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### Love and Work: Affect and ideology beyond 'The Great Resignation

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#### **Abstract**

Taking the scene of “The Great Resignation” in the US and UK (2021-23) as its starting point, this paper explores how love—with its promises and disappointments, its nurture and its destruction—is activated in relation to the ideologies of work that prop up capitalism’s world. Through critical engagement with the popular maxims of “do what you love” and “work won’t love you back,” we trace the weave of love and work in the context of predominantly (but not only) high-status employment-based work within the unevenly gendered, racialized, and sexualized labour markets in the US and the UK. We show how the call to love work or to recognize work’s lack, while ostensibly antithetical, both offer a key to understanding the promise and problem of work’s love. We argue that work’s love is productive of the capitalist world and the violences that accompany it and foreclose alternative possibilities. Through a critique of Arendt’s theorization of the world, we conclude by showing how love and work are central to geographical imaginaries of worldliness, and to both the rejection and possibility of other worlds after (or within) colonial-capitalism’s abolition. Our analysis thus demonstrates how affect and ideology – that is, modes of feeling and forms of consciousness that (re)produce the material relations of capitalism’s world - at once reverse into and continue one another in work’s love.

**Keywords:** affect, attachment, love, work, world, Arendt

#### **1. Break my Soul**

To love work, or to be loved by work: these tropes are the coordinates of an ideological and affective problem. Such injunctions to love or reject work’s love have been circulating and resurfacing in the US and the UK for well over half a century, taking on different classed, gendered, and racialized valances at different moments. Is work’s love a demand or an obligation, a way of countering work’s alienation, an expression of what has failed between the worker and work, a promise that work will be better (more caring, more fulfilling) tomorrow, or

the spur to walk out on work once and for all? Does bringing love to work or withdrawing from work's love *counter* or *reproduce* the relations of domination and exploitation that secure the (re)production of capitalism's world? The answer can only be, *it depends*: on whose work, whose love, and in what context these questions are posed. Work's love is, in effect, geohistorical: an affective and ideological orientation that takes on a certain shape and significance (culturally and economically) in a particular time and place.

When Beyoncé (via Parkwood Entertainment and Columbia Records) released *Break My Soul* on 20 June 2021, it was hailed by some as the expression of an epochal shift: “The Great Resignation,” a trend towards walking out on work. ‘Now I just fell in love’, Beyoncé sings, ‘And I quit my job/I’m gonna find new drive’.<sup>1</sup> Beyoncé proclaims a search for ‘motivation’, a ‘new foundation’, a ‘new vibration’. The chorus, ‘You won’t break my soul’, could be addressed to an exploitative employer (Beyoncé sings, ‘they work me so damn hard’) or more broadly to racial capitalism itself. The song samples Big Freedia’s 2014 track ‘Explode’, in which he chants an imperative to ‘release’: your anger and your mind, your job and your time – and finally, ‘release the love, forget the rest’. The lyrics to *Break My Soul* were interpreted by many as anti-work, pro-love, and together with the bounce of the dance-pop production, a paean to self-empowerment. On the day after it dropped, Beyoncé’s single was heralded in *Forbes* as the ‘anthem for the Great Resignation, encouraging listeners to quit their jobs and rid themselves of stressors in their lives’.<sup>2</sup>

In 2021, “The Great Resignation” entered public discourse to refer to what some expected to be a mass exodus from the workforce in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic in the US. The term originated with professor of management Anthony Klotz, who suggested that not only would the winding down of pandemic measures in the US release a surge of pent-up resignations, but these numbers would be multiplied by “the many pandemic-related epiphanies—about family time, remote work, commuting, passion projects, life and death, and what it all means—that can make people turn their back on the 9-to-5 office grind’.<sup>3</sup> This prediction appeared to be borne out by workforce trends when, in the US and the UK, resignations surged in 2021, peaking in 2022 with 46.6 million resignations in the US and 442,000 resignations in the UK.<sup>4</sup> These record numbers were circulated and amplified in media in both countries, sparking a flurry of articles and blogs about how (and why) to quit your job, alongside questions about what is “essential” work, concerns about ‘quiet quitting’, and debates about the effects of remote work. As a “viral” concept, the Great Resignation was at once totalising (subsuming a multitude of forces and factors) and individualizing (implying the free choice of all those leaving employment). Work was cast as a bad object choice, as a site of an attachment that would deliver more harm than nourishment to those foolish enough to become attached to it.<sup>5</sup> Work, like a withdrawn beloved or a broken promise, was undeserving of the worker’s devotion. Work won’t love you back, and it just might break your soul. In short, the Great Resignation went beyond naming an objective workforce trend to signal *an affective orientation and an ideology of work* in these countries.

Empirically, the actual story of “post-pandemic” work is more complicated. The rising tide of resignations was not new in 2021, but the continuation of a 12-year trend that had taken an anomalous dip in 2020 due to the uncertainty engendered by COVID-19 and the stop-gap policies (furloughs in the UK, income-replacement in the US) that kept workers frozen in place.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the narrative that people were leaving their jobs for ‘passion pursuits’ was supported more by anecdote than evidence. The effect of this was to belie the real circumstances of resignation, which were distinctly gendered, raced, and classed. In the United States, younger people, women, Hispanic and Asian Americans quit more than other demographic groups.<sup>7</sup> Resignations were also sector specific. The highest proportion of resignations were in leisure, food services, and hospitality, while there was a small but significant rise in the proportion who left work due to long term illness.<sup>8</sup> Those quitting most often cited low pay, lack of advancement opportunities, and not being respected at work as key reasons for leaving. In short, those leaving their jobs most likely did so in response to a range of circumstances unrelated either to laziness (as The Great Resignation’s conservative critics claimed) or to the pursuit of passion projects (as “quit your job” media encouraged). Instead, the observable rise in resignations occurred within a longer historical context of failures of governance, work, health care, and social justice in the US and the UK.

Whatever 2021-23 employment trends might actually have been indicating (e.g., a bifurcating labour market, worker disablement, or an internet-enabled rise in job-shuffling), the Great Resignation articulated a mood, a *feeling* about work that also served an ideological purpose. To examine work’s love is therefore to shed light on the blurred zone where affect and ideology pick up from and reverse into one another.<sup>9</sup> “Love” soaks up a wide range of feelings and orientations (passionate, ambivalent, nurturing, destructive, enlightening) and takes no end of possible objects. But love is not only an (inter)personal matter. It is a socio-economic prescription: a ‘promise of happiness’ that props up structures of domination and exploitation.<sup>10</sup> Love’s ideological work crystalizes at the site of the normative (heterosexual, patriarchal) family; as Sophie Lewis writes, ‘The family is an ideology of work’.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, as we explore in this paper, love of work (or work’s love) is itself ideological in a classical sense of reproducing the dominant relations of capitalism’s world. Drawing love and work into proximity provides a way to demonstrate the cooperation of affect and ideology in propping up the gendered, racialized, and classed relations that secure capitalism’s conditions. By offering a critique of discourses of love and work circulating across the US and the UK in the post-2021 period, we aim to shed light on how relations of exploitation and domination are reproduced and maintained on the knife’s edge of affect and ideology.

In the critique that follows, we take The Great Resignation’s ‘bad object’ of work and hold it and its representations to critical scrutiny, examining work’s promises, attachments and detachments, and the modes and consequences of its betrayals and disappointments. To understand how

work's love operates both affectively and ideologically, we trace the evolving public discourse around (not) loving work as manifest in the injunction to "do what you love" and the warning that "work won't love you back". We then explore how work's love situates its subjects in relation to capitalist worldmaking and the other kinds of worlds that are being imagined through nascent refusals of work's love. With Beyoncé's so-called anti-work anthem buoying our pursuit, we thus seek out the new and not-so-new motivations, foundations and vibrations of love and work in 'post-pandemic' contexts of the US and the UK.

## 2. Theorizing love, the world(s), and work

While most treatments of love (at least since Plato's *Symposium*) begin with some form of the question, "What is love?", recognizing love's contingency and cultural and historical variability tempers the philosophical grandeur of such a question.<sup>12</sup> With love being 'so enormous within our human nature', even philosophers of love have come to eschew the project of constricting it 'within a single, fixed and all-embracing, definition of the kind that Plato sought'.<sup>13</sup> The enormity of love has to do not only with its multiplicity of form (from nurturing to destructive, disinterested to obsessive) but the proliferation of its objects. For while person-directed love dominates a Western cultural imagination of love (with an occasional AI, doll, or sea creature in the mix), there is in fact no limit to what might be beloved: other living organisms, objects, institutions, ideas, values, places, activities, memories, sensations, works of art, humanity, God, or the world. It might be tempting to define all this diversity of love away by stating that we must 'begin by understanding that love is a thing that happens between *people*'.<sup>14</sup> But such a limiting notion of love is difficult to defend empirically or philosophically. Even in Plato's *Symposium*, enthusiasm directed towards a person is just one type of love, which is always love of *something* but not necessarily *someone*.<sup>15</sup>

Narrowing the meaning of love may help focus treatises, but it does not put an end to love's promiscuity or torment. Rather than resolving its tensions, we are interested in how love manifests the problem of its 'enormity' in a particular time and place (that is, in contemporary, Western and Anglophone contexts) in relation to work. Drawing close to Lauren Berlant's 'cruel optimism', our analysis tracks love as a circulating promise (of intensity, happiness, and reciprocity) that alights within the field of work in both damaging and animating ways.<sup>16</sup> Love is a powerful narrative, an ideal, *and* a messy and ambivalent investment in an object that may or may not prove cruel. These investments attach us to a particular image of a world in which those objects exist in relation to others, not least the inhuman relations of racial-colonial capitalist orderings.<sup>17</sup> In such a world, work has become a key site of attachment, mediating participation in these orderings as a "calling" or "mission"—acknowledging the religious overtones of both terms—that organizes affective investment as a compulsive and alienating force that materially demands our participation in order to achieve a "good life", or any kind of life at all.<sup>18</sup> The relationship between love and work is central to the ongoing reproduction of a world (often constructed as *the only* world) as we know it, to the subject's projection of their place within that

world, and to projects seeking to build a different kind of world, even as the vicissitudes and ambivalence of love continually complicate both.

“The world”, as *a concept* and *imagined geographical referent*, has been crisscrossed by multiple different meanings and projects—including, to name a few, world-systems theory, (post)phenomenological attention to lifeworld(s), theoretical-political projects of queer and trans world-making, and attunement to geographical imaginaries and material practices of worlding in and beyond colonial orderings. Across these and other approaches, “the world”, depending on how self-consciously it is approached as a concept, might be something like an extensive spatial context through which relatively encompassing systems of social-political-economic relations unfold. It can be a lived, experiential reality—in either individual, plural, and/or depersonalized senses—or a ‘background [...] that shapes how things show up, how they are sensed, and how they become intelligible’.<sup>19</sup> It can be pluralized as a site of political intervention and relational creativity, for example, against the coordinates of settler colonialism and anti-Black racism, and it can name the result of imaginative and material practices of relating and separating people and places, often in “messy” or ambivalent ways.<sup>20</sup> How we conceptualize the world intersects in a complicated way with the world(s) we actually inhabit.<sup>21</sup> Not entirely unlike love, pinning down what the concept of world means—if one would even be inclined to do so—is a challenge.

The world, ‘as a frame or scene of political and ethical engagement’, can become a site of affirmation and even love.<sup>22</sup> For Hannah Arendt, whose influential theorization of politics hinges on a complex, contradictory understanding of the world as a site of human plurality, loving the world represented an ethical disposition to be cultivated as a condition of possibility for democratic political action.<sup>23</sup> Writing against a human-centred analytics, Derek McCormack defends the usefulness of a concept of world against detractors who see it as a limiting abstraction by developing a circumstantial understanding of world as ‘all the forces in excess of an actual entity or occasion [...] that become foregrounded insofar as they become sensed and palpable to that entity and occasion’.<sup>24</sup> Yet as different as they are, Arendt and McCormack both find reason to remain attached, conceptually and politically, to the world. And while not always so explicitly theorized, world and its political possibilities remain a seemingly unavoidable reference point in much critical thought.

Others have raised critical questions about the work that “world” does, and who or what might be outside its frame. These questions can be seen in different ways among geographers of affect, materiality, and embodiment,<sup>25</sup> and among Black studies scholars contesting a world (and concepts of world) predicated on anti-black violence.<sup>26</sup> Thomas Dekeyser (2023) critiques a tendency toward ‘worldly futuring’ through which critical scholars habitually seek to imagine or enact new, other, or different worlds in the future.<sup>27</sup> Showing how the world is invoked as a site of provisional stability and commonality and as a horizon for collective meaning-making, Dekeyser draws attention to the constitutive outside that makes this shared future horizon

possible (for some). He shows how, in seeking to ward off worldlessness, what has been left outside or understood in opposition to a world is continually pushed aside. As Black feminist critics have especially noted, this problem can be seen in Arendt's conceptualization of the world as the product of human work (to which we turn later in the paper) where the "human" world is effectively defined against the worldless naturalness she somehow finds in Black and Indigenous life and where purposeful "work" that produces something new and carries something of its creator into the world is set against "labour" that merely, cyclically, and anonymously reproduces the conditions for survival.<sup>28</sup> If *that* is the world, we can only agree with Aimé Césaire's suggestion that 'the only thing in the world that's worth beginning [is] The End of the World'.<sup>29</sup>

In this paper we do not seek to establish a hierarchy between labour and work as Arendt does or to situate labour as "productive" and social reproduction as "unproductive" as Marx does, which implicitly values a particularly classed, gendered, and racialized form of *labour* (i.e., a geographically and historically specific form of paid work for an employer that involves producing goods or services that realize value on a market) over and above other kinds of work. Rather, we are interested in the affective-ideological force of these normative hierarchies in compelling attachments to a heteronormative, racial capitalist world. Our own definition of work would follow feminist critiques of Marx that define work very broadly as *any activity that produces a good or service whether for oneself or for someone else*, which includes socially reproductive work, unpaid work, informal work, the work of slaves, work for the state, and so on.<sup>30</sup> Here, we do not mean to join what Saidiya Hartman has critiqued as the erasure of the specificity of 'slavery as a mode of power, violence, dispossession and accumulation' vis-à-vis abstract categories of workers or labourers.<sup>31</sup> Instead, our aim in the paper is precisely to understand the worldmaking and world-breaking ways that work is differently and hierarchically ordered, experienced, imagined, and felt.

At the intersection of abolitionist imperatives to end the world of racial-colonial capitalism, to imagine and enact other, better worlds, to love or affirm the world in its excess or plurality, it is easy to get disoriented. In the abstract, the difference between affirming *a* (future) world and ending *the* (current) world may not be as large as it appears. Indeed, one may seem to imply the other. Yet it is clear that the political stakes of the difference between affirming *this* world or seeking to end it could not be higher. Here the "world" we are concerned with, insofar as it relates to intersections between love and work, is the one that constructs capitalism as the only possible world, creating a fallacious epistemological totality that denies both the constitutive outsides upon which capitalism depends, and the reality that in fact capitalism is *not* a totality.<sup>32</sup> This can be seen, though very differently, in the neoliberal construction of capitalism as the only possible economic system and in certain Marxist conceptualizations of capitalism that tend toward a totalizing conceptualization of capitalism while externalizing coloniality, racialization, the transatlantic slave trade, and unpaid forms of work (Ferreira da Silva 2022).<sup>33</sup> We raise

questions of attachment and detachment from such an imaginary, within which the romance between work and love (or lack thereof) is indelibly caught up, and the role of our affective investments in making, changing, or ending a world.<sup>34</sup>

Insofar as work has become a key part of securing some kind of place in a/the world—for those who have it, however provisionally, as well as for those who are denied it—work’s love implicates individuals within the gendered and racialized ordering system that capitalism’s world constitutes. While here we are focused on the complexities and ambivalences of the love of work in terms of an employment or freelancing relation, love’s most dogmatic representations (i.e., within the couple form) anchor the ‘ideological core of modern heterosexuality’ and are structurally situated at the center of capitalist relations in the context of social reproduction.<sup>35</sup> This is, perhaps, the most pervasive, and structurally essential, way in which love enters the world of work: it props up the nuclear family, facilitates the intergenerational reproduction of the working population, and has historically served as a justification for women’s unpaid labour in the home.<sup>36</sup> It provides a perpetual subsidy for capital, enabling the social reproduction of the workforce.<sup>37</sup> In the realm of remunerated and formalized ‘care-based’ work outside of the home, love is often situated as a justification for underpayment and the undervaluation of nursing, teaching, elder care, and other forms of feminized ‘body work’.<sup>38</sup> Love, or a cluster of emotional obligations that approximate it, is centrally implicated in social reproduction and a justification of the un- or underpayment of care work.

While socially reproductive and so-called caring work are both central to the relationship between love, work, and the world,<sup>39</sup> in this paper we focus on two normative discourses that link together work and love: “do what you love” (DWYL) and “work won’t love you back” (WWLYB). These discourses most directly implicate love of high-status forms of work—the capitalist world’s most hegemonic examples of what highly remunerated “good work” should look like. But at the same time, one of the most insidious features of these discourses is that they prop up capitalism’s meritocracy myths by forming a normative idea about what the appropriate affective disposition to work *in general*—beyond high-status and well-remunerated forms of work—*should be*. We see these discourses as most obviously (but not exclusively) applying to work in the Global North, where there has been a general tendency toward more work, i.e., longer working hours and to not questioning work as a societal norm.<sup>40</sup> In this context, we complicate the presumed political valence of DWYL and WWLYB (the first ostensibly more right-wing, the second more left-wing) while pointing out that, irrespective of the direction or absence of critique in either case, both situate love as centrally implicated in work’s world.

### **3. Work’s worlds**

#### **3.1. Do what you love!**

“Do what you love” (DWYL) is a common ideology (“choose a job you love, and you will never work again”) that has been seeking to define appropriate attachments to work since at least the

early 20th Century in the Global North. Critical scholars, in empirical research with entrepreneurs and digital media workers, show how these workers narrate their work through the DWYL discourse.<sup>41</sup> DWYL also shows up in “digital culture” sectors such as fashion, beauty, and retail in what Brooke Duffy terms ‘aspirational labour’, but more broadly, DWYL defines much high-status white collar work in general terms.<sup>42</sup> DWYL is also a common discourse directed toward and espoused by artists, musicians, writers and other “cultural workers”: a sentiment offered as a meager consolation for their work’s devaluation and their un- or underpayment. Described as the unofficial work mantra of our time, DWYL has become the ubiquitous property of self-help books, motivational and inspirational speakers, entrepreneurs, celebrities, influencers, and other pro-capitalist boosters, including Steve Jobs and Oprah Winfrey.<sup>43</sup>

DWYL is a rhetoric that is individualizing and depoliticizing, designed to direct attention away from power relations and the potential for solidarity or collective action in the workplace.<sup>44</sup> The “you” in DWYL is significant. A second-person injunction, it is a demand to know yourself well enough to know what *you* would love and to pursue that above all else. The implication is that, for those who are not already doing what they love, it is they themselves who are deficient, not the workplace or the structures that surround it. What work (an absent presence in the phrase) should be loved is undefined: it is personal and individual (“do what *you* love”), particular to you, and something only you can know. Work thus becomes a personal lifestyle choice indistinguishable from other sources of individual fulfillment. This relates to Simon May’s outline of the normative ideology of love explored in the next section: the unsubstitutability and irreplaceability of love ties into the self-help and authenticity discourses that define modern subjectivity.<sup>45</sup>

In the DWYL discourse, the uncommodifiability of love means that work, undertaken for love, cannot be rightly conceptualized as having value.<sup>46</sup> This directs attention not just to the kind of work that might most appropriately be loved by the subject (something singular to their authentic self, that only they can know), but also to what kind of subject is most amenable to loving work correctly. Surely, the worker who loves their work the best, in the most pure and ideal form of that love, would work for free, wouldn’t they? Those who deny work’s love or are unable to love work in the right way (refusing overwork or demanding a higher wage or better working conditions) are cast as destructive, selfish, or otherwise deficient lovers. Like the killjoy or affect alien, they spoil everyone else’s fun while also needlessly holding themselves back from enjoyment, from *love*.<sup>47</sup>

What kind of subject does one have to be to be a willing recipient of work’s love? It is not just that the subject must know themselves well enough to know what kind of work they would love. They also must transform themselves (perhaps engaging in “self-discovery”) into a suitable lover of work. The subject of DWYL is both universal and specific, effacing the pervasive racism,



sexism, and other forms of discrimination that characterize the labour market and the workplace. And certainly you don't need money or property; simply finding your personal passion is the key to self-fulfillment and success. In the individualism of the DWYL ideology, a subject unable to love work is personally at fault and must address something within themselves to appropriately participate in the mandated love of work. The subject thus implicitly *owes something to work*: they must participate in a form of emotional self-management and be willing and able to love their work. In this sense, DWYL is the modern iteration of the demand for the subject to internalize the disciplinary management discourses of Taylor's scientific management or Weber's Protestant ethic. It is also a reversal of the *actual* structural relationship of work under capitalism, in which the employer owes something to the worker (i.e., a wage) for their work. In DWYL, the subject instead owes something to work; that is, they're obligated to provide for work an acceptable self-fashioned subjectivity available for work's love, so as to secure for themselves a place, however provisional, in the world.

This rhetoric of the indebted or obligated worker is especially effective for younger workers, i.e., those offered their first "real job" and upon whom employers have "taken a chance".<sup>48</sup> Similarly, this feeling of indebtedness, a concern that one must feel and be the right way for and about their work, may be especially acute for those on the margins of labour markets when jobs are scarce and when union activity is in decline, and, most generally, amid our continued shared dependence on the market for our social reproduction. When we *need* a wage to live, it's easy to believe that we owe something to those employers supposedly benevolent enough to take a chance on us. Why not then offer in return something as small—and free—as love, in return for being offered a coveted place in the exclusive halls of an increasingly globalized and competitive labour market? Love becomes a meagre price to pay to be allowed the privilege of having one's surplus value extracted by an employer.

Berlant provides insight here through her examination of post-Fordist affect and precarity in informal and low-status service sector work. Here, ruthless fantasy, the promise that something or anything might be better, translates into a demand for work that, for the worker, looks something like love: in the absence of any available object, a bad job might appear better than nothing where love becomes 'an incitement to misrecognize the bad life as a good one'.<sup>49</sup> Berlant highlights how *Rosetta's* eponymous protagonist rejects welfare and feels ashamed of her trailer-park upbringing, how she cheats her friend out of informal work so that she can participate, however marginally, in the market in his stead, investing in the false promise that a job offers her a source limited reciprocity: a real place in the world. Berlant interprets Rosetta's actions as a desire to participate, to belong to *a* world (without the privilege of being able to choose that world or even expect that one might have a choice), to be a part of *something*, excluded as she is from other forms of normality or externalized legitimacy that society has to offer. Berlant sees aggression in Rosetta's demand to remain attached to a world that barely shows her interest, in which she has 'no controlling share', and in which she shows 'an insistence in being proximate

to the thing' as her only form of compensation.<sup>50</sup>

That the role of the employer has been minimized or erased in this discussion is part of the DWYL ideology too. DWYL imagines work as a relationship between only the doing of work (perhaps experienced, or misrecognized, as a form of participation in a world) and the self, with no other parties involved, i.e., no colleagues, no manager, no employer, no labour market, no union, no HR department. More minimally, it is an attempt to collapse the distinctions between work and the self altogether: to reimagine work as the only medium through which one can or should relate to the self. Work then becomes a personal passion project, a creative site for exploring the self and one's relationship to one's own subjectivity. As Lindsay DePalma notes, 'the passion paradigm successfully reorients professionals to pursue work that they love as a service to themselves and their individual happiness'.<sup>51</sup> Michele Foucault speaks of this in terms of a generalization of the entrepreneurial form under neoliberalism: the self (re)imagined as an autonomous individual who is solely responsible for their own satisfaction.<sup>52</sup>

Yet, if love for work justifies un- or underpayment, who can afford to indulge in a work's love? Who can receive the *real* rewards of work's love, beyond the paycheque, benefits, and pension: fulfilment, a sense of self, recognition? These psychic rewards are not ideal ones. They are the real, material, and propertied rewards that capitalism bestows, to a small few, who participate in its dramatization of racial, gender, and class dynamics. The real reward for loving work is thus full participation in society as a propertied subject of capital; it is the capacity to develop the form of subjectivity privileged by capitalism's ideological system. Indeed, for the 'right' people, with the right existing privileges (i.e., mostly white men and women with existing inter-generational wealth and networks of social and monetary support), work *will* love you back. And insofar as this group often sets the standard for what "good work" should look like for the rest of us, that's precisely the problem.

### **3.2. "Work won't love you back"**

In the context of current discourses on work in the US and the UK, "Work won't love you back" (WWLYB) appears as a counter-mantra, pushing back against DWYL and its accompanying ideology. Buoyed by the anti-work mood of the Great Resignation, many anti-work thinkers (including, variously, leftist academics, advocates of quiet quitting, those tagging posts with #antiwork across social media, those who frequent the r/anti-work subreddit, and other pundits and commentators) have adopted WWLYB as a spur to re-evaluate affective investments in work. Indeed, our own critique of DWYL runs alongside the thinking of such anti-work scholars and activists. But at the same time, our critical engagement with the question of love and work leads us to examine how WWLYB, as a mantra that in fact originated in pro-work discourse, also reproduces and papers over the affective-ideological concoction that binds workers to work. While acknowledging that for many the question of "love" may seem incidental to WWLYB as an anti-work slogan, we maintain that the problem of love and work is not so easily elided.

Proclamations of love (and its lack) are neither straightforward nor neutral; the relationship between love and work is not incidental to workplace politics but in fact at the heart of how work (un)makes its worlds. For this reason, we turn now from DWYL to the more ambiguous implications of WWLYB.

The WWLYB mantra itself is not new and has not always been associated with anti-work positions. Instead, the mantra has a history of being bound up with *pro-work* advice. In the 1990s, WWLYB surfaced as the title of a ‘dual career couple’s survival guide’.<sup>53</sup> A decade later, the quote ‘You can love your job, but your job won’t love you back’ was being printed on posters and regularly attributed to Cathie Black, the former President of Hearst Magazines who perennially appears on Fortune Magazine’s list of ‘50 Most Powerful Women in Business’. Work’s lack of love at this time was not touted as cause for *withdrawal* from work, but the expression of a pro-work attitude to negotiating harder, ‘living your best life’, and ‘striving for success’.<sup>54</sup> Until the COVID-19 pandemic threw the ‘bad object’ of work into relief, WWLYB was continuing to crop up as a mantra of the successful and enlightened, the sage and the savvy.<sup>55</sup> Yet there was also an edge. ‘Your Job Will Never Love You Back’ cried the 24 October 2019 headline of the *New York Times*’ ‘Work Friend’ column, followed by the subheading: ‘TBH it’s pretty rude that your work causes you endless stress and never even goes to couples’ therapy with you’.<sup>56</sup> With this, the inability of your job to return your love becomes not just a neutral fact, a reminder that it is futile to seek love from a contractual relationship, but a betrayal of reciprocity. Pretty rude.

If the admonition to DWYL romanticizes work, WWLYB goes further: it introduces the problem of reciprocity and thereby risks activating the conventions of the ‘love plot’. For Berlant, the love plot is one of the conventional plots in which people get stuck. The genre of romance plays into the ‘sentimental bargain’ that replaces ‘representations of pain and violence’ with ‘representations of its sublime self-overcoming’.<sup>57</sup> Not only does sentimentality displace other modes of seeking change, but the ‘tacit proprieties’ of the conventional (white, heterosexual, bourgeois) love plot are ‘used to justify the economic and physical domination of nations, races, religions, gays, lesbians, and women’.<sup>58</sup> The love plot in this sense is a lure and a promise, a demand and a decoy.

What happens when this genre of romance, with its normalized excesses, is taken to work? Is there a ‘sentimental bargain’ that could make work, like sex, ‘good again’?<sup>59</sup> The statement ‘your job will never love you back’ has the air of a good friend sharing a hard truth. Read the signs. This isn’t a mutual relationship. They don’t love you and therefore don’t deserve your love. The statement works rhetorically by substituting one meaning for another, because of course we “love” many things, activities, and places (like a song, or a sunny day, or cooking) without needing or wanting something impossible from them: that they in any sense love us back. By shifting the register of work’s love to romance, the phrase shames us for our inappropriate,

unrequited attachment (to work) and suggests that we might begin to heal from this wound if only we can reorient our attachments towards other more receptive objects. Fall in love, quit your job, build a new foundation. It's a *great* resignation.

Love has come to name the problem with work. It therefore might also be the solution. On the one hand WWLYB surfaces as an anti-work discourse, a way to resist 'the progressive [senti]mentalization of working processes, and the consequent enslavement of the soul'.<sup>60</sup> But on the other hand, WWLYB suggests that the problem with work might still be mitigated by *more love*: by making workplaces sites of employee health and wellness programs and by cultivating an expectation of care from and at work. WWLYB in this sense expresses an implicit longing to be loved by work; work *would be better* if it were a site of love and care. Perhaps we should see WWLYB as not just *deflecting* but *reflecting* the creeping reach of love-ideology into the workplace, a kind of sentimentalization of work that takes the demand to love one's work one step further by suggesting, in its manifest negation of the aim, that this is what we most desire: work's love.

Of course, on the face of it, and from the point of view of workplace politics and union action, it is absolutely true that "work won't love you back", not only because the deed (work) loving the doer (worker) defies sense, but also because dominant notions of what love is or should be make it *definitionally incompatible* with labour (as both a commodity itself and the source of value) under capitalism. Philosopher of love May argues that the dominant love ideology today (in what he calls 'those parts of the world marked by the confluence of ancient Greek and biblical heritages') is a secularized, sanitized version of divine *agape* with four characteristic features: to be unconditional, disinterested, enduring, and affirming.<sup>61</sup> According to this ideal (which May argues is more parental than romantic), the mark of true love is that the object (the beloved) cannot be valued, exchanged, or replaced, and the lover must have no expectation of return on their investment. The ideology of love that May identifies and critiques is one that figures love as a foil to both the "commodification" of the loved object and any sense of love as a "productive" relationship marked by labour (though see our arguments about this in the previous section). An ideal of love in which value is conferred by the lover regardless of quality, in which there can be no substitution, and in which there is no expectation of return appears as *directly counterpoised* to capitalist labour relations, in which embodied value, replaceability, and return on investment are all paramount. Making love something inherently incompatible with commodification, exploitation, or exchange is in part how love (whether romantic, parental, or work-related) becomes compensation for the wreckage of worlds. By embedding such an ideal of love and scripting work's failure in romantic terms, WWLYB thus becomes a vehicle for the love plot (with all its promise, heartbreak, and dramatic allure), still clinging to work even at the moment of its critique.

Finally, while it is true that your job doesn't go to couples' therapy with you to grapple with its inability to fill your lack, perhaps this apparent disengagement reflects not the absence of love from the scene of work, but rather a gap between the ideal of love (as beyond questions of value or exchange) and the drama of love and work. If the tragedy that appears in the space between DWYL and WWYLB is one of unrequited love, this is premised on the worker entering the scene as a lover, only to find the beloved unaffected, indifferent enough to break their soul. But in the labour relation, is it not the employer who lacks?<sup>62</sup> Who seeks, who advertises, who has a 'position to fill', a 'vacancy', and the worker who 'has something' (their body, mind, affect, labour) that work desires? Is it not *work* that requires another (the worker) to fulfil it, to play a certain role in its fantasy of surplus? And the worker: is it not they who finds themselves a bit in the dark, unsure what it is in them that work seeks to extract? The demand to love work, to "do what you love", is *work's own plea* to the worker, who is called upon to give to "work" what they essentially don't have: the surplus value/enjoyment, the source of profit itself, that only emerges once what is not there has been given. What if the cruelty of work is in fact the sign of work's love: a love characterized not by spiritual nurture, but by the vicissitudes of idealization and disillusionment, promise and betrayal, asymmetry and reversal?<sup>63</sup>

Pushing this analysis all the way to the point that work *does* seem to love the worker (albeit viciously), our purpose is neither to revive faith in work's love nor to undermine anti-work thinkers for whom WWLYB has become a way to resist the snares of DWYL. Instead, by suggesting that WWLYB, as a slogan that dates at least from the 1990s, partakes in the sentimentalization of work and reflects a particular ideology of love, we take aim at how "work's love" rivets us (as workers) to a relation to work. By shining a light on work's attachment to the worker, we rewrite the story of work's love, not as a lack but as the active presence of an extractive and ambivalent (love) relation. In the impasse between DWYL and WWLYB, what comes into focus is the affective-ideological investment that binds workers to work in the making of capitalism's world.

#### **4. Work, love, and the end of a world**

From a geographical perspective, the world that capitalism imagines for itself is at stake in work's love. Indeed, work, and the norms, laws, and the cluster of promises that surround it, are central to the production of capitalism's world, both in a material sense (in producing the 'world of commodities' in Marx's frequently-used phrase) and an ideological one. That capitalism is taken to constitute *the* world rather than *a* world (i.e., one of a possible many) is a frequent critique of neoliberalism, embodied best in Margaret Thatcher's oft-quoted assertion that 'there is no alternative'. This conviction flourishes in the arena of high-status work, where the promise of reward for successfully navigating capitalism's bogus world of meritocracy—climbing the corporate ladder, pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps, doing what you love—and the modalities of whiteness and masculinity implied therein, finds its fullest articulation.

The drama of work's love opens up important questions about our affective investments in a world where capitalism puts many of us to work—in very different ways and with different kinds of compulsions and rewards. Luke Boltanski and Eve Chiapello suggest that 'in many respects, capitalism is an absurd system' that is obliged to produce its own ethos and set of moral justifications to bolster its otherwise senseless imperatives.<sup>64</sup> In other words, it is not at all clear why we remain attached to a system that is so actively violent and destructive. To be sure, the material compulsion of needing a wage to survive plays a central role for most workers. But even here, Boltanski and Chiapello argue, active 'commitment' and 'involvement' in work, beyond just showing up, often necessitate some degree of normative assent and felt justification, or an ability to find meaning in and to feel fulfilled by work. As Kathi Weeks notes, even those who do not need a wage appear to remain committed to the reification of more and harder work as a valorized social norm, something to which we *should* remain comfortably and unproblematically attached.<sup>65</sup>

It is on this differentiated terrain that the drama of loving work and of questioning work's love enters the scene as a question of attachment and, as scholars like Berlant and Ben Anderson have explored, of 'how attachments allow people to inhabit and make liveable worlds'.<sup>66</sup> The problematic nature of these attachments in the context of asymmetries of power has been crucial to socialist, feminist, abolitionist, and other intersecting left intellectual-political projects, where imagining and enacting a different world has centrally involved struggling over the racialized, colonial, gendered, classed organization of work, the production and distribution of work's surpluses, the recognition of different kinds of unpaid work, and the possibility of different ways of (not) working. Questions of attachment, investment, and, indeed, love, are central here, both in terms of how we find ourselves attached to or detached from the world and attached to or detached from the promise of making, changing, or ending it.

The question of love for or from work may be more likely to emerge explicitly in some contexts than in others. As academic workers, we are perhaps especially well attuned to how affective investment in one's work can become the grease that makes the wheels of the sector spin, even as it becomes a fraught site of contestation and debate. Yet, we also think that discourses of loving work (or not) reveal an implicit hierarchy—some kinds of work are rendered more "lovable" than others, while not loving some kinds of work (e.g., parenting, teaching, nursing, and most broadly "caregiving") can be seen as morally reprehensible with significant political consequences. Indeed, it reveals something important about how the racial-colonial capitalist world is made in the current moment. In this context, Arendt's three-fold distinction between 'labour', 'work', and 'action' productively highlights the intersection of this world-mediating and world-ordering aspects of work.<sup>67</sup> While Arendt's writing embeds a number of intensely contradictory impulses—from the radically democratic to the hierarchically colonial—we follow Fred Moten here in approaching Arendt's writing as reflecting something of the anti-abolitionist infrastructure of our times, in which the injunctions to love (or not) our work, and thereby to

affirm the world as it is or could be, depend on keeping people and their activities in their “proper” place.<sup>68</sup>

From a critical reading of Arendt, we can distil an understanding of what is at stake in work (and attachment to work) for generating a/the world. Arendt sets out to challenge frameworks that place labour at the centre of human existence by arguing that such approaches have tended to conflate *merely* reproductive labour and more generative kinds of work and reduced the realm of the political action to the management and satisfaction of human needs. For Arendt, labour names the activities that people do to reproduce themselves and their world. It has a cyclical, processual, and a seemingly futile quality of always needing to be done again. While it creates the possibility for the emergence of something new, it is itself oriented primarily toward survival and keeping the individual and the world going. For Arendt, labour is tied to our ‘animal’ biology and our ‘slavish’ need to continually consume to survive. Comparing the isolating experience of pain with labouring, she writes that:

The only activity that corresponds to the experience of worldlessness, or to the loss of the world that occurs in pain, is labouring, where the human body, its activity notwithstanding, is also thrown back on itself, concentrates on nothing but its own being alive, and remains imprisoned in its metabolism with nature without ever transcending or freeing itself from the recurring cycle of its own functioning.<sup>69</sup>

For Arendt, then, labour is primarily reproductive. It also tends towards a sort of “worldlessness”, whether in an isolatingly individual sense or, in terms of the “modern” mass organization of labour, in a namelessly collective sense. Who could love that? Certainly not Arendt, although she is clear that this labour provides a kind of foundation from which other kinds of actually worldly activities become possible, as when she matter-of-factly explains that the Athenian democracy from which she drew inspiration would have been impossible without the labour of enslaved people and others (including women) excluded from it—the labour of necessity outsourced to disenfranchised and objectified others in private so that some could have freedom to act in the public realm.

In contrast to reproductive labour, which is cyclical and worldless, ‘work’ for Arendt has a clear teleology and a worldly orientation. It is oriented toward creating specific, relatively durable objects through the interaction between a person, the world, and the materials it provides. It is important to note that Arendt’s conceptualization of world is, at least in some of its articulations, an explicitly racialized one, relying on a civilization/savagery binary, where the ‘human’ world is effectively defined against the worldless naturalness she somehow finds in Black and Indigenous life.<sup>70</sup> Arendt’s ‘work’ is modelled on the image of an individual craftsperson or artist, working intentionally to create useful or meaningful objects, in contrast both to the people that Arendt could only understand as ‘primitive’ and stuck in their ‘metabolism with nature’ and

to ‘modern’ industrial workers anonymously labouring to survive. In this account something of the distinctiveness of who the craftsperson/artist is contributes to the creation of a new, distinct object that goes out into the world for meaningful use or appreciation separate from its creator. While going beyond Arendt’s time and text, we suggest that this valuation of work, as distinctive and meaningful contribution, over and against essential but anonymous labour, carries forward straightforwardly enough into the ‘makers’, ‘creators’, and ‘founders’ of the current economic moment.

What is the work that one is meant to love—to give one’s soul to—and that is meant to love one back, if not precisely this kind of personally meaningful, world-making work? And what kind of work are we meant to detach from, if not precisely the futile, pointless, repetitive drudgery of labour? And to make clearer the gendered and racialized hierarchies behind these questions, who precisely is the “one” and the “we” here? Are certain subjects, for Arendt, better suited to labour’s worldlessness than others? We can see Arendt’s labour-work distinction—and the worlds implied therein—in normative understandings of academic work, where the careful, even loving, work of pouring oneself into supposedly meaningful research and teaching can, under the pressures of disinvestment and managerialism, be felt to give way to the cyclical (and perhaps cynical) reproduction of always more research “outputs” and degrees—for those “lucky” enough to even secure a place as an academic worker at all. The advantage of turning to Arendt’s writing here is that it illustrates, perhaps against its own intentions, the hierarchical, racializing impulses at the foundation of privileging some kinds of meaningful (world-making) work over the necessity and supposed futility of (worldless) labour—impulses that proliferate within academic institutions, from discourses of universities as sites for preparing and credentialing students for significant, meaningful work to the persistent devaluation of the reproductive labour (done by maintenance, food service, and other support staff, for example) on which universities depend.

When one is reminded that work won’t love you back—and to redistribute one’s affective investments accordingly—or when one has finally had enough and quits the job threatening to break one’s soul, what kind of detachment is being called for or exercised? Is one detaching from a specific situation so as to, in fact, remain attached to the world as it is, in hopes that one could be situated differently within it? In the absence of a clear alternative, this might be understandable or even difficult to avoid for any particular person. But are other, more thoroughgoing forms of resignation possible?

## 5. Conclusion

‘Putting the soul to work: this is the new form of alienation’. <sup>71</sup>

The reception of *Break My Soul* as a specifically Black and queer anti-work anthem stands in direct contrast to the Arendtian suppositions of Black worldlessness (based on the racist and wrongheaded assumption that Black culture has never moved beyond the iterative labours of its



own reproduction) as articulated in the above section. In Beyoncé’s song, it is possible to find an articulation of Black queer worlds beyond those sanctioned by mainstream (love of) work discourses, worlds cultivated and built—beyond the narrow framings of labour and work—in the streets, in homes, in clubs, and in dancehalls.<sup>72</sup> She builds upon drag and ballroom aesthetics (in her ongoing collaborations with Big Freedia, and aesthetic references to and transcendence of, for example, images of Bianca Jagger sitting on a white horse on the opening night of Studio 54) as part of a broader active rejection of hustle and burnout culture and the waged (or sometimes salaried) servitude of contemporary colonial-capitalism.

This Black queer aesthetics also points (albeit obliquely) to the specifically queer and racialized characteristics of contemporary labour market change encompassed rhetorically in the discourses of The Great Resignation, quiet quitting, and the transition back to the office experienced unevenly by white-collar workers after COVID-19 work-from-home mandates. For example, and despite myths of queer affluence, queer and trans people are more likely to experience precarity and discrimination in labour markets than other groups.<sup>73</sup> Abay Asfaw estimates that Black workers in the United States were 35% less likely to be able to work from home because of COVID-19 lockdowns than white workers, while Angelica Puzio found in her survey of “knowledge workers” that the demographic group least likely to desire a return to the office are Black men.<sup>74</sup> These data point to queer and racial inequality within labour markets, and to the fact that work remains a site of homophobic, transphobic, and racial discrimination. In addition to being a mechanism for the appropriation of surplus value, discourses around loving work are not evenly available and are predicated upon a racialized and sexualized hierarchy. Thus *Break My Soul* could be heard as a call for Black and queer people in particular to reject both the normative worlds inaugurated through the love of work and the work required to build them, and to engage instead in a different conceptualization of love (work and the world) altogether.

At the same time, *Break My Soul* can be read just as readily through a lens that questions its radical veneer. Beyoncé-as-global-superstar and multi-millionaire is closely implicated within the very systems she appears to critique, and the incongruence between the political aesthetics of her work and her own political stances (or lack thereof) can loom large—as many have pointed out, for example, in the coexistence of her use of revolutionary Black Panther aesthetics and her publicly promoted aspiration to be a Black Bill Gates.<sup>75</sup> However, our point here is not primarily in arriving at a position on Beyoncé, but rather in approaching *Break My Soul* as potent affective-ideological concoction, exemplary of its moment and of our argument. *Break My Soul* is interesting precisely because it appears as a kind of rejection, usually associated with much more marginal artists, of the empowerment narratives that contributed to Beyoncé’s global stardom, even as the song points buoyantly toward a new foundation and new salvation that could readily slip into the individualistic narratives of the entrepreneurial subject. It takes the problem of work and love as it was being articulated in the anti-work discourse circulating in 2021 (especially in the US, but also more broadly), rearticulates it within a specifically Black

queer aesthetic that at once differentiates and weaves together the diversity of workers affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and makes the fantasy of the Great Resignation passionate, danceable, something anyone can listen to on their way to work.

Modes of feeling and forms of consciousness that (re)produce the material relations of capitalism's world at once reverse into and continue one another in work's love. To be asked to love (the world of) work is to be asked to ignore the structures that make it possible (namely gendered, racialized, and sexualized divisions of labour) and that position some workers (and some work) beyond the pale of the romantic promise of work. At the same time, being asked *not* to love work, to withhold our affective investment because work itself is lacking, risks reasserting the romance of work, placing the worker in the role of the lover whose heart (or soul) has been broken. In either case, work's love becomes both the cynosure and the horizon of the world, the site of an attachment or detachment beyond which there appears to be no world at all. This is the geography of work's love: a mapping of the/a world in which work is the site of a libidinal investment that subtracts the world-of-work from the (racialized, sexualized, capitalist) territory that it constitutes. What is at stake in love and work is thus no less than our affective-ideological investment in making, changing, or ending a world.

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<sup>1</sup> Songwriters: Adam Pigott / Allen George / Beyoncé Knowles / Christopher Stewart / Fred McFarlane / Freddie Ross / Shawn Carter / Terius Nash BREAK MY SOUL lyrics © Kobalt Music Publishing Ltd., Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, Spirit Music Group, Warner Chappell Music, Inc.

<sup>2</sup> Marissa Dellatto, 'Beyoncé's "Break My Soul" Heralded as Anthem for The Great Resignation', *Forbes*, 21 June 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Arianne Cohen, 'How to Quit Your Job in the Great Post-Pandemic Resignation Boom', *Bloomberg*, 10 May 2021.

<sup>4</sup> D. Clark, 'Estimated number of job-to-job resignations in the United Kingdom from 4th quarter 2001 to 1st quarter 2023', *Statista*, 16 January 2024; Felix Richter, 'US Labour Market: The "Great Resignation" Isn't Over Yet', *Statista*, 8 January 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Melanie Klein, *Love, Guilt, and Reparation (and Other Works 1921-1945)*, Vintage, New York City, 1975.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Fuller and William Kare, 'The Great Resignation Didn't Start with the Pandemic', *Harvard Business Review*, 23 March 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Kim Parker and Juliana Menasche Horowitz, 'Majority of Workers Who Quit a Job in 2021 Cite Low Pay, No Opportunities for Advancement, Feeling Disrespected', *Pew Research Center*, 9 March 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Jay L. Zagorsky, 'The "Great Resignation": Historical Data and a Deeper Analysis Show it's Not as Great as Screaming Headlines Suggest', *The Conversation*, 11 January 2022; Office for National Statistics, 'Half a Million More People out of the Labour Force Because of Long Term Sickness', 10 November 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2011 (henceforth *Cruel Optimism*); Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, Polity, New York City, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2011 (henceforth *Promise*); Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love*, Punctum Books, Santa Barbara CA, 2012 (henceforth *Desire/Love*).

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