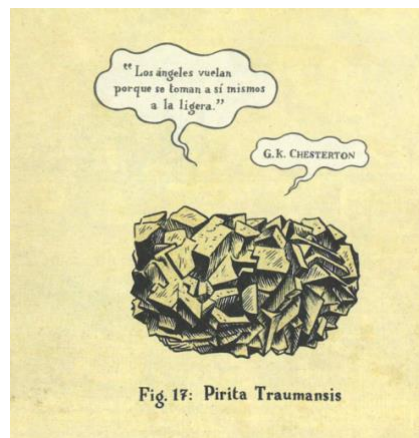
Interestingly, rock vignettes like *Malaquita delirens* always appear on the last page of Víctor's diary entries (again, how the graphic novel is divided). I read this in two ways. First, these vignettes act as the summative conclusion to Víctor's experiences, serving like the end of a chapter. They assess both nature's and his shared emotional status within species loneliness (think of the shared semantic structure of many of the rocks' names, pictured below in figure 16: *Malaquita* (species) *delirens* (emotion); *Calcita* (species) *depresiforme* (emotion); *Almandino* (species) *apático* (emotion); *Pirita* (species) *Traumansis* (emotion); *Barita* (species) *ansiosoide* (emotion); *Dolomita* (species) *somnoliense* (emotion)).



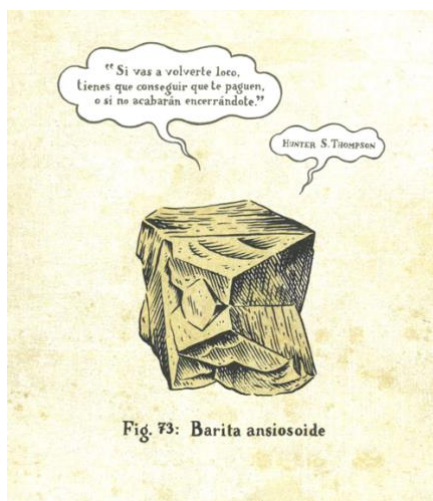
(lunes 2 n.p.)



(martes 3 n.p.)



(viernes 6 n.p.)



(domingo 8 n.p.)



(martes 10 n.p.)

Fig. 16.

Paying attention to this repeating semantic structure raises awareness to the idea that species loneliness can manifest itself across a broad biological and emotional spectrum. Secondly, the rocks' advice often transitions Víctor to the next stage of his reckoning with work. It summarizes his diary entry and then moves both Víctor and the book's story along to their next phase. For example, after these panels appear, Víctor often evolves to investigate new relationships and new emotions. I interpret this to mean that rock vignettes act as a dividing feature throughout his diary,

separating his experiences one from another, as if to lean into Víctor's innate awareness of the need to incorporate nature's wisdom into the folds of humanity's working life.

Víctor's embracing of incorporating nature can be seen for example when he visits his psychiatrist, Milagros. Milagros prescribes him medicine for his "depression". Víctor refuses the medication and instead pursues an alternative one: nature or "un alivio sedante" as he calls it (lunes 2, n.p.). The novel illustrates him sitting before a group of trees, who offer him the therapy and wisdom that he failed to find in Milagros:

no sois tan distintos a nosotras, ¿sabes...? El problema está en que siempre os meceís a merced de los mismos vientos... como un niño que hubiera aprendido, en tiempos inmemoriales, a jugar a un solo juego, y ya no fuese capaz de concebir otras reglas distintas. (lunes 2 n.p.)

The trees remind him that he is intimately connected with nature despite an economy (and pharmacology culture) that rejects this truth. Víctor listens to the trees and reflects, "Después de esto, por primera vez en semanas he sentido... algo de paz" (lunes 2 n.p.). The short diary entry concludes with a panel of a rock again, this time labeled "Calcita depresiforme" (see figure 17 below). The panel helps to make sense of his feelings and reaction to Milagros and work.

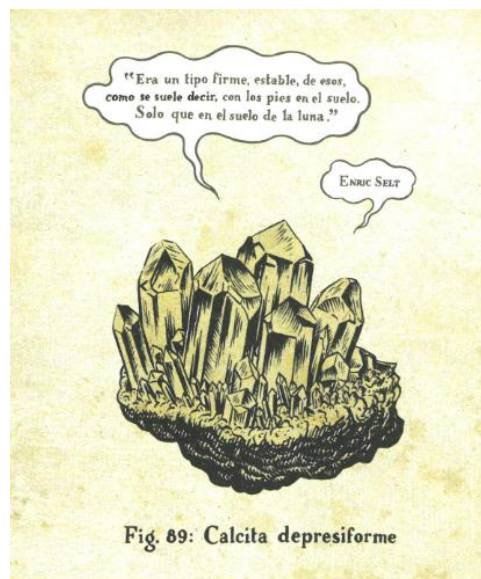


Fig. 17. The rock presents new structural existences (lunes 2 n.p.).

The rock is taxonomically labeled a calcite, the most stable polymorphic form of its species. Polymorphism, in geology, is the material transition to another crystalized phase of existence. Polymorphism, in pharmacology, has an important application, because drugs with polymorphic forms can improve the effectiveness of original medications (Censi and Di Martino 18762). Keeping this in mind, Brieva seems to be suggesting that seeking out new formations of existing structures advances our well-being. As such, the imagery of the calcites emerging upwards into their new life structure visualizes Víctor's own emergence out of his so-called "depresiforme" towards an improved well-being. After getting a dosage of nature, he realizes that the only way to heal is not through traditional approaches to medication but rather through radically grounding oneself in nature. "Era un tipo firme, estable, de esos, como se suele decir, con los pies en el suelo. Solo que en el suelo de la luna", the rock urges him (lunes 2 n.p.). Víctor's and the rock's shared thought process connects to the emerging, radical intellectual framework offered by environmental humanities scholars who argue that "the only rational plan of action 'is a radical change of course' (Prádanos *Postgrowth* 6, citing Foster, Clark and York). The rest of Víctor's entries are dedicated to discovering this radical change of course in which he must leave behind traditional economic practices and instead must make a radical trajectorial change where he can root himself "en el suelo de la luna" to improve his emotional and economic existence — like the trees suggested to him in the first place, "no sois tan distintos a nosotras, ¿sabes...?" (lunes 2 n.p.)⁷⁶.

As already perceptible with his renewing relationship with rocks and their wisdom, Víctor's radical change away from neoliberal approaches to work has beginnings within antispeciesism. Posthumanist scholar Leonardo Caffo's book *Fragile umanità: il postumano*

⁷⁶ These rock vignette analyses are owed completely to Kata Beilin, whose seminar on Iberian Crisis discussed this graphic novel in depth, specifically as it related to nonhuman human implications, like these. In fact, she specifically encouraged me to think more about Víctor's relationship with rocks and what it might say about work.

contemporaneo describes speciesism, the elevation of humans above other species leading to nonhuman exploitation, as a “pregiudizio”, “un termino morale”, “una narrazione” that “descrive e prescrive i nostri comportamenti” (7, 10, 16). To Caffo, speciesism is the root of humanity’s ecological and economic problems: “lo specismo è il motore dell’economia” (9). Overcoming speciesism means deconstructing that motor so that humans can rebuild a new economic system that, in Haraway’s words, “honor(s) the entangled labor of humans and animals together in science and in many other domains” (80).

While Caffo might refer to Haraway’s solution as “antispecismo”, Indigenous culture, like that taught by Kimmerer, has long implemented an antispecies-like canon of rules that govern how humans can respectfully work alongside and take from nature: the Honorable Harvest (Kimmerer 17). Though the details vary greatly across tribes and ecosystems, the basic principles remain universal. The Honorable Harvest, which in some regions resembles government ecological regulations, calls for humans to respect what the Earth offers, to never take more than half the available resources, to take care of Her in return for Her gifts, and to consider killing the biophysical realm a death of a “who” and not an “it”. In doing so, nonhuman “resources” transform into beings “vested with awareness, intelligence, spirit” that leads to more an expansive moral, ethical, and economic conscientiousness that can negotiate more appropriately with the biophysical conditions of work: “When you regard those nonhuman persons as kinfolk, another set of harvesting regulations extends beyond bag limits and legal seasons” (Kimmerer 183). For Víctor, rocks are nonhuman persons — kinfolk vested with awareness, intelligence, and spirit — who are worthy of respectful, interactions.

Such eco(nomical/logical) conscientiousness is viewable within Victor’s emotional responses to different types of work and the way these jobs interact with nature and its beings.

Amongst the slew of temporary (often, “bullshit” jobs), one of them stands out to him from the rest: working in the library as an “almacenista” (see figure 18). When he passed out pamphlets, he described the work as creating a “cementerio de troncos”. He thought the economy was making the trees ‘killable’. In contrast to this job though, he finds working with paper at the library to be largely different. Despite the trees still having been felled like in the pamphlet job, dissimilar to that, he recognizes that the trees’ lives are not being wasted in the same capacity. The entanglements between the non-human and human labor are bound more deferentially: there is a long-term purpose to the trees’ post-mortem ‘labor’. Nature has not been irrevocably silenced or discarded but has been given a ‘generative’ legacy: it will continue to speak for generations onwards through the lasting words of the pages the trees helped to create⁷⁷. Under this dynamic of employment, nature’s life (and death) has been carefully considered when ‘harvested’. This work is pleasing to Viktor for there is purpose beyond economic value. He calls it the “curro de mi vida”, suddenly happy to be working with nature in a more honorable capacity, “Al menos, la mayoría de aquellos árboles cayeron por una buena causa...” (miércoles 27 n.p.). He appears at peace with this work, a slight smile across his face and music in his head (see figure 15). This job and its vignette display no species loneliness. This can be linked to the fact that for Víctor, working as a bookkeeper engages with antispeciesism, as it deconstructs the

⁷⁷ When I use the word “generative”, I am referring to Erik Erikson’s use of “generativity” in his theory of the psychological phases of development. In his book *The Life Cycle Completed* (1982), he proposes that humans psychologically progress through nine stages of life. From Trust vs. Mistrust during infancy to Ego integrity vs. Despair during dotage, the different challenges of each stage eventually restore virtue and meaning in human lives. For example, in the sixth stage of development, Erikson avers that humans struggle with intimacy vs. isolation, but that if they successfully and healthily complete this stage, they acquire the basic virtue of love. In the subsequent stage, Erikson believes that humans face generativity vs. stagnation. For him, generativity is the generational task of generating new beings, products, ideas, or other beliefs to be passed on beyond one’s life as a means towards cultivating a legacy. For many humans, he writes, generativity is achieved through parenthood. In *LQMP*, I see Víctor look at the trees’ death (the books) as a generative gift rather than a wasteful usage (the pamphlets).

“motor” of the economy and honorably harvests from Earth’s resources, as if it were a gift rather than an entitlement. He can emotionally accept the biophysical and economic conditions of this approach to work.



Fig. 18. Víctor works peacefully with trees in a generative capacity (miércoles 27 n.p.).

The thoughts informing Víctor’s feelings about work — the antispeciesism, the killability, and The Honorable Harvest —connect to a wide array of ecological trends. One of these trends that the book continuously circles my mind back to as a reader is ecofeminism. So often I thought about ecofeminism while reading Víctor’s intimate thoughts and feelings, that it led me to ask Brieva if Víctor was an ecofeminist and if so, where he learned such progressive ideas as a young male whose home tended to encourage highly neoliberal and patriarchal modes of thinking (to be touched upon soon). Unsurprisingly, Brieva confirmed that Víctor is in fact an ecofeminist. Interestingly, though, he informed me that Víctor did not have to learn his progressive ways; it was merely his innate sensibility. That inner sensibility is what sparks his discontentment with many subjects in the book, not just work. His ecofeminist ‘essence’ equips him to intuit the erroneous ways of engaging with humans and nonhumans across subjects, spaces, spheres, etc.

Víctor's dissatisfaction with and deconstruction of patriarchal modes of environmental engagement encapsulates ecofeminist thought well. Ecofeminism, states Political ecologist Christelle Terreblanche, in fact, is all about making diverse connections, like Víctor does. She defines ecofeminism as the "historical, material, and ideological connections between the subjugation of women and the domination of nature" (163). In essence, this definition in practice means that ecofeminism is about firstly recognizing the interconnections between the subjugation of women and nature as a mode of thinking and a model of behavior. Then that mode of thinking is exposed across spheres and domains as a means to deconstructing patriarchal systems whose practices dominate and exploit women, nature, and society all together. In doing so, these practices promote the "revival of ancient wisdom on the interconnectedness of 'all life'" (164).

Because of ecofeminism's wide reach to "all life", consequently, scholars of various fields are applying its wisdom to their subspecialities' investigative spheres of life. For example, Spanish ecofeminists Amaia Perez Orozco and Alicia Puleo apply ecofeminism to life in the economic sphere. Orozco's work specifically aims to review the economy's exclusive "criterios del mercado" and to realign them with "criterios de justicia" (22). As outlined in this dissertation's introduction, her ecofeminist ideas help to imagine ways of expanding the meaning of neoliberal work to include activities that transcend the exclusivity of neoliberal wage labor that often leaves many informal, unpaid labors invisible and/or undervalued (as analyzed extensively in Chapter One). Not to mention, broadening the scope of neoliberal work would likely ignite changes on a grander socio-economic scale, too, which would foster wide-reaching possibilities — and hope — for a more ethical, equitable, and sustainable future. Puleo's words help to explain how and why that is:

la crítica feminista tiene mucho que aportar a una cultura ecológica de la igualdad...Es hora de ecofeminismo para que otro mundo sea posible, un mundo que no esté basado en la explotación y la opresión. Esta sociedad del futuro se vislumbra ya en la lucha contra todas las dominaciones, las antiguas y las nuevas, las de los antiguos patriarcados de coerción y las del patriarcado de consentimiento que impone sus mandatos en la desmesura neoliberal. Transformar el modelo androcéntrico de desarrollo, conquista y explotación destructivos implica tanto asumir una mirada empática sobre la Naturaleza como un análisis crítico de las relaciones de poder. (15 – 16)

Víctor employs a similar transformative, reflective, ecofeminist-like “mirada empática” upon many diverse relations and issues throughout the graphic novel. Readers see him viscerally repelled from and saddened by relations of domination, power, and patriarchy. Conversely, he is attracted to and intrigued by alternative methods of engagement, particularly those that subvert hegemonic modes of thinking and employ more egalitarian and/or ecological ways of interacting with nature and work.

Víctor’s ecofeminist “mirada empática” towards nature and work can be clearly seen via his curious relationship with a young woman named Pepa, whose unusual approach to nature and work inspires him to introspect and to deconstruct his own perceptions about work. Pepa lives and “works” with her father on the outskirts of the city — and on the outskirts of neoliberal work (hence why “works” is in quotation marks); meaning, they do not participate in the formal, remunerated labor market (They work “peripherally” in the sense deployed in Chapter One). Initially, Víctor’s remarks that “ninguno de los dos trabaja”, and that they “sobreviven por su cuenta” (viernes 6 n.p.). His words reflect his own internalized neoliberal binary beliefs about nature (nature as something separate ‘out there’ in the wilderness and society as something ‘right

here'⁷⁸) and work (Paid work/unpaid work = real work / non work⁷⁹). However, Víctor's "mirada empática" quickly undermines these internalized binaries. He observes Pepa and her father working, almost like an apprentice would, taking note of their alternative, ecologically honoring ways to conceive and to enact the concept of work. In this way, this observational relationship functions in a literary foil capacity, helping him (and readers!) to reconnect nature with work, thus honoring the ecofeminist postulation that all life is interconnected.

A close reading of one scene reveals Víctor's ecofeminist "mirada empática" and how it subverts neoliberal work norms⁸⁰. Take the moment where Víctor runs into Pepa at the park. He finds her studying the "work" of ants, creatures whose existence is often culturally characterized by constant, busy work. Pepa, though, discovers that this is a misconception, which has tremendous deconstructive implications for her own understanding of what constitutes the concept of "work". She exclaims to Víctor, who listens carefully:

resulta que el 70% de su tiempo las hormigas no hacen nada... ¡nada de nada, tío! ... !?
 ¡¿Te das cuenta de las tremendas implicaciones que tiene este descubrimiento?! ... Toda la vida poniendo a las hormigas como ejemplo paradigmático del trabajo incansable... ¡Y va y resulta que las tías tienen la jornada laboral de 7 horas desde ni se sabe cuándo! Y eso sin contar con que no tenemos ni idea de qué hacen en verdad ese 30% de tiempo que supuestamente están currando... ¡Lo mismo andan de paseo o de cháchara entre ellas! ¡A saber! (viernes 6 n.p.)

As this quote demonstrates, Pepa realizes that the way ants work (specifically how much they rest) shows that the late-phase capitalist way of working (8 hours+ a day where primarily left-brained activities are justifiable) is not supported by nature's wisdom. For her, this discovery is a "calado

⁷⁸ Víctor's characterizations of Pepa and her father being out on their own because they do not participate in the mainstream economy reflects neoliberally influenced thoughts that lead humans to view Nature and Society as separate spheres. He is effectively enacting upon them an "illusory sense of independence from nature" (Plumwood foreword).

⁷⁹ Patel and Moore make this equation in their book, *The History of the World in Seven Cheap Things* (2017). See Chapter One for more details.

⁸⁰ This phrasing is inspired by Orozco's book title, *Subversión feminista de la economía* (2014)

enorme” with “tremendas implicaciones” (viernes 6 n.p.). If not even ants work all the time, a species that is culturally and scientifically known for being busy working beings, then she thinks that maybe humans should adjust their work rhythms, too. Doing so would more appropriately align work with the way nature works and less in line with the exploitative way neoliberalism works. For Pepa, human work should be directly relational to how nature works, no matter the epistemic norms. The images illustrating this scene are framed closely and intimately around Pepa and the ants, giving the visual impression that Víctor is paying close and careful attention to the interconnectedness between humans (Pepa), nonhumans (ants), and work. Corroborating this inference is this conversation’s ending: Pepa is biking Víctor away, physically from the park but also cognitively away from neoliberal approaches to work. He reflects back, “Hoy he aprendido unas cuantas cosas gracias... a ella” (viernes 6 n.p.).

This scene exemplifies how ecofeminist perspectives are foundational in Pepa’s holistic understanding of work and thus subsequently instrumental in Víctor’s progressive reckoning with neoliberal work. Take, for one, how Pepa is pictured as an outlandish character; and she certainly is outlandish when compared to the neoliberal society. Yet, her ecological/economic approach to work aligns with current environmental research and public discussions, making her outlandishness a subversive character trait in ways, fulfilling Brieva’s aim to subvert that which we consider normal. For instance, her scientific observation of nature (how much ants work and rest) and her willingness to learn from them to correct human issues (a disequilibrium between work and rest) connects to what some may consider a subfield of ecofeminism: biomimesis, or the study of nature with the hopes of ecologically improving human behavior and organization in the multispecies ecology (definition inspired by Riechmann’s ideas, parsed out below).

The somewhat polysemic term, biomimesis, (sometimes used interchangeably with biomimetics and biomimicry) derives from earlier conceptualizations, problematizations, and eventual amplifications from over the years. Initially, science writer Janine Benyus first popularized the emerging bio-engineering discipline of bionics as “biomimicry” in her 1997 book: *Biomimicry: Innovation inspired by nature*. As the subtitle implies, she introduced biomimicry from a more technological lens. She conceived it as the taking of inspiration from nature and emulating its design to technologically engineer more sustainable products and practices into human systems (2). She writes about “manufacturing the way animals and plants do”, “using sun and simple compounds to produce”, and “self-fertilizing and pest resistant” farms (2). Benyus’ definition positively portrays biomimicry as a path towards “radical re-ontologization and re-politicization of production” (Johnson and Goldstein 1).

Though it is easy to read well-intended ecological interventions in her work, it is also not hard to see capitalism being wrapped up in new ecological packaging, either. Human-environmental geographer Elizabeth R. Johnson and sociologist Jesse Goldstein caution against the absolute approbation of biomimicry, what they refer to as biomimetics (1). In their article, “Biomimetic Futures: Life, death and the enclosure of the more-than-human-intellect” (2018), the co-authors caution of biomimicry’s potential downfalls: techno-optimism and greenwashing capitalism. Ecological innovations, no matter how ingenious, they argue, do not address capitalism’s unsustainable logic of infinite progress; rather, they can renew, reinvigorate and even accelerate incessant industrial production (3). To this point, if one looks at Benyus’ chapter titles linguistically, (ex: “How Will We Feed Ourselves?” ; “How Will We Harness Energy?”; “How Will We Make Things”; “How Will We Conduct Business?”, etc.), they are, in fact, syntactically,

anthropocentric questions that theorize how humans can capitalize — and even possess—nature’s systems more efficiently, productively, and powerfully⁸¹.

Johnson and Goldstein further problematize Benyus’ conceptualization of biomimicry by noting that this type of production-based technological innovations is marketed beneath the more ecologically-friendly, and thus, vendible label of ‘biomimicry’. In such a commodified form, they argue that biomimicry “reduces, channels, and flattens a more-than-human ‘pluripotent intellect’ into a general intellect focused on commercial and industrial advance” (4). To them, this greenwashing is an insidious continuation of capitalist-centered thinking that dominates alternate, diverse ways of knowledge and existence: “This follows in the wake of earlier (and ongoing) forms of colonial conquest that have entailed the erasure of local knowledges, ontologies, and sciences, all lost in the pursuit of a generally industrious, universally rational mode of (profitable) progress” (4). In sum, Johnson and Goldstein provide salient critique to biomimicry. They outline how its practices can still be subject to the social and economic relations of capitalism that transform parts of nature into profitable usages and leaves the rest “left to waste” (1). This is certainly not Pepa’s employment of the term.

Jorge Riechmann, whose ecological poetry was beforementioned, expanded the term of biomimesis in his 2006 titular book, and his amplification of the term more closely aligns with Pepa’s methodological and philosophical approach to studying ants and work in the graphic novel. From a definition standpoint, Riechmann takes the term biomimesis “en un sentido más amplio”, seeing it as an overarching “idea sociológica y económica” that seeks to reorient human behavior

⁸¹ Despite this critique, it is important to point out that Benyus’ work is not absolutely problematic. In fact, she explicitly states that she desires for biomimicry to engage in a “respectful imitation” of nature. She writes, “unlike the Industrial Revolution, the Biomimicry Revolution introduces an era based on not what we can *extract* from nature, but on what we can *learn* from her” (2).

into “una relación más cooperativa— y menos dominadora — con la naturaleza” (194 – 201). With such a wide-reaching interpretation, biomimesis evolves into an ecological philosophy, perspective, and political mindset, applicable to many fields — not only human technological innovation. In fact, he says, the objective of such a “mirada ecológica” is antithetical to the unsustainable trajectory of capitalist production. Instead, biomimesis seeks to undermine that logic. It desires to “Reconstruir los sistemas humanos imitando rasgos básicos de los sistemas naturales es la única manera de salir de la antinomia entre preservación y desarrollo...perseguirá un verdadero *ecodesarrollo* en todo el territorio...” (209). Remnant of Kimmerer’s words that humans are limited to their own biological-knowing capacities, Riechmann also believes biomimesis marks the “hora de prestar atención a lo que ella (*nature*) sabe hacer mejor que nosotros” (209 parenthesis, mine).

Riechmann’s interpretation of biomimesis reflects more closely the way that Pepa seeks to emulate “rasgos básicos de los sistemas naturales” to reorient human behavior at work, specifically seeking to improve their unhealthy temporal relationship between work and rest. While Pepa may be culturally “behind” per say (approaching work in a more precapitalist way), she is scientifically and publicly on par for criticizing the culturally dominate belief and practice “del trabajo incansable”, or non-stop work, that deteriorates humans and the biosphere (viernes 6 n.p.).

Riechmann questions the problematic norm of “trabajo incansable”: the way capitalism unnaturally approaches and ‘utilizes’ time. In his co-authored essay *Tiempo para la vida: la crisis ecológica en su dimensión temporal* (2004), he explains that capitalism does not employ the rhythms of nature that once guided all activities on earth; instead, capitalism has taken over, accelerated, and effectively eradicated the once-biologically-oriented concept of “time”. The result is “La falta de tiempo (por el culto a la velocidad, la aceleración de los ritmos, la

compartimentación de la vida cotidiana, la dilatación de los trayectos que se recorren cada día en las aglomeraciones urbanas, la centralidad del trabajo asalariado y de un ocio mercantilizado, etc.)” that he sees as an “enfermedad cultural” (n.p.). Not merely a metaphorical description, Riechmann concludes, like Pepa and her study of the way ants spend their time, that humans direly need to reorient their rhythms to reflect nature for their own well-being too:

El tiempo circular de los astros ha de acomodarse de alguna forma con el tiempo lineal de la historia. Y tanto los cronobiólogos como los médicos del trabajo saben bien que si no acertamos en esa conjugación, si contrariamos en exceso los biorritmos naturales de nuestro organismo, las consecuencias pueden ser muy negativas. (n.p.)

In addition to Riechmann’s scholarship, public spheres are constantly discussing and debating the “falta de tiempo”, or more specifically the cultural dominance of “el trabajo incansable”, too. As discussed in this dissertation’s introduction, in his book *No tengo tiempo* (2018) writer, sociologist, and political scientist Jorge Moruno declares that the problem with work and time is that “el tiempo vital se convierte en tiempo de trabajo disponible para el capital... Tiempo que no se tiene porque el trabajo se come a la vida, y la vida cotidiana queda subsumida bajo el mercado” (n.p.). Under capitalism, time is a measure of capital-based productivity instead of a reflection of biological functions and circadian rhythms that respond to the changing natural environment. The result is an incessant work culture, because work is time and time is work: “el trabajo se come a la vida”.

Like Moruno, public discussions and recent legislature are also concerned with and challenging “el trabajo incansable”. A plethora of articles, unions, and businesses similarly contemplate, study, and experiment the possibility of reducing the number of work week hours to recuperate the idea of rest as an essential component of functional work. Under this umbrella, Spain recently passed the “Right to Disconnect” law under article 88 of its Data Protection Act

(Ley Orgánica de Protección de Datos y de Garantía de Derechos Digitales) which supports the growing desire to recuperate rest. The law guarantees an employee's right to disconnect digital work devices during off hours with the aim to respect and to protect employees' rest, personal, and family time ([119838](#)).⁸² As Pepa concludes in *LQMP*, the fight against “el trabajo incansable,” as seen in these public examples as well, is directly related to an ecological reconfiguration of the relationship between time/capitalism, rest/work and humans/nonhumans. Víctor has picked up on this as well. His cycling away from the scene can be read as a metaphorical representation of a directional, energetic, and philosophical turn away from neoliberal work.

To recap this section and its implications on work, Pepa and her father work outside the confines of neoliberal work. They work on their own land, and they do not engage in waged, formal, neoliberal work. Their understanding of work also surpasses neoliberal cognitive confines. Pepa studies nature's work in order to better understand the way she believes humans should be working (discussed through biomimesis). She views the human and nonhuman as inextricably interconnected, and honoring that interconnection, means learning from Other beings to expand work beyond exclusively Western and patriarchal market-based criteria (discussed through ecofeminism). It also embodies ecological intelligences that are relationally bound, defying the

⁸² Article 88 states: “1. Los trabajadores y los empleados públicos tendrán derecho a la desconexión digital a fin de garantizar, fuera del tiempo de trabajo legal o convencionalmente establecido, el respeto de su tiempo de descanso, permisos y vacaciones, así como de su intimidad personal y familiar. 2. Las modalidades de ejercicio de este derecho atenderán a la naturaleza y objeto de la relación laboral, potenciarán el derecho a la conciliación de la actividad laboral y la vida personal y familiar y se sujetarán a lo establecido en la negociación colectiva o, en su defecto, a lo acordado entre la empresa y los representantes de los trabajadores. 3. El empleador, previa audiencia de los representantes de los trabajadores, elaborará una política interna dirigida a trabajadores, incluidos los que ocupen puestos directivos, en la que definirán las modalidades de ejercicio del derecho a la desconexión y las acciones de formación y de sensibilización del personal sobre un uso razonable de las herramientas tecnológicas que evite el riesgo de fatiga informática. En particular, se preservará el derecho a la desconexión digital en los supuestos de realización total o parcial del trabajo a distancia, así como en el domicilio del empleado vinculado al uso con fines laborales de herramientas tecnológicas.”

financially isolating norms of neoliberalism. With connections to environment research and current discussion in public parlance, Pepa's approach to work allows Víctor — and Brieva's readership/viewership — a reflective opportunity to conceptualize more ethical and sustainable engagements with the economic and ecological spheres. Though at first when Víctor had observed Pepa and her father's activities he declared that “ninguno de los dos trabaja” (viernes 6 n.p.), it is important to remember that he ultimately bikes away in a state of reflection.

The next section of this chapter will show how Víctor goes from reflecting and deconstructing work to recalibrating it. Ultimately, readers see him reject lonely work and reorient it to what I will call “multispecies work” — a form of work that is relationally bound to the multispecies collective in hopes of promoting healthier ecological relationships and economic flourishing in a broader, less exclusively Western and exceptionally capitalist sense.

Conclusion: From lonely work to multispecies work

The graphic novel's labor lesson culminates in both the ending of *LQMP* and Víctor's complete (d)evolution of the concept of neoliberal work. This is achieved through a confrontation of patriarchal characters and speciesist norms that antagonize — and subjugate in ways — Víctor and his opportunities to work. For one, in contrast to his receptiveness to ecofeminism, it is worthwhile to point out that Víctor often experiences negative emotions, particularly species loneliness, when encountering powerful men and their androcentric/patriarchal beliefs and practices that keep nature and work at hierarchical odds. In chronological appearance, first there was the unemployment officer, whose appearance and job metonymically represents the limited labor market under neoliberalism and austerity. He informs Víctor that there is an “escasa demanda” for geologists these days: “Lo lamento. No da el perfil” (miércoles 27 n.p.). Then, there

is Víctor's father, whose internalized neoliberal metanarratives invalidate Víctor's discontentment with his "bullshit jobs" provided by the unemployment officer:

¿Lo veis? Las cosas ya se están arreglando. ¡Ya estáis los dos trabajando! Esta gente sabe lo que se hace / ¡Los jóvenes siempre os estáis quejando! / La economía tiene sus propias leyes y hay que aprender a respetarlas... O ¿Qué es lo que queréis? ¿Qué regresemos al comunismo...? O peor aún: ¿A las cavernas? (viernes 29 n.p.)

And finally, there is the metonymic "Businessman" of the fictitious company Multicorp, whose encounter triggers the climax tension of *LQMP* and its subsequent falling action. I am interested in taking a closer look at how these interactions lead to Víctor's newfound understanding of a concept of work that works in harmony with Others, in particular nature.

The story goes that Businessman plans to gentrify Víctor's neighborhood by developing a local park and tearing down local housing. Víctor feels his ecological sensibilities should be considered in the cost-benefit analyses of such a socially and ecologically devastating park project. So, he visits Businessman. Víctor attempts to explain the inherent value of the neighborhood in terms of nature, human life, and cultural vibrancy. He pleads that the quantity of suffering will be "tan palpable como la palma de su mano" should the Businessman's work proceed (viernes 13 n.p.). But just as Val Plumwood posits in her book *The Environmental Culture: the ecological crisis of reason*, Businessman cannot comprehend non-economic approaches to value (28)⁸³. Accordingly, Businessman in *LQMP* counters, "Supongo que tendrá algo extraordinariamente

⁸³ Plumwood writes: The rules of capitalist economics have beautified a contractual, privileged and rationally "autonomous" master subject, recently identified as a businessman, and I've also universalized certain related exclusions. Businessman looks at cost and benefits from a very limited angle, considering only his own firm and what could be monetized, leaving out the rest of society and leaving out the externalities. The hegemonic concept of property give rise to a common pattern or logic of oppression or exploitation which includes the hegemonic conception of agency that denies or background the contributions of subordinated others and re-present the joint product in terms of agency of the master subject (28).

valioso que ofrecerme a cambio... ¿me equivoco?”. Víctor rebuttals, “No, es algo de un valor incalculable... al menos para mí” (viernes 13 n.p.).

Interestingly but unsurprisingly, like this scene exemplifies, none of the patriarchal men with whom Víctor speaks about work ever bring up nature. For them and those in charge, work is treated as separate and superior to nature, even though the interplay between the economy and nature is a widely accepted fact. In the graphic novel, the meeting with Businessman is Víctor’s last civil arbitration with androcentric, corporate capitalism. It resolves nothing and only furthers the depths of his species loneliness experience, as seen in his reaction: Víctor goes to the top of a hill to look out on the park, which is already in the process of being demolished to fit Businessman’s plans. “El parque arrasado...Nuestro barrio condenado a la destrucción.... Y todos mis amigos detenidos... ¡Todos!”, Víctor bemoans while staring off at the last barren tree remaining in the park (martes 17 n.p.). He feels alone, useless, and unsure of how to put himself to work again:

Permanecía horas allí, encaramado en el montículo, completamente abatido e incapaz de asimilar tanta injusticia, tanto despropósito, tanta estupidez. Incapaz de reacción alguna que no fuese estar allí sumido en los pensamientos más sombríos. (martes 17 n.p.)

This diary entry of the encounter with Businessman ends in a full-page panel of what appears to be coral, identified as “Frustracita común” (see figure 19). For geological context, coral consists of thousands of tiny living animals called polyps. These polyps, which are illustrated via the bubbles on the rock’s surface, depend on an intricate interdependency with plant cells (tiny algae called zooxanthellae) that live within the polyps. The polyps offer the cells a home in exchange for them sharing food that they generate through photosynthesis. Essentially, the polyps and the plants work together in a symbiotic relationship to foster a safe and nourished home.



Fig. 19. A coral rock reminds Víctor to engage respectfully with the multispecies world, beyond the neoliberal law of the land (martes 17 n.p.).

The coral's multispecies existence, in combination with the Bob Dylan quote, usher Víctor to leave behind parasitic relationships, such as individual exceptionalism that threatens and depletes home. These harmful relationships lay the dominant economic law of the land, as reflected in the exchange with Businessman who intends to gentrify the community and land for his own profit. The coral urges Víctor to not live within this law but rather to pursue more honorable ways of working and engaging with society, "Para vivir fuera de la ley, tienes que ser honrado" (martes 17 n.p.) The rock's taxonomical denomination "frustracita común" reminds Víctor that his feelings are shared and can be remedied by renewed engagement with the grander multispecies collective.

The rock inspires the book's — and Víctor's — resolution. Víctor spends the remainder of the novel working alongside others to defeat (the lack of) neoliberal environmental reason that disenfranchised him from work and propagated his species loneliness. The story wraps up through several rapid, frenetic sequences: a battle in a plaza mimicking 15-M where unemployed and

underemployed citizens revolted against austerity measures, an apocalyptic outburst where tree roots and other Earth beings fight alongside Víctor, and an odd moment where Victor plays a flute amidst the social storm engulfing him. I cannot attempt to make sense of these vignettes individually. In our interview, even Brieva told me it's not clear to him, either (Personal Interview 49:11). The only thing that is certain is that Víctor joined up with a multispecies collective — the roots, the people — to fight his participation in the individualist, anthropocentric, speciesist economy. The chaos is interpolated by the following two still images:



Fig. 20. The Big Bang-esque image even looks to sound quiet, an interesting employment of synesthesia by Brieva (miércoles 18 n.p.).



Fig. 21. The world, broken (miércoles 18 n.p.).

At the beginning of his epistolary entries, readers see Víctor repeatedly and negatively describe his work with the word “nada”, effectively constructing a new semantic ecosystem through which the limited meaning of work is spread. It symbolized purposelessness (“Ahora que ya no hago nada” – lunes 2) and disconnection (“Hoy no he hecho nada más que estar tirado [en casa]” – miércoles 27), hopelessness (“Lo siento, no he podido escribir nada hasta ahora... que no cabe ya mucha esperanza de despertar” – viernes 13) and frustration (“no hacer nada de nada no es cosa fácil” — miércoles 27 / “Con Milagros no he sacado nada en claro, como ya viene siendo habitual” - martes 10). “Nada”, i.e., unemployment, instigated a wide spectrum of feelings of species loneliness. Brieva contextualized to me the reasoning behind Víctor’s emotional crisis around the idea of “nada”: “No está haciendo nada en el contexto de la sociedad”; Brieva explained further, “Víctor al principio está en crisis, porque está dentro de la sociedad, está creyendo en la sociedad. Pero, dentro de la sociedad es un fracasado” (Personal interview 42:25).



12. Varios jóvenes duermen al lado de la entrada de Metro de Sol.

—
ISAAC F. CALVO

Fig. 22. *El País* captures the limited expression of work in post-2008 Spain in the following image that displays the cartel “... Y el odio que ‘el trabajo’ beneath unemployed youth (Calvo n.p.).

But as Víctor’s journey leads him away from the neoliberal society, Víctor rejects these conditions of *lonely work* that had been persisting the individualist culture of late-phase capitalism. He deliberately chooses to team up with other “jóvenes emperdedores” (those that fought in the plaza with him) and nonhumans (plants, rocks, ghosts). After this, he writes “nada” again, but this time, he invigorates it with positive energy: “Hoy ya no tengo nada que perder” (lunes 16 n.p.). He even explains the celestial vignette seen above in figure 20 using the word “nada” again, “Y, después de eso, nada...”, signifying the birthing of a new world of order, much like cosmological theories of primordial times where out of nothing began everything. In this sense, Víctor appears to be imagining a whole new world of work. The very next panel, figure 21, shows what appears to be a broken planet, suggests that to begin again, Víctor must break anew from where the androcentric, individualist culture of capitalism and its hold over work no longer exists — much like the previously discussed conclusion to *Memorias de la Tierra* in which Zuth leaves readers with radical, poetic instructions on how to inhabit the world: humans must recognize, respect and

marvel at their infinitesimal part in the universe should they desire to keep the delicate balance in tact (see figure 13).

This interpretation of figures 20 and 21 makes me think of renowned philosopher Bruno Latour's Gifford Lecture titled "The Anthropocene and the Destruction of the Image of the Globe". In it, he rhetorically argues for the breaking of humanity's world image, too, just like Brieva's images suggest. Latour argues that in the current environmental crisis, a new image of the earth is needed, one that recognizes... that humans are always implicated in the creation of the worldview (n.p.). To create a new world, Latour says humans must imagine one, a "new cosmology," as Latour calls it in his performative lecture titled "Inside" ([26:51](#)). Just like in Latour's proposal, Víctor does appear to be imagining a new cosmology, one that considers together labor consciousness and the ecological crisis.

Abruptly, the graphic novel ends with this final vignette seen below (see figure 23). Readers see that Víctor has repositioned himself within a multispecies collective to overcome his species loneliness. The harmonic vignette shows him coexisting with turtles, fish, humans, rocks, and seashells singing together under the sea. For the first time since playing "Detective de los estratos", Víctor is pictured in the same frame *with* his reciprocal pair, rocks. The vignette emblemizes the beginnings of a new imaginative era being born at the start of the 21st century, one that has successfully protested and subverted the norms of neoliberal approaches to work, crossing ideological barriers by profoundly altering the worker's orientation of the self in intimate proximity to the environment.

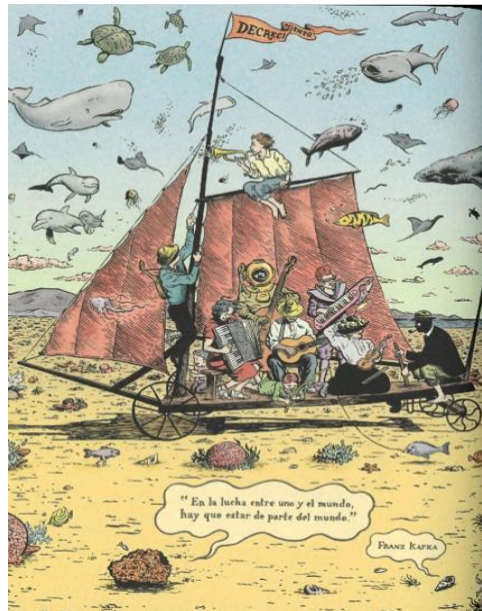


Fig. 23. Víctor inhabits his new cosmology ending his long struggle with species loneliness and employment, “En la lucha entre uno y el mundo, hay que estar de parte del mundo” (miércoles 18 n.p.).

This final vignette surprised me. Given that Víctor’s primary source of strife throughout the book explicitly dealt with work, why was it that this vignette seemingly had “nada” to do with work at all? I turned to Brieva and asked him: was this vignette purely metaphorical? Was it meant to apply to Víctor’s philosophy of work? If so, what how did it change his concept of work? Brieva enlightened me. When Víctor overcame his species loneliness, he also overcame his understanding of work. Under capitalism, work is “nada que vale la pena” but under a multispecies existence, work conceptually subverts to “nada que tiene que ver con el capitalismo” (Personal Interview).

Intrigued, this caused me to wonder about Víctor now. Was he working outside of the confines of capitalism with his expanded understanding of work? Was he a part of an alternative economy in Spain flying under their own proverbial flag of “decrecimiento” too? Brieva was not certain, but what he did say illuminated several possibilities for work not only for Víctor but for possibly readers as well:

Lo que sí está claro es que Víctor ya está en otro sitio. Víctor ahora ya tiene una comunidad, tiene unos valores más claros, y sabe interpretar lo que quiere y lo que no quiere de la realidad, lo que es real y lo que no lo es ... sobre todo, ahora pertenece al colectivo. (49:16 - 49:40)

Now the color that returned to the final page of his diary makes more sense. Víctor has reframed his “web of life” by working “por parte del mundo” (Moore 13 – 14, Brieva miércoles 18 n.p.). He has officially transitioned from *lonely work* to what I think of as *multispecies work*: a form of activity, both remunerated and nonremunerated, that is relationally bound to Others. It respectfully engages with nature and beings, both human and nonhuman, considering and balancing costs across ecological, economic, emotional, and social spheres. Reorienting himself within this grander network of beings and activities remedies Víctor’s species loneliness inherent to lonely work and also promotes healthier ecological relationships and a wider enactment of economic flourishing.

Luis Prádanos’ explanations on Spanish Environmental Cultural Studies saliently aids in contextualizing the critical messaging surrounding *LQMP*’s transition from *lonely work* to *multispecies work*. In the introduction to the companion, Prádanos writes that Spanish environmental cultural studies recognizes that the current socio-economic and ecological crises stem from a singular ““crisis of perception”” (3). For instance, while reports around global ecological decline are numerous, they rarely visibilize the dominant, life-depleting “cultural narratives, power relations, and historical dynamics that are behind those ecological declines” (2). Spanish Environmental Cultural Studies intervenes into this crisis of perception by reading cultural products in a way that sheds light onto the toxic cultural narratives, perspectives, and philosophies that are messily undergirding the failing institutions and infrastructures of the capital-accumulation-obsessed society. That gained ecological conscientiousness then reorients these destructive perspectives towards a more constructive “future-oriented critical gaze” (3, citing

Beilin and Ares-López). *LQMP*, in its textual and visual content and the theoretical analysis applied to reading both throughout this chapter, has served in both of these principal Spanish Environmental Cultural Studies aims. Looking at the graphic novel through the radical lens of indigenous philosophies has, firstly, exposed the naturalized and normalized growth-oriented, patriarchal, androcentric, extractivist, exclusionary, and exceptionalist perspectives and cultural paradigms that have wielded Víctor's economic and emotional states intolerable and uninhabitable, both presently and in the future. Secondly, the ecological subversion of those perspectives and paradigms has indeed offered forth desirable visions for the future of work. Just as Brieva had explicitly aimed to do, Prádanos writes of the importance of paying attention to these eco-narratives: "We have to change not only our institutions and infrastructures, but also the stories we live by, the metaphors and framings we use to make sense of our realities and act upon them" (3). In nearly synchronicitous spirit, Brieva concludes *LQMP* by quoting, "En la lucha entre uno y el mundo, hay que estar (trabajar) de parte del mundo" (n.p., final parenthetical addition, mine).



Fig. 21. A zoomed in partial shot of the final vignette where the coral speaks to him again, corroborating his exit of capitalism (miércoles 18 n.p.).

CONCLUSION

Texas vs. Galicia

I came of a working age within the outer wake of the 2008 financial crash. Like many around me, I was peripatetically juggling several jobs at once, all for under \$10/hour. I could barely make my rent— a modest shared apartment occasionally infested with water bugs (giant, flying cockroaches) — let alone afford to fill my car with gas to drive from one job to the next. Walking was not an option in my Big Oil state, nor were there any turnstiles to skip to save money like Uxbal of *Biutiful* had done. Work was exhausting. I was exhausted. Not to mention, I was often alone and frequently sick, even though I was youthful, surrounded by other city-goers, and in general, healthy. This was the workscape I came to know — and to resent — as a young adult.

Yet, as I was running myself into the ground working and/or looking for more work, a discordant conversation continued to invalidate my efforts and stop me in my tracks: it was being said that workers today were entitled and lazy; they did not want to work; they needed to pay their dues before expecting good wages; workers struggle because they waste their money on frivolities; if they worked harder and more passionately it would all work out in the end, etc. Yet, nothing was working out for me. My financial situation became so dire — my electricity was cut off — that I begged my parents to let me move back home. My dad, a former military fighter pilot gone commercial, reminded me that no one helped him back in the day, and he had made it. He had even supported six kids on his sole salary, too. The cacophony of words from him and others around me scratched at my ears like nails on a chalk board. They sounded eerily like the song Víctor's dad had sung in *Lo que me está pasando*: the older generation was inculcating

millennials for their working conditions instead of blaming crisis-ridden capitalism for worsening those very working conditions.

Fortunately, before this cultural narrative could settle in my mind as truth, I graduated and secured my first teaching job in Galicia, Spain. I was bright-eyed and bushy tailed. I wanted to be a professor. I hoped working abroad would improve my Spanish language skills and make my CV more competitive to procure better work opportunities upon my return home.

Once abroad, I encountered both a familiar *and* an unfamiliar workscape. Like the US, workers in Spain were also struggling with post-2008 economic conditions. That I expected. Unlike the US, though, the national narrative (at least from the working class around me) did not negate those struggles. None of my peers were blaming other workers for their low wages. None were stultifying workers' complaints by suggesting they manage their money better. Conversely, some even asked me why Americans were content to work themselves to an impecunious death. Antithetical to what I had heard in the US, this song played more concordantly and mellifluously to my ears: workers were blaming the system and not the workers. This I did not expect.

It was within this cultural and economic environment that I worked as a *funcionaria* from 2012-2013 in IES As Bizocas, a public school in O Grove, Pontevedra; and during my tenure here, I stayed true to my linguistic goals. In fact, I learned the word “*huelga*” in Spanish many times over. In reality, though, I was mostly learning its meaning in my native tongue. At least five or six times over the course of the year, I went on strike with my co-teachers and my students. Together, we protested working and learning conditions in their education system. Though my colleagues' paychecks were cut 3.3% with each strike — for not teaching in nearly student-less classrooms —, they remained vociferous with their signs and steam⁸⁴. Their

⁸⁴ Depending on the news source in Spain, there were either no protestors (described as una “[delgada huelga de aulas gallegas](#)”) or “[miles](#)”. My school was nearly vacant on *huelga* days. Interestingly, articles

collective combativeness was both foreign and intriguing. To me, they seemed somewhere between enlightened and enraged. It turns out they were what I would eventually come to know as *indignados*. And strangely, I think I was beginning to become so, too.

In addition to *hacer huelgas*, there were several other unlearning moments peppered in throughout my time in O Grove that impacted my understanding of work. Many were economical or linguistic, but others were environmental or social. For instance, IES Bizocas was located directly across from a remote beach. On more than one occasion while teaching I glimpsed a pod of dolphins frolicking in the water through the classroom window. It was serene. *Was that a HUNDRED dolphins?* I had never worked in such proximity to nature, having only been employed within a massive metroplex (where all the “good” jobs were located!). During *la comida*, a few teachers and I would head to the beach to surf. Once while bobbing on my board, my legs got tangled in plastic grocery bags. The other instructor I was with was so enraged that he made us retire our surfboards and spend the entire rest of the break cleaning up the beach. The whole time we were picking up trash, he furiously muttered about capitalism ruining the earth. As a born and raised tribalist-like Texan, I should have shaken my head in defense of our beloved capitalism: *what blasphemy! All hail capitalism!* Instead, I found myself nodding in silent agreement as I scooped up another discarded wrapper from the sand.

O Grove was incredibly remote. So, I chose to live in the nearby city of Pontevedra and would carpool an hour into work with another instructor. Cars were highly discouraged by city design, so every morning I walked to the edge of town to await by the *Ponte do Burgo* bridge where this teacher would pick me up. During these bucolic car rides she frequently talked to me

framed high teacher participation rates as “[solo 43%](#)”. This was another point of inflection. As an American where striking was largely illegal a 43% participation rate framed as meager compounded my culture shock. It demanded me to recalibrate ideas around normal economic behavior.

about the status of the economy, often chiding recent austerity measures. She drove and bantered and complained; I sipped my coffee, listened (“why did Americans always take their coffee to go?” she once interjected into my silence, perplexed) and looked hypnotically out the window at the ultramarine water refracting back at me (I had only ever lived near man-made, dark green, often stagnant, amoebae-infested lakes).

Once, this teacher complained about her decreasing income due to public expenditure cuts. I, still an out-of-sorts Texan, inquired (rudely) about what her income tax rate was. I suppose I was reflexively insinuating her financial woes were the fault of her country’s inflated social spending. I had grown up hearing the ostensibly “fiscally conservative” platform that posited social welfare programs were “far from free”, “unsustainable” and not to be coveted; socialist countries “take all your money” via taxes, sentencing both you and the state to poverty. Rather than answer my uncouth question, she instead methodically paused. After a few seconds of discomfort (mostly for me), she began to graciously talk about fortune and misfortune: She was lucky. She was employed and healthy, *¿lo sabes?*, she emphasized, wide-eyed, while puffing a cloud of cigarette smoke out her cracked window. I held in my breath, held back a cough, and buried down into my coat. She continued. She was happy to give a portion of her money back to others. She wanted the unlucky to be taken care of during their time of unemployment or illness; it was not their fault they were suffering from misfortune. It could be *a-n-y-o-n-e*, she had said soberly, stretching out her last words, *c-u-a-l-q-u-i-e-r persona, Racheliña*. I stopped holding my breath. It was the very first time I had ever heard taxes taught from the human dimension instead of the numerical. She had driven me across a bridge, indeed.

I have replayed this conversation in my head throughout my life ever since: while seeing a doctor in Spain and not receiving a bill, while seeing a doctor in Texas and receiving a large bill, while listening to my co-worker in a Texas high school openly and confidently bash socialism only to hear her shamefully admit in private a few months later than she had applied for unemployment benefits. Her husband had been fired, and they had just bought their first home together— a home that happened to be at the top of their, formerly and now non-existent, combined budget. They were hardworking people, she swore. They were just unlucky, she had supplicated, her chagrin notable. I agreed with her. She really was unlucky. I replied to her that I hoped part of my taxes were going to her family directly during their time of misfortune. She did not reply, but I thought I saw her embarrassment waver, if only a little.

Unbeknownst to me, pivotal moments like these— that all took place either at work or about work — were instilling a new economic, social, and environmental sensibility into my concept of work. It was with this newfound sensibility (and/or skepticism of late-phase capitalist approaches to work) in tow that I began to pursue a higher degree in Spanish Culture and Literature in the US. I was still chasing my professional aspiration of becoming a professor. But unfortunately, the more degrees I earned and the higher up in education I taught, the worse I was paid — just like Elisa of *La trabajadora*— and my friends in O Grove. One outraged teacher in O Grove once complained about her monthly paycheck after conquering *las oposiciones*: “*una carrera tan rigurosa y aún no llegamos ni a los dos mil!*”⁸⁵. Though we mothered different

⁸⁵ While in another carpool situation, my friend Menxu had explained, at quite length, the cut-throat process of becoming a public-school teacher/*funcionario docente* in Spain. Teachers are hired through a demanding process of official state exams, called *las oposiciones*, in which the highest scoring test-takers in the country are awarded limited and highly coveted civil servant spots. For instance, in 2023, 19,000 people competed for 1,600 education spots available in the community of Valencia (Gonzalo Sánchez [n.p.](#)). Menxu’s exclamation, “*¡...y aún no llegamos a los dos mil!*”, was an exasperated reaction to her years of training and competition that she felt was not being commensurately compensated under neoliberal labor reforms.

tongues and inhabited different sides of the Atlantic, I too was experiencing similar exasperations revolving around neoliberal approaches to work as they manifested in financially eviscerated educational careers. Neoliberal work was clearly not working, and I was certain it did not have to do with me not working hard enough (or any of the other gaslighting metanarratives of *neo-nomos at work* that Elisa and I had been hearing). I now saw my deflating experiences with the neoliberalization of academia, a once stable and highly regarded employer, as a pinnacle representation of the neoliberalization of work itself. As Arne Kalleberg's research would later corroborate to me, precarity today is not unique to a particular field, like academia *per se*, but rather is unique to neoliberal approaches to work in the aggregate. Out of this epiphanic frustration at home – and the experiential ones abroad — this dissertation was born.

I have begun this conclusion with a personal narration of my time working in the US and Spain, because without these conflicting economic experiences, I may never have questioned neoliberal work under its hegemonic dominion at all. Fortunately, though, the juxtaposition of working in a deeply devoted capitalist society versus one deeply devoted to workers' rights forced a productive and timely reckoning in my mind. It came at a formative moment when I was still configuring my own perception of the world, including my own economic ideologies. That youthful malleability positioned me to be able to work through how similar circumstances could be met with such dichotomous reactions. Eventually, I came to see that work appeared to mean one thing in the US (a free-market privilege to be endured and respected by workers; the market determines work conditions for the greater good of the economy; what economist Jared Bernstein theorizes as “optimal incentives” under his motto “you’re all on your own”) and another in Spain (a right to be respected and regulated by the government; the market does not

determine conditions for the greater good of its people; what Bernstein theorized as “we’re all in this together”, i.e., collaborative prosperity), though unfettered neoliberalism had asphyxiated both to function as neither had hoped. So, despite the plurality of geographical, cultural, and linguistic differences, the two workscapes shared common ground in my mind. An idea expressed in the introduction; these countries were like two ecotones in contact with late-phase capitalist work as the point of destructive intersection. However, one country seemed vastly aware of and combative against such destruction and the other submissive to or maybe even manipulated by it. Pressing into this dissonance and trying to rearrange sense into it intrigued and inspired my studies.

Consequently, my academic focus sharpened. Becoming an effective professor now meant representing Spanish culture(s) as I had come to know a facet of it most intimately and impactfully: through a pugnacious economic lens. Spain had antagonistically illuminated to me the problematic nature of work under late-phase capitalism. Culturally shocking interactions unraveled the many wrongs that I had always been told were not only right but that were the only economic truths possible. Since my time in Galicia, I have committed most of my informal and formal education to challenging the neoliberal doctrine in the workforce, both in its functionality and its homogeneity. As a result, I wanted my research to i) reflect that unlearning and to ii) dig deeper into the doubts and discomfort that Spain had planted in my mind.

For me, this meant, firstly, remembering and acknowledged the amorphous nature of work. Work has always been tied to its culturally and historically specific episteme, shifting and contorting to fit its temporal context. The introduction of this dissertation recalled various expressions of work throughout time to establish this epistemological pliability. It paid particular

attention to work's most financially exclusive and culturally hegemonic existence as executed today under the neoliberal rule.

With the fluidity of the concept of work established, this project then initiated a Spanish environmental cultural studies investigation into neoliberal work. This meant analyzing work from a variety of socioecological dimensions to draw attention to the power dynamics, socioeconomic cultural fantasies, delusional economic metanarratives, extractive and exceptionalist late-phase capitalist modes of thinking, exploitative human and nonhuman labor practices and other asymmetrical and life-depleting processes that all play a major role in constituting the failing, conceptual institution, infrastructure, and implementation of work today. While the financial dysfunctionalities of neoliberal work were certainly critically detailed, the three main chapters of this dissertation primarily inspected how approaches to neoliberal work were also injuriously affecting the environmental, social, and emotional spheres. I explored these ideas separately through what I called toxic work, *neo-nomos* at work, and lonely work. Each theory was employed respectively in the chapters to develop a deeper understanding of the multifarious and far-reaching shortcomings of work as expressed by post-2008 Spanish film and narrative.

Together, these two objectives — acknowledging the fluidity of work and exploring its dysfunctionalities— ultimately revealed work's epistemological insufficiency on the Iberian Peninsula; meaning, an analysis of contemporary cultural products voiced how the late-phase capitalist concept of work is failing. It is unsustainable, unviable, undesirable, and irrational in the overarching context of a planetary crisis. It is well-known that neoliberalism's financial ideologies shape labor: the linearity of infinite growth, the pyramidal hierarchy of hyper individualism, and the imperturbable confidence of dualist, binary thinking. It is little considered

how this labor structure is incompatible with the shape, form and condition of the biogeochemically cyclical, biophysically finite, and relationally interdependent ecology that is earth. Metaphorically speaking, crushing this economic square into earth's ecological circle monumentally manufactures massive extinction and massive inequality at an unprecedented scale in this historically specific point in human history — so as to break the entire puzzle⁸⁶. Not to mention, in the process of performing this form of labor, the human relationship to work and the environment and their experience at work and on earth are severely disfigured, damaged, and damning in a relational, emotional, and socioeconomic sense. Neoliberal work is killing the planet and decimating all forms of Life (capital L to signal a more expansive understanding of life forms). In other words, work is not working anymore. The current socioecological crisis demands to name this reality, to recognize as many of the cultural paradigms that play into it as possible, and to, finally, restructure work with a “future-oriented critical gaze” (Prádanos 3, citing Beilin and Ares-López).

Critical attitudes were examined closely across film, novels, graphic novels and more — characterized as works about work — that contributed to these Spanish environmental cultural studies objectives. These products came together to envisage a countercultural (in the neoliberal dominance sense) desire to disassociate work from neoliberal ideologies, to disarticulate it from its social and ecological inequities, and to recouple it with more life-sustaining objectives. All in all, while I am no longer personally on the lines with my sign and steam and vociferous Spanish colleagues, executing these objectives and magnifying these messages has been my continued *huelga indignada*, my own kind of internal protest, externalized in this dissertation as “toxic work”.

⁸⁶ This entire paragraph, and way of thinking, is inspired by the many articles, books, and other Spanish environmental cultural studies publications by Luis Prádanos.

Toxic Work: Environmental, social, and emotional consequences of neoliberal approaches to work

This dissertation defined toxic work — the primary theoretical underpinning of the entire project — as the apostatic epistemological turn to harmful economic activities executed under late-phase capitalism that deplete life and environments.

Ecologically, neoliberal work accrues enormous environmental costs. In a planetary context, the capitalist model of work now destroys life instead of sustaining it. Its sacrosanct pillars of productivity and growth threaten the biophysical equilibrium of Earth by transforming its climate, diminishing its biodiversity and lastly by endangering the possibility for (human and nonhuman) societies to continue living in the future. Work's necrotic nature today — meaning the more humans work the more that dies — evinces how capitalist work can be seen as materially toxic. Toxic work produces real and tangible consequences in contemporary society; it can be seen pillowing within the urban smog of cities, wading within the indefatigable black tides along coastlines, and even lingering inside bodies and clouds in the shape of microplastics and other nearly imperceptible but equally potent biproducts. Normalized modes of economic behavior, like extraction, exploitation and expansion, have not only rendered workers themselves sick and tired from toxic stress and toxic exposures, but have also fundamentally reconstructed the country's ecology. Overdevelopment (like tourist infrastructural investment, real estate speculation) and maldevelopment (like "*España vaciada*", depeasantization and the rural/urban dichotomous phenomenon) have reconstituted planetary biomass, life and territories into

commodities, infrastructures, and wastelands⁸⁷. Not to mention the country's dependency on foreign fossil fuels, exaggerated energetic usages, agricultural industrialization of livestock and farming, and tourism all threaten the multispecies life and land. This threat is even more alarming when considering the peninsula's hydrological and geographical sensitivities to human-accelerated climate change. The world —and Spain— cannot work like this any longer, or it will no longer exist.

In a social context, the exclusivity of wage labor separated workers from each other. This mainly took shape in the segregation of men from women, who were predominantly working in unpaid spaces of care as homemakers, wives, and mothers. Consequently, the various types of capital that were once shared more equally — monetary, professional, political, and social— were disproportionately redistributed amongst men. Women, on the other hand, were pushed to the socioeconomic periphery. As a result, a new androcentric, patriarchal, and individualist labor market was established that financed, and normalized, a social hierarchy, advancing some and hindering others. This hierarchy has only intensified in the post-2008 context. As unregulated and unrestrained policies of the neoliberal project dismantle workers' rights in favor of profits and cheapness, capitalist work has been dramatically siphoning wealth to the upper echelons of society, exiling, often discriminately, the lower classes to poorer, more peripheral, and more dangerous living conditions. Expectedly, massive inequality and a massive wealth redistribution have resulted in Spain. For example, since 2008 specifically, homelessness has increased, and so has the number of billionaires.

⁸⁷ This paragraph is informed by Luis Prádanos' introduction to *A Companion to Spanish Environmental Cultural Studies*. It takes specifically from the section where he discusses Spain's condition in relation to a recent 2020 article from *Nature* that found that human-made things outweigh all biomass on Earth (2,9).

Unfortunately, the social costs of toxic work are further empowered by persuasive cultural narratives that dangerously circulate — and reorganize — the deregulated neoliberal society. In an era with minimal to no social safety nets, dominant economic discourses— like chasing professional dreams, paying dues, finding flexible work, climbing ladders —although reasonable and even admirable in ways, ultimately ensnare long-term underpayment and underemployment. The socio-economically privileged can often afford these costs and may even be able to parlay them into greater financial gains down the road. However, for the already socioeconomically disadvantaged, the price is disproportionately steep; these vulnerable workers believe and enact these narratives to their own demise, losing out on years of earnings and stability, ultimately exasperating ascriptive inequalities in the labor market (Cech). (And in the highly hierarchical and majorly imbalanced social pyramid of neoliberalism, vulnerable workers are more the norm than the privileged.).

Leaning on the research of both Erin Cech and Lawrence Buell, I named this insidious theory “*neo-nomos at work*”. *Neo-nomos* at work is the capacity of late-phase capitalism to intercept reasonable economic ideas and to pervert them into dangerous and unsuspecting metanarratives for its own systematic advantage with the effect of pushing susceptible workers to (many kinds of) the edges of society. *Neo-nomos* at work voraciously spreads through the neoliberal labor market as a “toxic discourse” (Buell); it virulently convinces, cajoles and cartographs vulnerable workers into the literal and proverbial margins of life. In doing so, it effectively alters the social and economic organization of society by dramatically dilating the already-gaping distance between workers of differing demographics.

Emotionally, neoliberal labor norms have isolated workers from each other, themselves, and the grander multispecies ecology. This is due to the limited reality demarcated by the late-

phase capitalist economy that relentlessly practices The Great and fallacious human/nonhuman Divide, ignoring or perverting the many multispecies entanglements essential to maintaining life (Haraway, *When Species Meet* 9-15). Neoliberal practices including but not limited to infinite growth, extreme extractivism, insatiable energy consumption, and overdevelopment — which are propped up by a hyper-individualist logic and the fervent belief in human exceptionalism— have shrunk and exiled nature to something that “passively exists out there” while the human economy is something “done over here”⁸⁸. In doing so, the perceived distance between workers and nature has never been greater, with multispecies interactions becoming a requiem of the past. Remunerated workers have been isolated to the financial realm alone, in their offices, typing on their computers, pushing papers, presenting their PowerPoints, etc. And despite the interactions they may or may not have with their colleagues, many researchers have concluded that workers today are “lonelier than ever before” as they, unprecedentedly and dramatically, “dwell in and among our own creations” ([Seo n.p.](#), citing Orr 1993).

Consequently, theorists are now characterizing and defining the human species by our extreme capital-accumulating style of work (remember Wendy Brown’s understanding of *homo economicus*). In Jonathan Crary’s book *24/7: late capitalism and the ends of sleep* (2013), he argues that late phase capitalism’s 24/7 markets and its global infrastructure that supports continuous work and consumption has begun to mold personal and social identities in irregular ways (3, 9). To Crary, the extreme abnormality of working without pause disavows the human relation to its rhythmic life and subjects the human to perpetually laboring operating within a “non-social model of machinic performance and a suspension of living that does not disclose the human cost required to sustain its effectiveness” (9).

⁸⁸ This assertion is inspired by the environmental humanities writings including by not limited to those by Val Plumwood, Donna Haraway, and Sarah Whatmore.

One of these costs explored in this dissertation is the way that neoliberal labor approaches have rewritten and/or removed relational dynamics with economies, ecologies, and identities, producing an unparalleled experience with “species loneliness”: or the deep, unidentified despair that arises from estrangement from nature, from a loss of interspecies relationships (Kimmerer). In context of this project’s economic angle, I built upon their wisdom to say that the increasing species loneliness that occurs specifically *at work* can be conceptually theorized as “lonely work”. I defined lonely work as the emotionally deficient activity of remunerated work in late-phase capitalist societies whose limited reality causes feelings of species loneliness. Since humans possess a multifaceted need for multispecies connection (biological, emotional, social, philosophical, intellectual, etc.), lonely work, naturally, can likely be associated with a variety of toxic outcomes: — all of which have been linked to shorter lifespans, illness, and an overall lowered quality of life⁸⁹.

Toxic Work in Post-2008 Spanish Film and Narrative: A recap of the project

This dissertation employed toxic work like a case study. This “case study” considered toxic work, *neo-nomos* at work, and lonely work across three main cultural products from post-2008 Spanish film and narrative: Director Alejandro González Iñárritu’s film *Biutiful* (2010), Elvira Navarro’s novel *La trabajadora* (2014), and Miguel Brieva’s graphic novel *Lo que me está pasando* (2015).

In *Biutiful*, toxic work was shown to produce an economy of death; neoliberal approaches to work were directly connected to environmental disintegration. This was shown heavily

⁸⁹ See Chapter Three.

through Stacy Alaimo's idea of transcorporeality. Transcorporeality, or the porosity between human and nonhuman bodies, linked neoliberal work to the physical and material decline of bodies (seen via Uxbal's cancer) and the environment (seen via Barcelona's symbolic darkness and decay). Then, secondly, Uxbal's personal experiences with toxic work revealed a grander necrotic character of neoliberal work: the harder he worked, the more his sense of self and reality disintegrated. This section underscored how the amount of "energía laboral" required to be able to carry out dignified work objectives — to save enough money for security — is physically incalculable (Carpintero 51, paraphrasing Soddy in *Matter and Energy* and *Wealth, Virtual Wealth and Debt*). Neoliberal work, like the grander neoliberal project, is a biophysical impossibility. It extracts and decays to fuel its own necrotic metabolism, endangering the lives of humans and nonhumans together. The planetary crisis and late-phase capitalist work go hand in hand. Finally, this chapter acknowledged how *Biutiful* drew particular attention to the disproportionate socio-economic decline experienced by a variety of peripheral workers because of the unjust design of neoliberal work. Their decline illuminated how marginalized characters working far from (both geographically and socially) the shiny neoliberal center, were subjected to unequal, unhealthy, and dangerous conditions — visualizing and chiding the ascriptive vulnerabilities that affect those left out of the exclusive and unjustly-designed mainstream, formal labor market. All in all, this chapter's analysis showed how the film disassociates neoliberal work from its purported and delusional, desirable metanarrative of "economic progress" and instead more realistically reassociates it with the undesirable "deconstrucción ecológica" (Berardi 11).

In the next chapter, I investigated *neo-nomos* at work, a rhetorical and metaphorical manifestation of toxic work, a contemporary art of economic persuasion that ensnares vulnerable

workers into the socio-economic margins. To do this, I focused on Erin Cech's research on The Passion Principle (TPP), or the idea that capitalism today convinces workers to prioritize passion over stability although it often ensures long-term underemployment and low pay, which is especially disadvantageous for those with ascriptive vulnerabilities. To show *neo-nomos* at work through TPP, I contrasted cultural products that participated in the discourse of professional passion in antithetical ways. First, I looked at products that lionized TPP at all costs, like the popular *Netflix* series reimagining the book series *Valeria* and a wide array of economic self-help books. Then, I compared these narratives with the sobering auto-ficción/docu-ficción novel, *La trabajadora* (2014). Leaning on insights offered from a personal interview with the author, Elvira Navarro, in combination with historical, conceptual, economic, and feminist theories applied to moments in the book, this chapter was able to illuminate the dangerous, exploitative, discriminatory economic messaging of androcentric approaches to work under the neoliberal episteme. The patriarchal rationale that informs neoliberal work — like elitist, exclusionary and exceptionalist thinking — redistributes wealth, health and success in a hierarchical manner, making work — even “good”! work — precarious or unlivable in sharply asymmetrical so as to promote, propagate, and perpetuate white male dominance in the labor market. Remembering that the neoliberal economy's outcomes have *only* been proven to be 1) the redistribution of wealth to the upper echelons of society, which are predominately white and male, 2) massive inequality, 3) massive ecological decline, and 4) the expansion of the market to all realms of life, this chapter pieced together toxic rhetoric, failing institutions, and discriminate socioecological decline. This chapter concluded by contextualizing how cultural products like *La trabajadora* embody a grander purpose. They express a desire to disarticulate neoliberal work from the manipulating and misguiding rhetoric that sneakily exasperates ascriptive inequities. In sum, the chapter concluded

with a discussion on the discriminate distribution of salaried work in particular, whose extreme and exclusionary status is unique to the neoliberal era, and how that distribution is further empowered by *neo-nomos* at work.

In the final chapter, I sought to establish the existence and prevalence of *lonely work*, an emotional iteration of *toxic work*. This was approached primarily through Miguel Brieva's graphic novel, *Lo que me está pasando* (2010), that portrayed a young, geologist struggling to find socially, emotionally, and ecologically fulfilling work. The chapter analyzed vignettes that illustrated ecological disconnectedness and/or unethical entanglements with nature at work and how these produced feelings of isolation and despair, namely species loneliness, in the main working character, Víctor. Like in the previous chapter, the analysis was complemented by a personal interview with the author and ecological, indigenous, and ecofeminist perspectives. Together, Brieva's thoughts combined with scholarly theories like speciesism/antispeciesism, killability/The Honorable Harvest, bullshit jobs/reciprocal pairs, and more unified to identify the power dynamics of lonely work and how ecological connectedness, not solely human connectedness, is essential for overcoming the emotional toxicity of neoliberal approaches to work. The chapter — and project— concluded by suggesting that cultural products like *Lo que me está pasando* desire to recouple neoliberal work with more expansive, renumerated and nonremunerated labor activities that carefully consider and respectfully interact with nature and its beings, too— a regenerative idea I introduced as “multispecies work”.

Utilizing alternative and/or unexpected ecofeminist theoretical frameworks that arguably fall outside of the norm of Spanish cultural studies conventions, such as Native American philosophies about Life and emotions, was a direct challenge to the field's traditional approaches that have accidentally or explicitly promoted the capitalist, colonial, patriarchal, Western

worldviews that have “modernized” Spain, and the globe and its Beings, into a contemporary civilizational emergency (Prádanos). It is my belief that radically subverting the hegemonically “normal” and “modern” ways of thinking, knowing, seeing, envisioning, and interacting with the world ecology into more “peripheral” and “ancient” ways, is the only logical and sage way to reverse an ecologically corrosive culture into a flourishing one yet again. Reading Víctor’s story in *LQMP* from within this belief was a small contribution to this monumental task. This countercultural analysis not only permitted an expansively critical reading of the economy in the graphic novel, but it also gave ample space and honor to the incredibly difficult job of articulating and envisioning a vivacious future of work at a time when the future of anything at all is currently in dire question.

Work isn’t working!: the work of nature... the nature of work?

This dissertation has pondered, verbally and visually, one central question: what is the nature of neoliberal work? Analyzing post-2008 Spanish film and narratives about neoliberal work has given space for each to contribute its own descriptive answer: it is physically and ecologically decrepit (see Chapter One), socially dysfunctional (see Chapter Two), and emotionally deficient (see Chapter Three).

However, further conclusions can be drawn when the works about work are examined in a more collective sense. This project has pieced together highly concentrated, culturally critical conversations about work across a wide array of genres. From film and narrative, interviews and public journal articles, to laws and social movements, these works about work expressed suspicion, exhaustion, incertitude, lament, and/or even opposition to the concept of neoliberal work, in all its cultural and economic applications (see the Introduction’s cultural and economic

definition of neoliberal work). Taking into account this pervasively negative attitude that persists across genre and form, I posit that the works' about work significance goes beyond answering how the nature of neoliberal work is epistemologically insufficient; I contend that they also express a broader cultural force brewing in contemporary Spain, one that desires to undermine the dominion, hegemony, and ostensible infallibility of the all-powerful neoliberal project all together, which according to the analysis of these cultural products, marks the most socially, environmentally, and emotionally destructive economic episteme to have ever destructively deviated the nature of work.

These conclusions naturally segue into invitations for further research. The first being, if the *nature of (neoliberal) work* is toxic, could not the *work of nature* be its antithetical antidote? As touched briefly upon in the dissertation, many scholars across a variety of fields have begun turning to nature to help to understand and even to solve some of humanity's deepest and most perplexing problems, including but not limited to their economic issues. From an Environmental Humanities perspective, especially one that favors Indigenous wisdom, this provokes innovative thoughts about how to reconsider work. For instance, according to Indigenous knowledges, humans are said to be the youngest inhabitants of Earth and therefore, have the most to learn from other species, writes indigenous ethnobotanist, Robin Wall Kimmerer, the primary theorist of Chapter Three (9). Humans, like all species are limited to their own biological knowing capacities. Like a bee that sees colors imperceptible to the human eye or a tree's language inaudible to the human ear, she argues for adding in the sensors of other forms of life to aid in stretching the human intellectual capacities to help better perceive our home and workplace, Earth. Kimmerer describes this intellectual dynamic as an integrative form of knowing because it combines distinct and varied forms of intelligence often ignored by Western society that favors

some intelligences while devaluing or silencing others. Paying attention to and applying integrative knowledges — i.e., nature’s wisdom — cultivates what Kimmerer refers to as a “new species of knowledge, a new way of being in the world” (47).

Kimmerer’s ideas make me wonder how nature works: are other species working? Do animals work? ... plants? The Earth? If they are working, what kind of work do they do? And how can the work of humans integrate the knowledge and wisdom from the work of nature? These types of questions struck me while working on this project. In fact, they led me to read books like Belén Gopegui’s *El padre de Blancanieves* (2007), a story about a professor and her family whose entanglements with the nature of work and the work of nature, specifically with corporations and microbes, causes a philosophical and practical reckoning with economic and ecological norms. Although it goes without saying that more research is necessary to formulate a complete corpus, I could already imagine works like *El padre de Blancanieves* being anchored into reality via seminal contemporary environmental humanities and sociology projects, like those by Manuel Castells, Jorge Riechmann, and Juan Del Río for example, that study and/or propose alternative economic practices. I see this kind of project more comprehensively developing and defining my introductory concept of “multispecies work” from Chapter Three.

In addition to questioning the nature of work and the work of nature, this project naturally segues into another lingering question. This dissertation clearly presented Spanish cultural products overall discontentment with the current status of neoliberal work. But then, given the dramatic globality of neoliberal work in general, where else in the Spanish-speaking world are cultural products participating in critical attitudes that fracture the hegemonic concept and dominion of neoliberal work? Such a question could have easily expanded Chapter One, where my object of study, *Biutiful*, a bicultural collaboration in of itself, could have swung wide-open a

door to enter into a Spanish Mexican comparison. In such a hypothetical project, transatlantic cultural studies experts or a collaboration of Iberian and Mexican specialists, could enter through this door. I imagine their work could compile more convincing, and more powerful, evidence on global cultural production opposition to neoliberal work. Additionally, beyond literary and cultural studies, economic geographers, and environmental historians, many of whom who are already known for being quite critical of the neoliberal project in general, could also look more expansively, yet, specifically into neoliberal work itself. Adding in their perspectives to a bicultural comparison could dynamize the strength of the cultural products' anecdotal and descriptive opposition.

These invitations for further research have been intrinsically provoked by my own thoughts while working on this dissertation. That being said, when I have spoken about my project to friends, family, colleagues, committee members, etc., one question has been repeatedly, extrinsically and passionately retorted back to my ideas: "if not Neoliberalism, then what? Communism? Feudalism?...". I have often responded that this is beyond the scope of my project; I explain that my project's main interest is investigating critical attitudes about neoliberal work. It is about analyzing the different cultural products arising from here and there throughout Spain, and how when these products are placed together, they cohere a national conversation about the shortcomings of work today. To elucidate my cultural studies approach to my US peers, I often refer to the "Ideas" section of popular magazines like *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic*. I note how their contributing writers/scholars routinely analyze recent films, movies, social movements, and laws, to generate a cultural dialogue that debates and deciphers "what is going on in the US". In the same way, I say, this project intends to make sense of "what is going on in Spain" as it pertains to the way cultural products present their thoughts and feelings about

neoliberal work — which may have otherwise gone unnoticed had they remained fragmented within their own context. To this explanation, I often receive a nod of understanding, which is then abruptly abandoned by a return to: “if not Neoliberalism, then what? Communism? Feudalism...?”. I believe this happens, because this question is one that continually loops in the back of the unsatisfied mind of many workers — those of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. And like Spanish economist and feminist Amaia Orozco Pérez has said, until work is governed “con criterios de justicia” instead of exclusively “con criterios de mercado”, this question will likely, indefinitely, and inevitably persist (Orozco 22). In other words, as long as toxic work — the harmful economic activities based exclusively on remuneration that deplete life and environments — survives, so too, and rightfully so, will the dissatisfaction with neoliberal work’s destructive status quo.

And finally, it must be stated that my analysis of the nature of neoliberal work was skewed by my own biases and interests. For instance, at various points throughout this project, I pointed out various representations of discrimination that I felt were major contributors to the dissatisfaction with neoliberal work. This first appeared in Chapter One when I analyzed marginalized workers — in particular undocumented migrant workers, an extralegal sex worker, and an informal care worker — and their disproportionately dangerous experiences with toxic work. I also wrote at length about gender discrimination in Chapter Two. I thoroughly established the unequivocally unlevel playing field that Elisa, the primary woman worker of *La trabajadora*, found herself unfairly competing and losing within.

Obviously, it was impossible to discuss all forms — or even most forms — of economic discrimination prevalent in the neoliberal episteme (After all, neoliberalism does systemically depend on legal, institutional, and systemic discrimination to afford its ability to hoard and to

concentrate extreme wealth and power amongst the upper echelons of society). That being said, I still could have selected cultural products that deconstructed other modes of labor discrimination; for instance, how age, health, physical appearance, and/or sexual orientation-based discrimination, etc., still pervade workforce experiences or even prevents certain populations from having a workforce experience at all⁹⁰.

Self-reflecting at the end of this project, I can now acknowledge that not looking into these facets of economic discrimination speaks to my own biases as they relate to age, health, physical appearance, and/or sexual orientation. As a young, able-bodied, white-passing, heterosexual female, I was mostly *indignada* to the woes of the workers' experiences with whom I could most closely relate. Albeit of much less consequence, I see this bias like the male-dominated car industry whose safety tests were historically only programed for male measurements. Similarly, my findings are limited by my own direction and design. As such, this project's analyses should certainly be read with a comma, rather than a period, as more diverse indignations are needed to drive the discussion in different, expansively inclusive, directions.

Signing Off of Work: Final thoughts on toxic work in Spain

⁹⁰ In the context of Spain, this makes me think in depth about age-based discrimination, which poses a serious issue for many in the post-2008 labor market that prioritizes hiring "cheaper" employees. In an interview, author of *Disrupción. Mi desventura en la burbuja de las start-ups* (2021), Dan Lyons, specifically addresses age discrimination in the neoliberal labor market as it played out in the tech sector. He explains that young employees are more desirable, because their lives are less complicated and thus, freer to devote to work: "su vida gira alrededor del trabajo" (n.p.). Conversely, older employees, he contends, have other responsibilities they must negotiate and manage (He names older kids about to enroll in university as an example, but I also think of age-correlated illnesses that could make the employee need more time away, thus costing the company more), and therefore, are more expensive to hire (not to mention they are more expensive in general too because they tend to be more experienced). I could see Lyons' book serving as theoretical support for the analysis of other Spanish cultural products, like the films *Los lunes al sol* (2002) or *La mano invisible* (2016) based on Isaac Rosa's 2011 titular book, that deal with the relationship between unemployment, cheapness, age, and technological advancements.

The status of toxic work is both non-specific and specific to Spain, and that generalized and specified environmental cultural studies analysis has been this project's contribution towards recognizing the need for a cultural and paradigmatic transition away from the financially exclusive and ecologically necrotic ideologies of neoliberal work.

Spain, like many other neoliberalized workforces around the world, is suffering similar, localized symptoms of the same globalized illness that has pervaded economies for decades. In fact, toxic work is like a contagion. During the onslaught of neoliberalism, it emerged as a new, unknown pathogen, never having existed before. And because of rising GDPs (which have been more accurately reframed as “uneconomic growth” for the social and environmental costs) and the expansion of the capitalist market, neoliberal work succeeded in quietly evading timely containment (Prádanos)⁹¹. The entire neoliberal project spread rapidly around the world. And consequently, as the more people go to work, and the more they move around the globe looking for such work, they carry with them and spread around the toxic norms, practices, and ideas about neoliberal work allowing it the opportunity to mutate, strengthen, and intensify its injurious dominion over lives and environments. After decades of this superspreading, neoliberal work's virulent ecological, social, and emotional structure has so dramatically and radically evolved so as to render it completely unrecognizable from that of work's earlier forms that once aimed to serve multispecies flourishing; and such pervasiveness has functioned as an attempt to

⁹¹ In a personal communication with Prádanos, he framed the rising GDP experienced after the 2012 implementation of the neoliberal project as “uneconomic growth”. As largely outlined in the dissertation, this phrase problematizes a “rising GDP” due to its marginality of the growth that was largely absorbed by elites while the purchasing power of the average citizen declined while their rising costs associated with dismantling public services simultaneously rose. Prádanos also explained that this kind of growth, a marginal rise in GDP, derived from selling public goods and public industries to private corporations, deregulating the financial system, and polluting the environment. The rise was thus ineffective and dysfunctional, creating massive social inequality, environmental decline, and overall chaos that were “disconnected from productivity and the real economy”.

persuade its existence as a normal peril of life. But as a researcher who has written this dissertation during the beginning, middle, and end of the COVID-19 pandemic, I end with a reminder that toxic work is a human creation; it is far from normal, nor natural. As such, humans have the tools to eradicate it, should the community come together in united opposition to bolster their defenses against this proverbial, existential illness and finally put an end to this virulent economic episteme.

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