The Cultural Politics of Jennifer Lawrence as Star, Actor, Celebrity

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Introduction

> 'I always forget you're supposed to chill rosé. I'm new money.'[i]
>
> - Jennifer Lawrence

Jennifer Lawrence came to prominence in the years immediately following the 2008 financial crash and subsequent recession. Through her performances on- and off-screen she has become reflective of many of the traumatic, long-term consequences of this economic shock. As Richard Dyer (1987; 1998) contends, certain film stars come to represent certain values and ideologies at particular times, embodying and often resolving the contradictions ordinary people experience in their everyday lives under capitalism. Dyer's work also argues that stardom has the capacity to challenge or critique a culture's ideological shibboleths. While few, if any, stars can truly be said to defy or depart from the s*tatus quo*, many of them will toy playfully with its boundaries, representing the possibility of liberation from the strictures of society, while simultaneously reaffirming its most widely-held beliefs. Stars come to exemplify the 'preoccupations, values and conflicts and contradictions of a particular culture', often reinforcing both dominant and alternative values (Gaffney and Holmes 2007: 1).

In the contemporary context of economic crisis and social upheaval, Lawrence has functioned precisely in this way. From her breakthrough in *Winter's Bone* (Debra Granik, 2010), through *The Hunger Games* (2012-15) series, to her collaborations with David O. Russell (*Silver Linings Playbook* [2012], *American Hustle* [2013] and *Joy* [2015]), Lawrence played characters living in precarious situations, struggling to achieve stability and prosperity in environments in which such relatively modest goals seem impossible. One of Lawrence's close friends described this archetype, rather uncharitably, as 'white trash with too much

responsibility'.[ii] However, through individual drive, gumption, ingenuity and resilience, to varying degrees Lawrence's characters come to achieve at least a semblance of what they sought, even if the conclusions of some of the films appear somewhat ambivalent.

This article will establish the cultural politics of Lawrence's image, on- and off-screen. Her film performances are characterised broadly as quiet, restrained and lacking in ostentation. Off screen, Lawrence's cultivation of an image of folksy, unpretentious, unaffected ordinariness chimes with a period in which Hollywood stars are reviled as elitist and out-of-touch. Her management of her on- and off-screen personae suggest a desire to resist the *status quo*, even if ultimately conventional wisdom is reinforced. Through a focus on the initial phase of Lawrence's fame, this article will capture the ways in which her image functioned as an embodiment of mainstream culture's response to the crisis of neoliberalism and the endemic insecurity it has precipitated. Her career reinforces the idea that the star within mainstream cinema should function as a figure able to resolve the contradictions of the era of which they are part; in Lawrence's case, and most prominently in the films chosen for close attention here, to sell us fantasies of liberation from oppression and poverty in films that deal with these themes in the aftermath of the financial crisis.

The case for this focus on the first part of Lawrence's career is as follows: arguably, it is difficult for her to now represent these concerns in the same way as she did previously because, according to the Forbes' annual list of top Hollywood earners, she was the highest-paid woman in the American film industry in 2015 ($52 million) and 2016 ($46 million) – she can no longer believably embody 'ordinariness' or 'precarity' in the same way.[iii] The meanings of her image have also altered somewhat since the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Whereas prior to this it was possible to view the fresh-faced, outspoken ingénue Lawrence (and her characters) as the embodiment of a post-crash rebellion against the crumbling edifice of neoliberalism, she has now become symbolic of the very elites against whom Trump's victory was targeted. Trump has also radically upended who is allowed to claim economic anxiety, with the shift in focus to an older demographic that constitute his electoral base. Lawrence does not speak for this group: in her outspoken views on Trump's presidency and her own feminist concerns, Lawrence has picked her side in the United States' culture war, and she belongs now firmly to the Hollywood establishment. She has also suffered a backlash against her claims to authenticity: while her apparent guilelessness and naiveté was on initially celebrated, some of her comments in interviews have been interpreted as thoughtless and insensitive, and others

co-opted by right-wing elements on the internet to trash her image because she is an outspoken progressive feminist.

Neoliberalism and Precarity

In considering how Lawrence's image contends with the nature and structure of neoliberal ideology, it is necessary first to establish how debates about precarity have found their way into critiques of neoliberalism. While widespread economic precariousness has always been an inbuilt condition of capitalist societies, with the Keynesian postwar welfare state now seemingly an interregnum in an interminable history of worker exploitation, it is arguably a state fundamental to the persistence of neoliberalism as an organising principle of culture, society and economics. While 'neoliberalism' carries a variety of meanings depending upon the discipline in which it is mentioned – it is, according to Manfred B. Steger and Ravi K. Roy (2010), simultaneously 'an ideology, a mode of governance [and] a policy package' – in cultural studies and the humanities it has been most consistently analysed as an ideological structure (11). Stuart Hall (2011) described it as a 'hegemonic process' which has shaped contemporary life and pitched the 'free, possessive individual' against the 'tyrannical and oppressive state' (706). It is this emphasis on individual agency that animates the theory and practice of neoliberalism, defined (in contrast to classical liberalism) as a 'programme of deliberate intervention by government in order to encourage particular types of entrepreneurial, competitive and commercial behaviour in its citizens' (Gilbert, 2013: 9). In theory, neoliberalism creates rational, autonomous, self-sufficient individual consumers who compete in the marketplace to meet their own material needs within a meritocratic system that offers an equal chance at success.

In reality, as David Harvey (2005) argues, neoliberalism is fundamentally concerned with the restoration of power to the capitalist class, and has resulted in rampant inequality, growing poverty and widespread economic insecurity. Despite its manifest failure, neoliberalism has proved itself a durable means of organising society, undergirded by the following resolute beliefs: the power of market capitalism to correct all human ills; the idea that the individual can and should make their own choices within such a system, and not be dictated to by an overbearing state; the concomitant absolution of society for the consequences of those personal decisions, and demonisation of those who make the wrong ones. The persistence of this model is, to some extent, a consequence of what Mark Fisher (2009)

described as ‘capitalist realism’, ‘the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative’. (1) It could be argued, however, that this failure to imagine an alternative future is precisely because of the neoliberal system’s creation of whole strata of society living in various states of precariousness: anxious and risk-averse, they dare not rebel against this state of affairs for fear of destitution. As Jeremy Gilbert argues, neoliberal culture has generated political inertia to such a large extent that ‘the experience of precarity and individualised impotence [is] experienced as normal and inevitable’ (15). Lawrence’s characters in this period function as acknowledgments of this situation, while simultaneously attempting to shore up the fantasy that one might be able to escape it.

Pervasive economic insecurity is the inevitable corollary of the neoliberal refashioning of society: the decline of unionisation and dismantling of the welfare state since the late 1970s, coupled with the globalisation of the labour market and post-recession corrosion of secure employment conditions through the proliferation of casual arrangements and ‘zero-hours’ contracts, has driven more people into the category of workers known as ‘the precariat’, whose lives are ‘dominated by insecurity, uncertainty, debt and humiliation’ (Standing, 2011: vii). The ‘precariat’ is a globalised class that long predates the neoliberal iteration of capitalism. However, widespread debates about economic insecurity, or ‘precarity’, only became prominent in the West once it had spread in the aftermath of the financial crash to the formerly affluent white middle-class youth (Puar *et al*, 2012). The sudden and intense focus on this particular stratum of the ‘precariat’ in the aftermath of the crisis is instructive: as Lauren Berlant (2012) argues, a crisis becomes general in mass political terms when it affects the bourgeoisie (166). This ‘jilted generation’, who Berlant suggests ‘presumed they would be protected’ from the precariousness that blights the vast majority of people, now suffer from the anxiety that not only will they suffer a decline in living standards compared with their parents, but that they may end up destitute and homeless because the erosion of the safety net (2011: 120). For the purposes of this article and to illustrate the relevance of Lawrence’s image in the post-crash period, the ‘precariat’ will be defined as young Westerners who came of age following the crash, coinciding with the young star’s rise to prominence.

However, as Berlant (2011) has argued, despite the fact that upward mobility, job security and political and social equality have become less and less likely for most people in the liberal, relatively wealthy regions of the world, fantasies of ‘the good life’ - the escape from this cycle of uncertainty, anxiety and precarity - continue to animate their daily lives. This

'cruel optimism' endures because the possibility that a secure, prosperous life could be achieved provides the subject with the organising structure – however improbable - to keep living. The misguided hope and continued pursuit of this impossibility leads ultimately to the 'wearing out' of the subject (28). Lawrence's star image has participated in some respects in this 'cruel optimism', her image at first critiquing, and then reinforcing, the fantasies of liberation and prosperity in the post-crash era. In so doing, she has played a role in attempting to refurbish American Dream ideology, particularly the notion (enthusiastically endorsed by neoliberals) that the only barrier to improving one's lot in life is your own ability to do so. It is an imaginary repeated consistently through American popular culture, from Horatio Alger's dimestore novels to tales of success in Hollywood films, and is as crucial to the nation's conception of itself as the frontier narrative. As Julie Levinson (2012) notes:

> The [American Dream] is so durable because its promise that individuals can remake themselves and can wield absolute agency over their own fate is so appealing. Americans, the myth insists, are self-authoring and autonomous. It is our personal choices, rather than our social status or conditions, that create our identity and destiny. (2)

In this sense, the initial phase of Lawrence's film career (2010-16) performed essential cultural work in the aftermath of the recession, attempting to critique the consequences of neoliberalism's crisis, but ultimately coming to reinforce some of its fundamental ideological tenets.

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Lawrence's Image: Performing Authenticity / Negotiating Postfeminism

Crucial to Lawrence's appeal in the contemporary period is her careful cultivation of an image of 'ordinariness'. The post-crash years have been characterised by a populist revulsion of 'elites' (particularly politicians, but also big business and wealthy celebrities), suspicion of the mainstream media, and a desire for authenticity. How, and of what, this 'authenticity' is constituted is more complex than it is possible to explore here, but it is generally held that those individuals who refuse to play by the rules of polished, rehearsed, unchallenging media performances and 'political correctness' can be perceived to be 'authentic'. Lawrence has much invested in herself as an 'ordinary' person; this comes through in her film roles, but also in the ephemera that circulates her image.

While there is no evidence to suggest this was staged, her stumble up the stairs at the 2013 Academy Awards to accept her trophy played a crucial role in creating this impression:

she is not 'trained' to be a Hollywood star; there is a real person that exists beneath this rather tenuous façade. Indeed, as she rather bluntly stated when asked what had *happened* in the post-ceremony press conference, 'What do you mean? I fell down. Look at my dress!', pointing exasperatedly at the beautiful, elaborate garment she wore to collect the award.[iv] This forthrightness is revealed no more clearly than in her interviews: as she told talk show host Jimmy Fallon in May 2016, she had to be sent swiftly for media training after she joked in an interview that Kim Basinger, her co-star in *The Burning Plain* (Guillermo Arriaga, 2008) had died.[v] She claims to become utterly dumbfounded when in the presence of actors she perceives to be more famous and important than her, saying when she met Tilda Swinton that she kept prefacing everything she said to her with 'I love your work'. It is this unvarnished, guileless quality that has functioned to establish her image as one of ordinariness; that, as has been claimed by many, 'Lawrence is constitutionally unable to not say what she thinks'.[vi] In addition to these high-profile incidents, she has also objected vociferously to Hollywood's demands that actresses maintain an emaciated figure (this concern with body image reinforced by her performances in the *X-Men* films as Mystique, a shapeshifting mutant ashamed of her blue appearance, desperate to blend in with the rest of humanity, who eventually comes to accept who she is).[vii] Despite her fabulous wealth, Lawrence has claimed to have maintained a frugal, careful approach to her finances – 'I'm not cheap, but I don't want to waste even $5.'[viii] In the digital age, when seemingly every image is manufactured, digitally altered, manipulated and 'touched up', and celebrity appearances are heavily stage-managed, Lawrence has cultivated an image of normality and accessibility to combat this. As Masha Tupitsyn (2013) suggested of Lawrence, 'We have become so used to stock answers, camera poses, airbrushed bodies, faces, lives—that when something or someone is even slightly different, we are excited and relieved.' As Krista Smith suggested in the major interview and photo shoot Lawrence did for *Vanity Fair* in February 2018, 'her authenticity is a refreshing, much-needed antidote for a world drowning in a digital sea of meticulously curated social-media accounts, photo filters, and sponsored tweets.' It is perhaps unsurprising that Lawrence adores reality television like *Real Housewives* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*: through acknowledgment of her fandom, she can claim to be interested in the same things 'ordinary' people spend their leisure time doing, as well as associate herself with a form of popular culture that, however manipulated, is heavily reliant upon its relationship with reality. There is no doubt that this *impression* of authenticity, accessibility and normalcy has played a crucial role in Lawrence's success.

The origin of Lawrence's stardom is crucial to the establishment of this impression. Lawrence was 'discovered' by a talent scout (she wishes she had a 'gritty story'), and she has never had any formal training in acting. This is in many respects fundamental to this article's claim that Lawrence's performances speak to a period of profound economic crisis and uncertainty. In order to capture authentically the experiences of ordinary postwar life, the Italian neorealists sought nonprofessional performers, seeking to ground their stories of the quotidian struggles within not only documentary-style aesthetics, but low-key, naturalistic performance. In keeping with this, Shonni Enelow (2016) has argued of Lawrence, 'the new film acting shows us the micro-responses of people engaged in unspectacular strategies of survival, trying to get their minimal needs met by any means necessary.' (5) They are indicative of a simultaneous refusal, or inability to, express oneself in the contemporary moment, a withdrawal she describes as 'a response to a violent or chaotic environment, one that doesn't offer an alternate vision of an open and embracing future.' (4) It speaks to a context in which the very notion of 'performance' is viewed sceptically, as though it is inauthentic, misleading and potentially fraudulent. While growing up in suburban Kentucky is hardly comparable with postwar Italy, Lawrence's subtlety of gesture and low-key performance style are crucial aspects of the ways in which she her image functions in relation to the context of crisis. As director Francis Lawrence argued of her, 'She's kind of a savant when it comes to human behaviour. When she's acting a scene, it's not something that's been rehearsed or practiced'.[ix] In keeping with recent scholarship on film acting (Baron and Carnicke, 2008; Springer and Levinson, 2015), a focus on Lawrence's restrained, naturalistic performance style, and the means by which this approach is handled by the films themselves on the levels of visual style and narrative, will form a substantive aspect of the forthcoming film analysis.

The other aspect of Lawrence's star image, related to its reinforcement of neoliberal ideology, is its relationship with postfeminism. Postfeminism is a contested term that requires some unpacking: to many, it represents the neoliberal capture of the dominant beliefs of second-wave feminism; the reformulation of feminism from a critique of the structural inequalities in society along gender lines to an emphasis on women's personal freedoms and choices. In a sense, postfeminism suggests feminism has achieved all of its goals, and the only barriers to women achieving whatever it is they desire is down to the women as individuals. As will be demonstrated in detail later, this postfeminist image emerges most prominently in Lawrence's performances as Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* and Joy Mangano in *Joy*, with the former fulfilling many of the conventions of the postfeminist action heroine, and the

latter very much playing on Sheryl Sandberg's postfeminist cry for women to 'lean in' to corporate culture: in essence, adapt to a masculine-dominated world rather than attempt to reform it. As Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (2014) suggest, 'Just as postfeminist culture suggests that it is individual women (rather than systems of gender hierarchy) that require modification, recessionary media culture implies that *management of the self* can effect positive change.' (2) Lawrence perhaps unconsciously reflected this shift in her response to the hack of Sony Pictures' emails in 2014, which revealed how much less she was paid than Hollywood's biggest male stars. In keeping with the neoliberal consensus in a letter published on Lennyletter.com, rather than blame a structural inequality, she blamed herself for not negotiating her salaries in a more robust manner (2015). It could be argued, however, that Lawrence also rejected another aspect of its ideological system: the accruement of vast amounts of wealth for seemingly no purpose, stating plainly that she simply did not need the money. Furthermore, despite falling into the neoliberal trap outlined above, she did argue that her unwillingness to negotiate her salaries more confidently is part of a gendered anxiety about coming across as 'difficult' and 'spoiled', words she says would never be levelled at a male star. It is this tightrope along which Lawrence's star image walks, and navigating its contours and idiosyncrasies is seemingly such a crucial aspect of her appeal.

Strategies of Survival in the Postindustrial Decay of **Winter's Bone**

Winter's Bone was Lawrence's breakthrough role, for which she was nominated for her first Academy Award. It played a crucial role in establishing two aspects of her star image: in playing the role of working-class Missouri teenager Ree Dolly, Lawrence retained a crucial proximity to the American heartland from which she emerged. As an ordinary person from an unpretentious family in Kentucky, Lawrence embodied 'The Real America' of bourbon, bluegrass music and fried chicken, rather than the distant, alienating glitter of Hollywood aristocracy. Secondly, it marks the first performance of a character type that would dominate the first phase of her career: the tough, resilient, independent young woman required to fulfil roles within the family as a result of absent or semi-absent parents. Set in a working-class community in the Ozark Mountains of rural Missouri, an impoverished region even during times of national economic prosperity, *Winter's Bone* tells the story of Ree, a teenage girl who must find her father, Jessop, who has absconded after being charged with producing and dealing methamphetamine. Having put the family home up as part of his bail bond, Ree is in a race against time to find him before their home is taken, but she faces a wall of silence from a

community unwilling to help her. Furthermore, although it is never explicitly stated, it appears Ree's mother has suffered a mental breakdown and is therefore unable to care for her or her two younger siblings, leaving Ree with the responsibility of housing, clothing and feeding her family. If she does not find her father, they will lose what precarious grasp on security they have. So the film is, in essence, a quest; however, it is not one animated by the pursuit of the American Dream, or what Berlant describes as 'the good life', but a desperate attempt to survive in a context in which such mythologies have almost no meaning.

Through its grey, washed out visual style and emphasis on infrastructural and social decay, *Winter's Bone* most obviously reflects the misery of the immediate aftermath of the recession, in which the cultural imaginary was dominated by images of abandoned and foreclosed homes following the subprime mortgage crisis of 2007. While there is a regional specificity to the film's Ozarks setting which, as Martha P. Nochimson (2010) notes, 'too often functions in American pop culture as the occasion for "hilarious" laughter at mental and physical deficiencies, or the Gothic horror of dehumanized, zombielike threats to civilization', the film clearly intends the region to function as a microcosm for wider anxieties about the state of the nation (52). Like its contemporaries *Wendy and Lucy* (Kelly Reichardt, 2008), *Frozen River* (Courtney Hunt, 2008) and Granik's most recent film, *Leave No Trace* (2018), *Winter's Bone* would seem to form part of what Berlant (2011) describes as 'the cinema of precarity', which 'melds melodrama and politics into a more reticent aesthetic to track the attrition of what had been sustaining national, social, economic, and political bonds and the abandonment of a variety of populations to being cast as waste.' (201) The community in *Winter's Bone* has indeed been 'cast as waste': a post-industrial wasteland addicted to crystal meth, where productive capitalism is a distant memory (although one of which we are consistently reminded, as the landscape is littered with abandoned cars and machinery), and job opportunities extend only to signing up for the military's misadventures in the Middle East. Indeed, the film's critique of neoliberal post-crash United States takes its inspiration from the region itself which, according to Granik (Bell, 2010), has always, in good times and bad, rejected many of the beliefs upon which the United States is built, particularly the 'fantasy of individualism' and the 'drive for material accumulation' (28).[x] *Winter's Bone* can therefore be said to offer a pointed critique of the neoliberal idea that individual drive is all that is necessary to deliver prosperity: however resourceful or determined Ree is, opportunities to escape this situation are scant and unrealistic because the structures that enabled such mobility have

corroded beyond repair. The best she can hope for is to ensure her family's bare survival. This is an environment untouched by fantasies of 'the good life'.

Lawrence's Ree is fundamental to this critique. It is her daily struggle to keep her family afloat that provides her motivation. She is shown performing the duties expected of both father and mother, the former absent and the latter incapable: walking her siblings to school, helping them with their homework, cooking, and cleaning their modest home, but also teaching the kids self-reliance, showing them how to catch, kill, skin and cook squirrels and other small animals (in the absence of other food), use weapons and fend for themselves. As Enelow argues of Ree, she is a 'Red State version of an American archetype (the indomitable rural heroine, self-reliant defender of the hearth)'. While these values may appear to be commendable, even desirable, traditional American beliefs of grit and hard work, it is apparent that the film laments this recline into nineteenth-century frontier values and the withdrawal (or non-existence) of any kind of a state-sponsored safety net: Ree is reliant solely on the kindness of her neighbours for small amounts of food and medicine. The neoliberal policies that allowed the hollowing out of local industry at the same time as withdrawing governmental support and fostering a ruthless individualism have engendered this situation. The bonds of community have frayed: they are not just unsupportive but actively hostile. Her family network, embodied by her troublesome, drug-addled uncle Teardrop (John Hawkes), is largely unreliable. It is clear that wider state authorities such as the police are not trusted. However, given the precariousness of her situation, Ree can only practice a quiet defiance of their judgements.

Lawrence's acting style is fundamental the film's critique of the abandonment of communities like Ree's, and the precarious lives they are doomed to suffer as a consequence of deindustrialisation and state withdrawal. As Enelow (2016) notes of Lawrence's characters, they fight 'not to' express themselves, in order to survive. Ree's reticence to express herself within her own community suggests the precarious, dangerous situation she is in is nothing new to her, and certainly not unusual in the wider milieu: to reveal too much of herself - anger, fear, disappointment or sorrow – could potentially be fatal to her cause, drawing the unwanted attention of the police or the criminals in the community. In this sense, the intensely controlled expressions that Lawrence deploys in her performance of Ree suggests she is a figure used to surviving traumatic situations, reinforcing Berlant's suggestion that the affective responses to the world in the neoliberal age can be characterised by an acceptance that crisis is an ordinary, rather than exceptional, state (11). Ree's face seems permanently etched by a partial grimace, trying desperately to repress her contempt for both the police and the criminals in the

community. Whenever she does express her frustration, as she cries briefly to her mother who cannot help her, or following the bail bondsman's verdict that their home will be taken, she quickly retreats into an inscrutable and rigid glare, narrowing her eyes and clenching her mouth. She often stares silently into the middle distance, clearly burdened by her worries, but without a support network to whom these can be easily expressed. Ree's refusal to argue too fiercely, respond too angrily, or feel too deeply, are necessary for her survival in this hostile environment. Indeed, Lawrence's performance speaks to Berlant's claim that it has become impossible to maintain even a façade of optimism to disguise the anguish of living precariously: 'a recession grimace has appeared, somewhere between a frown and a smile, and a tightened lip.' (196) While Ree is successful in her mission to save the family home, the final shot of the film, showing her with her siblings sitting on the steps of their cabin, is tinged with uncertainty about the future. This impression is created by Lawrence's vacant stare into the distance, which suggests more struggles lie in wait, this moment of calm only brief respite from the otherwise permanent state of crisis.

Ultimately what Lawrence conveys through her performance of Ree is the effort required simply to survive, the strain revealed in her every clenched expression. The overriding sense the film offers is that the crisis is perpetual, demanding repetitive, exhausting toil. Ree trudges slowly around this decaying milieu to find her father. The film challenges that uniquely American story of the individual embarking upon a quest for independence, autonomy and self-reliance, conquering the landscape, achieving their goals, and returning to a safe and secure home at the end. As Levinson argues,

> Paradigmatic success myth stories involve ordinary young men who, through individual will and initiative, overcome their humble beginnings and all other hurdles to advancement. The myth tends to deny or downplay innate limitations, social constraints or systemic obstacles while satisfying the hopeful belief that if an individual remains true to his aspirations, he will receive his just rewards. (2)

Winter's Bone is entirely dismissive of this myth, and through Lawrence's performance – her rigid scowl and clenched mouth in the face of the bail bondsman, exasperated sigh when leaving the military recruitment station, and resigned stare at the film's conclusion – focuses *entirely* on the limitations, constraints and obstacles that exist in this environment even in the pursuit of basic subsistence. Ree is stuck because she cannot abandon or uproot her family, the 'way out' through the military is impractical, and they will probably always lack the capital and resources necessary to improve their lives. It is apparent that even the *hope* of a good (or even better) life is absurdly utopian: the social mobility fundamental to the American Dream

is, for people like Ree and her family, a fantasy. The frontier of her ambition is simply to ward off the most immediate threat to the family's existence, and await the next crisis. The fantasies of the 'good life' do not, and perhaps cannot, drive her: every drop of effort she is able to muster must be put in service of the daily grind of basic, unspectacular survival. Through her intense, controlled performance, Lawrence reinforces the sense the film is keen to articulate: neoliberalism's crisis cannot be overcome and transcended, because it is permanent. Survival is the best one can hope for.

Authenticity, Performance and Individualism in The Hunger Games

In contrast to *Winter's Bone*, The *Hunger Games* offers a consolidation of Americanism, particularly the belief in the individual's importance over the state and the ability of one significant person to stand up to tyranny, and triumph. *The Hunger Games* capitalises on Lawrence's burgeoning image as an 'authentic' Hollywood star, no doubt aided by her raw, fresh performance in *Winter's Bone*. The series is set in Panem, a dystopian vision of the future United States in which an authoritarian government has seized power following an uprising and exacts revenge for the people's rebellion by forcing them to live in varying degrees of misery in districts outside the metropolitan Capitol, once a year sacrificing two of their child citizens in a spectacular, televised deathmatch known as 'The Hunger Games'. The districts are divided in a rigid hierarchy, with some of them enjoying a semblance of material wealth, and others, such as the mining community of District 12, deliberately impoverished and decaying. Indeed, the opening scenes, featuring dilapidated wooden cabins in rural settings coupled with a rusting, industrial aesthetic bears remarkable similarity with the milieu in which *Winter's Bone* is set.

On the surface, then, *The Hunger Games* appears to be a fairly clear critique of neoliberalism and economic inequality. Rebekah C. Sheldon (2015) suggests most contemporary science-fiction can be read through this prism, as many of the genre's most prominent recent examples tell stories of societies beleaguered by economic inequality while simultaneously characterised by state structures that 'coerce, compel and confine' citizens into accepting this untenable situation (206-7). Indeed, as Fisher (2012) argued of *The Hunger Games* specifically, 'The film and the novel have no doubt resonated so powerfully with its young audience because it has engaged feelings of betrayal and resentment rising in a generation asked to accept that its quality of life will be worse than that of its parents.' (27) Author Suzanne Collins' inspiration for the original novels was drawn from a very clear picture

of the contemporary United States: the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the proliferation of reality television competitions like *American Idol* and *The X-Factor* (29). It is perhaps no coincidence that these would prove her sources: in precarious economic times, and in a neoliberal, globalised economy that has driven down wages and outsourced opportunities, the perception is that the only ticket to financial stability for many Americans from working-class backgrounds is the military (as shown in *Winter's Bone*), and the only means to achieving the kind of wealth enjoyed by elite members of society in an economy rigged in favour of the already very wealthy is to win a reality television competition. Indeed, *The Hunger Games*' film releases (one per year from 2012 until 2015) speak to the aftermath of the crash and the crisis of neoliberalism.

Lawrence plays Katniss Everdeen, a teenage girl who volunteers to take the place of her younger sister in The Hunger Games. She is a quarrelsome presence throughout, defying the Capitol by refusing to kill her district partner Peeta (Josh Hutcherson), and sparking the revolution that culminates in the murder of President Snow (Donald Sutherland) and the institution of democratic government in Panem. However, she is a reluctant revolutionary and, in keeping with one of the central planks of neoliberal postfeminism, her motivations are always personal: to rescue her sister, her friends and her family. Like Ree in *Winter's Bone*, Katniss does not trust the motivations of authority figures, whether they emerge from the government or the resistance. The series overall is rather wary of mass movements: they are just as susceptible to corruption and manipulation as the overbearing state itself, as evidenced by the manipulative demagoguery of Alma Coin (Julianne Moore), the resistance leader.

The series is preoccupied with issues relating to image, performance and authenticity. It is here that Katniss's characterisation and Lawrence's star image are most closely related: the discomfort Katniss experiences in having to market herself to potential sponsors in *The Hunger Games*, the awkwardness of her performance in interviews, and her reluctance to reveal anything personal about herself. In her first interview with gameshow host Caesar Flickerman (Stanley Tucci) - the embodiment of the artifice and excess of the Capitol replete with coiffed blue hair and improbably white teeth – she is hesitant, clearly overawed by the situation. The camera movement and sound design of the sequence speaks to Katniss's hesitation and discomfort: she is followed from behind by a stumbling handheld camera onto the stage, and the noise of the cheering crowd becomes distorted and ultimately deafening as she fails to hear Flickerman's first question. She is rather expressionless, mouth slightly open, her neck snapping towards the laughing crowd as she replies unguardedly to Flickerman's question

about the flaming dress she wore earlier in the film. As with Ree in *Winter's Bone*, Lawrence's angst is etched plainly on her face. When confronted with a question about her sister, she fights to maintain a veneer of solidity, only slightly bowing her head as Flickerman clasps her hand after expressing his inauthentic emotion at her sacrifice. Enelow (2016) argues Katniss is 'blank' and 'cold' in this interview, but it is clear that this is a consequence of her inability (or perhaps refusal) to perform, or behave as expected. She is unaccustomed to such displays, confirming that her real self has not been lost amidst the extravagant artifice bestowed upon her. It is clear that *The Hunger Games* plays on the associations of Lawrence's star image with authenticity: in Lawrence's refusal to 'play the game' in the traditional way by giving sanitised interviews and remaining silent on issues that matter to her (pressure on girls and young women to conform to a particular body shape, for example, but also the invasion of her privacy when nude images of her leaked online), she has rejected the tendency for Hollywood stars to appear stage-managed and uncontroversial. By portraying Katniss in a similar fashion, as completely oblivious to, or uninterested in, the pageantry of staged performance, Lawrence attempts to erase the impression that there is any distinction between her film performances and how she is off screen. Doing so in a context in which there is widespread suspicion of performance and artifice is fundamental to the appeal of Lawrence's star image: *she* is the star capable of transcending the manufactured nature of Hollywood performance to convey her fundamental ordinariness.

These issues emerge even more vividly later on in *The Hunger Games*, particularly in *Mockingjay*: by this point in the saga, Katniss has become a pawn in the resistance's game, being deployed as a propaganda tool because of her symbolic value. It is clear that it is her *authenticity* that is most craved by the nascent rebels in the districts, an impression built by her refusal to conform to the Capitol's wishes in the previous two instalments. In *Mockingjay*, the resistance ask her to record a rallying cry for the rebels, but quickly realise she is not able to *perform* authenticity. She stands in her combat gear in front of a background that is computer-generated, and is asked to imagine she has just stormed the Capitol with her fellow soldiers. She fluffs the first take, forgetting her line, and her second and third takes are stilted and unconvincing, the anger and passion in her voice clearly fraudulent. As mentor Haymitch says, 'You need a symbol for the revolution – she can't be coached into it.' They realise that her impulsive anger needs to be captured as and when it arises, and they do so by removing her make-up, and putting her into combat, filming and broadcasting her furious response to the Capitol's indiscriminate bombings of civilians. Here, the series again adopts a handheld,

documentary aesthetic, attempting an approximation of the immediacy of war reportage, which captures Katniss's emotional reaction to the bombing of the hospital and her message to President Snow. Her outburst is a raw, emotional response to shocking violence and trauma, tears gathering around her eyes as she issues a furious and guttural message of defiance – 'If we burn, you burn with us' – before sinking to her knees, tears quietly rolling down her cheeks. Again, the film plays on Lawrence's cultivation of an image of authenticity intrinsic to her success in its construction of Katniss as a symbol of the revolution: her emotions cannot be performed, but only captured as and when they materialise spontaneously.

However, while *The Hunger Games* reinforces clearly Lawrence's claims to authenticity in a period in which Hollywood artifice has come under severe scrutiny, its position as a mainstream critique of the economic inequality precipitated by neoliberalism, and a feminist text celebrating the woman as revolutionary, is considerably more problematic. Katniss' narrative trajectory bears an obvious resemblance to other postfeminist action heroines whose motivations are not structural but familial: conforming to the structure outlined by Lisa Coulthard (2007), she engages in violence for pragmatic reasons, and then retreats to the feminised domestic realm once the Capitol has been defeated and violence is no longer required (153-75). In *The Hunger Games*, the fantasy of 'the good life' is achievable, as long as revolutionary politics are abandoned and conventional, domesticated femininity is embraced. Where Katniss begins the series as a hunter, out in the woods catching animals to provide food for her family (another instance of Lawrence's tendency to act as breadwinner for a family in which the father is absent, in this case deceased, and the mother is incapable of looking after her and her younger sister), she finishes it as a mother. The final scene of the series, in which Katniss and Peeta play with their children in a bucolic, pastoral landscape back in District 12, confirms the reassertion of Katniss as a domestic homebody, and the denial of her previous revolutionary self. Here, she remembers her role in the revolution only as an unwanted nightmare. She does not mention the (presumably) better life she helped to secure for herself or the citizens of Panem, but celebrates only the fact that she survived it. Where *Winter's Bone* ending suggested anxiety about the precarious future Ree and her siblings faced, *The Hunger Games*' shift in aesthetic tells a different story: where previously the films are defined by a grey, cold visual style, the shift to the golden soft-focus of the pastoral idyll is marked; away from revolutionary politics and collective struggle, the future is, quite literally, bright. In many respects Katniss's retreat embodies the wider response to the crisis of neoliberalism: dissatisfaction and anger with the way things are is coupled with an uncertainty and scepticism

of what may follow it. This drives a desire to turn inward and perhaps escape these anxieties altogether, rather than imagining how a society founded on principles alternative to neoliberalism might work (Fisher, 2012: 30). As with Lawrence's apparent accommodation of the neoliberal, postfeminist *status quo* in her anxiety about demanding more money, and facing the recent backlash against her outspokenness, what is revealed in her performance of Katniss Everdeen ultimately reinforce fundamental tenets of neoliberal ideology: the dream of 'the good life' is contingent on looking after oneself and retreating from the struggle for structural change.

Joy *as Postfeminist Neoliberal Fantasy of Escape*

Joy demonstrates the complete refurbishment of the American Dream, and restores many of the central, mythical tenets of American capitalism. Loosely based on a 'true story', Lawrence plays Joy Mangano, a single mother of two living with her mentally ill mother and ex-husband. Frustrated with her life working at an airline check-in counter, she pours much of her additional time and energy into inventing things. She comes up with a self-wringing mop which, after much struggle, becomes a huge seller on home shopping television network QVC. Mangano becomes a millionaire as a result of its success. With voiceover narration from Joy's grandmother (even following her death, rendering her a 'fairy grandmother'), *Joy* is in essence a neoliberal fairytale, an idealised snapshot of postfeminist financial success and class mobility produced in a context with which it is curiously out of step. This quality is underlined by the film's opening, in which the young Joy refuses to have her 'dream' defined by the normal measures of success for women – marriage and children – insisting that she is different. Here I will explore how the film connects the neoliberal values of marketisation and modification of self as means to achieving financial independence, thereby jettisoning the collective activism of second-wave feminism in favour of a 'lone wolf' approach that suggests the only barrier to a working-class single mother becoming a millionaire is her own willingness and drive to achieve it. In this sense, *Joy* is rather different from other postfeminist cinema in which the narrative drive of the film tends to police the protagonist into more traditional roles of motherhood and domesticity. Indeed, *Joy* finds its cinematic corollaries in a much earlier period – the 1970s – in which films about class politics and transcendence were more common. However, unlike *Norma Rae* (Martin Ritt, 1979), the politics of which focuses very much on the collective pursuit of justice and equality, and *Rocky* (John G. Avildsen, 1976) or *Saturday*

Night Fever (John Badham, 1977), where class is transcended through the execution of a unique skill or ability (boxing in the former, dancing in the latter) the focus in *Joy* is, in keeping with its neoliberal flavour, much more individualist, competitive and money-orientated. The film articulates this largely through the appeal of Lawrence's ordinariness, and this will form a crucial part of the discussion.

Lawrence's collaborations with 'indie' filmmaker David O. Russell have proved vital to her establishment as a respected actor and star. Alongside her performances as Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games*, it is arguably her roles in Russell's films *Silver Linings Playbook, American Hustle* and *Joy* that have attracted the most attention (and three Oscar nominations, with one win for *Silver Linings Playbook*). All three films show Lawrence playing lower-middle-class women, often 'down-on-their-luck' types reliant upon slightly fantastical, certainly unrealistic, schemes and projects to attain financial independence and self-worth, be it ballroom dancing in *Silver Linings Playbook*, mastering the art of the con in *American Hustle*, or inventing a product that will transform the nation in *Joy.* Of the preoccupation with illegal sports betting as a ticket to financial independence in *Silver Linings Playbook*, Alan Nadel and Diane Negra (2014) argue that the film's approach to this 'magical thinking' is similar to that which underpins the financialised neoliberal economy, which 'promises structural controls and entrepreneurial opportunity in exchange for trust in its self-governing adjustments, thus situating material failure in a causal relationship to the failure of individual faith and personal discipline.' (318) I suggest that such 'magical thinking' extends to the construction of a fairly straightforward American Dream story in *Joy*, which essentially rehearses the narrative beats of the success narrative outlined by Levinson cited earlier.

While *Joy* follows this pattern almost to the letter, it is different in two crucial respects: first, that it extends the possibility of achieving the 'American Dream' to a woman, and that it does so in a period in which the ability to achieve that Dream (for men and women) appears to be more difficult than ever. Despite the media's obsession with the recession's impact upon men's job prospects and mental health, it is actually women who have suffered its most severe consequences. As Negra and Tasker (2014) suggest (and which relates to the character of Joy), 'women have more fraught and contingent financial arrangements, lower amounts of savings and more dependent obligations, and their more vulnerable economic position prior to the recession has been well documented.' (22) In this sense, *Joy*'s representation of the individual transcending their unfavourable circumstances to achieve fabulous wealth are indicative of traditional conceptualisations of the American Dream, a central plank of neoliberal thinking

and a timely means to resuscitate both somewhat decrepit discourses. To a significant extent, *Joy* problematically participates in 'cruel optimism', offering neoliberal fantasies as solutions to economic anxiety.

Valerie Walkerdine and Peter Bansel's (2010) formulation of neoliberalism is useful in relation to *Joy*. They explore neoliberalism as 'the fashioning of oneself as simultaneously consumer and commodity; as buyer of goods and services and as a seller of oneself in the market. This is accomplished through the articulation of oneself within a discourse of entrepreneurship.' (2) Neoliberalism teaches citizen-consumers to 'self-actualize through [your] own labour.' (2-3) *Joy* exports this matrix of citizen-consumer-commodity fairly explicitly in its deployment of Mangano as an icon of the (then) burgeoning teleshopping network QVC. Having struggled to gain traction in the conventional marketplace for the Miracle Mop, Mangano is given the golden opportunity to sell the product (and herself) by TV executive Neil Walker (Bradley Cooper). While Walker had previously suggested the mop should be sold by one of their existing actors/salespeople because they 'don't have regular people, [they] have celebrities', Mangano insists it should be her on screen because she uses the mop, and it is to working mothers like herself that the product appeals. In essence, Mangano believes that by having somewhat unmediated access to the audience for her product, she will be able to sell it as an extension of her own identity. It is at this point that Lawrence's star image and the characterisation of Mangano as an ordinary working mother collude to articulate *Joy*'s neoliberal fantasy of commodification of the self and achievement of financial success. Firstly, Mangano insists on wearing her own clothes rather than the finery provided by the network because 'This is me, I wear a blouse and I wear pants' (presumably similar attire to that which one might wear to actually *use* the mop). Secondly, she freezes when first on camera, and is unable to perform. She stands motionless holding the mop in the middle of the stage, complaining about how bright the lights are. The camera holds her in medium close-up as she gazes dumbstruck into the middle distance. Unlike Lawrence's anxious stares in *Winter's Bone*, as though her mind is burdened by many other things, here she is overawed. Like Lawrence's own stumbles in front of the media outlined earlier, and the awkwardness of Katniss Everdeen when on television in *The Hunger Games*, her inability to 'act' in front of the camera and deliver a polished performance under pressure, are crucial aspects of her appeal. In this sense, the sequence reaffirms both Lawrence's and Mangano's ordinariness. Thirdly, and in an aspect crucial to the film's articulation of neoliberal rhetoric surrounding the marketing and commodification of self, when Mangano's friend telephones the network to provide her with

some moral support, this gives her the chance to combine the appeal of the mop with her own identity, 'speaking from my experience … as a mother of two'. As Mangano continues to talk about the mop in relation to her own experience of using it – 'I have been mopping most of my life'; 'This is just me, speaking from my experience'; 'It has three hundred continuous cotton loops that I looped myself when I designed it' – the sales of the mop continue to grow. As with the rebellion's desperation to capture the spontaneity of Katniss's anger in *The Hunger Games*, here Neil races furiously to the camera operators urging them to capture Joy's improvisations: her gesticulations with her hands, clasping them, tapping her own chest to emphasise the personal relationship she has with the mop, squirting chocolate syrup on the floor to demonstrate its efficacy. In a similar fashion to Katniss in *The Hunger Games*, Joy's ordinariness cannot be constructed, only captured. The product and Mangano's identity are fused, as entrepreneurial neoliberal thinking decrees they should be.

The other aspect of neoliberal ideology that *Joy* reinforces is the rhetoric of responsibility for one's own choices and decisions in an environment in which the state has largely absolved itself of responsibility for the wellbeing of its citizens. When it becomes apparent that Mangano has been the victim of patent theft, the authorities are unable to help her. She has to exact retribution herself. While *Winter's Bone* laments the absence of the safety net, and judges a society that would abandon its citizens to a life of uncertainty and fear in this way, *Joy* celebrates this new emphasis on individual empowerment. Mangano's toughness in facing down her enemies, in true neoliberal postfeminist style, goes hand in hand with a makeover: she cuts and dyes her hair, and dons a leather jacket and dark sunglasses before she neutralises the threat of those who have wronged her. This is in marked contrast to her earlier makeover prior to her first appearance on QVC: then, as with Lawrence's performance in *The Hunger Games*, Joy expresses clear discomfort in the glamorous (though, in truth, rather cheap-looking) attire provided for her by the network. The black dress, adorned with large, garish gold buttons and complete with an absurd 'up-do' in her hair, is not 'her'. The film clearly reinforces this by framing her from a distance, making her appear awkward and isolated against the white background of the dressing room door and walls. Lawrence's performance reinforces this impression, emerging from the dressing room with an uncertain grimace on her face, arms slightly outstretched, averting her eyes and tugging awkwardly at the frills on her blouse. Following her makeover, the synchronisation of the beats of the non-diegetic music with Joy's purposeful march across the street and up the pavement for her rendezvous with the enemy indicate that the leather jacket and dark sunglasses definitely are 'her'. The fantasy extends to

the film's penultimate scene (a flashforward) in which Joy is shown glamorously dressed, replete with extravagant hairdo and pearls around her neck, sprinkling opportunities to women who are as disadvantaged as she was. The film's ultimate conclusion sees Joy walking out of the building in which she has secured her financial future. Its final shot settles into a closeup of Lawrence's face, a choice of framing Russell has used throughout to emphasise her individuality and determination, as she puts the dark sunglasses back on, and smiles triumphantly to camera. The lyrics of the song that play over the end credits – 'I feel free' – plainly equate Joy's financial success with independence and happiness. While this conclusion is clearly triumphant, it reinforces the structure, ideology and rhetoric of neoliberal thinking: society does not require structural reform in its gender relations or economics. 'The good life' is still possible if you are willing to fight for it (and Joy has certainly fought for it). In addition, a few successful individuals like her will distribute opportunities to other previously unfortunate people and the wheels of the American Dream - and promise of 'the good life' - will remain greased through individual largesse, the essence of neoliberalism's belief in 'trickle-down' economics.

Conclusion

It is apparent from the films discussed that Jennifer Lawrence's star persona in the initial stages of her fame spoke clearly to the concerns of the period. *Winter's Bone*, *The Hunger Games* series and *Joy* all evince some anxiety about the power and rectitude of American values of individualism and self-reliance, but while the former suggests a hopelessness and despair, the latter demonstrates a rather fantastical restoration of belief in these ideas. All the films discussed show a fundamental mistrust and suspicion of authority – one of the defining characteristics of the current moment – and the necessity of looking after oneself in such an environment. In keeping with these ideas, but expanding upon them further, all three deal with themes of economic precariousness and insecurity (despite offering different solutions to this issue). It would seem clear from the examples presented that Lawrence embodies worries about economic instability, although her own remarkable success and the resolutions offered by *The Hunger Games* and *Joy* problematically suggest that such fears are unfounded: dominant constructions of gender and domesticity, as well as continued faith in the fantasies of 'the good life', provide comforting solutions to apparently intractable social, political and economic problems. It is the escape routes offered in all three films which speak most vividly to the

pervasive sense of unease about the solidity of these constructs: Lawrence's characters are offered only very limited options to change their circumstances.

In *Winter's Bone*, in keeping with its critique of neoliberalism's abandonment of the nation's poorest citizens, the only solution for Ree's poverty is to join the army, which itself is no solution at all because of her caring responsibilities. She is trapped in an endless cycle of poverty, potential homelessness and debt, with no safety net to catch her or her family. The escape route offered in *The Hunger Games* is similar, although the series' preoccupation with addressing the plight of neoliberalism's victims means it must necessarily intertwine the two most obvious escape routes available in the contemporary period: joining the army, and winning a reality television contest, before ultimately advocating for retreat from structural change. *Joy*'s apparent nostalgia for teleshopping is intriguing. It suggests it holds, for its eponymous character at least, a similar opportunity for class mobility as reality television (Lawrence's widely-publicised adoration of reality television also allows this to function as a further iteration of the argument that there is little distinction between Lawrence's on-screen performances and off-screen reality). In essence, *The Hunger Games* and *Joy* bottle and sell the very limited chances neoliberalism provides to escape economic anxiety and transcend your class status, which coalesce largely around the ability to market oneself successfully, and deliver an image of undistorted authenticity, familiarity and ordinariness and to an increasingly sceptical wider public. Perhaps inevitably, despite the fact that the success of her star image is reliant upon the cultivation of a sense of proximity to the lives of 'ordinary' people, Lawrence is a film star whose success will (and to some extent already has) inevitably detached her from the rigours of the quotidian. As this article has demonstrated, while she represents a mainstream critique of, and response to, the crisis of neoliberalism, ultimately the roles Lawrence has played, and her success, are increasingly emblematic of a fantasy of 'the good life' that is beyond reach.

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[viii] Van Meter, 'Jennifer Lawrence is Determined, Hilarious and – Above All – Real', Vogue 11 November 2015.

[ix] Krista Smith, 'Jennifer Lawrence: A New Light', *Vanity Fair* February 27 2018.

[x] This is a developing theme in Granik's work – *Leave No Trace* (2018) tells the story of a war veteran (Ben Foster) and his daughter (Thomasin McKenzie) who live 'off the grid' in the Oregon woods. They reject the material and organisational trappings of society, finding them oppressive and suffocating.