Tragedy's Illumination of Capitalism and Masculinity on SHOWTIME's *Dexter*

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Degree of a Masters of Arts in the Department of English

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Thesis Abstract (English Version):

This thesis project interrogates the political contradictions revealed by the application of a tragic theoretical paradigm to SHOWTIME's *Dexter* (2006). As an exemplification of the 'complex' and 'unsafe' narrative styles of 21st century American serial television drama, I argue that *Dexter* represents the ideological paradoxes of capitalism and patriarchy in a way that is not decipherable under a melodramatic framework. My analysis focuses on the frustrated agency of neoliberal and masculine subjects oriented towards both individual freedom and collective belonging, in a social order that tragically instrumentalizes their affective engagements. I begin by questioning Linda Williams' influential argument for the dominance of the melodramatic mode in American popular culture by putting her work in dialogue with Terry Eagleton and William Storm's more flexible conceptions of tragic experience. I then consider the various official and unofficial forms of labour undertaken by Dexter that strive to enable his murderous impulse, suggesting that his emulation of the neoliberal working norms of freelance labour and entrepreneurial subjectivity propose that his vigilantism reacts to alienating labour conditions. A final scrutiny of Dexter's discordant effort to occupy both 'old' and 'new' forms of masculinity - the supposedly out-dated 'breadwinner' archetype identified by Barbara Ehrenreich, and the more recent notion of emotionally engaged fatherhood - exposes how neoliberalism paradoxically asks men to maintain both versions while pursuing self-interest for a purportedly public good. The conclusion of this work reiterates that Dexter's performative undertaking of extra labour reveals the tragic structures of both capitalism and patriarchy, because Dexter's personal connections within these spheres become inauthentic when appropriated as a façade meant to enable his navigation of the social order. A last evaluation of the series' finale examines the difficulty of concluding television serials, the tragic requirement of personalized violence for individuals living in a society that refutes the revolutionary potential of collective action, and the necessity of dialectical thought while interpreting tragic 'inevitability.'

Thèse Abstraite (Version Française):
Ce projet de thèse s'interroge sur les contradictions politiques révélées par l'application d'un paradigme théorique tragique à l'émission Dexter de Showtime (2006). En tant qu'exemple de styles narratifs 'complexes' et 'dangereux' des séries dramatiques de la télévision étasunienne au 21st siècle, je soutiens que Dexter représente les paradoxes idéologiques du capitalisme et le patriarcat d'une manière indéchiffrable à l'intérieur d'un cadre mélodramatique. Mon analyse se concentre sur l'agencement frustré de sujets néolibéraux et masculins orienté à la fois vers la liberté individuelle et vers l'appartenance collective, à l'intérieur d'un ordre social qui instrumentalise tragiquement leurs engagements affectifs. Je commence par questionner l'argumentaire influent de Linda Williams sur la dominance du mode mélodramatique dans la culture populaire américaine en mettant son travail en relation avec les conceptions plus souples de Terry Eagleton et de William Storm de l'expérience tragique. Je considère ensuite les différentes formes officielles et non officielles du travail entrepris par Dexter qui permettent l'activation de son impulsion meurtrière, suggérant ainsi que son émulation des normes néolibérales du travail, avec son travail indépendant et sa subjectivité entrepreneuriale, propose que son vigilantisme est en réaction à des conditions de travail aliénantes. Un examen final de l'effort contradictoire en Dexter à occuper autant les 'anciennes' et les 'nouvelles' formes de masculinité - le 'soutien de famille', archétype prétendument obsolète identifié par Barbara Ehrenich, et la notion plus récente de la paternité engagée émotionnellement - expose comment le néolibéralisme demande paradoxalement aux hommes de maintenir ces deux versions tout en poursuivant ses intérêts personels prétendument pour le bien public. La conclusion de ce travail rappelle que l'entreprise laborieuse édictée par Dexter en dehors du travail révèle les structures tragiques du capitalisme et du patriarcat étant donné que les relations personnelles de Dexter dans ces domaines perdent leur authenticité quand nécessaire afin de faire façade destinée à permettre sa navigation de l'ordre social. Une dernière évaluation de l'épisode final de la série examine la difficulté de conclure les feuilletons télévisés, l'exigence tragique de la violence personnalisée pour les individus vivant dans une société réfutant le potentiel révolutionnaire de l'action collective et la nécessité de la pensée dialectique dans l'interprétation de l'inévitabilité tragique.

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Introduction:

Tragedy's illumination of Capitalism and Masculinity on SHOWTIME's *Dexter*

This thesis project engages with popular depictions of violence on contemporary American television to better understand the contradictions of late capitalism and patriarchy. SHOWTIME's *Dexter* (2006) is my central object of analysis, for its depiction of a protagonist who perfectly embodies the contrary demands imposed on masculine and neoliberal subjects. The series stages its complex anti-hero's resistance to the fatal consequences of non-normativity for those living within the confines of patriarchal capitalism. Working towards an understanding of *Dexter* as an exemplification of ideological paradox, this project argues that the series' evinces how tragic discourse offers an incredibly relevant and useful interpretive model for understanding dramatic serial narratives in the twenty-first century.

Formally, *Dexter* is a crime-drama that aired on subscription cable, as opposed to network television (on the pay-channel SHOWTIME to be specific). The program ran for eight seasons from 2006 to 2013, is comprised of twelve hour-long episodes each, and amounts to approximately ninety-six hours of content. It is also an adaptation of a series of novels by Jeff Lindsay of the same name, developed for television by James Manos Jr. (Showtime Networks Inc., 2016).

Narratively, the show centers on a protagonist who defies moral absolutes. A forensic analyst by day and serial killer by night, Dexter Morgan (played by Michael C. Hall) is initially painted as a contradictorily 'good' murderer by the series; he is a vigilante enforcer of the law, who both mimics and works to uphold a legal system that he himself hypocritically transgresses. He is a victim of profound and un-treated trauma,

which he uncovers progressively over the program's eight seasons. Dexter and the audience learn together by the end of the first season that, as a child, he was left in a pool of his mother's blood for three days after witnessing her brutal dismemberment by chainsaw, and then found and taken in by Harry Morgan, a homicide detective working for Miami Metro's Police Department.

It is crucial to note from the outset that Dexter's moral code is not of his own creation, but rather, has been crafted for him by his late (adoptive) father Harry, who, apparently noticing a violent predisposition in Dexter at a young age, teaches him how to channel his violent urges 'ethically.' The two central tenants of the code are as follows: 1) to take every precaution against getting caught, and 2) to maintain absolute certainty that those who he kills are murderers as well. Additionally, although Harry has technically passed away by the beginning of the series, his presence lingers on in Dexter's psyche, and the series frequently stages Dexter having imagined debates with Harry's apparition. Each season Dexter increasingly challenges the code's validity in their fantasy conversations, while he uncovers the truth of his own history.

Dexter's resistance to the code is not so much to do with the ethics of murder as such, as it is a conflict with the way in which the first tenet, in its requirement of absolute secrecy, denies him authentic connection and a sense of belonging. Harry's articulation of Dexter's murderous tendency as inevitable (as a result of his traumatic witnessing), invites us to read the series tragically. If Harry's code is considered an oracular prophesy externally imposed on Dexter, prescribing his non-normativity and proper outsider status, his resistance to it can be interpreted as a representation of the fate / free will dialectic integral to the tragic mode.

Even still, the fact that Dexter only murders those who fit into his personalized code proposes a concept of justice that is inherently flawed and fragmented. The series' premise requires that some criminals inevitably slip through the cracks of the legal system, which enables Dexter, in theory, to have retributive moral authority, even as he satiates his lust for violence. It is here that theorists may be tempted to read *Dexter* melodramatically – particularly through Linda Williams' claim that melodrama stages "private and individual acts […] as having the potential to restore justice and order" (Williams, *Melodrama Revised* 74).

The tragic lens adopted by this research project has been largely provoked by Williams' assertion that a televised recreation of 'tragedy' in a postmodern, late-capitalist context is simply not 'doable' (80 L. Williams, *On the Wire*). My first chapter, "Melodrama vs. Tragedy in "Complex Television,"" critiques a melodramatic reading of *Dexter*, favouring the tragic mode as a form that better reveals the show's depiction of the structural contradictions of late capitalism and patriarchy. Rather than sidestepping these structural issues, as melodrama does in its presentation of "characters who embody primary psychic roles organized in Manichean conflicts between good and evil" (77), the tragic collapses the categories of predestination and choice, and exposes "the incoherence [of the human responding] to the rigid oppositions of binary thought" (Carney 16). Tragic idioms usefully move beyond "vulgar determinism" to articulate "the experience of necessity [which is] itself a facet of loss, namely alienation from human agency" (Carney 11). This chapter focuses on the series' premise to evince that Harry's - and the social order he signifies - expectation that Dexter should personally respond to and

manage a pre-determined (and supposedly untreatable) desire to kill is best understood through the language of tragic paradox.

This section begins by tracing how the tragic status of shows like *Dexter* (a status often proclaimed by series creators themselves) can be related to new narrative structures in contemporary television. Recent televisual aspirations to tragedy run parallel to what has been termed narrative 'complexity' and narrative 'un-safety,' on dramatic serial TV, as writers intentionally demarcate their work from melodrama's morally dichotomized stylistics. After considering a possible melodramatic reading of *Dexter* according to Williams' framework, I unpack the program's morally complicated premise to oppose her argument for the dominance of the melodramatic mode in American Popular culture. I then explain my turn to William Storm's notion of 'The Tragic,' and how this concept usefully releases interpretation from the pressure to read tragedy according to its classical dramatic form. I subsequently link Storm's understanding of 'the tragic' as fragmentation arising out of both internal and external discord to Terry Eagleton's assertion that dialectical thought needs to be recovered in tragic discourse to make a case for the mode's political potential (163-164). Putting Storm and Eagleton in dialogue with one another generates the definition of the tragic taken up by this thesis project, which applies the dialectic between predestination and choice to the contrary promise of personal freedom within the constraints of neoliberal and patriarchal social order. This chapter finally refers to key ideas from trauma theory to uncover how shifting the way we think of dramatic character from a melodramatic to a tragic perspective negates an individualized reading of violent compulsion, and instead sees the consequences of untreated trauma as part of a larger social disorder.

My second chapter, "*Dexter* as a Tragic Anti-Hero Navigating Capitalism's Contradictions," further articulates the value of reading *Dexter* through a tragic operational aesthetic. This section begins my examination of the series' fourth season, which remains the narrative focal point of analysis for the duration of my thesis project, and explores the various forms of labour undertaken by Dexter to demonstrate how capitalism paradoxically promises (and fails) to deliver both personal autonomy and a sense of communal purposiveness to its subjects.

By uncovering how Dexter's official work in forensics strives to facilitate his primary desire to commit murder, this chapter asserts that Dexter essentially takes on the job structure of the neoliberal self-as-entrepreneur in response to the alienation of his employed labour on behalf of the state. His reparative 'work' as a serial killer is interpreted here as freelance labour, because Dexter implicitly takes on the second, private and unregulated shift of vigilantism for its promise of literal and temporal flexibility. This chapter also introduces a critical assertion that continues into the third chapter of this thesis, which is that Dexter's interest in the fourth Season's Trinity Killer exemplifies how his 'free' submission to the patriarchal family unit adds on an unexpected 'third' shift for Dexter, who consequently becomes the entrepreneurial subject of neoliberalism in his effort to portray a façade of normativity to avoid capture.

This section also traces the tangible and ideological shift that occurred from factory Fordism to the immaterial labour conditions of post-Fordist neoliberalism, and concludes with a close analysis of Dexter's performance of two subtypes of immaterial production in both his privatized and official apprehension of other killers: informational labour and affective labour. I finally consider how Dexter's identification with neoliberal

subjectivity seems to positively offer him an interpersonal network, but Dexter's undertaking of various forms of extra labour ultimately fails to provide him with authentic connection because of the constant necessity of his performance of normativity.

The third and final chapter of this thesis, "The Added Challenge of Masculinity under Capitalism's Contradictions," works to untangle Dexter's discordant occupation of two versions of patriarchal masculinity – specifically, what Barbara Ehreneich has coined the abandoned breadwinner archetype (12), and the more recent version of fatherhood that is asked to engage in emotional labour at home. I then introduce how neoliberalism paradoxically seems to encourage both versions, in its support of the (supposedly out-dated) breadwinner archetypal investment in self-interested activity outside the home, as well as the notion of marriage-as-work more in line with entrepreneurial subjectivity - and the more recent assertion that both genders are now expected to participate in emotional labour at home, albeit to varying degrees (Hochschild 163).

This section explores how the absorption of normativity into the identity of the individual occurs at the level of gender, which accords with the fragmenting effect that the performance of neoliberal selfhood has on its subjects. I argue that Dexter's struggle to live according to a redeeming moral code (exacting justice) and freely (by acting on his non-normative desires) is a fantasy of capitalism and patriarchy both: that individuals can pursue their self-interest while also serving the public good. This fantasy is frustrated because self-interest, whether pursued via capitalism or patriarchy, occurs at the expense of those exploited by, or dominated within, these systems.

Accordingly, this chapter narrows in on Dexter's interest in the Trinity killer's seemingly successful performance of normativity and affective labour within a traditional

family unit, to make a case for the social contradiction of normative masculinity, which asks male subjects to participate in exactly the same sort of instrumental use of others required by Dexter as a serial killer evading capture. I then interrogate what Roger Horrock has called "the paradox of patriarchy" (25) by looking at Dexter's undertaking of both old and new versions of masculinity, and at how male dominance in the public sphere concurrently disempowers men by restricting their emotional expression (25-26).

I conclude this chapter by conducting a close analysis of the marital dynamic between Dexter and his wife Rita in the fourth season and throughout the series as a whole, in order to understand the tragic paradoxes of neoliberal and patriarchal subjectivity that culminate in her murder - which also confirms the cyclical nature of trauma proposed by the series which gets repeated for Dexter's son. Finally, I interrogate the program's contradictory representation of Dexter as a mentally ill subject (as he is figured as both 'normal' in his emotional disconnect as a male, even as he is clearly disturbed in light of his murderous compulsion). The chapter closes with an examination of how the prescription of Dexter's affective limitation as 'permanent' is best read as a manifestation of the tragic.

The conclusion of this thesis looks to the penultimate episode and series finale, to address a major political critique offered by *Dexter*: the suggestion that privatized violence is tragically necessary in a flawed social order that is unable to properly execute justice. This claim is illuminated by an application of Raymond Williams' discussion of the possible movement from tragedy to revolution, as I examine how the series fails to stage the transformation of 'tragic' consequence into 'epic' social change, because Dexter pursues a life that resists isolated masculine and neoliberal subjectivity. I then analyze the

series ending in its entirety to reaffirm my argument that the program is best read

tragically, due to Dexter's simultaneous lack of punishment and denied melodramatic

'happy ending.' I finally consider the implications behind his self-banishment to a site of

psychic, material, laborious, and interpersonal alienation, and then propose the exciting

potential of considering 'complex' contemporary television through the lens of the tragic.

Chapter 1) Melodrama vs. Tragedy in 'Complex Television'

This chapter begins by tracing the story-telling affordances of television as a medium that works to enable *Dexter*'s complex narrative trajectory, and proceeds to examine the series in relation to two infamously opposed narrative modalities – melodrama and tragedy. Specifically responding to Linda Williams' argument for the ongoing relevance (and dominance) of melodrama, I take issue with her concurrent dismissal of the possibility of contemporary tragic art and interpretation. She accuses tragedy of not "adapt[ing] well to a mass-culture democratic age because it is not possible to democratically include 'ordinary suffering' as tragedy" (L. Williams *On The Wire* 102). I argue instead, that although programs like *Dexter* might not neatly map onto the formulaic narrative arc of classical Greek tragedy or offer the exact type of tragic-hero that Williams' describes as canonical, her refutation is itself a restrictive reading of the classical example – and of the extensive theoretical debates surrounding the subject of what counts as tragic in academic discourse. Terry Eagleton opposes Williams' stance on tragedy's disavowal of 'ordinary suffering,' for example, as he asserts that tragic heroes ought to function as artistic renditions of "the fundamental human condition [that represents] humanity as a whole" while at the same time they should be "elevated above [their] fellows" (Eagleton 76). Dexter's characterization exposes the over-simplistic undercurrent to Williams' assertion - he personifies the contradiction between the tragic hero's elevation of character and concurrent embodiment of elemental humanness, as both an enforcer and transgressor of the social order. First examining the formal and generic aspects of the program will lay the groundwork for my interpretation of *Dexter* as

a tragedy, and prelude my argument for the political potential of making an inquiry into the series' tragic rather than melodramatic attributes.

The Formal Structure of Narrative in Contemporary Television

Rather than tracing the genealogy of television's development and its relationship to older-forms of narrative-based audio-visual media (particularly film) (Dunleavy 46), let's look instead at the technical affordances enabling diverse storytelling strategies adopted by television writers today. Studying communication technologies as material objects that operate within and in response to cultural and technological transformation necessitates an acknowledgment of the inevitable expiry of theoretical concepts used to describe these channels, and the consequential need to continuously update our critical paradigms according to "ongoing technological redefinition[s]" of diverse media forms (Uricchio 168). The resultant challenge of ascribing stable definitions to television's storytelling conventions thus requires a brief rundown of the specific terminology that I will be using throughout this thesis.[1]

Narrative 'Complexity'

Programs like *Dexter* have been distinguished from traditional TV programming by two important features: narrative 'complexity' and narrative 'un-safety' (Mittel 29, Martin 5). Jason Mittel makes a case for narrative complexity as "a distinct narrational

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[1] Many theorists have noted the difficulty in discussing television using consistently applicable vocabulary. Marijke de Valck for example, deems TV an "unstable medium in transition" at a "historical moment of economic and technological change" (8). This is an admittedly open-ended description that could apply to a wide array of communications technologies in our post-modern epoch, as "media convergence and digitization are redrawing the boundaries of media and the disciplines that study them" more generally (8).

mode" (29) that is particularly suited towards the serial structure of television drama, which stands apart from early conventional and episodic examples of seriality (20). [2]

Deliberately divorced from the "generic assumptions" attached to its precursor the soap opera, narratively complex programs retain a serial structure, while "rejecting or downplaying melodramatic style and [the] primary focus on relationships" typical to soaps (32). Central to this concept and to seriality in general, is the rejection of plot closure within each individual episode - instead 'complexity' is typified by on-going accumulated narrative, requiring that audiences remember larger story-arcs across episodes and seasons, thus intensifying viewer engagement (32, 29). Significantly, closure is absolutely denied to *Dexter*'s audience on numerous levels – on an episode-to-episode basis, across seasons, and also by the series unresolved and ambiguous 'ending.' [3] This lack of episodic 'closure' is crucial to the series' narrative arc as a whole - it enables the complicated reveal of Dexter's selfhood (to both the audience and to himself) in the form of occasional flashbacks, and this gradual uncovering of his repressed childhood trauma across seasons permits the morally ambiguous (and arguably tragic) rending of his character.

Narrative 'Un-Safety'

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[22] Trisha Dunleavy clarifies that at its most basic level, a 'series' refers to a show that recycles characters and settings, yet concludes individual stories within each contained episode. Dunleavy defines the 'series' in contrast to the 'serial,' which does not conclude the story within each episode, instead picking up where it left off in later episodes after a hiatus (45). Raymond Williams also first proposed that 'the series' is the less familiar form (in comparison to 'the serial'), consisting of "continuity not of action but of characters" (57).

[3] Season eight was declared to be *Dexter*'s definitive finale by its host network *SHOWTIME* at the time of its premier in 2013, but there have been subsequent, non-official teasers of its possible return as recently as November 2015 (Baral, IDigitalTimes). There is the possibility that such rumours of *Dexter*'s revamp derive from deliberate network hype to (re)-engage former and new audience markets, but this is less relevant to my argument.

Moreover, Mittel's conceptualization of narrative 'complexity' is directly related to Brett Martin's claim that "quality network TV" emerging around the turn of the 21st century distinguished itself as "narratively ruthless" (Martin 5). The altered formal aspects of television inevitably impacted the type of content that could be presented, as stories were "no longer confined to cable [and the] old ad structure [which] usurped traditional values and content restrictions" (86). Going as far as to claim that these network dramas comprise a "Third Golden Age of Television," epitomizing "the signature American art form of the first decade of the twenty-first century" (11), the 'New TV' being gestured towards by both of these authors is characterized by the thrill of the unpredictable, facilitated by new creative affordances resulting from "genuine business and technology upheaval" in the twenty-first century (11).

The Melodramatic Mode & Television

My interpretation of seriality through the lens of the tragic first requires a more patient sketch of how understandings of popular narratives through the melodramatic mode have been recently privileged in popular discourse. For the purposes of clarity and consistency, and because her analyses have prompted my interrogation of tragedy's comparative potential, I primarily engage with 'melodrama' as defined by Linda Williams. According to Williams, authorial claims to 'tragic' status on television, alongside the thematic popularity of "masculine dominance [on] many contemporary serials," directly corresponds to "the desire [of writers] to disassociate such work from the taint of the feminine family melodrama and their earlier soap-opera origins" (Williams, *On the Wire* 46). Williams identifies two basic types of televisual serial melodrama – that which "will usually acknowledge that it is melodrama by name," and

that which "doesn't like to call itself melodrama" (47). These categories also relate to her distinction between: 1) shows that openly build "sufficient redundancy into the program for the viewer who only occasionally tunes in to follow the story," and 2) that which does not contain much "built-in redundancy," relies on viewer retention of narrative that spans across episodes and seasons, and considers itself to be "more demanding," "authentic," and "novelistic," than prime-time television (47).

The turn towards melodrama, or perhaps more accurately, its theoretical re-turn and uncovering as a primary narrative modality and dominant art form, occurred in response to its supposed neglect in film studies (L. Williams *Melodrama Revised* 43). Williams herself has published multiple works on the subject, continually re-fashioning and updating her own definition of melodrama's form, function, reception, and place in contemporary North American culture. Accordingly, let's look to the basic tenets that she posits in her updated work *Melodrama Revised* (1998*)*. Williams' defines melodrama as "a peculiarly democratic and American form that seeks dramatic revelation of moral and emotional truths through a dialectic of pathos and action" (42). Noting its specific American origin arising from the mid-19th century stage, she asserts that melodrama is foundational to the classical Hollywood film, which thrives on moral and emotional registers while demanding sympathy for beset victim-heroes who attain moral status through pathetic yet virtuous suffering (42-43).

Conceptually, melodrama has a broad discursive history and international scope. The term itself has been associated with numerous generic and sub-generic classifications (action-melodrama, 'women's-melodrama etc.); it has been spoken about in relation to several story-telling mediums (literature, theatre, TV, film); and identified in multiple

geographical contexts (19th century French theatre, 20th century U.S. Hollywood cinema)

etc. In light of the many qualities that have been attributed to the mode, William's

chooses to isolate four critical features: 1) narrative suspense; 2) the resolution of this

suspense through the expression of a transparent morality grounded in an unambiguous

separation of 'good' and 'evil'; 3) the re-location of the moral 'good' in a 'space of

innocence' that previously existed, either in childhood or in an earlier time and place; and

finally, 4) the deeply entrenched notion of 'excess' – in narrative, the degree of a work's

aesthetic intensity, spectacle, emotion, and music (L. Williams, *Mega-Melodrama!* 524).

The Wire as Melodrama

Williams' looks to *The Wire* (2002) as a case study for her argument that

'complex' serial television remains melodramatic, despite writers' overt "ambition to

tragedy," which strives to "distinguish [their] exceptional dramatic achievements beyond

typical genre television" (80 L. Williams *On The Wire*). Quoting David Simon, *The

Wire*'s primary writer and creator, Williams' takes issue with his application of Greek

tragedy to "the modern city state," as he purposefully links "postmodern institutions [to]

the indifferent gods" of the classical form (4). She surmises that *The Wire*'s aspiration to

tragedy is a misguided one due to the one central difference she takes between these two

modes. She argues, "melodrama demands justice, while tragedy reconciles us to its lack"

(2). Based on this basic distinction, she asserts that *The Wire* lacks the necessary sense of

tragic inevitability to be a 'true' tragedy; instead it is melodramatic in its "mode of

feeling that generates outrage against a fate that *could* and *should* be changed" (88). For

Williams, tragedy lacks currency in a liberal democratic context due to its "inclusion of

more ordinary (shall we say lower-class?) suffering [which] make the sentiments of

tragedy [il]legible when characters have so little distance to fall" (102). She ultimately

asserts that *The Wire,* and other serial programs like it, should be read as melodramas

because they can (and frequently work to) reflect upon the broader social conditions in

which they are situated, rather than simply lamenting the unfortunate fate and "suffering

within the soul of the tragic hero" (105).

Dexter as Melodrama?

Admittedly, *Dexter* meets the criteria that Williams' sets out for melodrama in at

least a couple of ways. Audience suspense functions as a crucial feature of the show,

fulfilling the first formal stipulation set out in her revision. Dexter is constantly on the

brink of being caught, by coworkers, regular civilians, law enforcement, and most

excitingly, by other primary characters directly involved in his day-to-day life. One of the

most anticipated moments of the series for example, occurs when Dexter's adoptive sister

Deb (the show's secondary protagonist), catches him in the act of murder at the end of

Season Six. This in turn triggers the show's 'resolution' of suspense in the joined

narrative arcs of Seasons Seven and Eight, and climaxes in Deb's death, which is

tangentially related to her uncovering of Dexter's secret vigilante occupation.

Moreover, Dexter's character is initially sketched as a melodramatic victim-hero

seeking moral legibility through hyper-vigilance, following his traumatic witnessing of

his mother's murder by chainsaw. A melodramatic interpretation of the show would

hinge on his moral 'code' as a signifier of ultimate moral truth. *Dexter*'s pilot episode

deliberately introduces him as a 'good' killer by way of showing his first victim to be

especially deserving of his punishment – the man is not just a murderer, even worse, he is

also a pedophile. When the man pleads for his life and begs Dexter "you have to

understand," Dexter replies, "Oh trust me, I do. But children? I could *never* do that" (*Dexter* SE1xE01). Dexter's standards elevate him in the eyes of the audience while making him a sympathetic victim-hero; the underlying reason behind Dexter's compulsion to kill seems justified by his own lost innocence and childhood trauma.

Finally, it should also be acknowledged that the series as a whole in many ways ascribes to the formal 'excess' credited to melodrama, literalized by the show's very premise. The sheer number of other killers in Miami that provide Dexter with a consistent stream of bodies to dismember across eight seasons, all the while he hides in plain sight employed by the police department, bespeaks the "aesthetic intensity" of the show's hyperbolic representation of violence.

Challenging Melodrama as the Dominant Narrative Mode in American Popular Culture

There are far more ways in which *Dexter*, and complex TV in general, does not map onto Williams' melodramatic framework. It is easy to complicate the applicability of narrative suspense to televised serial drama, a form that "has expanded temporally as stories go on and on" (L. Williams, *Mega-Melodrama!* 524). Narrative complexity exploits audience anxiety through an ongoing deferral of narrative resolution, and as a result the second basic feature that William's attributes to melodrama - the required location of moral truth coinciding with relief from this suspense - is hindered by the complex serial paradigm and its rejection of plot closure (Mittel 32).

The move toward narrative un-safety in serial dramas opposes melodrama's narrative trajectory, which is "ultimately more concerned with a retrieval and restaging of innocence than with [exploring] psychological causes [and] motivations" (L. Williams *Melodrama Revised* 42). Melodrama's lack of exploration into the psychic terrain of

characters has resulted in accusations the mode's monopathy, as it is known for

organizing characters through basic "conflicts between good and evil" (77). Narratively

un-safe television gives primacy to characters that deliberately do not fit into this binary.

Martin purposefully cites *Dexter* as the series that evoked his awareness of un-safety

while viewing this new type of television program. Made uncomfortable by the fact that

the series had coerced him into rooting for Dexter, he admits,

> "Ten years earlier, I would have felt protected from [the sight of
> premeditated murder] by the rules and conventions of television;
> it would simply not happen, because it *could not* happen, it was a
> sickening, utterly thrilling sensation to realize that there was
> no longer any such protection" (Martin 6).

Essentially, melodrama's recognizable plot structure that generates a sense of safety for

viewers who know what to expect – a storyline that evokes sympathy for a victim-hero,

and builds to a climax that establishes this character's moral worth (L. Williams

Melodrama Revised 58) – has been usurped by narrative complexity and narrative un-

safety. The turn to this type of storytelling has attracted viewers precisely because it

disallows easy readings of character morality, and refuses to adhere to predictable

conventions or narrative conclusions. Instead, contemporary serial dramas require formal

awareness and attention to narrative continuity from fans, who in turn demand "backstory

consistency, character unity, and internal logic" from writers (Mittel 33). The ongoing

nature of these narratives complicates the interpretability of actors who gradually develop

and make decisions based on past story action, often seasons prior to new events. The

goal of such story telling then, is itself ambiguity - a clear working against the restoration

of character innocence and the search for an ultimate moral truth.

Williams' makes a problematically essentialist claim when she sketches only two basic types of serial melodrama found on television today. Suggesting that all TV seriality is melodramatic – the only difference being whether or not it overtly acknowledges itself as such - she rhetorically sets up a dichotomy that allows for no other potential reading of contemporary television narratives (L. Williams *On The Wire* 47). Essentially everything is melodramatic by this logic - if all TV dramas are in fact melodramas in disguise, conceptualizations of television's narrative 'complexity' and 'un-safety' fail to adhere to a fundamental part of Williams' definition of melodrama – which requires not simply the dramatization of good overcoming evil, but rather, the crucial final "*recognition* of a good or evil that was previously obscure" (L. Williams, *Mega-Melodrama!* 524). Shows such as *Dexter*, *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men*, *Sons of Anarchy* and so on, have been classified as 'unsafe' precisely due to their narrative volatility. These hour-long network dramas have thrived *because* they feature tormented men "in recognizable struggle" under the conditions of late-modernity (Martin 4-5) – conditions in which moral certainty necessarily remains obscure. Inviting audiences to root for criminals and killers as these shows' main protagonists, these narratives consciously revolve around ethically divided, complex, and "deeply human" characters – which has resulted in programs "far more ambiguous and complicated than anything that television, always concerned with pleasing the widest possible audience and group of advertisers, ha[s] ever seen" (5). The evident popularity and undeniable pleasure of watching these types of shows derives from their implicit invitation to viewers to judge, identify with and to rationalize the choices that characters make in extreme and

(often illegal) circumstances, rendering a deliberate reading of recognizable "good" and "evil" moral truth as underlying story-structures analytically reductive.

Dexter's Non-Adherence to the Melodramatic Mode

Aside from the aforementioned formal complication of TV seriality upon the decipherability of a final clear moral truth, *Dexter* negates such a reading in its very premise – vigilante acts are not easily categorized as 'right' or 'wrong.' Keeping in mind that melodrama needs to situate a revelation of "the goodness that deserves to live" in a restaged "space of innocence" – either recuperated via the happy ending or mourned via the sad one to support the idea of the moral good as a genuine possibility and outcome to strive towards (L. Williams, *Mega-Melodrama* 524) – *Dexter* denies a melodramatic return to innocence at its crux. There is literally no narrative mechanism that could suggest that there is a potential space of purity for Dexter to 'return to,' having been permanently robbed of this after witnessing the murder of his mother as a young child. Although the show's premise could function as a melodramatic justification of murder – his extreme response might be an attempt to prevent the further loss of innocence in the world at large - the series' progression doesn't allow its audience to maintain its initial idealized image of Dexter. If he never questioned or deviated from his moral 'code' we might read its stipulations as attempts to recuperate innocence lost, but that is not what ultimately transpires in the series. Dexter significantly *wants* to kill for killing's sake, and he enjoys the act itself in a way that proves fatal to those close to him.

Dexter's narrative trajectory develops by negating a coherent moral reading of its protagonist's selfhood - his motives for murder alter seasonally in tandem with his traumatic self-discovery. The series refuses to offer easy or straightforward indications to the audience of whether of not his violent actions are 'justified' or 'good' as the series

progresses. Although its ending is not the focus of this research project, *Dexter's* denouement culminates in his sister's death, which he is implicitly responsible for. The show's tragic ending is triggered by a series of events that follow Dexter's planned murder of an innocent co-worker who discovers his secret. He thus transitions over the eight seasons from a seemingly traumatized victim-turned-vigilante, into a man acting in his own self-interest, actively choosing to deviate from his moral 'code' out of competitive and individualistic self-preservation. Despite the series' initial melodramatic justification, *Dexter* concludes in ambiguity and disorder.

Turn to a Tragic Interpretive Modality

Williams' contention with contemporary tragedy is not simply derivative of her perceived limitation of today's media auteurs' ability to convey its necessary narrative and formal aspects in our current socio-political context - she is equally concerned with the audience's interpretation of generic cues. As an instructor, Williams' has purportedly experienced the difficulty of teaching the concept of tragic fate to college students, who, "imbued with the popular value of melodrama, cannot help but see these fates as punishment for anti-democratic 'overweening' pride" (L. Williams, *Melodrama Revised* 53). Essentially, she argues that the notion of tragic necessity and inevitability have become conflated with melodramatic morality – heroes are punished when they fail to succumb to pathetic yet virtuous suffering, and audiences interpreting narratives in this way fail to grasp the 'true' essence of what constitutes the tragic.

Given assertions by tragic theorists that America has ideologically suppressed "any consciousness of the identity between freedom and necessity" (Carney, *Review – Sweet Violence* 163), Williams' case for the precedence of melodramatic reading is not entirely

out of place in tragic discourse – that is to say, her conclusion that "Americans read Greek tragedy melodramatically" is undeniably provocative. However, while there may be a problematic tendency of audiences to interpret archetypes from classical tragedy through melodramatic tropes, it is just as troubling to presume that there is not an equal danger in denying the inverse possibility. Audiences can just as easily read melodrama into narratives that are deliberately paradoxical, morally complicated, and intended to be received as tragic. Even if it is true that audiences often interpret plots that openly strive towards tragedy through the lens of melodrama, this is likely a result of what Terry Eagleton would call a failure of dialectical thinking - the ability to appreciate the identity between conceptual opposites (161). If Williams' is right, it is all the more important that we recognize when popular narratives are aspiring (and succeeding as *Dexter* does) to emulate a tragic structure, one in which ideological contradictions are not resolvable by the individual's personal plight alone. Rather than concluding that American audiences are ironically 'fated' to conduct reductive analyses of popular culture, regardless of the actual narrative structure of dramatic programs, we ought to look to dismantle such absolutist readings, and instead look to how the tragic mode better interprets the absurdities of the larger social arena.

'The Tragic' & The Political Potential of Tragic Inquiry

Tragic structure and interpretation, when conducted with a less strict approach and understood precisely as dialectical contradiction, exposes America's fantasy of voluntaristic ideology, suggested by Terry Eagleton's political methodology of tragedy (163-164). Contrary to Linda Williams, Terry Eagleton offers us a way of looking at the political potential of taking a tragic perspective, specifically in his requirement that we

accept *simultaneity* if we are to properly understand tragedy's argument for freedom's inexorability from fatality, in a way that is not melodramatically punitive. Tragic figures, he asserts, while predetermined, are concurrently free to resist inevitable catastrophe – and such "fruitless rebellion" has been admired in the modern age as "the final refutation of utilitarianism" (Eagleton 103). As such, what is revealed in the contradictions of the character that both resists and enacts his 'fate,' works to reveal the contradictions of the social situation. Under late-modern conditions "constraint [becomes] constitutive of liberty" – a wholly unpredictable world would destroy one's freedom to navigate it (106). Rather than understanding tragic motifs of inevitability as barriers to political critique, *Dexter* can help us to also understand them as reversals that can challenge the status quo.

Seeing tragedy as a historical moment "imposes certain methodological rules for interpreting tragic works" (Vernant 29). My argument for reading *Dexter* as a rendition of tragic aesthetics is in no way seeking to understand the work as a dramatic narrative that needs to perfectly emulate a predefined Greek formula. Conscious of the potential limitations inherent to taking ancient ideas and suggesting that they retain relevance and currency within our contemporary context, I opt instead to use a tragic vocabulary, which seeks to offer a cogent response to the obstacles posed by Williams of reading current narratives under a misinterpretation of the classical model. Instead we ought to engage with the concept of the tragic as a structure, as a feeling, and as a human experience, without interpretively imposing a requirement for contemporary plots to exactly emulate their Greek origin. This approach mindfully observes that "the great failure of theories of the tragic" tends to occur when critics deduce that "actual dramas fall short of […] established theoretical parameters [which then causes them to be] found not to be

tragedies" (Carney *Politics & Poetics* 3). *Dexter* is particularly vulnerable to such reduction, as contemporary dramas are more prone to this failure - as they are "inevitably and necessarily held up for comparison against past forms of tragedy" (3). Instead, this thesis looks to the dialectics of tragic character caught within contradictory structures, which provides us with a discursive and analytic tool that would be otherwise unavailable. What this tragic discourse affords is a sense of character in which we can see opposites embodied in a way that would be incoherent under a melodramatic analytical framework. 'Good' and 'evil' action are inseparable in *Dexter* – the show's essential premise of justified vigilantism necessitates that they are understood as one the same.

To fully conduct a dialectal reading of the tragic on *Dexter*, it will help to first consider William Storm's useful severance of the dramatic form of 'tragedy' from the concept of 'the tragic' - the natural condition of human experience to which dramaturgy responds (Storm 24). Due to the problematic way in which 'Tragedy', 'The Tragic', and 'Tragic Vision' are often used interchangeably in discussion (29), it is important that we don't use these terms synonymously, lest we wish to fall into the trap that Linda Williams does, reading television seriality under a pre-designated framework that disallows a fluid interpretation of generic modes of storytelling and their applicability to contemporary works and culture. 'Tragedy' is often employed to refer to prescribed dramaturgy "set down by Aristotle, adapted in various ways by the neo-classicists, and filtered through Romantic and Modernist aesthetics" (30). Storm maintains that even when critics agree that Tragedy has indeed survived its Athenian origin, there remains a propensity of theorists to create evaluative, categorical and historical sub-contexts (32). Utilizing the concept of 'The Tragic' by contrast releases us from the delineations imposed by the

antiquity of 'Tragedy' understood solely as a dramatic form – instead 'The Tragic' offers

us a lens of interpretation that is ahistorical; an ontological situation separate from its

artistic manifestations, consequently able to be conceived of as timeless (32).

Tragic Character as Fragmentation; A Working Definition of 'The Tragic'

The would-be-agent's experience and embodiment of 'The Tragic' still requires a

more precise definition. Storm's central thesis is that dramatic character always signifies

and has a relation to the Dionysian; to the dismemberment of selfhood famously

illustrated in Euripides *The Bacchae* (7). He argues that "the tragic individual, as

dramatic character, has struggled from the beginning for cohesive selfhood, for a unity of

motive, action, and identity," which is fundamentally denied by the spirit of tragic drama

(21). Storm posits an image of tragic experience as fragmentation, which arises out of

paradox and contradiction, both internally and externally experienced by the

impossibility of maintaining a coherent notion of the self (21). The definition of 'The

Tragic' being utilized within this thesis works to link Terry Eagleton's political twinning

of freedom and fatality (Eagleton 110), which posits dialectical thought as "the necessary

force of contradiction [that] underl[ies] any concrete change" (163-164), to William

Storm's notion of 'The Tragic' as Dionysian fragmentation and dispersal of the essential

self. This project thus understands tragic experience to be the dialectic between Fate (as

institutional determinism and traumatic compulsion), and Freewill (as the contradictory

premise of individualism under neoliberal capitalism).

Dexter's Representation of 'The Tragic'

Let's examine more closely a Dionysian understanding of tragic experience as it

manifests on *Dexter*. The series' titular protagonist literally dismembers his victims' limb

from limb in a mimetic echo of the violent dispersal of his mother's murder by chainsaw. In doing so, he is not only literally repeating this cycle of violent fragmentation, but he is also symbolically rending apart his own incoherent selfhood by way of mutilating other murderers that mirror his affliction back to him. However, "the Dionysian rhythm" is also "one of death and rebirth […] of breaking into parts and reconstituting the whole" (Storm 22). Dexter's 'code' is what allows him to regain some semblance of 'wholeness' and coherence, as it is what brings him back together, alleviates his guilt, and returns him to his humanity after he severs other human beings who represent his internally divided self.

In line with conceiving of 'the tragic' as an expression of fractured interiority, the fate vs. freewill dialectic that I crucially engage in this thesis thus must also be understood as the struggle of the self versus the self. Dexter embodies both internal and external discord simultaneously, as his identity and selfhood are necessarily broken into parts in order to for him to be able to maintain his façade and his sense of 'freedom' - his ability to navigate the social order undetected. Throughout the eight seasons, Dexter concurrently performs the roles of brother, father, husband, son, neighbour, employee, and forensic analyst to convincingly hide his 'dark passenger;' his psychopathic, serial killing 'self.' In each context, Dexter must assume an identity that he often describes as not being a genuine reflection of his core affect (or perhaps more accurately, his disaffection) to avoid getting caught. And yet, the series refuses to clearly represent what Dexter's 'core' or 'true' self in fact resembles, because he himself does not seem to know. He characterizes his murderous desire as other to himself, regularly self-referring in third person to his 'dark passenger':

> I just know there's something dark in me, and I hide it. I certainly don't
> talk about it, but it's there always, this Dark Passenger. And when he's

> driving, I feel alive, half sick with the thrill of complete wrongness.
> (*Dexter* SE02xE03).

Dexter's multiple social masks cannot be subtracted as mere attempts to veil a singular

cohesive selfhood of murderous impulse underlying his 'true' yet necessarily hidden

identity. Agency becomes un-locatable in the absence of a cohesive selfhood that strives

towards a singular object – instead multiple competing desires and versions of Dexter's

identity come up against one another as he seeks to harmonize incompatible drives,

namely a longing for human connection and social acceptance together with his secret

life as a serial killer. It is this reading that comes against materialist and political readings

that might reduce the narrative to be one that simply presents us with an individual versus

society, and complicates them as such.

*Dexter'*s Narration & Representation of Trauma

Furthermore, the contradictions of the tragic criminal posed in *Dexter* invite us to

read its protagonist as analogous to Sophocles' Oedipus Rex. To reiterate, I am not

arguing that *Dexter* follows the pattern of Greek tragedy that emerged in approx. 533 BC

in Athens (Poole 4), or the prototype outlined in Aristotle's *Poetics* (Whalley 21). The

doubleness of Oedipus as a protagonist whose identity is critically composed of opposites

offers us another useful model for understanding tragic character and tragic paradox more

generally. Dexter, the social deviant-as-anti-hero, reveals the contradictions of the larger

institutions through which he operates, as like Oedipus, Dexter commits crimes that

violate the social contract and judicial system. He 'makes the land sick' through his

violent transgressions, yet he is also a socially esteemed forensic analyst who works to

'return the land to health,' both officially and through his acts as a vigilante killer.

The following chapters will focus exclusively on Dexter's enigmatic desire for community that becomes blocked due to the instrumentalization of his efforts within neoliberal and patriarchal social order. For now, I'm more interested in the motif of blindness that is experienced by both protagonists, which amplifies our perception of them as tragic – both guilty and innocent at the same time. Dexter, like Oedipus, is an unreliable narrator – a riddle to himself as a consequence of his childhood trauma.

Referring to key ideas from trauma theory only to the extent that we can shift how we think of character from a melodramatic to a tragic perspective, this analysis primarily engages with trauma as a concept that sheds light on the fate vs. free-will paradox of the tragic mode. Prior to conducting a comparison of *Dexter'*s rendition of trauma within these two modalities, let's first define trauma within critical discourse, particularly as a psychic condition that has been associated with "imitation (mimesis) and hypnosis," due to the tendency of trauma victims to "'repeat' the original wound" (Levine 54). Responding to Ruth Leys seminal text *Trauma: A Genealogy (2000)*, Stephen K. Levine understands the central mimetic element of trauma to be an ethical problem, which has been in part due to the threat that mimetic theory poses to "the ideal of individual autonomy and responsibility […] trauma victims risk being conceived of as less than moral subjects" when seen through this lens (55). According to Levine, mimetic readings implicate the victim as complicitous to the original traumatic episode, and consequently such criticism has prompted a counter anti-mimetic position in trauma discourse that understands it as a "purely external" phenomenon. Trauma from the anti-mimetic perspective occurs entirely outside the control of the individual that it imposes itself upon, overwhelming the sufferer with a shock-triggering memory erasure, despite their

being "present during the traumatic event" (55-56). These contrasting theories of trauma

for Levine expose a "structural contradiction within trauma discourse itself," even as both

positions finally situate the trauma sufferer as a victim – either to the mimetic impulse of

compulsive repetition after the fact, or to the initial and external triggering event (56).

   A melodramatic reading of trauma in *Dexter* would focus on his innocence before

the traumatic incident, a recovery of his repressed history, and require his return to a

space of narrative innocence. However, this is not what occurs in *Dexter* – while he

significantly uncovers his repressed trauma gradually, this doesn't totally account for

every act of murder that Dexter commits, nor does it paint him as finally 'good' or

'innocent.' By the end of the first season he is mostly aware of his history as a traumatic

witness to his mother's brutal murder; the slow reveal centers more upon how the moral

'code' came to be developed for him by his father Harry and his psychiatrist Dr. Evelyn

Vogel. The narrative arc focuses instead on Dexter breaking free from the 'code' that he

continues to impose on himself despite the fact that the man who taught it to him has

been dead for the entire duration of the series. Dexter consistently questions his imagined

vision of Harry, a motif that the show uses to portray Dexter's increasing uncertainty as

he challenges the validity of the code itself that is ultimately revealed to be a

contradiction. The two (and only) rules of the code self-destruct when the culmination of

the show reveals that they are necessarily at odds with one another – Dexter cannot

simultaneously adhere to the first rule of avoiding getting caught at all costs without

breaking the second that mandates a certainty that his victims are also guilty of murder

and thus deserving of death by his hand. As such, a recuperation of Dexter's innocence is

not crucially at stake within the show; instead the tension of the series is located in its

irresolution of Dexter as both predetermined to kill by 'the code' that was given to him as a kind of prophesy, and the way in which he responds to its imposition on his agency.

Reading Trauma Tragically - Trauma & the Fate vs. Free-Will Dialectic

For Storm, "the core dialectic of tragedy […] is an arbitration of cosmos and chaos […] the tension between conditions or events that are in some way unfathomable – due to mystery, apparent happenstance, or the sheer extremity of circumstances – and conditions that by contrast appear […] to be marked by a sense of order, sense, or destiny" (44). In this perspective of simultaneous predetermination and autonomy, we can read Dexter's vigilantism as a self-fulfilment of the prophecy set out for him by Harry. By confronting Dexter as a child with the expectation that he would forever be violently predisposed, Harry supplants within him the mimetic and prescriptive expectation of traumatic discourse. We learn as the series progresses that Harry did not engage with institutional recovery for Dexter as a genuine treatment possibility; instead Dexter's proclivity to kill is described as intrinsic to him from the outset, following his loss of innocence and the impossibility of its return. However, the series disallows a simple reading of Dexter as destined for violence following this trauma. He is not absolved of guilt and responsibility, which moves us to Levine's suggestion that we ought to look to Greek Tragic Theatre as a way of surpassing "the structural opposition [between] mimesis and anti-mimesis" (62). A dramatic reading returns us to the concept's origin - an understanding of mimesis that is both "conscious *and* enacted," one that doesn't impose a dichotomy between "'blind' enactment and 'conscious' recollection" (61). Dexter consciously re-enacts his original traumatic wound through a very deliberate moral filter; he is never depicted hypnotically committing murder against his will. Although his violent desire is characterized as compulsive, Dexter's own

admission that he is a "very neat monster" who methodologically plans his kills with acute detail, deliberately only murdering under precise and codified conditions, shows that he is at once actively engaged in and subject to the impulse of traumatic repetition that has been prescribed to him. As we will see in later chapters upon close analysis, Dexter's tragic catastrophes are each hinged upon active choices that he makes, selfishly wanting to revel in his acts of vicious dismemberment that could as easily be conducted through a less visceral kill method. Finally, although Levine's proposal that we return to classical understandings of mimesis is less concerned with re-interpreting the political import of contemporary narratives as it is with the incorporation of art into therapeutic practice, his call to restore our understanding of mimesis to its original conception allows for a more complicated and dialectical interpretation of traumatic experience. Conducting a dramatic reading of human suffering for Levine can help us to incorporate trauma into a broader social suffering, as opposed to one in line with a melodramatic interpretation of individualized victimization deprived of cognizance and responsibility.

Chapter Conclusion

Linda Williams' conception of *The Wire* and programs like it as inevitably melodramatic, able or unable to emulate a tragic formula, limits the potential to interpret television serials as politically resistant, and misses an opportunity to uncover paradox in narrative and character as reflective of the structural contradictions that the anti-heroes of complex television are forced to grapple with. Turning to the tragic mode for a superior interpretive generic template is not the point - instead this thesis works to separate the concept of 'the tragic' from tragedy's classical narrative arc in order to define more loosely contemporary tragic experience, which I maintain, is and can be represented on these types of shows.

Chapter 2: *Dexter* as a Tragic Anti-Hero Navigating Capitalism's Contradictions

Now that we have examined the series' essential premise and made a case for a tragic interpretation of *Dexter*, this chapter will explore how such a reading illuminates the contradictory logic of capitalist social order. Expanding on my argument that 'the tragic' functions as a pertinent reading modality of contemporary television drama - one which offers a more complex dialectic of moral simultaneity (in the place of Linda Williams' melodrama), this section of my thesis conducts a close analysis of Season Four of *Dexter,* and its thematic focus on the various forms of labour carried out by the series' protagonist. In demonstrating how one can convincingly navigate capitalist social order by way of performance, Dexter exposes the synthetic and routinized nature of traditional structures – structures which are revealed to be over-arching institutions that promise (yet fail to provide) both individual freedom and collective belonging.

Accordingly, this chapter uncovers the way in which neoliberal subjectivity is evinced by Dexter's character arc at the midpoint in the series. Dexter works as a blood-spatter analyst for two main reasons: because it provides him with community 'camouflage' (*Dexter* SE04X03), and access to the tools and information only available to the police-department. His official employment facilitates his fulfillment of Harry's code, while enabling his pursuit of his 'real' desire, which is to kill. His official labour on behalf of the state is arguably 'forced', or, 'unfree' because it is alienated – directed by his superiors, its means and ends are determined by someone other than himself (Marx XXIII). Ironically, Dexter's responsive acts of personal justice also accomplish the state-directive of population control. His

privatized killing of other murderers winds up mimicking and appropriating the codes and norms of his un-free alienated labour of forensic work.

Essentially, Dexter freelances - reinforcing the job structure of the neoliberal self-as-enterprise (and entrepreneur). His freelance work promises independence and flexibility from the temporal strictures of factory Fordism. It abides by the norms of late-capitalist labour and its power hierarchies, as the "benefits of [his freelance] autonomy are often undermined" and not without cost, as the freelance worker undertakes personal risk on behalf of the enterprise (Cohen 147-148). By suggesting that government institutions are incapable of delivering what they promise to provide (in the case of *Dexter,* law enforcement that works), the series aligns with the neoliberal dismantling of the power of the state, by implying that its' tasks need to be privately carried out by individuals. Dexter's various forms of labour in the series reveal the paradox of 'free labour' under the capitalist constraint - the show depicts neoliberal-capitalism to be a tragic institution as such.

Dexter Season Four (Thematic Overview)

Season Four's principal villain is Arthur Mitchell, aka "The Trinity Killer," played by John Lithgow (for the purposes of concision this piece will largely refer to him as 'Trinity'). The ongoing narrative of the season centers on Dexter's deliberate deferral of Trinity's 'justified' murder in favour of prolonged covert observation. Dexter takes on the alias of Kyle Butler to protect his true identity during his inquiry – and his family's identities, by extension, which later has crucial significance for the season's tragic finale. The seasonal arc tracks a sequence of choices that Dexter makes while stalking the killer, culminates in the accidental unveiling of his true

identity, and leads to the retributive murder of Dexter's wife in front of his newborn

son - effectively sealing the series' proposal that the cycle of trauma is both

tragically 'inevitable' and yet a result of conscious action and repetition.

The series often invites the audience to draw 'meta' observations of Dexter's

character through his internal monologue (offered in voice over) in which he

consistently and consciously compares his internal sense of social difference to the

outward personas of other serial killers who markedly 'lack' his moral compass.

Season Four intensively plays upon this trope of comparison by making Trinity its

primary and on-going villain, who critically also seems to harbour the secret to the

successful externalization of normativity, which Dexter has not yet perfected.

Despite being finally opposed, these two killers share important common ground –

significantly, a gradually revealed childhood trauma that serves as an explanation

for their 'monstrosity,' better understood as violent compulsion arising from

untreated distress.

In SE04xE05, Dexter evaluates Trinity's methodology while working on a

crime scene. He compares, "I make my bodies disappear, Trinity leaves his out in the

open, supremely confident that no one will ever trace them to him," which leads to

his summation that Trinity is a "very different monster" than himself. Subsequently

struggling to rationalize Trinity's kill pattern, he muses, "Why her? Why here? What

is Trinity's code? Does he have one?" At this point in the series, Dexter is intensively

grappling with the validity of the code, which by mandating his evasion of capture at

all costs, inhibits his ability to engage in a full sociality. Towards the end of the

episode, Dexter follows Trinity home by car with the intention of murdering him,

only to come to the jarring discovery that Trinity also lives in suburbia, and is likewise greeted by a wife and children. The episode concludes with Dexter's disbelieving statement "Trinity's a husband, a father, he's – like me." The insight that they apparently share the *desire* to perform neoliberal subjectivity to the fullest while getting away with murder prompts Dexter to postpone his planned assassination of Trinity. Dexter's intentional delay is implicitly self-interested, as he seeks to make sense of how Trinity can apparently function within society, as opposed to living on an affective periphery without family or community.

In the following episode, Dexter learns that 'Trinity', or Arthur Mitchel (on paper and to naïve observers), is an esteemed teacher, father and husband, church deacon, and leader of charity organization "Four Walls One Heart." As such, Trinity personifies Dexter's conflicted orientation toward what I argue is a specific manifestation of tragic necessity, namely, the "institutional-level power dynamics" that mandate "performances of power relationships" under the pronounced hierarchies of late-capitalism (Monahan 495). Or, put another way, *Dexter*'s representation of tragic experience is largely represented as resultant of the expected social performance of his personhood "under the growing centrality of work" which construes identity through "competing, fragmentary, and contradictory discourses" (Tracy & Tretheway 168).

The narrative trajectory of Season Four follows Dexter's struggle to balance his work, family, and vigilante life, as the season begins immediately after the birth of his first son Harrison and marriage to long-time girlfriend, Rita, at the end of Season Three. Dexter's new commitment to the family ideal is hyperbolised by the

existence of Rita's two children from a previous marriage, which prompts the couple

to buy a larger home together in suburbia, making it much more difficult for Dexter

to continue his night-time transgressions unseen.

The thematic focus of the season proposes that attempting to navigate

various social roles (father, husband, employee, serial killer) impacts Dexter's ability

to perform each of these expectations convincingly and well. He mixes up case files

in court due to the lack of sleep that comes with being a new father, damaging his

credibility as an employee and later enabling a guilty killer to go free. Said

drowsiness causes Dexter to get into a car accident after he personally kills the man

who his professional oversight allowed to escape due process, which triggers his

loss of the body of the victim. His exhausted state also significantly prompts him to

accidentally violate Harry's code as he murders a man he learns not to be guilty later

in the season. And yet, the multiple roles that Dexter juggles also provide him with

an alibi for why he is socially absent at inappropriate times – he goes to a

conference for 'work' while investigating the Trinity killer, and the irregular work

hours now standard to immaterial, neoliberal labour conditions account for his

frequent late arrivals home after disposing of the bodies of his victims.

It would thus be overly simplistic to argue that performing social duties does

nothing but hinder Dexter's overall 'freedom;' these roles also enable him to justify

his total absence from the social arena, while he practices what Terry Eagleton

(paraphrasing Albert Camus), calls pure freedom - "the freedom to kill" (Eagleton

106). And yet, Dexter does not live in an anarchistic society, but rather within late-

modern conditions in which "constraint is constitutive of liberty, not just a curb to

it" (106). Dexter's pursuit of Trinity at the heart of Season Four allows for the series

to highlight Dexter's fraught attempt to fit into dominant institutions in order to

ironically navigate them 'freely.' When vigilantism is interpreted as a form of

personal, unregulated labour, Dexter can be understood as a man taking on a

'double shift' – following his formal and regulated workdays with informal and

privatized laborious nights. His undertaking of family life as an alias enabling his

'second shift' paradoxically layers on a 'third' shift that he didn't anticipate, as the

expected duties of being a father and husband require his presence and energy.

      The tragic in *Dexter* is thus evinced by the show's proposal that Dexter is

subject to an excess of institutional determinism, even while the predictability of

modern society allows him to take informed and voluntary action. It is this tension

between implied determinism (prescribed traumatic compulsion and societal

constraint), and the sequence of choices that Dexter makes to assert his individual

autonomy, which culminates in the tragic murder of his wife at the season's end.

Post-Fordism and Neoliberalism

      Before further unpacking the ways in which I take Dexter's experience of

capitalist social order to be tragic in its "political twinning of freedom and fatality"

(114), let's first define the social conditions that surround the series – namely its

situation within the context of 21st century capitalism in North America.

The specific aspect of late-capitalism that I argue is most pronounced by *Dexter,* is

neoliberal subjectivity. Writing in 2007, David Harvey pinpoints the 1970s as the

decade that saw a turn towards neoliberal thinking and political economic practices

(2). This ideological shift responded to the tangible 'crisis of Fordism,' which on very

basic terms, was provoked by "over-capacity and overproduction," increased

international competition, global manufacturing in industrial countries, and

advancing technologies that accelerated the production process (Tauss 54-55).

These changes triggered a dramatic restructuring of labour organization.

　　　　Most importantly, a shift away from the shackles of 9-5 factory Fordism

occurred, towards a more flexible labour temporality, which supposedly 'freed'

worker energy (56-57). While the post-war period involved mass production and

consumption enabled by controlled markets and working environments, our

current mode of production mandates "flexibility and rapid response to change"

(MacDonald 177). 'Post-Fordism' then, signifies the political-economic transition to

neoliberalism, which has been described in its first instance as "a theory of political

economic practices" that work to unencumber *individual entrepreneurial*

endeavours within a largely privatized and deregulated institutional framework, an

attitude which has dominated the international stance of the United States post-

9/11, and arguably even earlier (Harvey 2, 7 [emphasis added]). However, this

'freeing' of energy for 'entrepreneurial potential' came at a cost – although personal

freedom is now guaranteed at the level of the marketplace, accountability for one's

success or failure has been made entirely the responsibility of the individual (65).

　　　　While the notion of self-management is not unique to contemporary

capitalism (Bauman 31), it has been argued that individual autonomy lies at the

heart of neoliberal governance (McNay 56). Of critical relevance to my argument for

Dexter, is neoliberalism's propagation of the 'self-as-entrepreneur.' Nicolette

Makovicky has crucially argued that "the crux of neo-liberal political economic

philosophy [is] *possessive individualism and its enactment through the concept of*

'enterprise" (11 [emphasis added]). The 'flexible' labour processes of neoliberal

post-Fordism – including but not limited to compliant machines, communication

systems, and an appropriately adaptable workforce (Jessop 257), has encouraged

Americans "to run themselves as 'mini corporations'" (Makovicky 7). Today,

workplaces increasingly stress the importance of adaptability and self-management,

as individuals are expected to relate to themselves "as a business," by establishing

self-distance, while embracing personal risk and responsibility (Scharff 2, 6).

      Dexter's juggling of three forms of labour – regulated blood-spatter analysis

on behalf of Miami Metro, privatized vigilante work that ethically alleviates his lust

for violence, and the unpaid domestic work of being a father and husband typifies

Dexter as the imagined entrepreneurial subject of neoliberalism. The series shows

entrepreneurial "intensified individualism" itself to be normative, despite the

deleterious effect that this personalizing logic can have on the populace's mental

health (Scharff 3). The series' ideological underpinning of personal accountability is

broadly applicable to the 'psychopathy,' prescribed to Dexter following his

childhood trauma. Under neoliberal capitalism, if a subject becomes ill, physically or

mentally, it is assumed to be resultant of a lack of tenacious industriousness –

individuals are charged with their health and wellness, or lack thereof (Bauman 34).

Dexter's violent impulses, in this personalizing light, have been allowed to fester to

the extreme of serial murder, due to a lack of personally sought medical treatment

for the symptoms that Harry perceived in him as a young boy. Instead of looking to

official institutions, Harry naturalized Dexter's 'dark passenger' as an intrinsic

affliction without the potential to be healed. Rather than pursue a remedial option,

Harry taught Dexter the values of flexibility and social performance, as a means of

hiding his deviation from the status quo - effectively charging him with full

responsibility for the entrepreneurial management of both his illness and normative

public behaviour. Chapter Three will discuss psychotherapy in greater detail, and its

proposition as an institutional answer to the very distress that neoliberal capitalism

induces in its subjects - particularly with respect to how Dexter is forced to undergo

marriage counselling for failing to perform expected spousal duties.

Neoliberal Entrepreneurial Subjectivity as Tragic

Neoliberal capitalism embodies the "logic of dialectics […] of contradiction"

that Terry Eagleton ascribes to tragedy, by confronting subjects with the "fantasy of

individual agency" which runs parallel to the "voluntaristic ideology" of capital

(Carney *Sweet Violence Review* 163-164). Rather than block or limit social control,

biopower reshapes personal freedom to support disciplinary governance, by

"indirectly organiz[ing] individuals in such a way that their apparent autonomy is

not violated" (McNay 63). By staging responsive violence in tandem with "situations

of the loss of human agency in (apparently), unavoidable, inhuman situations,"

(Carney *Politics and Poetics* 12), *Dexter* is a contemporary rendering of tragedy's

dissolution of the 'fate' vs. 'freewill' dialectic, transformed into the contradictory

situation where institutional determinism comes to enable rather than block

personal autonomy while subjects navigate the marketplace.

Lois McNay argues that our current social order has become composed of "a

multiplicity of individual enterprises" that are profoundly depoliticized and

fragmented, detached from meaningful collective action (McNay 65). When freedom

comes to signify free enterprise (Harvey 37), the social system itself becomes a

tragic paradox. The series exposes the social-economic incongruity of neoliberalism

by proposing that the concept of society itself is a misnomer –Dexter's

transgressions work to uphold a social order that he must violate to maintain, while

he is unable to fully engage within it for fear of exposure.

*Dexter'*s tragic narration does not allow its audience to absolutely discern if the

actions of criminal subjects are inspired by "divine providence", "genetic

predisposition", or "economic modes of production" (Eagleton 132). Harry's code is

not simply a mechanism that functions to prevent Dexter from being caught. It is

also part of what Harvey deems a fundamental issue within neoliberalism – the

"contradiction [that] arises between a seductive but alienating possessive

individualism on the one hand, and the desire for a meaningful collective life on the

other" (69). It is this paradox that propels Dexter to transgress in a manner that

upholds the directives of his workplace (literally the police-state) while also

undoing them. A society of free individuals" is finally shown to be oxymoronic - the

interconnection of social life congruent to capitalist competition dictates that, "one

individual's project is bound to obstruct another's" (Eagleton 227). This

contradiction of competition among individuals within a larger interdependent

social web is not exactly the same as the contradiction of self-interest at odds with

communal involvement, but each point is related to the larger systemic paradox of

neoliberal governance.

According to McNay, "governance through enterprise construes the individual as entrepreneur of his own life, who relates to others as competitors and his own being as a form of human capital" (63). A key example of Dexter's competitive entrepreneurship occurs toward the season's close in SE04xE11, as he becomes increasingly anxious about the prospect of his department capturing Trinity before he can personally kill him. He frames a former suspect by planting evidence in his home to have more time to kill the real Trinity killer, while his department is derailed by the false lead. After receiving a phone call from colleague Sgt. Batista demanding his presence at the station (signposting the excessive flexibility of post-Fordist labour conditions), Dexter is halted by an apparition of Harry. He is chastened, "you're juggling too many people, Dexter." First assuming that his father is referring to the literal number of individual people that are demanding his time and energy - his wife, his boss, and other killers - Harry, clarifies: "I'm not talking about them, I'm talking about Dexter Morgan. Blood-Tech. Husband. Father. Serial Killer. And now Kyle Butler extortionist. Which one of them are you?" Dexter's stubborn response is "all of them," asserted while the mise-en-scène literally situates him in front of a vanity containing four distinct mirrors projecting his singular image back to him.

This scene returns us to my initial argument in Chapter 1 for Dexter as a tragic character, taking up the motif the Dionysian "fragmentation and the dispersal of [not just] the body but of the essential self" (Storm 21). More precisely, Dexter-as-entrepreneur (i.e. his internal division of energy and desire that manifests in competing social roles) is an exemplification of the Greek term *agon,* foundational to

classical tragedy, which "generally refer[s] to a conflict or contest between characters or to a collision of ideologies" (55). It is here that we can link *Dexter*'s narrative premise to the tragic aspect of neoliberal thought, to "the assumption that individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market" (Harvey 7). *Dexter*'s proposal that individuals might have to kill out of necessity in the name of an imperfect form of justice, suggests that human behaviour ultimately cannot be contained by social contracts, be they political or economic. A form of state policy that both informs and is informed by market freedom, that fails to deliver on due processs absolutely or consistently, bespeaks the "critique of bourgeois self-determination" so commonly found in tragic art (Eagleton 33). While the neoliberal self-as-enterprise pretends to offer subjects emancipation, this labour transformation has too been subsumed by capitalist logic - by the subjects' "paradoxical compulsion to responsibility," since 'freed' labour energy has been redirected to serve neoliberal interests (McNay 65). The instinctive drives of the individual become splintered by the normalization of constant working availability under neoliberalism. Workers like Dexter must be constantly 'on-call,' ready to manage their in-the-moment impulses unrelated to their success in the marketplace. Post-Fordism's breakage of the boundary between personal and private life is less the cohesion of separate living spheres, and more an insidious form of alienating separation. Immaterial labourers are removed from the collective efforts of companies, because to succeed they must manage their private and professional division of energy within self-interested, solitary working conditions.

Privatized Labour

Dexter's self-described 'violent need' through the lens of an alter ego (his 'dark passenger'), severs his acts of murder from his 'intrinsic' or 'authentic' sense of self. His deliberate subjective fracturing aligns with my understanding of tragic experience as the fragmentation and "internal death of the self " which arises out of "various forms of alienation: social, personal, psychic" (Carney *Politics and Poetics* 15). When his compulsive need to kill is understood beyond the series' explicit proposal of traumatic re-enactment, Dexter's vigilantism can be interpreted as the private appropriation of his official labour for the state in response to the alienated labour conditions of capitalist production.

My supposition that Dexter's killing of other serial killers privately responds to alienation, works from an understanding of privatization as the general shift "from government to private ownership" (Feigenbaum, Henig, Hamnett 5). Privatization does not just connote a movement of power from public to private spheres, however, but also refers to the tendency "to increase individuals' responsibility for their own needs" (5) – hence Dexter's hyper-vigilance after the loss of his mother. The broad applicability of privatization as a concept has prompted criticism of the term's lexical ambiguity (6), but it still serves as a useful model for understanding Dexter's need to personally reclaim his labour power. The neoliberal redirection of Dexter's energy into flexible worker autonomy proves unsatisfying while alienated, and the ineffectual excess bureaucracy of the legal system rationalizes Dexter's social transgressions.

The series' stance on the importance of maintaining state power is ambivalent– if the state functioned without error there would not be an existing

'market' of other killers for Dexter to eliminate from the social arena privately. The state as his official employer also materially enables his elaborate ritualized acts of murder, which often includes Dexter covering entire industrial spaces in plastic before he butchers his victims (to ensure that he leaves no evidence after the fact), later disposing their bodies over the side of his yacht. Literal exemplifications of Dexter's wealth-acquired-by-state-employment aside, the series conclusively dismantles the authority of the state by suggesting that the justice system is unable to carry out its assigned function, thus necessitating Dexter's private reclamation of the task of administering penalty against crime.

Alienated Labour

Karl Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* famously articulate the concept of alienated labour. Essentially constituted by its externality to the worker, alienated labour can be understood as work that objectifies the labour energy of its workers into products that become "independent of their producers" (XXII). Also referred to as 'estranged' or 'forced,' alienated labour is importantly defined as work that is not volitional, "manifested not only in the result but in the *act of production,* within the *producing activity,* itself (XXIII).

Both Dexter's official regulated labour on behalf of the state, and the privatized acts of justice he commits outside its confines, are figured as forms of alienated labour, though to different degrees. His acts of vigilante murder are implicitly undertaken in response to the self-estrangement evoked by his official occupation, in which his work becomes not his own but the product his employers (Marx XXIII). His subversive acts ironically become alienated too, by policing the population on

the terms deemed appropriate by official jurisdiction. His father Harry, who created

Dexter's code for him, was a police officer for the same station that Dexter later

becomes officially employed by.

The notion of alienation as both product and process is especially important to

immaterial production, which we will return to this later in the chapter. First, let's

define what 'unalienated' or 'free' labour might then resemble instead. If "the

worker […] only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside

himself," the only 'free' activity that can be felt becomes related to one's "animal

functions – eating, drinking, procreating"(XXIII). Dexter's killing sprees in this light,

can be read as primitive ritual acts that allow him to experience "naked human

interaction" outside the alienating sphere of work (Turner 10).

By mimicking capital, Dexter's "appropriation [of] estrangement" intends to be

an act of "truly becoming a citizen" (Marx XXIII). And yet, after Dexter kills an

innocent man accidentally in SE04xE08, he is riddled with personal guilt, despite his

'good' intention of upholding state-justice, which significantly cannot be relied on to

operate without the occasional flaw or failure. His private vigilantism tries and fails

to resolve the experience of alienated labour through appropriation.

Neoliberalism & Surveillance

The fourth season of *Dexter* aptly stages the performance of identity and its

assimilation into dominant institutions - hence its focus on Dexter's investigation of

the Trinity killer's nuanced externalization of normativity. Our anti-hero's conscious

goal to perfect his personification of the neoliberal subject brings our attention to

the intertwined nature of state and market regulations, and how they come to

embed themselves within the lives of individual subjects.

According to Nicholas Gane, neoliberalism functions primarily as a

governmental form that "operate[s] through different models of surveillance" (611).

Drawing on Michel Foucault's 1978-9 lectures on biopolitics, Gane strives to tease

out the connection of surveillance to the governmentalities of contemporary

capitalism (which he perceives Foucault to have neglected), to make an up-to-date

case for surveillance beyond its popular understanding as first and foremost a

panoptic and disciplinary "architecture of power" (611, 616). Gane usefully

articulates the continuing prominence of surveillance today, as a concept and

practice that "both frames and is framed by a particular understanding of

neoliberalism" (612-613).

Actualized beyond a literalization of institutional constraint, social control

today functions through a "post-panoptic neoliberal arrangement whereby the

market increasingly structures the form and activities of the state" (611-612). The

covert entrenchment of persisting panoptic structures is accomplished, according to

Gane, by the recasting of the link between the market and the state through a

rhetoric of liberty - surveillance has become justified as a normative model of

governance that rationalizes its mechanisms of power as ones that promote

freedom through "additional control and intervention" (618). The 'additional

control and intervention" depicted in *Dexter* does not signify micromanagement, of

the series' protagonist or his fellow subjects. Instead, "flexibility at work infers

empowerment and autonomy in the organization of labour time/space," which

provides an illusory sense of agency to the subject, to the sovereign self-as-enterprise (Odih 21, McNay 62).

The false-freedom of flexible work is depicted throughout Season Four, as it tracks Dexter's frustration towards the literal on-call expectation of being a new father and husband. These roles add to the pressure of his already poorly demarcated work and personal lives that dramatically overlap due to Dexter's dismantling of the work and leisure divide (Turner 7), in his quest to disavow the alienation of his labour through his mimicry and appropriation of state-justice.

Freelance Allegory

Dexter's private and unregulated execution of other killers is interpretable as an allegory of 'freelance labour,' an occupation type characteristic of the neoliberal job structure of the self-as-entrepreneur. Marked by independent contracting and project-based, short-term employment, 'freelancing,' has often been described as "the antithesis of alienation", granting "workers relative autonomy in the labour process [while] facilitat[ing] self-expressions and opportunities to engage in total human activities" (Cohen 142). Dexter's in-person enactment of justice through murder is a visceral rebellion against his alienated and immaterial work of evidence-based knowledge production. His kills re-connect him to the mental outpouring of his labour energy by being tangible and immediate. His ritual, which involves the preservation of a drop of his victims' blood on a glass slide, takes the freelance allegory even further. If "cultural workers feel great attachment to the products they create" (142), Dexter's kept blood slides can be read as mementos of his un-alienated, 'free' acts of murder.

Although it has been idealised for its supposed provision of "escape from the employment relationship," and for its allotment of personal "control over where and when [one] works […] and how work is performed," freelance work still adheres to the capitalist model of production (147). Motivated by economic precarity and increased competition, "the risks and costs of [freelance] production are downloaded onto workers" themselves – subjects are exploited by firms in exchange for creative and temporal autonomy (147-148). The negative side effects of freelancing culture are evinced consistently throughout *Dexter*'s fourth season. In SE04xE01, Dexter flips his car on his way home from an after-work kill, after being redirected by his wife's request that he pick up emergency medication for his newborn son Harrison. In SE04xE05, while Dexter prepares to murder the Trinity killer (which would have effectively prevented his wife's murder in the finale) he is called by his sister Deb who demands that he meets her at a crime scene. The forcible address of familial duty is not all that is shown to reroute and control Dexter's labour energy, however – he is often subject to his co-workers demands on his time as well, made paranoid when they ask for his expert opinion.

Dexter's discordant efforts to have both community 'camouflage' and a type of solitude that is only achievable when one is independent of others, mirrors his divisive relationship with his means of employment - employment which he intentionally disrupts while struggling to emulate independent, freelance-based labour. His vigilantism does not simply strive to repair a flawed bureaucratic process – he actively hinders the public progress of his colleagues for his own private satisfaction. The tension between "individual distinctiveness, freedom, and

agency" on the one hand, and "*voluntary* group commitment" on the other (Fischer

369), prompts Dexter to compete with the state, with his own workforce, while

personally taking on the risks involved in removing dangerous criminals from the

public arena. The risks he undertakes while privately pursuing Trinity result in the

paradox of tragic fatalism – the death of his wife could have been avoided had

Dexter never 'freelanced' in this way, but the neoliberal ideology that provokes his

desire to personally reclaim his autonomy could not be so easily circumvented.

Immaterial Labour

Although Dexter works for the state of Florida, as opposed to explicitly for a

corporation or factory (which would literalize his subjection to market values in a

more immediate way), he is still a part of the demographic that has experienced the

shift toward "*immaterial* forms of production" (Hardt & Negri 275). The transition

to post-Ford neoliberalism, which we have already traced, transvalued production

by favouring labour marked by "mobility, flexibility, knowledge, communication,

cooperation, [and] the affective" (275).

Freelance work is immaterial in the sense that it results in an "immaterial

product," by making abstract the time and energy input of the worker. Freelancers

appear to "sell simply a finished piece of work […] not the labour time required to

produce that piece" (Cohen 147). Juggling official work for the state, his private acts

of vigilantism, and the unwaged labour of domestic tasks, Dexter is shown to be

constantly on the clock, often without material compensation for his 'work'.

Let's consider Dexter's enactment of two distinct types of immaterial labour

(manifesting in each of the three spheres described above), which both enable and

disrupt one another. Each is an exemplification of "the passage from the domination of industry to that of services and information […] the new immaterial […] composition of labour power" (276, 280). Firstly, his official occupation as a blood-tech can be categorized as 'informational labour,' as it involves "analytical and symbolic tasks, which [break] down into creative and intelligent manipulation on the one hand and routine symbolic tasks on the other" (292). His paid-employment requires the mental, interpretive task of re-creating crime-scenes and tracing the blood left behind by victims. Dexter's work is valued for its informational decoding and reportage of the 'stories' that the material residue of violence symbolically tells.

The second type of labour that Dexter performs is 'affective' - the work "of human contact and interaction" (292), which he conducts through the manipulation of the affect of his family and colleagues in order to maintain his façade. Let us look at each mode of labour in more detail with respect to the series, before synthesizing how these tasks illustrate the tension between Dexter's conflicted orientation towards both the American valuation of individualism and his desire for community.

The postmodern economy has been called informational as a result of the structural shift from the model of industrial to informatized labour (285). More precisely, this change has included an altered "system of communication between the production and consumption of commodities" (289). If we are to apply the logic of informatization to the justice system that Dexter works for, we ought to view his labour through the lens of neoliberal theory, which "centers on the rule of law and a strict interpretation of constitutionality [where] conflict and opposition must be mediated through the courts" (Harvey 66). Admittedly, most societies (not just

neoliberal ones) include court-systems that deter murder through punishment. Even still, without social disobedience, Dexter, along with his coworkers and the series' central cast, would be without work, or employed elsewhere.

Paid labour on behalf of the state is shown to *require* that crime occurs in order to justify policing as a form of employment. It depends on crime for its own ideological validity, because "it is deviations from these institutions that are crimes [...] established institutions become the implicit standard of justice from which criminal deviations are measured" (Reiman 177). And yet, Dexter's material acts of murder are situated as somehow necessary in light of the fallibilities of the immaterial and informational aspect of a judicial system that is not seamless. When Dexter mixes up case-notes in court, his admittance of exhaustion due to his family's new baby is dismissed by the prosecution that shames him:

> "Wrong notes, wrong blood type, wrong defendant, wrong case –
> that's what you call a momentary mix up in a murder trial? Your
> honour, the witness has just demonstrated how unreliable he is in a
> courtroom. I would have to ask how reliable his work is in the lab,
> or on a crime scene. Moreover, how reliable is a police department
> that would place so much trust in his expert opinion?" (*Dexter* SE04X01)

The audience knows that Dexter's lapse corresponds to his exhausted division of energy that is not just a result of Dexter's new fatherhood – his depleted focus is a result of the overly flexible and constant nature of immaterial labour conditions. After the killer, Benito Gomez, goes free, Dexter is personally blamed by his co-worker Quinn for "letting that asshole walk." The series thus naturalizes the implicit ideology of criminal justice within a capitalistic framework, as "by virtue of [criminal law's] focus on *individual* criminals [...] it diverts attention away from our institutions [and] conveys a subtle yet powerful message in support of established

institutions" (Reiman 174-175). The series focuses on individual guilt rather than systemic or social responsibility by making Gomez accountable as the distinct wrongdoer, and Dexter as the singular agent who ought to have performed his informatized duties without error. The failure of Dexter as an employee of the state is framed as equally nefarious to the original crime itself, as the system is shown to need subjects to enforce its rules; it is not autonomously just or infallible on its own.

Informational Labour

Dexter's immaterial forms of labour, which despite being stressfully 'light,' fluid, perpetual, and without the temporal boundaries or predictability of the spatial enclosure attributed to factory Fordism (Bauman 58-59), provide him with consistent social interaction and community, which he scarcely allows himself to admit that he wants. Cooperation is an immanent corollary to immaterial acts of labour (Hardt & Negri 294). While the inherent sociality of affective work is equally relevant, for now let's focus on how informational production "relies on what we can call *abstract cooperation* […] dedicat[ing] an ever more central role to communication of knowledges and information among workers" (296). Dexter's forensic work can be read in this way, because the analytical labour he conducts on behalf of the state supports the larger community, as well as his smaller cohort, the homicide department that he shares his investigative data with. Dexter's informational working conditions are thus both alienating and oriented towards communal effort, as his labour relies on collective action undertaken individually.

Under the postmodern configuration of capital (Harvey 276), Dexter's labour is not spatially or temporally divisible, nor is it fixed by the enclosed institutions of

Foucault's disciplinary society (Deleuze 3-4). After the courtroom acquittal

described above, the episode transitions to a scene depicting Dexter's relieved

solitude once alone in his lab, back at the station. He narrates: "Finally, peace and

quiet. No crying baby. No Marco, no Polo. Just me, and blood." Yet his momentary

peace is almost immediately disrupted - Rita calls, asking him to sing a lullaby to

their baby Harrison to help him fall asleep. While singing 'America the Beautiful' to

his son, Dexter begins to research the killer that his earlier courtroom oversight

allowed to escape by using the Miami Metro Police Department Database & Records

Division, highlighting the tools of social control that his work gives him access to.

The cinematography exerts dramatic irony through the audio contrast between

Dexter and Rita's verbal exchange and the lullaby, and its visual coincidence with

violent images of the victims of the man Dexter is researching and planning to kill.

This scene perfectly captures the way in which his acts of labour are shown to be

overlapping and threefold: he performs the affective-emotional labour of

fatherhood, the private labour of vigilantism (that works to support and repair the

flaws of state law), all the while using the technical apparatus and informational

tools afforded by his official employment as a blood-spatter analyst. Even during

Dexter's solitude, we can identify the abstract and cooperative nature of "the labour

of informational production" (Hardt & Negri 296) – each form requires that he

communicate information in some way. When Dexter is alone doing research, he is

still engaging in a network – among other law enforcers and criminals, and also

among the shared informatized databases of personal information collected by the

police state's exertion of social control through archived observation. Informational

labour is thus shown to orient Dexter towards individualized work away from the

social arena (and thus the added pressure to perform normativity), while it

promises belonging through co-creation and interactivity among a divided populace.

Affective Labour

Dexter's off-duty work as a vigilante requires that he manage others view of

him – and at the same time, the 'others' whose affect Dexter must manage regularly

includes his co-workers. More often than not, Dexter's sociality is interwoven with

his formal working life; his "affective labour produces […] social networks [and]

forms of community" (292). For example, his closest familial ties share his literal

workspace – his late-father Harry and his sister Deb likewise trace(d) careers within

Miami Metro's police department. Various inter-office romances between co-

workers occur consistently throughout the series - Dexter is even called on to act as

a witness to the politically-strategic (but sincere) marriage of his lieutenant Maria

Laguearta and fellow officer Sgt. Batista - and a comic motif of the series sees minor

character Vince Masuka proposing drinks at the end of exhausting work-days.

It is within Dexter's corporate network that we can locate 'biopower,' what

Hardt has called the primary potential of affective labour - "the production of

collective subjectivities, sociality, and society itself" (Hardt 98). While biopower has

been conceptualized as the power "of governmentality to create, manage, and

control populations," it has also been said to offer, "networks of affective labour

[that themselves create] a form of life" (98). Affective labour then, does not simply

function to reproduce affects that can be exchanged in commodity form. In the

context of biopolitical production, "labour works directly on the affects; it produces

subjectivity, it produces society, it produces life" (99). Essentially, affective labour produces for Dexter the life of a 'normal' and acceptable subjectivity; a life in which he is able to openly engage with a community that shares a common commitment to justice. In short, affective labour produces a liveable and lived-in identity for Dexter.

As we have already noted, while publically navigating society as Arthur Mitchell, the Trinity Killer maintains a reputation as a model civilian by leading charity builds for the aid organization 'Four Walls One Heart.' Unlike Dexter, Trinity hides his murder weapons in plain sight - specifically a hammer that functions as both a bludgeon and charity-build tool, which he strategically gives to Dexter as a gift. The hammer becomes a symbolic object that literalizes the instrumental nature of Dexter's undercover research of Trinity, and paradoxically comes to support his informatized labour for the state - Dexter's veiled personal study of Trinity later provides him with the hammer model number (the specific kill tool), being requested of him by his lieutenant at his formal space of work.

Like the scene that conveyed Dexter singing a lullaby to his son while researching his next victim, this scene too shows the overlapping nature of Dexter's various forms of labour (familial, vigilante, investigative), which concurrently reinforce and block one another. The illegality of his acts of murder in principle, contradict the immaterial, informational benefits that his off-duty, affective research has for his department. As we have already noted, this incongruent situation of Dexter's attempt to personally reclaim his labour power results in the final tragedy of the season, as Dexter is driven to actively disrupt the capture of the man who vengefully murders his wife.

Chapter Conclusion

The third and final chapter of this thesis will continue to unpack the series'

representation of Dexter's affective labour (and its distinct subtype, emotional

labour), within the family model. Expanding on my analysis of Dexter's performance

of neoliberal subjectivity, the next chapter will examine the added pressure of

masculine social performance, and how notions of agency and identity are gendered

within the series. Further, putting Brenda Boudreau's theory of the 'double bind' of

masculinity in dialogue with the dialectic of the 'free' yet determined tragic

character illuminates how Dexter's violent acts of execution are a defiant response

to his blocked masculine agency.

<u>Chapter 3: The Added Challenge of Masculinity under Capitalism's Contradictions</u>

The final chapter of this thesis builds upon my discussion of institutional paradox outlined in the previous chapter, paying special attention to Dexter's performance of masculinity within a discordant patriarchal family model. Like neoliberal capitalism, patriarchy is also shown to impose contradictory demands on its subjects. Dexter tensely occupies two different versions of patriarchal masculinity – namely, the old-school breadwinner type, and the more contemporary dad-who-partakes-in-emotional-labour version. The series' conveyance of his uneasy straddling of these two distinct versions of masculinity demonstrates that by "imitating" normative masculinity, Dexter comes to embody it. Season four in particular suggests that normative masculinity, like neoliberal capitalism, generates precisely the sort of self-division and instrumental use of others that Dexter must engage with as a serial killer to avoid getting caught. More than this, through the series' concurrent representation of other men – both killers and innocents – who experience similar relational dilemmas, it becomes apparent that Dexter is not pathological *despite* his effort to imitate normative masculinity; instead the series reveals normative masculinity itself to be pathological.

The brilliant irony of Dexter's undertaking of family life as an alibi meant to enable his solitary second life as a murderer, is that it necessitates his involvement in interpersonal relations and demands. Being a father and husband become a third form of social labour that works to camouflage his singular identity as a vigilante killer. Hence the paradox that Dexter finds himself in – his desire for community acceptance is frustrated, because his relationships become necessarily instrumentalized and inauthentic. As such, even Dexter's domestic and suburban (allegedly non-work) spaces that are

supposed to facilitate his un-alienated, 'free' labour provide him with neither personal autonomy, nor genuine community.

Like neoliberal capitalism, patriarchy as a structure is one that is also structured by paradox. The idealization of male responsibility for economic family support opposes the notion that men ought to have absolute autonomy and freedom from domestic demands. The masculinization of entrepreneurial values – suppressed emotion "consistent with 'rational' decision making and control," independence, risk taking, and individualism, are "juxtaposed to the family [...] solidarities" so often "central to [community] survival" (Mulholland 132). *Dexter* exposes the contradiction and artifice that underlie the feeling rules engendered by patriarchal capitalism.

Dexter's Interest in Trinity's Affective Labour

Building off Chapter 2's discussion of Dexter's affective labour, namely the biopolitical production of Dexter's lived-in identity enabled by his workplace, let us now turn to *Dexter*'s representation of affective labour within the domestic space of the home. The series' proposes that Dexter's choice to construct a private family network is itself a socially coerced and (yet individually interested and strategic) form of affective labour.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Dexter frequently socializes with murder suspects to fulfill his 'code' prior to their execution throughout the series. His deliberate observational delay of Season Four's Trinity killer is crucially shown to not merely function to fulfill the code's stipulation of 'certain' guilt. Instead, emotive sincerity is what is most at stake during Dexter's inquiry, in his refracted attempt to discern if the killer's relationship to his family is more than just camouflage; if the warmth and intimacy externally portrayed is genuine. Dexter hopes to see if it is actually possible to

pull off a "normative" self-representation while also being free to pursue desires and

impulses that are non-normative. His fatal curiosity regarding Trinity's apparent

potentiality for authentic love and connection reflects his own inner turmoil; his

resistance to the alienation of his labour and the instrumentalization of his affective

connections. This is consistently represented by Dexter's imagined debates with Harry,

whose apparition repeatedly insists on the incompatibility of sociality and serial murder

throughout the season and series as a whole.

While Dexter's pursuit of Trinity is the primary plot point of the season, it is linked

to the equally significant and related storyline depicting Dexter's struggle to convincingly

perform emotional labour, which becomes critically important for Dexter to maintain his

marriage. To 'learn' from Trinity how to most convincingly perform the emotive work of

being a father and a husband, Dexter must engage in a type of affective labour in order to

form an acquaintanceship with him. When he first introduces himself under the alias of

Kyle Butler in SE04xE06, for example, Dexter bends the truth to induce affected

sympathy in Trinity, pretending to be estranged from his wife by exaggerating their

existing marital problems. Dexter's specification of family turbulence is purposive; he

assumes that Trinity has a set of affective tools not in his personal repertoire to be gained.

The Paradox of Patriarchal Masculinity

Dexter experiences patriarchy as a paradox in multiple ways. Because he treats

his marriage as a means to an end, as a social performance, he struggles to reconcile both

the emotionally distant old-school breadwinning masculinity that began to decline around

the 1950s (Ehreneich 118), and new-school caring, engaged fatherhood that anticipates

mutual "psychological bowing" and "emotional gift exchange" within the institution of

marriage (Hochschild 83). Dexter is derailed by contemporary neoliberalism's seeming valuation of an older version of masculinity, and this suggests that Dexter's apparently out-dated pull towards breadwinning is not simply due to the hangover of a previous gender regime.

This chapter will later trace the temporal and ideological trajectories of these two versions of patriarchal masculinity, and the third, added tension of neoliberal selfhood's impact upon normative manhood, due to its construction of "entrepreneurial men" as only able to appropriately "engage and express their emotions in the dialectical process of wealth creation" (Mulholland 142). The paradox between the old and new masculine ideal represents the problematic way in which contemporary masculinity is divided between emotional labour and capitalism, because neoliberalism devalues energy spent on non-capital relations.

Dexter also portrays the paradox of hegemonic masculinity more broadly, and its promise of male public sphere dominance at the expense of harmful emotional suppression (Horrock 25-26). Dexter's forced (and confused) expression of affect is underscored by the series' amplification of his struggle to determine the appropriate intensity of emotional expression. As a man, as a self-described sociopath, and as a killer, Dexter's necessary performance of normativity is multiplied. For example, his co-workers cycle through various failed relationships, broken engagements, short-term marriages, and divorces throughout the series – all largely without narrative suspicion that they might be 'like Dexter,' or violently criminally deviant. Accordingly, Dexter explicitly narrates his free adoption of the institutional norm of marriage, in an era in which this is no longer standard or necessarily expected, as strategically necessary to

mask that he lacks basic emotional registers and an ability to interpret normative social

cues.

Despite Dexter's emotional apathy (apparently resulting from his childhood

trauma), there is clearly something more going on with Dexter at the level of gender

normativity. His emotional disconnect also seems to result from what Roger Horrock has

identified as the "crisis of masculinity," which sees men crippled by their own claims to

power (25). Dexter's self-identification of affective lack (of an inability to emote), can be

read as an extreme case of suppressed emotional energy, resulting from Horrock's

summation of hegemonic masculinity's "cryptic message":

> Don't accept who you are, conceal your weakness, your tears,
> your fear of death, your love for others. Fake your behaviour.
> Dominate Others. Then you can fool everyone, especially yourself,
> that you feel powerful. (25)

Horrock's links his argument to feminist sociology of the late twentieth century, which

saw gender expression as structured by the "impasse between determinism [social and

biological], and voluntarism [to prescribed social codes]" (13). A deterministic view of

gender as both biological and freely adopted, layers on another institutional manifestation

of the fate/freewill dialectic being explored throughout this thesis. In sum, hegemonic

masculinity is a false form of empowerment that enables male dominance in the public

sphere through the naturalization of male apathy. It's conflicted conception asserts that

men are both at the mercy of their biological functions, yet only powerful as active

agents. This is the "paradox of patriarchy" (25).

The Breadwinner Ethic

I have mentioned that *Dexter* conveys masculinity at present to be an incoherent

concept caught between old and new formulations of manhood, through its suggestion

that its protagonist's behaviour is informed by the ideological hangover of what Barbara Ehreneich has labelled, the "breadwinner ethic" (11). The assumption of male economic responsibility for female dependents is said to have largely collapsed during the approximate thirty-year period between the 1950's and the 1980's (118), as a result of women's liberation movements of the sixties that concurrently worked to free men from "the responsibility of being [solitary] breadwinner[s]" (11). Ehreneich specifies that by the late 1970s and early 1980s, men were "no longer burdened with the automatic expectations of marriage and breadwinning" (12). If her summation is correct, and men are no longer considered "not suspiciously deviant, but "healthy"" for postponing marriage (12), we must question what *Dexter* is proposing through its protagonist's conscious undertaking of a domestic ideal that lacks normative currency for the 21st century male. Arguably internalizing Harry's code beyond its literal stipulations of certain guilt and the evasion of capture, Dexter's enactment of modern fatherhood is imbued with the ideals of an older version of American masculinity - unsurprisingly, those that likely would have been more relevant to his late-father Harry's generation.

Curtis R. Bergstrand and Jennifer Blevins Sinski support my reading that the bread-winner ethic persists, despite Ehreneich's convincing argument for its dismantling. Their claim that "social institutions and the narratives that create and sustain them tend to stubbornly persist as reifications in public consciousness" (161), acknowledges that the monocentric structure of American society, and "the sacred nature assigned to the family form characterized by sexual, emotional, and practical monogamy" in the 19th and 20th centuries, has been foundational to "the entire social, economic, and political order of industrial capitalism" (92).

Male breadwinning is not just a remnant of an out-dated set of gender relations – it actively feeds more recent neoliberal values, which are also linked to the "monocentric narrative" and "romantic love ideal" fundamental to the "American dream" of American culture (124). Immediately prior to the narrative action being addressed throughout this project, Season Three of *Dexter* somewhat comically stages Rita's need to be convinced by Dexter that his marriage proposal is genuine. In keeping with his character, Dexter does not immediately (or passionately) propose after he discovers that she is pregnant with his child, which leads to Rita's scepticism; she does not immediately agree due to her perception that Dexter's motivation is not properly inspired by romantic love.

Moreover, Jealousy, for example has been called a key ingredient to the construction of the romantic love ideal of monogamous marriage in capitalist societies (124), which assume that possessiveness of one's partner is within human nature, when in fact, monogamy serves the capitalist mode of production and its "obsession with privatization, self-reliance, and competition" necessary to the isolated nuclear family's survival (92).

Dexter and Rita's marriage seems to improve after Dexter conforms to the "private emotional system" (Hochschild 56) of American culture. After learning that their neighbour Elliot tried to kiss Rita while he was away performing his un-alienated 'free' labour, Dexter confronts him with a punch, while Rita watches from the window, evidently pleased with his show of jealousy (SE04xE11). By reinforcing his private ownership over his wife and physically displaying his possessiveness, Dexter properly conforms to the normative "feeling rule" of jealousy. Since "feeling rules [establish the] obligation that governs emotional exchanges" (Hochschild 56), this subplot, although

seemingly minor, significantly reinforces private ownership over one's partner in monogamous marriages, while ironically opposing the notion of home-as-authentic-sanctuary away from social monitoring (Bergstrand and Blevins Sinski 161). The evident appropriateness of Dexter's emotional display, links to the more contemporary ideal of manhood that engages in emotional relationship maintenance, and helps us to understood Dexter's disorientation at having to perform both old and new masculine ideals.

The Male Sex Role and "Men's Liberation"

The ideological shift that saw men "claim new sexual and financial freedoms" has been identified in some literature as the movement of "men's liberation" (Ehreneich 122). While Ehreneich challenges the idea that a male 'revolt' occurred during the 1970s, she does permit that there was a challenge to "the notion of a male sex role," defined in response to the feminist theorization of its female counterpart in the late 1960's (123). Speaking out against the "price [of] psychic alienation," critics of the male sex role argued that the masculine ideal had become a burdensome social construct (125). Men's 'liberation' worked harmoniously with "the human potential movement [and] the American reverence for authenticity," which applauded "candour and naturalness," enabled men to go from being 'hard' to 'soft,' and stripped away their "fear of emotional contact […] perpetuated by the pressure to succeed (as a breadwinner) in the competitive male world" (122, 127).

Dexter's inability to be 'authentic' places him in a liminal space – he cannot identify with men's liberation overtly without losing the safety of his 'camouflage.' The normative ideal thus serves as the camouflage; the issue is that this new and 'liberated' masculine ideal has ironically become more labour intensive, while it intended

to free men to feel their emotions openly. Men are now expected to act as breadwinners *and* to engage equally in emotional family labour. The irony is that in the twenty-first century, carrying out traditional and long let-go of expectations makes him the anomaly, and results in his hyper-visibility at the season's end (depicted in the premier episode of Season Five), when Dexter is forced to report and publically acknowledge Rita's murder, which suspiciously does not fit into Trinity's typical kill-pattern.

Masculinity and Emotional Labour

Let's continue to unpack the more recent version of masculinity that expects Dexter to share in emotional work at home. Although emotional labour is socially assigned differently for men and women (women are expected to do more emotion work in general, and to be more cooperative and available, while men are expected to respond with aggression "against those that break rules of various sorts"), both are tasked with emotion management (Hochschild 163, 165). Although the consequences of the commercialization of feeling are different for each gender, market appropriations of feeling nonetheless bleed into men and women's shared private lives (83-85).

Emotional labour as I will be discussing it, can be understood as a specific type of work that falls under the umbrella of affective production. Typically executed in person, emotional labour is often cited in academic literature as work characteristic of (but not limited to) the service sector of the economy (Hochschild 7). Significantly, emotional labour "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others," (7). Through the appropriation of the emotive countenance, this type of work requires the "manipulation of affects and requires (virtual or actual) human contact and proximity" (Hardt & Negri 97-

98). Let's now look directly at Dexter's deliberate undertaking of family life to "blend in," which requires his conduction of emotional labour at home. The intensity of the energetic demand of domestic labour necessary to maintaining his familial ties in many ways derails Dexter from his primary tasks (his official and unofficial work in the pursuit of 'justice'). What is meant to enable Dexter's freedom in the broader public sphere winds up impeding his overall agency at a very literal and temporal level.

Domestic work as such, is overtly and hyperbolically represented in SE04xE07. As soon as Dexter arrives home from work, his family begins with a list of demands. His stepson Cody greets him, "Dexter, finally, you have to help me finish my report on amphibian animals!" His stepdaughter Aster interrupts, "No, I need him to put up the shelves in my room." After Dexter weakly protests, "Actually, it's been a long day…." his wife Rita, enacts her role as the maternal manager of household labour (namely "child-rearing and household work" in line with women's economic dependence on men under the organization of patriarchy) (Hartmann 14), not by intervening in her children's requests, but by organizing Dexter's tasks for him, designating "first he'll help Aster, then Cody, then [he's] going to help me put Harrison's baby-bouncer together." Dexter's passive aggressive reply "that's a lot of helping," is dismissed with "that's what daddies are for."

The scene transitions to again represent the overlapping of Dexter's various forms of labour that work to enable his private and unregulated vigilantism. While officially on the clock, Dexter researches activities to keep his children occupied, hoping to minimize their demands on his leisure time. His plan backfires though – Dexter doesn't immediately realize that signing his stepson up for the "young sailors" club mandates his

active participation as a father - he resists the idea that he should have to participate in familial activity beyond providing basic economic support. Instead of fully committing to his stepson's overnight excursion, Dexter leaves the campsite (and apparently also his stepson alone in a sleeping bag) to murder a photographer that he believes to be guilty of killing many of his former models. The consequences of this choice are manifold. His family suffers from his division of attention – his stepson gets into a fight at school in Dexter's defense in SE04xE10, because a peer claims to have noticed Dexter sneaking back onto their campsite the following morning. And as mentioned in the previous chapter, we learn of the more serious consequence of Dexter's rushed entrepreneurial behaviour – he accidentally murders an innocent man and violates Harry's code.

Marriage and Maturity

Moreover, looking at Ehreneich's linkage between normative, adult masculinity and definitions of 'maturity' during the 1950s-60s, sheds light on Dexter's defiant undertaking of family as-alibi. A mature adult male subject embraced "responsibility, empathy, (mature) heterosexuality, and a "sense of function, or, as a sociologist would have put it, acceptance of adult sex roles" (Ehreneich 17). Ehreneich claims that "marriage [functioned] not only a proof of maturity, it [was] a chance to exercise one's maturity through countless new tasks" (19). This task-based perspective on marriage links us back to an understanding of Dexter's domestic life as a form of emotional labour, because it coincides with the "approved male attitude toward marriage-as-work" (19).

From a materialist perspective, patriarchy is not simply a psychic structure, but also one that is both social and economic (2). Heidi Hartmann's seminal piece "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Toward a More Progressive Union", first published

in 1979, makes the case that "patriarchal relations [have tended] to bolster capitalism,"
while the material basis of patriarchy rests "fundamentally in men's control over
women's labour power," (Hartmann 2, 11). In keeping with my argument that Dexter
problematically attempts to emulate an out-dated ideal of masculinity, it is apparent that
his approach to marriage is equally awkward and overly-traditional in the context of late-
capitalism, which no longer views wedlock as necessary to normativity. Ehreneich had
begun to articulate desertion from the male breadwinning role as early as the 1980s,
instead tracing the movement "toward a moral climate [endorsing] irresponsibility, self-
indulgence, and an isolationist detachment from the claims of others" (Ehreneich 169).

Dexter is caught between individualistic neoliberal ideology, the broader cultural
shift that saw to the veneration of male self-interest (119), and Harry's earlier
generation's perception of "adult masculinity [as] indistinguishable from the bread-
winner role" (20). He challenges Harry as the patriarchal authority figure who imposes
the expectation of emotional detachment upon him, ironically through a defiant
subscription to an out-dated developmental model of male maturity (18).

The Masculinization of Entrepreneurship

Dexter is unable to directly contest his family's demands upon his energy because
of his instrumental impetus. Instead, he narrates to the audience the incongruity of his
situation, "Dear Abby, I'm a serial killer and I need advice on how to keep my kids from
taking over my life" (*Dexter* SE04xE07). Surmising that only the Trinity killer can help
him, he goes to him under his alias Kyle Butler. The role of the father, according to
Trinity, is "to prepare children for self-sufficiency and the outside world." He seems to
have the balance that Dexter seeks - embracing the newer version of fatherhood in his

external persona, he is also able to limit the emotional demands on him at home, which gives him leisure time to kill. Suggesting that Dexter encourage his children to "pursue their outside interests," Trinity implies that the measure of success in a capitalist system is participation in neoliberal society itself – self-sufficiency translates to dependency upon the wage-labour market as opposed to continued dependence on the family income once they reach adulthood.

Katie Mulholland's analysis of "the naturalization of male entrepreneurialism" sheds light on Dexter's implicit assumption that as the patriarch, he is primarily responsible for providing his family with economic support, not caring labour – he presumes that his sole responsibility is as wage-earner. The linkage between "the hidden services provided by women in the household" to the cultural assumption that men predominantly possess the qualities necessary for successful wealth-accumulation (Mulholland 124), reinforces men's superior ability "to construct masculinities around […] public sphere activity, away from […] private sphere activity and from the labour of wives" (123-125). And yet, Dexter maintains an interest in being a 'good dad' (understood in the contemporary sense), which reinforces the contradictions between old and new ideals of fatherhood that get exacerbated by neoliberalism's ideological insistence on an earlier self-interested masculinity.

Expanding on Chapter Two's discussion of Dexter's embodiment of entrepreneurial subjectivity, we can understand Dexter's treatment of self-as-enterprise as more than a consequence of neoliberal ideology – it is also as an offshoot of his performance of masculinity historically rooted in the mutually beneficial partnership that has existed between patriarchy and capitalism (Hartmann 1-2). Cultural expectations of

male "leadership, management potential, and long-term strategic orientation," also demand that men act ruthlessly, that they take risks, and that they deny emotion in favour of rationality (Mulholland 124-125).

Trinity is evidently also an entrepreneurial subject that Dexter both admires and feels threatened by, since "the competitive character of entrepreneurialism […] reinforces fundamental divisions between men" (125-126). Dexter doesn't simply compete with his own department to personally execute justice against other killers – he also implicitly competes with these killers themselves for the spot of the most successful entrepreneurial subject. This is evinced throughout the series, as seasonal antagonists tend to be characters that particularly impress (and threaten) Dexter with their kill-strategies. For example, the Ice-Truck killer in Season One catches Dexter's attention through his unique methodology of draining bodies entirely of blood. Specific to the Season in question, Dexter notably expresses awe over Trinity's evasion of capture over an approximate thirty year time-span, giving him the status of the most successful and longest-running serial-killer that Dexter has encountered at this point in the series.

Further, dominance and physical violence are frequently appropriated to restructure, negotiate, and sustain masculinities, both alternate and hegemonic (Courtenay 400). Serial killing itself then, can be understood as a violent entrepreneurial practice that responds to the masculine construct. Because men attain the hegemonic ideal by embracing risk, "masculinity *requires* compulsive practice, because it can be contested and undermined at any moment" (400). If this is true, Dexter and Trinity's parallel experiences of trauma cannot alone account for their acts of compulsive violence, and it

is also worth noting the extreme disproportion of male to female killers that find themselves on Dexter's table across the program's eight seasons.

It is critical that we acknowledge that Dexter's desire for masculine self-sufficiency and 'freedom' is not just his own pathology, but also that of other men on the show, too. The series stages a relational dilemma experienced by men across the board. A man doesn't have to be a serial killer for his relationships to be disrupted by the pursuit of labour. The concept of 'workaholism,' cuts across both older breadwinning and the newer patriarchal model, as "claims to workaholism, which is essentially activity outside the home, have been long associated with the notion of authentic masculinity (Mulholland 134). According to both breadwinning ideology and neoliberalism's "acquisitive enterprise culture" (139), male emotion should be "consumed in the construction of the business and in the making of money" (135).

Agent Frank Lundy figures as an example in the series of a 'properly' normative male (a non-murderer) who experiences the same uneasy orientation towards perpetual labour and masculine autonomy that upset men's maintenance of emotional intimacy. In Season Two, Lundy forms a relationship with Deb that is broken off when he leaves town to pursue a killer in Oregon. Lundy returns to Miami in Season Four to Hunt the Trinity Killer, despite the fact that he is technically retired from the FBI. In many ways, Lundy and Dexter, cop and killer, are mirror images of one another. Lundy's insists on continuing to work without official employment or payment, because he too, derives his sense of self-hood from his work. Further, like Dexter, Lundy also finds bureaucratic process – and state justice by extension – to be flawed and in need of private, reparative action. In SE04xE01, we learn that Lundy has been personally pursuing Trinity for

approximately fifteen years. He explains, "law enforcement doesn't talk to each other, no one in the FBI is on board." His initial theory of Trinity's kill pattern (which we later to learn is even more extensive), is that he murders three people in the same state each year, before moving on to repeat the cycle in a different municipality. Lundy's inability to keep up a romance with Deb while hunting Trinity (and killers like him), across state borders, parallels Dexter's fraught relationship with Rita, while he works double-time to exact justice on 'deserving' victims.

The Instrumentalization of Feeling

The constancy of Dexter's necessary performative façade alienates him from experiencing an integral sense of truth in his intimate relationships. Arlie Hochschild attributes worker self-estrangement to modernity's "instrumental stance towards feeling" (22). The individual's daily exposure to various social roles and spheres has made it less clear "what feeling is owed to whom, and when, and how" (22). Neoliberal subjects have been made to mentally question what they *ought* to feel in a given situation, as opposed to intuiting and acting on their already present emotional states (22). This contextual fluctuation of emotion management has been linked to the self-questioning of personal identity, which illuminates "the possible cost of doing [emotional] work"; the circumstances in which "the worker can become estranged or alienated from an aspect of self – either the body or the margins of the soul – that is *used* to do the work" (7). In alienating contexts, emotion management can become dangerous to the individual, because the conscious affective manipulation of others has the parallel potential to distort what one's inner emotional state and sense of interiority becomes (26).

Emotion locates a sense of selfhood; it arguably uncovers an "unconscious perspective" or the "true position" of the subject (29). The consequence of Dexter's instrumentalization of affect then, is interference in his "signal function" of feeling, the intuitive indication of his primary inner position (29). In his effort to contort the perceptions of others during his performance of normativity, Dexter disassociates from his own emotional state. Moreover, this deliberate intervention in his "signal function of feeling" (30) occurs because he has been trained to enact absolute objectivity, which is typically understood as "free[dom] from feelings" more generally (Hochschild 31). Unbiased murder is foundational to Harry's code. Dexter's disavowal of emotionally charged murderous impulse is, in theory, a good thing – it is this essential quality that makes him a 'good' killer and worthy protagonist. The flip side of this 'objectivity' however, is that it requires Dexter's suppression of affect, and as a result, he "suffers a sense of arbitrariness" and perceives his own "point of view [and] self-interest [to be] irrational (30). When "feeling" is evoked as an object, the individual's self-perception becomes untrustworthy (47). Since "various elements of acting are taken away from the individual and replaced with institutional mechanisms " (49), Dexter's conception of his family as camouflage amplifies its configuration as another institution to be navigated, rather than a secure space enabling authenticity.

Further, Hochschild articulates modernity's contradictory normalization of the "false self" in both the private and the public management of feeling (194). On the one hand, the false or 'unclaimed' self is implicitly considered healthy by social standards – "by giving up infantile desires for omnipotence" individuals can secure a place in society (195). On the other, the "potentially estranging" consequence of emotional labour is

against the modern celebration of spontaneous feeling" (192). Dexter's endgame in Season Four (his motivation behind conducting observational research of Trinity's affective repertoire) is to mask the artifice behind his own performance of emotional sincerity within the domestic model. To 'freely' navigate society; to outwardly convey his 'normalcy,' Dexter must sacrifice connection to his very emotional constitution itself, as all men are basically required to do.

The Marital Dynamic in the Series; Women's Domestic Role

The family institution becomes public and disciplinary rather than private and intimate for Dexter because he is unable to truly let his guard down even when he is at home. This fact does not go unnoticed by Rita, however, and after she discovers that he chose to keep his apartment in SE04xE05 (even after they have married and bought a house together), she suggests that their marriage is in jeopardy, telling him that when he comes home they "have a lot of work to do if this marriage is going to last." Marriage-as-work in this instance is made explicit by the series, and because he cannot tell Rita the true reason why he kept his old apartment (as a place to house his kill-tools and his ritual blood-slide trophies), it is insinuated that he did so out of infidelity, threatening the monogamy of their nuclear family and its romantic love ideal [Bergstrand & Sinski 125]. Since both serial killing and adultery are considered non-normative desires, infidelity's equal threat to Dexter's marriage is a suggestive connection made by the series.

In the following episode, Dexter, frustrated by the labour involved in marriage, muses, "She has to forgive me eventually, right?" His assumption that their problems might resolve themselves without labour energy on his part is upended by Rita's demand that they attend to marital counselling together. Once in therapy, Rita cries she is so

frustrated by their lack of open communication - while Dexter narrates his discomfort to the audience, "I'm perfectly comfortable with bodily fluids. Blood. Snot. Tears. But the emotions that go along with them? Not so much" (*Dexter*, SE04xE06). Dexter's self-estrangement from his emotional center is made apparent in this scene, as it is unclear if he is genuinely apathetic or self-prescriptively so. It is ambivalent whether Dexter's inability to deal with emotion is because his experience of trauma, or if it is because he obeys the social script of masculinity. Dexter's pained effort to adhere to normative ideals of manhood exemplifies my earlier point that his relational dilemmas as a serial killer are not that different from those experienced by other men (like Agent Lundy) who are also imposed on by normative gender expectations.

More significant to my reading of *Dexter* as tragic – both in its protagonist's frustrated desire for both community and individual autonomy, and as the season's literal consequence – is that Rita gives Dexter the option to leave the marriage if he cannot be authentic. She asserts, "I need a partner Dexter, someone I can completely trust. Unless you can be completely honest with me, I don't want to do this anymore" (*Dexter*, SE04xE06). Dexter's likeability as a 'good' bad-guy is challenged here, insofar as his instrumental marriage to Rita is illuminated to be truly selfish, because Dexter knows that he cannot uphold her terms of honesty – he married her precisely to support his dishonest lifestyle. By not ending the marriage, Dexter does not allow Rita to find a relationship that meets her needs, one that does not jeopardize her or her children's safety. It is on this point that Harry attempts to intervene without success until it is too late, as Rita ends up dead and her children are left without a mother. Herein lies the tragic paradox: Dexter is indirectly responsible for her murder, and yet he has been oriented towards the self-

interested, supposedly masculine social ideals of "enterprise culture," these being "individualism, single-mindedness [and] instrumentalism," (Mulholland 139). Dexter believes that he is protecting his marriage (and by extension his wife) by taking on normative values, and yet this is exactly what gets her killed.

Moreover, Barbara Ehrenreich notes that the abandonment of the male breadwinning ideal created a precarious future for women, who have been made "increasingly dependent on [their] own resources […] in a society and an economy that never intended to admit [them] as independent persons" (175). This explains why Rita is shown to have more at stake in their relationship - she is implicitly financially dependent on Dexter, as the fourth season does not show her to have work. While past seasons have depicted Rita working in both the real estate and hospitality industries, she is not characterized as a high-profile "career woman" similar to many of Dexter's colleagues and 'equals,' which I would argue is deliberate on the show's part. The most self-interested activity that Rita expresses interest in all season is a night off each week to do yoga, which Dexter wryly internally dismisses, "scheduling my activities around her downward facing dog could prove challenging" (*Dexter*, SE04xE07). Rita's attempt to carve out a time away from domestic duties for self-care is made trivial in comparison to Dexter's labour in the name of 'justice.'

Dexter attempts to recreate a version of patriarchal capitalism that, according to Hartmann (citing Eli Zaretsky), "requires women to work in the home in order to reproduce the labour force, provide psychological nurturance for workers, and provide an island of intimacy in a sea of alienation" (4). We have noted already how Dexter's marriage ironically becomes a site of alienation due to his utilitarian treatment of his

family members, but it worth noting that even before he and Rita are wed in Season Four,

Dexter's instrumental treatment of Rita is explicit. In Season One, he articulates that Rita

is his chosen partner because she is "just as damaged as he is," while recovering from

domestic abuse inflicted by her first husband (*Dexter*, SE01XE01). She fits the maternal

and domestic prerequisite by virtue of her existing two children, and she also

significantly does not immediately demand that Dexter perform the affective labour of

sexual intercourse following her experience of abuse. As her character develops and she

gains more confidence however, this lack of demand on Dexter's affective energy

changes – the premier of Season Four humorously shows Rita jumping him after his

exhausted arrival at home, teasing, "the baby's down you know what that means." She

asks, "Between work and the baby, aren't you as horny as I am?" (*Dexter*, SE04XE01).

Dexter struggles to get out "of course I am," – his difficulty keeping up the emotional and

physical work of marriage show it to be a form of labour as such.

Let's briefly return to Dexter and Rita's ongoing therapy resulting from his

"inability" to communicate with her. After their session in SE04xE06, Rita is still angry,

but Dexter's need to hide his 'dark passenger' shows him to have no idea how to begin

sharing with her. While Rita does the dishes, Dexter's internal monologue shows him to

be genuinely socially awkward: "She wants a partner, okay I'll share. About what?

Work? Spatter Analysis? No, something personal. Trinity? No, too personal. Food – I'm

hungry, I could tell her that." Dexter's over-identification with entrepreneurial

subjectivity has him completely preoccupied by his various forms of work at all times –

his only other mental preoccupation (food) is that which is required for his basic survival.

Dexter is so thoroughly defined by his labour (that which is socially imposed on him, and

that which he chooses to independently pursue), he doesn't have an interior self to share with his partner, not unlike other normative men who, by "pursuing the capitalist impulse," tend to experience "loneliness, alienation, and a lack of solidarity and intimacy" (Muholland 138).

Masculinity, Public-Sphere Dominance, and Mental Health

Despite the fact that the nuclear family is necessarily "self-reliant" and expected to be "a completely self-contained unit that can and should meet all the needs of its members" (154), Dexter's emotional disconnection that proves Rita's demand that they undergo marital counselling might ironically be read as an indication of his mental health rather than illness. Murray Bowen's definition of mental health is cited by Bergstrand & Sinski as the individual's "achievement of a "differentiated self" [which] refers to one's ability to separate one's own intellectual and emotional functioning from that of the family" (119). We might read further paradox into this apparent contradiction between the celebration of individual differentiation in mental health discourse that goes against the adulation of family co-dependency, if Dexter was not a man and expected to maintain a certain degree of emotional distance - coined by Horrock as "the male ethic of self denial," or, the "ability to suffer and remain cut off from human feeling" (42). Therapeutic discourse reinforces this understanding of masculine emotionality – after Rita unloads her frustration that Dexter is still keeping secrets, their counsellor responds "it sounds like you knew about him when you married him" (*Dexter,* SE04x06). Rita sniffles, "I hoped he would change," - solidifying stereotypes of passive femininity which further enable Dexter's secretive behaviour, as she acknowledges her 'responsibility' for their disconnect because she 'knew' what Dexter was like prior to committing to their

marriage. Of course, Dexter continues to lie to Rita, particularly about his 'double shift' and pursuit of Trinity. While justifying his intended absence for a work-related "conference" and how it will attractively boost his salary review, Dexter and Rita share a rare moment of genuine intimacy – Dexter seems truly touched when she 'allows' him to go unencumbered, while she reassures him of his value as a wage-earner - "I love your dedication. To your work. To our family. It's one of the reasons why I married you."

Dexter's instrumental submission to the institution of marriage is more than pretence which supports his 'free' navigation of the public institutions he transgresses. We have mentioned how he is motivated to demonstrate adult maturity to Harry, which is linked with the show's very important proposal that Dexter's demonstration of dominance in the public-sphere is only able to occur at the level of his psychic subjectivity. Since Harry passed away before the real-time narrative action of the series, Dexter's imagined debates with his long-dead father characterize him as a mentally ill subject. This implication clashes with the program's ironic conveyance of Dexter's prolonged ability to hide his sociopathic disorder from others for nearly the entire duration of the series, arguably only possible because emotional unavailability is normative for men, which causes cues of Dexter's disaffection to be overlooked. These scenes that occur entirely in the realm of fantasy importantly stage Dexter's turmoil as necessarily internal, inferring that he is unable to have authentic, emotionally cleansing conversations in his every-day life. Harry's imaginary figuration significantly evinces the lack of public (institutional) healing modalities available to Dexter, as he is unable to seek help from official or public organizations without sacrificing his claim to power

within the public sphere itself; he would risk hospitalization or imprisonment if the truth

behind his murderous compulsion were to be discovered.

The Relative 'Permanence' of Affective Injury and the Tragic

In SE04xE03, Dexter imagines Harry reprimanding him after he embarrasses his

stepdaughter Aster at a neighbourhood barbeque. The fact that Aster is on the brink of

puberty, and generally undergoing the individuation process of early adulthood, is

glossed over – Harry asserts, "you knew this day would come Dexter. You've always

been good with children, but they grow up and develop complex emotions that just aren't

in your skill set." Harry insists that Dexter is incapable of connecting to his wife and

children, cruelly stating, "I hope you're not taking any of this seriously. The wife, the

kids, the 'burbs. It's all great camouflage. But that's all it is." Dexter tries to push back

against this denial of his affective potential, arguing, "it's gotten more complicated than

that" - but such a vague assertion lacks self-conscious conviction in his actual emotional

stance. Harry's apparition ultimately functions as a visual representation of Dexter's self-

prescribed affective injury.

Dexter's imagined debates with Harry demonstrate how Dexter disavows himself

the plurality of human experience as such. Harry's ruthless final word – that Dexter

needs to "un-complicate it" and to "realize his limitations" suggests even at this mid-

point in the series that Dexter's social dislocation is a learned behaviour. It is in this

'doomed' struggle for sociality that the tragic fate vs. freewill dialectic surfaces – Dexter

has been conditioned to believe that he is fated to a life of isolation due to his 'fixed'

violent compulsion, and the series' as a whole stages his resistance to Harry's code; to the

prophesy that he cannot genuinely connect with others because of stipulated secrecy.

Dexter personalizes the challenges he experiences within his relationships as wholly resultant of his stunted ability to emote, but if he were truly without a 'heart' as he claims himself to be at the beginning of his character development (*Dexter*, S01xE01), or the ability to process emotion on at least a functional level, he would presumably lack the inclination to form tentative relationships throughout the course of the series. Looking at the entirety of *Dexter'*s conclusive narrative arc (that spans across both the seventh and eighth seasons) is beyond the scope of this project; however, it is worth noting that *Dexter* concludes its final season with a psychiatric interrogation of the validity of its own premise – of the problematic implication of the relative permanence and un-treatability of Dexter's social disconnect.

Chapter Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter worked to show how *Dexter* illuminates that the contemporary neoliberal, male subject is ironically similar to the older, breadwinning version of masculinity, in its veneration of individualism and self-interest. The more recent assertion that men should be emotionally invested within the domestic sphere is not just a manifested tension between just old and new ideals of masculinity; neoliberalism itself works to encourage the older breadwinning archetype that prioritizes men's investment in the sphere of work over emotional labour at home. The "male entrepreneur's work activity" pervasively overtakes their possible involvement in domestic life, both temporally and at the level of gender normativity (Mulholland 143).

Further, because "the energies of wives of such men are also indirectly consumed by the same activity" of entrepreneurial behaviour, it logically followed that Rita would wind up murdered by one of Dexter's competitors. Rita's death very literally represents

the elimination of her demand on Dexter's energy, as she is figured by the series as,

above all else, an impediment to Dexter's entrepreneurial and masculine subjectivity.

Thesis Conclusion*: Dexter,* The Tragic, and the Failure of Collective Action under Neoliberal Capitalism

My argument for the ongoing relevance of tragic interpretation may have indeed been sparked by Linda Williams' assertion that melodrama remains the dominant narrative mode of twenty first century American popular culture (50 L. Williams *Melodrama Revised).* However, my reading of *Dexter* through the lens of Eagleton's tragedy-as-dialectics (the political inseparability of personal freedom from submission to institutional determinism), which links to Storm's notion of 'the tragic' (as individual fragmentation), developed through a deeper examination of the series' narrative structure. *Dexter* reveals how capitalism and patriarchy function as collapsed, internalized, and 'tragic' scripts that are both imposed on and enacted by individuals who fail to successfully emulate these structures, because these scripts are in themselves flawed and contradictory. Through Dexter's exemplification of the very inability to escape the social systems that bind him, namely, the impossibility of acting out violent desire on his own terms in a way that is not enfolded into the neoliberal labour regime of the self-as-entrepreneur, we are asked by the series to consider the nature of individual agency within political and economic institutions.

I have argued that the tragic nature of the series is locatable in its representation of the illusory promise of personal autonomy and community offered by but not actualisable within capitalism and the patriarchal family, and the contradictory demands that these structures place upon social agents. The possibility of genuine freedom is foreclosed by capitalist logic, which defines freedom as "obedience to self-imposed sovereignty" (Eagleton 115). Requiring an ostensibly independent individual to carry out its mechanisms, capitalism paradoxically constrains its subjects by submitting them to the

inhuman logic of the market. While the question of how the state requires the self-subjugation of its subjects is an important one, this project has been more concerned with the neoliberal marketplace that requires Dexter to engage in exploited and alienated labour to survive, and how despite his varying reactions to these circumstances across the series, he is not able to independently resolve the contradictions of capitalist social order.

Dexter's desire to overcome his prescribed outsider status is repeatedly blocked, insofar as his engagement with the social sphere becomes instrumentalized in the service of capitalism and patriarchy. His workspace is organized to serve the interests of capitalism as opposed to the social ties which develop through collaborative efforts towards justice, and his family is revealed to be a site that requires a constant re-negotiation of power dynamics, negating a possible sense of affective authenticity while it reproduces unequal gender hierarchies.

I would like to conclude this thesis by untangling a crucial political implication posed by *Dexter* – that privately performed violent action becomes a tragic necessity for individuals living in a society that fails to adequately deliver justice. Briefly looking at the way that the series concludes reaffirms my reading that the program is indeed structured tragically – Dexter fails to protect those dearest to him when he resists the individualizing and competitive logics of patriarchy and capitalism that oppose and devalue collective social action.

Raymond Williams posits that there has been an unnecessary formal opposition between the ideas of tragedy and revolution, largely advanced by defeatist perspectives of tragedy as the forced acceptance of inevitability (63 R. Williams *Modern Tragedy*). Defeatist readings of the tragic (like Linda Williams' contention with contemporary

tragedy in her work *On the Wire*) highlight the import of reviving Eagleton's argument

that dialectical thought needs to be recovered in the modern era to understand ideological

paradox as such (Eagleton 203). Conceiving of tragedy as mere inevitability also

overlooks how Dexter's actions can be read as a purposive, non-utilitarian response to

social disorder (63 R. Williams *Modern Tragedy*). R. Williams bridges the seemingly

opposed notions of tragic fatalism and intentional, revolutionary social change, by

claiming that while times of revolution are often felt to be tragedies because of their

evident "violence, dislocation, and extended suffering," when social movements work,

our perception of their tragic nature tends to change. In retrospect, "the successful

revolution […] becomes not tragedy, but epic"(64). The series concludes tragically,

because even when Dexter tries to make the transition from a tragic to a revolutionary

outcome by engaging in collective action, he is still subjected to fatal consequences

following his attempt to resist masculine and neoliberal calls to individualism and

personal accountability.

The opposition signified between tragedy and revolution is not merely a formal

one – considered conceptually these terms also offer two ways of reading experience.

Tragedy ordinarily "excludes […] experience which is social" from its narrative arc,

while the idea of revolution tends to depersonalize the experience of tragedy (64). Read

this way, collective social action – rather than individual opposition to injustice - is

required for social change to transpire, for the tragic resistance of inevitability to

culminate into something meaningful, something which might surpass the individual's

suffering and personal plight. Dexter's resistance to determinism; to his prescribed social

isolation, does not transform into epic (nor even into the basic deliverance of justice), in

the series' conclusion. It is precisely the notion of a properly communal effort towards social order that is denied by *Dexter*'s finale.

While I won't trace the entirety of the series' denouement, I will provide a general summary of the sequence of choices made by Dexter in the penultimate episode and series' finale. The show culminates in Dexter's self-severance from all social and affective ties, and in many ways from neoliberal social order itself, because he perceives himself to be responsible for his sister's Deb's psychic death – for her loss of cognitive function, basic selfhood, and quality of life after being shot by a killer that Dexter allowed to escape his personal retribution.

By the penultimate episode, Dexter intends to leave Miami for Argentina with his son Harrison and new romantic partner, Hannah McKay. His relationship with Hannah is shown to fundamentally contrast Dexter's marriage to Rita in one critical respect: Hannah knows that Dexter is a serial killer, and she accepts him because she too, identifies as a non-normative subject, having also killed before out of self-preservation. Dexter's bond with Hannah is authentic; he does not need to maintain a façade with her. Dexter non-instrumentally chooses to be with Hannah because he enjoys her company, not because she contributes to Dexter's external persona of normativity. If anything, Hannah hinders Dexter's effort to 'blend in,' because she is technically an escaped convict on the run.

Hannah's need to circumvent disciplinary measures accelerates Dexter's drive to kill Oliver Saxon, the eighth season's main antagonist, who like season four's Trinity killer, is in many ways a mirror image of Dexter. Saxon is the vengeful son of Dr. Evelyn Vogel; the psychiatrist who we learn developed Dexter's code with Harry. Vogel failed her son by trying to treat him institutionally, after recognizing in him sociopathic cues of

his future disposition toward violence at an early age (not unlike those Harry perceived in

Dexter as a child). Saxon resents Dexter for having had an opportunity to live a

normative life that he was not given; it was Vogel's failed attempt to treat her son using

enclosed medical discourse (the infirmary) that prompted her to develop an alternative

approach to treating Dexter's violent inclination with Harry.

As in the fourth season, the series again implies that Dexter has a personal score

to settle with a murderer that he cannot trust due process to settle without his individual

undertaking of vigilante murder. The difference is that here Dexter resists neoliberalism's

personalizing impulse - he actively chooses to put faith in the ability of the judicial

system to function in the way that it is meant to. At this point in the series, Deb is aware

of Dexter's true identity as a vigilante killer. She expresses surprise after learning that he

collected a DNA sample from the killer for the department, and openly asks him, "Why

are you helping us get Saxon? Don't you want him for yourself?" Dexter's reply "I just

want him taken care of" generates even further disbelief - Deb answers "that's new

coming from you." Dexter is significantly shown no longer to be in competition with his

own department or resisting the alienation of his official labour through the private

undertaking of the capture of criminals.

His motive to work collectively rather than individually is to ensure the safety of

those closest to him, with whom, the series suggests, Dexter has developed into genuine

relationships with, rather than treating them as mere camouflage. After he resigns from

his position as a forensic analyst, Dexter is personally addressed by the (oft-portrayed

cold) Lieutenant Matthews, who tells Dexter that he is "like family" to him, and that "if

[Dexter] ever need[s] anything, or if [he] decides [he] want[s] to come back, this will

always be [his] home." Dexter's coworkers also express sadness at his decision to leave –

Sgt. Angel Batista even makes a brief sentimental speech to the department on his behalf:

"Dexter Morgan may be leaving the Miami Metro familia, but he will always be right

here in our hearts." When Dexter awkwardly responds, "Um, I'll miss you guys too," his

coworkers laugh and show acceptance of Dexter's discomfort with the affective display –

they care for him just the way that he is (to the limits of their knowledge). Dexter's

relationship with his coworkers by the end of the series is largely revealed to be genuine -

professional boundaries fail to negate their expression of sincere care for one another.

The series' ending invokes the fate/free will dialectic of the tragic that I have

engaged throughout this project, by proposing that Dexter is given a (non)choice to leave

his murderous desire and need for personal retribution behind. Saxon offers that they both

"walk away, go [their] separate paths, [and] live [their] separate lives;" forgoing their

race to murder the other. However his 'offer' is not interpretable as a legitimate option

for Dexter, because it is really a barely-veiled threat. Saxon acknowledges that Dexter

has "a lot more to lose" than he does, because Dexter has "created the perfect cover life.

[A] cute little son. [His] sister. Step kids even. And now […] a girlfriend." Dexter then

privately narrates to the audience, "They're not a cover. They're real to me." This final

season thus tries to stage Dexter making a different choice that he made with season

four's Trinity killer under authentic rather than instrumental circumstances.

Even still, the series naturalizes Dexter's inability to "walk away;" to truly live a

normative life. Deb explicitly tells Hannah in a subsequent scene that despite her sense

that Dexter is making a mistake going after Saxon, it's just "who he is." And yet, this

thesis has also worked to demonstrate that as a neoliberal subject who has absorbed the

norms of freelance labour in his quest for autonomy, Dexter has been coerced into downloading "the risks and costs of production" onto himself (Cohen 147).

Towards the end of the episode, Dexter has a mental conversation with Harry that shows him to still be very much fragmented, as he grapples with his own willingness to allow official law enforcement to take care of Saxon without interfering. Dexter vents, "He came into my house and threatened my family," to which Harry replies, "Now you're sounding like the old Dexter." Dexter goes on to contradict his earlier support and cooperation with law enforcement, musing, "It didn't used to matter who was on my table, as long as someone was. But now, it's personal." In this scene, Dexter reverts to an earlier version of himself; very much like the Dexter of Season Four whose need for personal revenge against the Trinity killer instigated the death of Rita. The major difference now, is that Dexter truly seems driven by a primary desire for authentic – as opposed to merely instrumental – relationships. The Dionysian split of Dexter's selfhood is still very much present; it has just been reframed by the series as a division between "old" and "new" versions of Dexter, as opposed to through the language of his compulsive inability to resist a "dark passenger" that overtakes him.

The ultimate irony is that Dexter's sincere attempt to be normative and to affect genuine emotion within his relationships proves fatal for his closest emotional connection throughout the series – for his sister Deb. By the end of the penultimate episode, Dexter successfully gets Saxon on his table, but instead of killing him, he leaves him to Deb to be brought in by official law enforcement, because the pull he feels towards a new life with Hannah is stronger than his desire to commit murder. When he walks away, Harry's apparition proudly tells him, "I never thought this day would come. You don't need me

anymore." The series proposes that in saying goodbye to his need to kill, Dexter is also laying Harry's code and its imposition on his agency to rest. He no longer needs to perform normativity because he genuinely identifies with it; Dexter truly wants to try to live the life of a regular law-abiding citizen. Shortly after he walks away however, Saxon manages to escape his confines after being released by an unknowing officer working undercover, and proceeds to shoot Deb.

The actual series finale suggests that Dexter's 'choice' to abandon his 'fate' as a non-normative killer is what triggered Deb getting shot, and caused her eventual entrance into a vegetative state without the ability to independently function without various forms of life support. Dexter responds to this sense of personal responsibility by succumbing to his urge to independently murder Saxon, and after disposing of Deb's body at sea (as if she too is another number to add to his body count), he then fakes his own death by driving his boat directly into a hurricane, rather than joining his son and Hannah abroad. Dexter's final lines confirm his resignation to his 'doomed' inability to socially connect: "I destroy everyone I love. I can't let that happen to Hannah, to Harrison. I have to protect them, from me." At first it appears to the audience that Dexter has committed suicide – an ending which may have been satisfying for some, in line with the show's narrative premise that Dexter's task has been to take out all of the 'monsters' of society.

However, the show's 'real' ending reveals that it has in many ways been a narrative about labour all along. After a brief blackout the camera returns to show the audience a lumber yard setting: a site of intensive material labour, with trucks hauling very large loads of cut down trees while an apparently all-male workforce performs various other manual tasks. Dexter appears to have resigned himself to working a very

tangible, material profession, that does not seem immaterial (particularly in the

informational sense) in the slightest.

In an interview discussing the decisions made by the writers on the finale's

composition, executive producer Scott Buck explains,

> The future of Dexter is something that we leave purposefully vague – we
> don't show him killing, he's living a very penitent life at the moment but
> we don't know exactly what this means. He's certainly given up his humanity
> and if so, you have to ask yourself, what's left?
> (Buck, SHOWTIME Official Youtube Channel, 2 May 2014).

Earlier in the interview Buck proposes that Dexter's self-imposed exile from society is

worse than the finale's initial implication that he has committed suicide, because "the one

thing that he has longed for throughout the series more than anything is human contact,

and he has given himself a life where he completely denies himself that." The series is

thus unable to imagine Dexter's total 'forgoing of his humanity' outside of capitalist

working conditions - Buck implicitly conflates an isolated working class existence for

Dexter with a total loss of his elemental humanness. Significant class implications aside,

(as I have mentioned that this project has been more concerned with the structure of

neoliberal working order), Dexter's self-imposed punishment is a future performing

unrewarding, alienated labour in an intimacy-deprived space of social isolation.

The finale can also be interpreted as Dexter's retreat into an authentic

masculinity, taxed with neither the older demands of breadwinning, nor the newer

expectation of emotional labour. After Deb's permanent loss of cognitive function,

Dexter ruminates "for so long all I wanted was to be like other people, but now that I do I

just want it to stop." We have noted that his primary drive throughout the series has been

to authentically emote; to forgo his performance of affect in favour of genuine feeling.

Once Dexter is confronted with incredible grief – the most powerful emotion associated with the loss of human connection – he wishes to revert back to identifying as a properly suppressed masculine subject.

Further, Buck's admittance that that the writers "expect[ed] mixed reactions from fans" reflects how the deliberate final ambiguity on the show's part generated very frustrated responses from audience members (Gheesling, *Thought Catalogue* 23 September 2013). The writers' lack of decisiveness and transparency while ending the series illustrates the difficulty of ending a television series, as a medium that is punctured by the expectation that narrative remains open-ended and able to continue. The series' ambivalent ending ultimately reiterates that *Dexter* cannot be read melodramatically. Admittedly, if "today's big-screen mega-melodramas increasingly leave their heroes hanging – between life and death, one outcome and another" (530 L. Williams *Mega-Melodrama!*), Deb's shooting might seem to signify something of the "too late" temporality of melodrama. *Dexter* suspends its audience by showing its protagonist to renounce his anti-social behaviour after finding community and un-alienated interpersonal connection "too late;" Dexter despairingly only comes to this conclusion after fatally choosing to pursue Saxon instead of "walking away." However, it would be unjust to hold Dexter entirely responsible for Saxon's actions, because his arrival into Dexter's social reality occurred as a result of both killers' respective parents' actions, long before the real-time action of the program began.

Even more importantly to my reading against *Dexter'*s finale as melodrama, is the fact that Buck explicitly mentions in the interview that Dexter is neither fully punished (by death or capture), nor does he find a positive way to live with his traumatic

compulsion – he is finally denied a return to a space of innocence. His labour in a lumberyard cannot be read as a peaceful pastoral retreat, because Dexter's self-removal from the social order is clearly an unhappy one – he explicitly denies himself his primary desire for intimacy and social connection. The show does not end with melodrama's clear moral legibility of 'right' and 'wrong' action, and it also does not reveal what a properly functioning moral order might look like - Dexter's department is likewise shown to fail in the apprehension of wrongdoers; it is another officer's error that allowed Saxon to escape. Instead, the series' ending is a tragic denouement that highlights how Dexter's failed attempt to tie his transgressive (but justice oriented) desires into collective action results in his banishment to a space of solitude and unfulfilling alienated labour.

Dexter's lack of resolution which can only conclude in a removal of its anti-hero from the social order evinces that the individual alone cannot resolve the contradictions of capitalism and patriarchy. An understanding of the tragic as dialectical simultaneity, as the inseparability of predestination and autonomy, is critical to my understanding of how the series' ending frustrates a reading of the tragic inevitability. It is precisely Dexter's turning away from the individuating processes of neoliberalism that gets Deb killed and shows community justice to fail. The conclusion seems defeatist because it proposes that regardless of whether or not Dexter acts out of collective or self-interest, there are fatal consequences for all who become close to him. And yet, I would argue that Dexter's 'choice' to cooperate rather than compete with law enforcement still has an explicitly personal impetus. It is this self-interested desire in communal belonging, which he tries to incorporate into a neoliberal and patriarchal social order through a reframing of his

actions as intended to be for the social good, that ultimately fails - and exposes the incoherence of these systems.

This thesis has worked to demonstrate via *Dexter*, how 'complex' contemporary television can and does utilize a tragic mode of narration. Engaging with the concept of the tragic with broad generic (as opposed to formal) permissibility, reading popular serial dramas in this way enables us to uncover the significance behind surging interest in narratives staging the paradoxes faced by men in the twenty-first century, striving to assert personal agency while being asked to sacrifice emotional ties within their larger communities. I hope to have shown how the tragic mode offers exciting possibilities for social critique while considering the broader rise of complex television. Highlighting the contrary nature of social institutions that demand our 'free' submission to them, a tragic paradigm affords a model of interpretation that allows us to see both the individual and the social order as responsible for cyclical violence and interconnected human suffering.

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