

# **Neoliberal Projects: Rationalizing Poverty in Sean Baker's *The Florida Project***

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It was not by coincidence that the decline of public housing occurred in tandem with the rise of neoliberalism in the final decades of the twentieth century. The New Deal commitment to a robust social support system for the poor simply had no place within an increasingly ubiquitous logic engineered around the liberatory potential of deregulation, the free market, and the privatization of space. Under this logic, the poorest individuals living in public housing stood to benefit from a state-bolstered free-market housing economy that would drive down rents and provide more opportunity for the exercise of individual agency in housing decisions. This shift in policy would in fact do great harm to those communities it was ostensibly intended to benefit. The following pages address the often-unseen consequences of this shift through a reading of Sean Baker's *The Florida Project* (2017), a film that engages with the discourses of poverty and personal responsibility that have shaped neoliberal attitudes toward low-income housing and unemployment in the United States. Working on both representational and ontological registers, *The Florida Project* invites viewers in their assessment of the film's complex and flawed protagonists, in often unsettling ways, to deploy the very neoliberal rationale that has shaped U.S. housing policy. Involving viewers in the exercise of this rationale enables a critique of what Wendy Brown calls "the neoliberal markets-and-morals project," a far-reaching ideological campaign responsible for tethering politics, economics, and morality to the family unit. The final part of the essay addresses how the film's immersive and reflexive strategies operate on affective levels, exposing the

humanistic limits of attitudes that punish the poor amid conditions that all but ensure their continued domination.

Much scholarship on the housing crisis of the twenty-first century identifies the neoliberal commodification of housing as the underlying cause for both the erosion of public housing and the rapidly rising cost of housing across the United States. Existing under a rationale that ascribes commodity value to housing, lived spaces have become subsumed under real estate regimes operating solely on the logic of profit, a shift that has proven disastrous for those in need of affordable housing. Public housing, after all, is not profitable; real estate ventures that attract the wealthy, on the other hand, are. David Madden and Peter Marcuse observe how, with the recent surge in real estate investment in major U.S. cities, we have entered a stage of hyper-commodification in which “all of the material and legal structures of housing—buildings, land, labor, property rights—are turned into commodities. In the process, the capacity of a building to function as a home becomes secondary. What matters is how a building functions in circuits of economic accumulation.”<sup>1</sup> Within these systems, investors and developers make decisions based not on public good, but on the potential for attracting future investment. In this new era of hyper-commodification, Madden and Marcuse argue, housing has been replaced by real estate, or the commodification of habitation. Under these processes of privatization, individuals’ right to inhabit space and exercise agency within it is being existentially challenged.

These processes associated with the commodification of lived spaces are particularly pernicious when considering the vital role that housing plays in facilitating human autonomy, individual agency, and civic participation—all core tenets of democratic liberalism. As public housing continues to erode under conditions that frame city space in terms of profit, individuals, and particularly those on society’s margins, will encounter obstacles that preclude opportunities for growth and the exercise of political agency. “Struggles over housing,” Madden and Marcuse write, “are always, in part, struggles over autonomy. More than any other item of consumption, housing structures the way that individuals interact with others, with communities, and with wider collectives... No other modern commodity is as important for organizing citizenship, work, identities, solidarities, and politics.”<sup>2</sup> The neoliberalization of American cities, and of housing in particular, therefore has profound consequences for how we think about social and political life in the twenty-first century. The struggle over housing as a lived practice and a human right—rather than an investment opportunity—is imperative to reclaiming political subjectivity in the era of neoliberalism.

### **The Material and Ontological Landscapes of Neoliberalism**

*The Florida Project* addresses these enduring tensions within and outside of its diegesis, using creative strategies to both critique neoliberalism and involve viewers in the very logic that underlies the implementation of neoliberal housing practices for low-income communities. Baker’s film depicts the day-to-day lives of Halley (Bria Vinaite) and her six-year-old daughter, Moonee (Brooklynn Prince),



**Figure 1:** The Magic Castle. *The Florida Project*, June Pictures, A24, 2017

who, along with dozens of other poor and working-class families, live transiently in a motel situated just outside of Walt Disney World.<sup>3</sup> Halley continually exhibits erratic and at times unlawful behavior as both a mother and as a member of the motel community, and the relentlessly mischievous Moonee cannot seem to keep herself out of trouble throughout the film. When Halley turns to sex work to provide for herself and Moonee, the film requires characters in the narrative and viewers themselves to question her fitness as a mother.<sup>4</sup> In the conclusion, Halley presumably loses custody of her daughter when social workers arrive to place Moonee in foster care. *The Florida Project* is very much concerned with exploring the lives and behaviors of its two protagonists, but the film's overt attention to the purple "Magic Castle" motel and the impersonal nearby strip malls—which dominate the mise-en-scène for much of the film—betray Baker's interest in critiquing the neoliberal machinery that produced the environment in which these characters struggle to survive, an environment notably absent of public support systems and vital public spaces (Figure 1). With this neoliberal critique in mind, the "project" in the film's title might refer, more acutely, to the motel as a neoliberal instantiation of a housing project, a privately owned, unregulated business inadequately filling the void left by the decline of public housing over the past several decades.

The majority of *The Florida Project* simply tracks the everyday lives of its central characters. We see Moonee, for instance, visiting the nearby abandoned condominiums with her friends, we see the children getting into assorted mischief around the motel complex, and we see Halley spending time with her friend, Ashley (Mela Murder), who also lives in the complex. The central narrative conflict concerning Halley's impending loss of custody does not actually emerge until well into the film's fourth act when financial pressures force Halley into sex work. Because of its focus on the quotidian experience of poverty, the film produces intimate temporal spaces in which viewers may experience, alongside the characters, the exigencies of precarity. The quotidian in this way functions as a temporal category linked to precarity. Following the work of Lauren Berlant, these characters find themselves at an "impasse," "a temporary housing"<sup>5</sup> in

which the pressures of “getting by” preclude the production of future-focused imaginaries. Berlant writes, “An impasse is a holding station that doesn’t hold securely but opens out into anxiety... An impasse is decompositional—in the unbound temporality of the stretch of time, it marks a delay that demands activity. The activity can produce impacts and events, but one does not know where they are leading.”<sup>6</sup> Much of *The Florida Project* resides in the zone of the impasse, a perpetual delay in which its characters go about their everyday lives without thinking about the future, a temporality embodied here by the purple Magic Castle motel. The extended crisis that Halley is experiencing, of course, is the condition of precarity produced by neoliberal systems and policies. Because little opportunity exists for these characters, they find themselves trapped in an eternal present, a quotidian day-to-day existence in which they reproduce and recycle their own precarity. It is appropriate, therefore, that the film takes place predominantly in a motel; as “temporary housing,” the motel symbolically represents the temporal impasse from which the characters cannot escape.

Baker is attentive to contextualizing this crisis within the material and ontological landscapes produced under neoliberalism. As I have already discussed, the Magic Castle motel functions as a neoliberal iteration of public housing. Baker, significantly, dwells on the fact that the motel is a private business operated for profit. At one point, the owner, Narek (Karren Karagulian), who makes a brief appearance midway through the film, dispassionately instructs the manager, Bobby (Willem Dafoe), to evict anybody within the week for failing to move their bicycles to the back of the building. As the proprietor of a private enterprise, Narek quite evidently feels no social responsibility to his tenants. In another instance he even instructs volunteers from a food security nongovernmental organization to distribute food at the back of the building in order to preserve appearances at his establishment. These moments in the film reveal the hostility of the motel environment to the fundamental needs of its residents; the motel exists not to support the poor, but rather to profit from them. Even Bobby, the otherwise conscientious and compassionate motel manager, spends much of his time tracking down tenants and demanding rent payments, levying the threat of eviction when necessary. Furthermore, to avoid the possibility of tenants establishing residency (and thereby gaining legal renter’s rights) Bobby forces tenants to periodically vacate the premises for twenty-four hours, effectively turning them out into the streets or to another motel if they can afford the one-night rate. When Halley, upon one of these temporary evictions, discovers that the nearby motel has barred people like her from staying there, it becomes evident that no institutional structures exist to prevent her from falling into homelessness.

The urban landscape beyond the motels is equally inhospitable to the poor. In their daily excursions to the surrounding parking lots, strip malls, and abandoned condominium complexes, Moonee and her friends traverse city spaces that are dominated by private development and dangerous thoroughfares populated by fast-moving automobiles presumably taking visitors to and from the nearby Walt



**Figure 2:** The privatized city. *The Florida Project*, June Pictures, A24, 2017.

Disney World. Habitable public spaces do not exist in the world of *The Florida Project*. The children, who have normalized this environment, are blissfully unaware of the lack of public spaces around them as they move from one private development to another [Figure 2]. They have no money and therefore cannot participate in the practices of consumption that are a prerequisite for occupying these profit-oriented spaces. In one instance, they beg the customers of a nearby ice cream shop for money so that they can purchase a cone. This moment, like others that take place in the privatized outdoor strip malls, underscores the uncomfortable fact that wherever these children go, they do not belong.

Halley, too, finds herself incapable of locating free and inclusive public spaces. The most notable example of her encountering exclusionary spatial practices takes place during two scenes in which she attempts to sell perfume and cologne—which she has purchased from a wholesale retailer—in the parking lot of a nearby upscale resort. Catering to wealthy visitors to Walt Disney World, the resort is an intensely privatized space disciplined by security guards in golf carts. Initially, selling her products in the parking lot proves to be a modestly successful venture, as she raises enough money to pay that month's rent. On the second instance, however, a security guard confronts her, accuses her of solicitation on private property, calls the police, and violently confiscates Halley's entire supply of perfume and cologne, incurring what we can only imagine is catastrophic financial harm on the mother and her daughter.

Halley's struggles to establish herself as an economic body have much to do with the privatization of space that has taken root in American cities as a result of a neoliberal logic that prioritizes the profitability of land. Public spaces, which have long played a critical role in the exercise and practice of democracy, are increasingly being sold to private developers as cities attempt to find new ways to create tax revenue and raise property values in surrounding neighborhoods. For instance, the cost of maintaining a public park, combined with the opportunity cost of *not* using that space to generate tax revenue, all too often compels cities to appropriate park space for private development. These processes have given rise to what Samuel Stein calls "the real estate state," a "political formation in which real estate capital has inordinate influence over the shape of our cities, the parameters of our politics and the lives we lead."<sup>7</sup>

Both in terms of planning and governance, cities are increasingly imbricated within neoliberal capitalist structures that force them to shift their priorities from providing for their residents through housing and public services to creating conditions favorable for investment. In some instances, cities have ceded control of formerly public spaces to private organizations of commercial property owners who take responsibility for policing and maintaining these spaces. These private entities are not bound by the same city ordinances that protect people experiencing homelessness, vendors, street artists, and children—those whose existence depends upon the comparative freedoms of public space—and these populations are therefore frequently subject to exclusion. Private spaces in this way reinforce social inequality.<sup>8</sup>

Often absent in these calculations to transform public spaces is an argument for the important role that these spaces play in fostering marginalized discourses and political dissent. Most major political movements depend upon the ability for people to organize in public space.<sup>9</sup> Significantly, the decision to sell off or privatize public spaces is usually based on a logic of profitability, not on the needs of the people or on the costs to democracy of eliminating such spaces. Considering that public spaces are among the few places that people experiencing homelessness and poverty may legally occupy, and where vendor permits can allow low-income individuals to sell their wares, the disappearance of public spaces disproportionately affects the city's most vulnerable populations. In *The Florida Project*, because public spaces are so scarce, Halley lacks the legal means through which to sell perfume and thereby establish herself as a self-sustaining economic subject; in short, the intensely privatized environment prevents Halley from earning money to provide for her daughter. She is at once punished for her poverty and prohibited from taking the steps required to remove herself from it.

The economy of private spaces that dominates the film's mise-en-scène is directly connected to the presence of the nearby Walt Disney World, the looming corporate entity symbolically and materially responsible for sustaining asymmetries between the wealthy and the poor in the film. From the Magic Castle to the nearby Futureland Inn to numerous gift shops and other establishments attempting to capitalize on the tourist economy related to Walt Disney World, Halley and Moonee find themselves living in something akin to a neoliberal simulation of the Disney universe [Figure 3]. Significantly, this fantasy-oriented theme—replete with the familiar trappings of Disney—serves to conceal the brutal realities experienced by the poor, who cannot participate in the fantasy produced by the Walt Disney Corporation in the same way as those middle-class individuals in automobiles traveling past the motel. The most visible symbol of the asymmetries produced by this neoliberal landscape is the helicopter that shuttles wealthy tourists to and from Walt Disney World. In several scenes taking place in and around the motel, a helicopter can be seen taking off and landing in a field adjacent to the motel property. Even in scenes taking place inside Halley's motel room, Baker uses asynchronous sound to call viewers' attention



**Figure 3:** Girls running. *The Florida Project*, June Pictures, A24, 2017

to the presence of the helicopter. In these instances, viewers cannot help but be reminded of the deep asymmetries that exist between those individuals inhabiting the motel and the tourists who participate in the fantasy created by the Walt Disney Corporation. It bears noting that whatever economic benefits to the community brought by this tourist economy are quite evidently not being enjoyed by the residents of the motel.

The material landscape that these characters inhabit is a product of capitalist modernity, but Baker's film is attentive to capturing the totalizing force—associated specifically with neoliberalism—that this environment exerts on Halley, Moonee, and the other residents of the motel. Critics of neoliberalism like David Harvey, Wendy Brown, and Jamie Peck have been attentive to the various ways in which policy makers enacted deregulatory reforms in the last decades of the twentieth century that would reconfigure American cityscapes. In Halley's world, such transformation is notably not visible. The world that she inhabits, created entirely in the era of neoliberalism, embodies a totalizing ideological project that privileges the private sector and renders public life subordinate to commerce. The commons never existed in this tourist economy born entirely out of a neoliberal development logic. Consequently, the horizon of possibility contained in the idea of the commons can neither be said to exist. Halley and Moonee, born into a world bereft of the social, cannot imagine a life outside of a reality in which private investment defines and shapes, in the most absolute of ways, the materiality of existence.

The eradication of this horizon of possibility is a key feature of neoliberalism, and its effects extend deep into the realms of subjectivity and personhood. In their introduction to *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith plot the history of neoliberalism in four phases—economic, political-ideological, sociological, and ontological. It is in the fourth and final phase, the ontological, that neoliberal rationale becomes normalized in subjects and material environments to the extent that imagining a world outside of it proves impossible. Here, horizons of possibility associated with the commons cease to exist. Echoing the work of Michel Foucault and, more recently, Wendy Brown, Huehls and Greenwald Smith explain, "No longer just a



set of ideological beliefs or deployable rationalities, neoliberalism becomes what we are, a mode of existence defined by self-responsibility, entrepreneurial action, and the maximization of human capital."<sup>10</sup> In this phase, "the market and its bottom-line logic are everywhere."<sup>11</sup> Understanding neoliberalism as a totalizing ontology—one that shapes cities and subjects alike—helps to underscore how material realities, such as those that determine Halley's entire existence, perpetuate conditions of inequality by limiting the work of the imagination. Born into this world, so to speak, Halley and Moonee remain tragically incapable of locating the horizon of possibility beyond it.

The environment that Baker depicts, therefore, is capitalist to the core, but its ontological dimensions align it more specifically with neoliberalism as a phase of late capitalism. In this way, the film's depiction of Halley's struggles underscores the fact that neoliberalism has colonized the domain of reality so completely that forms of political action, such as those idealized by Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, and other theorists of urban life, have ceased to exist. Halley, for instance, does not encroach upon the private property of the upscale resort to establish herself politically in space, but rather to enter the market and assert herself as an economic body. As Wendy Brown, Steven Shaviro, Mark Fisher, and others have noted, the marketization of everyday life has had the consequence of depoliticizing subjects, thereby radically transforming the arena of political action under neoliberalism. Ironically, the very ethos of personal responsibility and entrepreneurialism central to neoliberal subjectivity is undercut by cultures of privatization that channel state-regulated forms of commerce, cultures fundamentally hostile to informal economies such as those in which Halley attempts to participate. As Foucault explains, neoliberal market conditions must be actively produced by governmentality,<sup>12</sup> and these conditions are here responsible for preserving unequal access to opportunity through the disciplining of space. Amid the contradictory impulses that simultaneously compel Halley toward and yet prevent her from entrepreneurializing her person, political action becomes an increasingly obsolete and unrealizable pursuit. Considering the extent to which neoliberal rationale has shaped Halley's thinking on ontological levels, it might be appropriate to acknowledge that political action has never been on her horizon of possibility.<sup>13</sup>

Baker captures the totalizing presence of neoliberalism in these characters' lives through another scene that features Moonee and her friends ransacking the ruins of a nearby condominium complex. Although the film is not explicit about what led to their abandonment, the relatively intact furnishings of the condos suggest that the units were remnants of the housing market crash of 2008, an event directly attributable to large-scale neoliberal deregulation that gave rise to the derivatives market and, subsequently, the housing bubble. The condos, then, are the always-already ruined landscape of neoliberalism, a landscape built for consumption and subject to the vagaries of the market. When the children infiltrate the ruined complex, ostensibly free of the disciplinary constraints present in the world outside, it might be tempting to read their



behavior as a channeling of the Debordian “situation,” an act of creative play rife, at least on symbolic levels in the film, with political potential. But the ruins that they inhabit are notably *not* the ruins of Lefebvre’s capitalist modernity. Rather, what becomes clear is that the deteriorating condo complex—the refuse of neoliberal investment—is the materialization of a failed neoliberal imaginary that disingenuously promised stability and prosperity for all [Figure 4]. As Shaviro explains, the neoliberal capitalist debt economy responsible for the 2008 crash “is a kind of double process. It ravages the present in the name of a future that will never actually arrive; and it depletes our hopes for, and imaginings of, the future by turning it into nothing but a projection of an endless repetition of the present.”<sup>14</sup> Characters in *The Florida Project* seemed trapped in this repetition of the present—the “impasse,” in Berlant’s words—and thus it is not surprising when the children’s play in the ruined complex devolves into violence. When they eventually set fire to the buildings, it is difficult to understand the act in redemptive or future-oriented terms, especially considering the problems it might later pose for Halley’s custody case. More likely, the destruction of the ruins underscores the latent violence that accompanies material and ontological projects that prioritize the economic over the political and that work to colonize the domain of the imagination.



**Figure 4:** Abandoned development. *The Florida Project*, June Pictures, A24, 2017

### The Neoliberal State

Beyond the ontological shift that has evidently taken hold in the world of *The Florida Project*, it is worth noting the institutional obstacles that Halley faces as she attempts to access temporary financial assistance from the state, obstacles specifically associated with neoliberal reform in the 1990s. As Lenette Azzi-Lessing discusses in her study on the failures of social welfare reform, financial assistance has, since legislation passed under President Bill Clinton in 1996, become increasingly difficult to access for those who need it most. Operating

under a neoliberal rationale that blames the poor and insists upon personal responsibility for lifting oneself out of poverty, these welfare reforms introduced work requirements to welfare programs. "Blaming chronic poverty on the poor choices made by irresponsible adults," Azzi-Lessing notes, "has become a tidy and convenient way for Americans to absolve themselves and their government of responsibility for solving [the complex problem of poverty in the United States]."<sup>15</sup> Introduced in 1996, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funding made states responsible for ensuring that recipients participate in specific work-related activities to receive cash assistance. Those who cannot find work are ineligible for assistance.<sup>16</sup> This reform has been nothing short of catastrophic for those living in deep poverty with incomes below one-half of the Federal Poverty Threshold, or what is commonly referred to as "the poverty line." Indeed, the number of families "living in deep poverty has doubled in the period since welfare reform became law in 1996 to 2011."<sup>17</sup> These funds became even scarcer following the 2008 financial crisis, during which time states routinely diverted funding from those living in deep poverty to other social services that were not immediately connected to poverty. In 1996, 70 percent of TANF funding went to poor families; by 2012, that number had dropped to 29 percent.<sup>18</sup> The repeated cuts to funding for welfare programs that benefit the poor are a direct result of a prevailing neoliberal logic that blames the poor—and not the systems that produce poverty—for the circumstances in which they find themselves.

Baker addresses these institutional failures in a brief, but important, scene in which Halley seeks help finding a job and applies for TANF assistance at the local social services office. During the scene, she explains how she was fired from her previous job as an exotic dancer for her refusal to perform sexual favors for patrons. After listening to Halley's story, the social worker responds dispassionately, "Okay. I'm sorry to say that's gonna affect your TANF" and advises her to "Please make a concerted effort to put in 30 hours." Halley, of course, has visited the office precisely for the purpose of gaining employment; she appropriately tells the social worker that she has submitted applications all over town, but has had no success finding a job, partly, the viewer is left to surmise, because she lacks the skills to comport herself for the demands of the workplace. Halley is financially destitute because she is unemployed, and, ironically and absurdly, she cannot receive financial assistance because she has not met the 30-hour minimum work requirement. In a subtle but scathing critique of the welfare system, Baker asks viewers to note that the person most in need of financial assistance is unqualified for that assistance.<sup>19</sup>

The filmic strategies Baker uses to advance this critique are likewise worth addressing. Baker alternates between two shots, the first of which features Halley's face foregrounded in profile and out of focus, with Moonee, in focus, playing with a doll in the background. The second is a medium shot adopting an over-the-shoulder perspective in relation to the social worker. Notably, the social worker is visually absent through the duration of the forty-second scene, giving viewers the sensation that the faceless and dehumanizing institutions

Halley is attempting to navigate, which ostensibly exist to serve people in her position, are themselves inhumane in their assessment and judgment of her moral character. Baker uses the over-the-shoulder shot to implicate viewers in the institutional processes that will ultimately prevent Halley and Moonee from receiving financial assistance. Baker seems to suggest through his camerawork that his presumptively well-educated, middle-class viewership is responsible for supporting social systems that punish the poor.<sup>20</sup> Also worth noting here is Baker's decision to keep Moonee, who is silent throughout the scene, in focus through the duration of shot one. The person most affected by the state's war on poverty will, of course, be the voiceless child in the background.

As scholars of neoliberalism and poverty in the United States have noted, welfare policies and reforms throughout the 1990s and 2000s were products of an emerging ethos that prioritized "personal responsibility" over reliance on public resources. Consistent with the core tenets of neoliberalism, these reforms worked under the assumption that individuals are responsible for their own successes and failures and that poverty is a result of poor choices and moral failings. Absent from this ideology is the role that neighborhoods, and the absence of neighborhoods (as we see in *The Florida Project*), play in creating conditions that lead to persistent poverty. As Patrick Sharkey's recent work has demonstrated, data gleaned from the 1960s onward shows that, despite civil rights protections and periods of economic prosperity, inequality has been passed down from one generation to the next. Poor Americans have achieved no upward mobility. He explains, "The American ghetto appears to be inherited. In the same way that genetic background and financial wealth are passed down from parents to children, the neighborhood environments in which black and white Americans live have been passed down across generations."<sup>21</sup> Placing Sharkey's work alongside what Scott W. Allard identifies as the "changing geography of poverty," in which the suburbs and not the inner cities are increasingly becoming home to the poor,<sup>22</sup> reveals how inherited poverty moves transiently in city spaces in the twenty-first century. Moonee, as the visual focal point in the scene discussed above, stands to inherit her mother's poverty. However, what is significant and disturbing about Baker's portrayal of poverty in *The Florida Project* is that Moonee and her mother—living transiently in a neoliberal instantiation of public housing—are placeless in their poverty and lack the security that may have been provided by functional welfare and/or housing systems. Moving just outside of the urban/suburban dialectic within which Sharkey and Allard work, Baker's characters exist in a nonplace, to use Marc Augé's term, characterized by financial precarity, the absence of rooted community, and real and symbolic immobility.<sup>23</sup>

### Internalizing Neoliberal Rationale

More than simply critiquing neoliberal systems and policies that fail to provide for individuals like Halley and Moonee, Baker's film takes steps to implicate viewers in the logic and the processes that sustain inequality in

American cities. Some viewers may be tempted to read Halley as an unlikable figure; she is crude, insolent, discourteous, and combative from the film's first frame to its last. She is also, however, trapped in poverty and lacks the resources to pull herself and her daughter out of the impossible circumstances in which she finds herself. In depicting the desperate measures that Halley takes to provide for her daughter—including sex work, theft, and physical assault—the film places viewers in the uncomfortable position of having to determine the extent to which Halley is a product of her environment and, simultaneously, the extent to which she has exacted her own ruin through her “irresponsible” behavior. Viewers may wonder why, if Baker’s aim is to critique neoliberal systems that exacerbate inequality, Halley is not framed more explicitly as a powerless victim of these systems. I argue here that Baker’s complex framing of Halley—who is simultaneously a victim of America’s war on poverty and a flawed human being who makes regrettable decisions—invites viewers to both sympathize with and exercise moral judgments against her behavior; in this process, viewers are themselves interpellated as neoliberal subjects who may unknowingly mobilize the logic of neoliberalism as they balance the moral conflicts that define her character.

By involving viewers in this logic, the film operates on ontological levels that replicate the work of neoliberalism, both in the film’s diegetic space and in the world beyond it. As I have addressed above, the ontological phase of neoliberalism is characterized by the internalization of neoliberal rationale—what Jamie Peck calls “neoliberal reason”—through a totalizing process that colonizes the domain of subjectivity and, on institutional levels, shapes future regulatory restructuring and “free-market liberation.”<sup>24</sup> Channeling Foucault’s ideas from his lectures in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Wendy Brown argues that neoliberalism depends upon a rationale in which individuals prioritize neoliberal principles of profit and efficiency, thereby giving rise to a new species of the human: *homo economicus*. Embodying this ethos, individuals pursue public policy that intensifies inequality by locating wealth in the private sector and depleting the public sector of funds and public spaces that are vital to those in need.<sup>25</sup> For Brown, at the heart of neoliberalism is “a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms,”<sup>26</sup> “an order of normative reason that, when it becomes ascendant, takes shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life.”<sup>27</sup> Neoliberalism is, therefore, a *way of being* that depends upon exercising modes of reason, rationality, and judgment that prioritize economic fitness; *homo economicus* could be said to *practice* neoliberalism by embodying this ethos.

Building on these foundational theories of neoliberalism and political subjectivity, Jane Elliott’s recent work on personhood and subjectivity in the twenty-first century helps to clarify how internal logics serve to reconfigure attitudes toward human agency and personal responsibility. Elliott’s work centers on the concept of “suffering agency,” a condition under neoliberalism in which

individuals “must make agonized binary choices between horrific options,” the outcomes of which prove existentially significant and are often matters of life and death.<sup>28</sup> Crucial to this formulation is the idea that subjects are not powerless or without agency in their capacity for self-determination; rather, they are imbued with an *excess of agency* as they weigh equally undesirable options. Elliott discusses how, under ontological regimes that valorize economic rationale, suffering agency becomes regarded as “a universal facet of human life itself.”<sup>29</sup> To be human under neoliberalism, argues Elliott, is to embrace and exercise hyper-agency amid increasingly dire economic conditions. Worth noting is that threat and risk are unevenly applied across economic contexts and that those on society’s margins are therefore much more likely to experience agency not as liberation, but as suffering.

Elliott’s framing of subjectivity and personhood is useful for understanding how viewers, even as they are clearly meant to sympathize with Halley’s predicament, may be susceptible to internalizing the logic of neoliberalism in their assessment of her character and the difficult choices she is forced to make. When suffering is understood as a “universal facet of human life itself,” the conditions that produce suffering are often uncritically accepted as the brutal and unforgiving substance of reality itself. Mark Fisher calls this process “reflexive impotence,” a condition in which individuals accede to a perceived state of powerlessness amid the seemingly overwhelming forces of late capitalism; in the fashion of a self-fulfilling prophecy, those who accept this reality are also responsible for producing it. To follow Fisher’s thinking, when capitalist realism takes root, institutional critique is replaced by cultures that pathologize human behavior. Individuals, not institutions, are seen as responsible for social problems.<sup>30</sup> Fisher’s commentary extends broadly across the ontological landscape of neoliberalism, and to imagine that viewers of *The Florida Project* are exempt from or exterior to this logic is to misunderstand its totalizing reach as an ontology that shapes every facet of human life, within and without the domain of representation.

Baker interpellates viewers into these neoliberal subject positions through his complex renderings of Halley’s character, challenging us to explore the affective dissonance produced by our conflicting desires to read her as both a victim of her circumstances and the architect of her ruin. The moral crux of the film—which emerges in the final act—concerns whether Halley should be allowed to maintain custody of her daughter in light of her violent behavior, her history of sex work, and her financial insecurity. In presenting this moral dilemma at the film’s conclusion, Baker invites viewers to question Halley’s fitness as a mother and as a member of the community, a question made legitimate only by the flagrantly combative behavior she exhibits throughout the film. Even as viewers empathize with her decidedly human shortcomings, they may find themselves participating in a logic that normalizes suffering and pathologizes poverty by locating in Halley’s agency the source of her failures. Daring viewers to participate in this dehumanizing logic, Baker’s realistic framing of his characters

creates opportunities to dwell in the messy complexities and contradictions of neoliberalism.

Despite her many endearing qualities, Halley fails as a subject under the logic of neoliberalism. David Chandler and Julian Reid describe the neoliberal subject as an individual stripped of political agency whose fitness within a neoliberal landscape is dependent on resilience and adaptability. Lacking belief in the power to challenge or shape the systems and institutions that comprise an impossibly complex institutional landscape, the neoliberal subject only believes in their capacity to *respond* to institutional power. The perfect neoliberal subject, in Chandler and Reid's words, is a "resilient, humble, disempowered being that lives a life of permanent ignorance and insecurity."<sup>31</sup> Viewers confronting Halley's fitness as a mother may be tempted to assess her character based on this neoliberal logic, which quite conclusively frames her as a failed subject who has inadequately adapted to her environment. According to this neoliberal logic, Halley lacks resilience, which provides a simple and convenient way to explain her failures. Living in precarity and perpetually exercising suffering agency, Halley is furthermore vulnerable, a category of neoliberal subjectivity that Chandler and Reid describe as emerging from one's inability to adapt to their environment. Vulnerable subjects, like Halley, who prove insufficiently resilient, are dangerous insofar as they lack "sound" decision-making capacity<sup>32</sup> and are subsequently unpredictable in their behavior. Antagonistic to a mode of thinking that prioritizes economic efficiency, such individuals unknowingly work to impugn the idea that neoliberal rationale is innate, ubiquitous, and fundamental to the human subject.

### Markets and Morals

When viewers confront the moral dilemma surrounding the decision to remove Moonee into foster care, part of the calculation may rest on their inclination to read Halley as an individual who cannot adapt to her environment. As an obstacle to neoliberal progress through her vulnerability and her propensity for making "poor decisions," Halley may also be read, through this logic, as unfit for motherhood. In this equation, one's fitness as a mother becomes conflated with one's failure to embody the ethos of *homo economicus*. In *Family Values*, Melinda Cooper explains how, with the embrace of welfare capitalism in the 1960s, the idea of the family was strategically reinvented around "private family responsibility," an amalgam of neoliberal atomistic individualism and socially conservative traditional morality.<sup>33</sup> The family, tethered to politics and economics, thus became a conduit for traditional morality. Wendy Brown describes this alignment of politics, economics, and morality as the "markets-and-morals project of neoliberalism,"<sup>34</sup> which, alongside disinvestment in social infrastructure, seeks to create "moral-economic familial units" responsible for fostering traditional morality.<sup>35</sup> In this relationship, the family functions as a site of both moral investment and, in its failed state, moral censure.

This neoliberal ethos of "private family responsibility" factors into viewers' assessment of Halley's character. Depicted realistically as a flawed and complex

human being whose behavior jeopardizes the familial unit, Halley's actions invite readers to exercise a perspective that locates her failings in moral terms. From this "markets-and-morals" perspective, Halley's position as a mother intensifies the degree to which viewers operating in this mode would locate her failings not just in economic terms, but in moral ones that ultimately disqualify her for motherhood.<sup>36</sup> The complicating consideration here is that, despite her failures as a neoliberal subject, Halley clearly loves her daughter and does, indeed, provide for her basic needs. The only moment in the film when Moonee displays anguish over her situation—this moment is also not coincidentally the height of the film's pathos—occurs when she realizes she is being separated from her mother. In considering the moral dimensions of this separation, viewers must determine the extent to which they privilege a logic that frames Halley as an unfit mother because of her failures to adapt and contribute to a challenging economic environment. I want to suggest here that Baker invites viewers to participate in a neoliberal logic that would justify Moonee's separation from her mother, only to challenge that logic by depicting the human cost of abiding by it. In locating morality in the "private familial unit," the film, like the neoliberal markets-and-morals project, strategically dissolves the boundary between the economic public domain and the affective domestic sphere. Viewers experiencing affective attachments to Halley's character thereby find themselves in a space of moral ambiguity resultant from the attempt of neoliberalism to colonize both sides of the purported public/private divide.<sup>37</sup> Witnessing the impending separation between mother and daughter, viewers can only feel on a humanistic level that a great injustice has been done, but the source of that injustice may be obfuscated by the indeterminate space in which we are left to process it.

In this way, *The Florida Project* invites viewers into a reflexive posture in which they employ a neoliberal rationale only to locate the limits of that rationale. The affective dissonance produced through this practice exposes the problems and costs of abiding by a mode of thinking that determines human value solely in economic terms. The character in the film who best embodies this dissonance—and who occupies a moral space similar to that of the viewer—is the kind-hearted and conscientious motel manager, Bobby, who cares deeply about his tenants, demonstrates compassion throughout the film, and, with no other options available, initiates the process through which Moonee is removed into foster care. In neoliberal times that have seen sharp decreases in funding for public housing and social services for the poor, it falls to conscientious characters like Bobby, individuals in the private sector who are themselves exercising suffering agency, to provide for the poor. In fact, one component of the neoliberal argument for decreasing funding for public services rests on the assumption that individuals in the private sector will fill the gaps—through charitable giving or philanthropic work—if public funding is diverted from programs that aid those in need.<sup>38</sup> The tragedy, of course, is that Bobby cannot make these provisions; he lacks the financial resources, he is ill-equipped to deal with complex familial and social conflicts, and, as the manager of the motel, he must prioritize the interests of the



business over the well-being of his tenants. Furthermore, because he is closer in class and social status to his residents than to the patrons of the nearby Walt Disney World, the moral obligation to help those in need—by sheer proximity to poverty—rests on him. The wealthy, who fly overhead in helicopters or drive past the motel in luxury automobiles, are not forced to confront poverty and are therefore morally exempted from dealing with it on micro or macro levels. Progressive tax systems that place a greater burden on the wealthy for providing for the poor (through welfare and social services) help to alleviate these moral obligations on individuals like Bobby, but such systems quite evidently do not exist in the neoliberal environment that Baker's characters inhabit. Instead, each character occupies a space of moral responsibility that locates, by necessity, their own survival above the well-being of those around them.

The film's final scenes demonstrate the devastating consequences of embracing such neoliberal policies and practices that exacerbate inequality and simultaneously render poverty invisible. Frantic after escaping from the social workers at the motel, Moonee tearfully attempts to explain to her friend, Jancey, that she is being taken away from her mother, but she "can't say it," suggesting that the separation is so traumatic that it pushes beyond linguistic limits. Instead, she squeezes out a single word, "bye," indicating that she understands that this will be the last time she sees her friend. Instead of returning the gesture, Jancey grabs her hand and the two girls run beyond the limits of the motel property, through the nearby strip malls and privatized city spaces, alongside the fast-moving automobiles on the thoroughfare, and finally into Walt Disney World, where they push through throngs of well-to-do tourists. Their journey ends in front of Cinderella's Castle, the iconic center of the Magic Kingdom theme park at Walt Disney World [Figure 5]. The two girls stare up at the castle for a moment, and then the film cuts to the closing credits.



**Figure 5:** The Magic Kingdom. *The Florida Project*, June Pictures, A24, 2017

This final scene functions as the key to Baker's critique of a neoliberal system that disingenuously promises prosperity while in fact exacerbating inequality. Baker uses several filmic strategies to convey to viewers that this surreal conclusion—a conclusion inconsistent in tone with the rest of the film—can only be read as a critique of the impossible fantasy produced by neoliberalism in the twenty-first century, which privileges privatization and corporate investment over the needs of the poor. At the moment when Jancey grabs Moonee's hand, Baker, for the first time in the film, uses nondiegetic music, an orchestral rendition of Kool and the Gang's 1980 hit "Celebration," as the soundtrack for the girls' desperate trip to the Magic Kingdom. The irony, of course, is that, unless the viewer has subscribed to a neoliberal logic that frames Moonee's removal into foster care as beneficial for the child, there is nothing to celebrate. In fact, Moonee at this moment finds herself in the midst of the most traumatic episode of her life, which is hardly cause for celebration.

Concurrent with the film's surprising introduction of a musical score, Baker in this scene transitions from 35-mm film stock to digital video filmed on an iPhone 6S Plus. Speaking in an interview about the logic underlying this decision, Baker explains, "[the iPhone 6S Plus] has what's called a rolling shutter, and it gave it this hyperactivity and a very different, jarring feel, and we liked that. We could have shot it on [an iPhone] 5s and made it more smooth, but we actually wanted to the audience to know that we were jumping from 35 mm to another medium."<sup>39</sup> This abrupt movement from the lush and fluid 35 mm, running at twenty-four frames per second, to the relatively grainy, stuttering iPhone video stock disrupts the sense of reality produced throughout the film, thrusting viewers into a surreal filmic space.<sup>40</sup> Baker's strategy here suggests that viewers are not meant to regard the girls' journey into the Magic Kingdom within the same diegetic space as the rest of the film; rather, their journey offers fantastical closure to a narrative incapable of providing happy endings.

As the girls stare in wonder at the shimmering castle and the film cuts to the closing credits, Baker leaves viewers to ponder the meaning of the girls' surreal journey into the Magic Kingdom. Is Cinderella's fairy-tale castle a symbol of the opportunity awaiting Moonee as she begins a new stage in life removed from the destructive exigencies of poverty, or is the castle—the iconic centerpiece of Walt Disney World—a symbol of the fairy tale of opportunity that is always visible, but never attainable, for those on society's margins? The former reading depends upon viewers exercising neoliberal rationale, as Moonee's future can only be secured by removing her from the financially destructive tendencies of her mother. Within the film's indeterminate moral space between the public and the private, this reading suggests that Moonee's financial well-being supersedes her emotional comfort and the inviolability of her relationship with her mother. The castle in the final shot represents a brighter future that awaits Moonee as she enters foster care and escapes poverty. The latter reading, on the other hand, involves a more pointed critique of the myths that fuel neoliberalism—that anyone, with hard work and determination, can achieve "the dream," captured

by the enchanting castle. The tragedy, of course, is that Moonee will likely never surmount the systemic obstacles that deny her the opportunity for growth and self-realization. This moment, as she is surrounded by the well-to-do patrons of the theme park, may in fact be the closest she ever gets to entering the middle class.

The surreal qualities of the scene contribute more readily to this latter reading, as Baker quite clearly seeks to frame the vision of possibility contained in the castle ironically as a fantasy produced by neoliberal corporatism. The Walt Disney Corporation, the company behind both the Magic Kingdom and the sprawling culture of commodification associated with Disney, is also the symbolic corporate presence responsible for producing the asymmetries that viewers witness in the film. As the girls gaze longingly at the castle, viewers may recognize in the castle the spectacle of corporatism that has transformed American life over the past several decades and that has created the consumer desire that we see reflected in the girls' faces. Ironically, the very object of that desire is the source of these characters' disenfranchisement. The rationale that would foster the rise of Amazon, Google, Apple, and any number of other megacorporations was executed through the defunding of public services and programs for the poor. Whereas we often think of neoliberalism as committed to "scaling back" public spending, it bears noting that neoliberal governance is equally committed to "rolling out" programs that foster corporate growth. These are two sides of the same coin: the public monies that would support programs for the poor are increasingly committed to policies and programs designed to support private investment—through tax abatements, decreases in the corporate tax rate, the building of public infrastructure necessary for economic growth, and public-private partnerships that minimize risk and maximize profits for developers. As Mark Purcell notes, these policies begin in conservative think tanks but quickly make their way to local and state governing bodies in which decision-making authority is often given to panels of business leaders and economic experts rather than elected representatives, who are perceived to be ill-equipped to confront the complexities associated with urban development.<sup>41</sup> Once these policies are put into action, they determine the shape and politics of urban space. In Baker's film, the corporate presence of Disney is total. While the girls symbolically confront the source of the fantasy in the film's conclusion, neoliberal corporatism may be said to have permeated the girls' ontological realities throughout the film to the extent that the privatized motel in which they live, the Magic Castle, is itself a symbolic extension of both Cinderella's Castle and the Magic Kingdom. The corporate landscape has become the very substance of these characters' lived reality, and because that reality is omnipresent, it remains largely invisible and transparent. Only in the final scene might we claim that the source of the fantasy has been laid bare, if not to Moonee, then at least to the viewer, who must consider the moral costs of embracing a rationale that privileges economic growth over protections for the poor.

Having taught this film at the undergraduate level, I found that students are quick to blame Halley for the tragedy that befalls her at the film's conclusion. Born into a logic of neoliberalism, these students read Halley as being unfit for motherhood largely because, in her efforts to provide for her daughter, she places Moonee in compromising situations. It is Halley's responsibility, these students argue, to find steady employment and thereby provide for her daughter. By framing Halley as a combative and contrarian character, Baker certainly invites readers to make snap judgments of her character; the viewer's initial impulse might be to assess her character according to a logic that aligns failure as a mother alongside failure as *homo economicus*. A more careful consideration of both the environment that Baker's characters inhabit and the filmic strategies he employs, however, inspires modes of thinking that complicate this neoliberal rationale. Viewers who are attentive to the more subtle mechanics of Baker's film will identify a counter-critique that challenges the very logic that the film invites viewers to deploy. Working against a neoliberal rationale that has reconfigured how we understand ourselves and our world, viewers may experience affective dissonance in their processing of the film's contradictory messages and indeterminate moral spaces. To employ Rachel Greenwald Smith's term, the film produces "impersonal feelings," or complex affective responses that are resistant to the market logic that drives emotional investment in popular narrative media.<sup>42</sup> Incompatible with conventional modes of affective consumption, impersonal feelings work to deconstruct the transparent neoliberal logic responsible for shaping subjectivity and political life in the twenty-first century.

Operating on these dissonant affective levels, *The Florida Project* captures the contradictions endemic to late capitalism, contradictions that are fully integrated in the social world that the film depicts as well as present in its interpretive frame. Walter Benn Michaels explains how the intensifying inequality and the erosion of the middle class occurring under neoliberalism produces dissonant and contradictory feelings toward the unemployed, who are perceived as objects of both empathy (for their poverty) and resentment (for the fact that their growing numbers drive down wages in capitalist economies).<sup>43</sup> This affective dissonance might be similar in kind to what viewers experience as they confront Halley's character, who simultaneously inspires both empathy and resentment in viewers attempting to process the complexity of her predicament and the film's framing of that predicament. For Michaels, the dissonance produced through these contradictory affects—what he calls "the beauty of a social problem"—enables new heuristic modes capable of laying bare the machinery of inequality under neoliberalism. He writes, "To feel the beauty of the problem... is precisely not to feel the pathos produced by the problem; it's to feel instead the structure that makes the problem."<sup>44</sup> Baker's immersive strategies in *The Florida Project* offer such opportunities for structural critique. Moving beyond representation, the film invites viewers into contradictory and dissonant affective spaces that expose, in Michaels' words, "the beauty of the problem," or the divergent impulses that compel individuals to adopt simultaneously inclusive (empathy)

and exclusive (resentment) postures in relation to poverty and class difference. Significantly, Michaels identifies affect (“to feel”) as the mode through which structural inequality may be perceived. In the case of Baker’s film, “the structure that makes the problem” only becomes apparent when viewers are actively and immersively incorporated into the moral logic of neoliberalism, a logic replete with unresolved contradictions and antihumanistic textures that must be felt to be understood.

Baker’s critique of the American housing crisis in *The Florida Project* therefore begins, but does not end, with housing; indeed, the housing crisis emerges as an outgrowth of a neoliberal logic that reaches into every domain of human life, and the film renders visible the social and infrastructural detritus produced under this logic. The purple Magic Castle motel, itself the depleted aspiration of a failed tourist economy, materializes the social wreckage that Baker stages through his desperate characters. Importantly, the film’s realism enters viewers into these characters’ lives in ways that illuminate the cruel structure of hegemonic neoliberalism, a structure in which all participants, in one way or another, and to varying degrees, are complicit. That these characters exist at all undercuts the promise of neoliberal reforms claiming that, once freed from dependency-producing public support, individuals will climb out of poverty. Such upward mobility is beyond the horizon of possibility for Halley and the other residents of the motel, as they remain trapped in responsibilizing cultures that ensure their continued domination. And yet these characters—and the populations of disinherited Americans that they represent—persist. Deemed illegitimate under the neoliberal markets-and-morals project, the social formations that they produce—the friendships and alliances that emerge throughout the film—contribute significantly to the film’s affective power. Indeed, the loss of these marginalized social forms, staged symbolically through Halley and Moonee’s traumatic separation, registers on affective levels that enable viewers to recognize the cruel logic of neoliberalism.

The depleted public sphere depicted in *The Florida Project* would prove instrumental for the antidemocratic politics of the Trump era, which relied upon a calculus that prioritized the economic over the human and the market over the social. Casting the political always in terms of the economic, according to Wendy Brown, results in the hollowing out of both “liberal democratic reason and a democratic imaginary that would exceed it.”<sup>45</sup> Within this environment, “fundamentally human capacities to think, imagine, know, create, and act purposively in the world are being pathologized as expressions of humanity’s hubris.”<sup>46</sup> The “natural order” is one that is openly hostile to the fostering of democratic agency. In *The Florida Project*, the neoliberal environment no doubt precludes the characters’ attempts to exercise such agency, but it is the film’s formal and narrative mechanics that invite viewers into an affective space that exposes the glaring limitations of neoliberal rationality, as viewers momentarily assume a posture in which they exercise neoliberal reason in their condemnation of a vulnerable family. How to confront the totalizing machinery of neoliberalism

has been an enduring concern for scholars working in this field, but perhaps what Baker's film teaches us is that to understand the dehumanizing logic of neoliberalism, above all else, it must be *felt*.

### Notes

1. David Madden and Peter Marcuse, *In Defense of Housing: The Politics of Crisis* (New York: Verso, 2016), 26.

2. Madden and Marcuse, *In Defense of Housing*, 12.

3. "The Florida Project" was the name given to what would become Walt Disney World in its planning phase in the 1960s. In *Married to the Mouse*, Richard E. Foglesong describes the unprecedented union of corporate investment and public governance that was forged in the second half of the twentieth century between the Walt Disney Corporation and the city of Orlando. Foglesong reads this public-private partnership as a cautionary tale that underscores the pitfalls of neoliberal urban development. Indeed, the tourist economy emerging from this union would shape the growth of gated communities and, in more abstract terms, the prioritization of private over public spaces. See Richard E. Foglesong, *Married to the Mouse: Walt Disney World and Orlando* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

4. Baker's film centers around the day-to-day lives of Halley and Moonee, both of whom are white. In locating precarity situationally in terms of whiteness, *The Florida Project* points to the ways in which inequality under neoliberalism has encroached upon the otherwise protected domain of whiteness. At the same time, in depicting white protagonists experiencing the brutal realities of neoliberalism, the film operates on racialized affective registers that arguably reinforce claims to vulnerability traditionally afforded to whiteness.

5. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 5.

6. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 199.

7. Samuel Stein, *Capital City: Gentrification and the Real Estate State* (New York: Verso, 2019), 5.

8. Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 128.

9. John R. Parkinson, *Democracy and Public Space: The Physical Sites of Democratic Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 2.

10. Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith, "Four Phases of Neoliberalism and Literature: An Introduction," in *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*, ed. Mitchum Huehls and Rachel Greenwald Smith (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 9.

11. Huehls and Smith, "Four Phases of Neoliberalism and Literature," 10.

12. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 121.

13. In *Dying of Whiteness*, Jonathan M. Metzler describes how the conservative political movements of the Trump era successfully mobilized low-income, white Americans to advance political initiatives that worked directly against the interests of those populations. Tapping into "white racial resentment" and thereby consolidating notions of racial difference, these movements framed everything from conservative tax bills to health-care strategies to pro-gun legislation as cultural imperatives foundational to white identity. While Baker's film stages the depoliticization of everyday life under conditions of white poverty, it bears noting that the Trump era saw the opposite: a repoliticization of everyday life through the fomenting of political action and violence under the rubric of white racial resentment. See Jonathan M. Metzler, *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment Is Killing America's Heartland* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

14. Steven Shaviro, "The 'Bitter Necessity' of Debt: Neoliberal Finance and the Society of Control," May 1, 2010, <http://www.shaviro.com/Othertexts/Debt.pdf>, 9.

15. Lenette Azzi-Lessing, *Behind from the Start: How America's War on the Poor Is Harming Our Most Vulnerable Children* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 36.

16. Under the Trump administration, federal work requirements became even more punitive for individuals seeking food assistance under the federal government's long-standing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which provides food assistance to individuals in need. Beginning April 1, 2020, the federal government limited states' ability to extend eligibility waivers to unemployed or underemployed "able-bodied adults without dependents." See Maggie Dickinson, "The Ripple Effects of Taking SNAP Benefits from One Person," *The Atlantic*, December 10, 2019, <http://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2019/12/trump-snap-food-stamps-cuts/603367/>. Were it not for extensions granted under the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, almost 700,000 Americans would have been denied food assistance under Trump's rule. The rule will go into effect once the emergency legislation expires. See Jessica Shahin, "SNAP – Families First Coronavirus Response Act and Impact on Time Limit for Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWDs)," US Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, March 20, 2020, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/ffcra-impact-time-limit-abawds>.

17. Azzi-Lessing, *Behind from the Start*, 25.

18. Azzi-Lessing, *Behind from the Start*, 53.

19. Ronald Reagan's conjuring of the "welfare queen" in the 1970s and 1980s strategically deployed race to shape Americans' views of the welfare system as being exploited by morally corrupt racial minorities. Tapping into racist perceptions of African-American women, in particular, this narrative worked to undermine faith in the effectiveness of public assistance, thereby authorizing dramatic reductions in funding for social welfare programs. See Azzi-Lessing, *Behind from the Start*, 34. In *The Florida Project*, it is ironically a white woman, Halley, who encounters the dysfunctional wreckage of a welfare system dismantled over the course of several decades by racist cultures of whiteness.

20. *The Florida Project* premiered in the prestigious Directors' Fortnight section of the Cannes Film Festival in 2017, and A24 has been diligent about calling attention to this fact since its theatrical release in October of that year. The DVD packaging features the Cannes affiliation, evidently appealing to festival film audiences that, as research has shown, are statistically highly educated and affluent. See Andrea Báez and María Devesa, "Segmenting and Profiling Attendees of a Film Festival," *International Journal of Event and Festival Management* 5, no. 2 (2014): 108. Since its release, the film has enjoyed widespread distribution on Netflix, Amazon Prime, YouTube, and other streaming services, but its slow pacing and minimalist plotting hardly align with the consumption expectations of mainstream audiences.

21. Patrick Sharkey, *Stuck in Place: Urban Neighborhoods and the End of Progress toward Racial Equality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 9.

22. Scott W. Allard, *Places in Need: The Changing Geography of Poverty* (New York: The Russell Sage Foundation, 2017), 7.

23. Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (New York: Verso, 2009), 63.

24. Jamie Peck, *Constructions of Neoliberal Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 7.

25. Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 33.

26. Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 17.

27. Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 30.

28. Jane Elliott, *The Microeconomic Mode: Political Subjectivity in Contemporary Popular Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 1.

29. Elliott, *The Microeconomic Mode*, 136.

30. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Washington: Zer0 Books, 2009), 21.



31. David Chandler and Julian Reid, *The Neoliberal Subject: Resilience, Adaptation and Vulnerability* (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2016), 3.
32. Chandler and Reid, *The Neoliberal Subject*, 122.
33. Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (New York: Zone Books, 2017), 21–22.
34. Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 15.
35. Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism*, 39.
36. User comments in online discussion forums reveal the extent to which many viewers fault Halley for her perceived moral failings. On IMDB and Moviechat.org, users describe Halley as “garbage,” “white trash,” “a horrible person with no values,” “a good-for-nothing mother,” and countless variations on these themes. In these contexts, Halley’s whiteness interestingly authorizes forms of moral censure that are impervious to the charge of “racism.” Seemingly freed from the constraints of political correctness attached to race, Halley’s detractors levy classist slurs that more or less abide by the logic and ideological foundations of neoliberalism. Notions of traditional morality reside at the heart of these judgments, and readers need only scan these forums to get a sense for how the markets-and-morals project has shaped viewer perspectives.
37. In *After Critique*, Mitchum Huehls discusses how distinctions between the public and the private have become obsolete with the ubiquitous rise of public-private partnerships. He explains, “On the one hand, the everyday workings of the neoliberal city blur and undermine any meaningful distinction between public and private space: the true nature of neoliberal space is its hybrid, public-private doubleness. On the other hand, neoliberalism encourages and deploys concepts, rhetoric, and discourse that represent public and private as purified, mutually exclusive domains. By capturing the entire public-private relationship, neoliberalism ensures that arguments favoring the public over the private and those favoring the private over the public will ultimately reinforce its core values.” See Mitchum Huehls, *After Critique: Twenty-First-Century Fiction in a Neoliberal Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 63.
38. Michael D. Tanner, “Why Is There So Much Government Hostility to Private Charity?” *National Review*, January 10, 2018, <http://www.nationalreview.com/2018/01/government-hostility-charity-must-end/>.
39. Ashley Lee, “‘The Florida Project’: Director Sean Baker Explains How and Why He Shot that Ending,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 11, 2017, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/florida-project-ending-director-sean-baker-explains-meaning-how-he-did-it-1047215>.
40. Apple’s marketing for the iPhone has consistently framed the device as integral to managing intimate relations and helping users to realize their dreams. The company’s marketing campaign in 2013 and 2014, in particular, channeled these ideals, depicting children using the iPhone’s video production capabilities to connect with loved ones across space and time. As a filmic technology in *The Florida Project*, the iPhone’s recognizable video stock might resonate with viewers on these consumer levels, imbricating them further in the corporate fantasy—loaded with affective consumer desire—that the film’s conclusion seeks to capture.
41. Mark Purcell, *Recapturing Democracy: Neoliberalization and the Struggle for Alternative Urban Futures* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 27.
42. Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 2.
43. Walter Benn Michaels, “The Beauty of a Social Problem (e.g. unemployment),” *Twentieth-Century Literature* 57, no. 3/4 (Fall/Winter 2011): 319.
44. Michaels, “The Beauty of a Social Problem (e.g. unemployment),” 320.
45. Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 42.
46. Chandler and Reid, *The Neoliberal Subject*, 6.

