Can the Family be Recovered?
Matthew Wolf-Meyer
AAA 2018

The American family has a troubled history, particularly in the context of psychiatry and the diagnosis of mental disorders. From Gregory Bateson's schizomogenesis-inducing mothers, to Harry Harlow's 'wire mothers,' to Bruno Bettleheim's 'refrigerator mothers,' mothers, especially, have been constructed as the origins of mental illness, particularly schizophrenia, autism, and other affect disorders. Fathers, for their part, are largely absent in these figurations, or participating in the same family system that provokes individual disorders in children. In this paper, I consider this other side of American kinship, one that is not based in custom or blood, but in the care and neglect of individuals and the making of affective subjects. I compare these historical theories of the family to the lived experiences of parents and children confronting diagnoses and treatment for affect disorders, and how conceptualizing the modern American family as one part of a diverse set of facilitating technologies that make modern subjects might be a way forward in recovering the family as a site of anthropological analysis. How is the family a kind of network of care, built into an environment of technological, social, and affective infrastructures, which might make and unmake mental illness in an era of intensified biological reductionism in neuropathologies? How might American kinship be rethought as a site of active, rather than passive, interactions between persons, resulting in the mitigation or promulgation of affective experiences?

Can the Family be Recovered?

This is the Suskind family: Ron, the father, and Pulitzer award-winning journalist, Cornelia, the mother, a dedicated homemaker and educator, Walt, their older son, and Owen, their younger son. The Suskinds are firmly upper middle class, living in the Washington D.C. area so that Ron is close to the U.S. government, which is the basis of much of his reporting. They have available to them a wide array of professionals – educators, physicians, psychiatrists – who support them in their care for Owen. Born in the 1990s, Owen benefits from decades of research, and his symptoms – aphasia, erratic behavior, lack of eye contact, fixations – quickly add up to an autism diagnosis. Owen is diagnosed with regressive autism; during his first couple of years, he seemed to be developing along normative lines, but around the age of three things changed. As Ron reports, Owen's use of language eroded to the point where he could say very little, and what he did say made little sense. From a rather typical little kid, interested in others and in play, Ron sees Owen's personality recede to the point of disappearance. Yet, from his earliest exposure to them, Owen loves Walt Disney movies of all kinds, from the earliest, hand drawn cartoons, to the more recent computer animated and live action films. The Disney films offer Owen a safe space to inhabit, where every narrative tension is resolved, and every character finds a role in the social fabric. The films also offer, over time, a way for Owen to communicate. The films animate Owen, they provide him with scripts for social interactions, with frameworks for interpreting himself, other people, and the world. The Suskinds show how subjectivity is facilitated through a framework based on shared animation – in this case, based Disney films and their generic conventions.

In this paper, I weave together two very different approaches to care, personhood, and subjectivity, both of which rely on ideas about animation and facilitation, primarily through mediation. The first example is that of the Suskind family, and I draw on Ron's memoir of their life together, *Life, Animated*, as an ethnographic document of parenting a child who is ostensibly non-verbal. The second example I draw from is Harry Harlow's experimental psychiatric research in primates, which focused on attachment and utilized a variety of mother-substitutes, most famously, the "wire mother." These examples are drawn from a much longer project on affective subjectivity in which I situate accounts of nonverbal individuals alongside a history of neuroscience in the US to use the tools of disability studies and science and technology studies to sidestep theories of subjectivity that depend upon liberal views of subjectivity founded on assumptions about transparent communication of interior states through language and institutional recognition of persons. I argue that personhood and subjectivity are separable, and that reconceptualizing subjectivity is vital for a more inclusive politics of care. Here, I want to think through *animation* as a particular kind of care. Animation depends not on an assumption of interiority on the part of the cared for, and allows for thinking through how relationships between human and non-humans can create novel forms of anti-normative subjectivities. I return first to the Suskinds and discuss their enrollment of Disney films in their care for Owen, and then turn to Harry Harlow and his experiments with non-human (or inhuman and inhumane) parents. Animation provides a way to rethink what counts as care and how care might be conceptualized in ways that exceed human-to-human relations.

Owen's relationship with each of the Disney films is intimate: he watches them over and over again, stopping and rewinding the VHS tapes repeatedly to pour over a particular scene or phrase. His family indulges this to a point, working the VHS remote for him. Eventually, when Own is able to do this repetitive work, he is left to direct it himself. Over time, Owen begins to mimic the words of the characters on screen, first with the repeated use of the phrase "juicervose"[1] and eventually "bootylyzwitten."[2] Juicervose, the family learns, is from a key song in *The Little Mermaid*, in which Ursula, the evil, tentacled, undersea witch barters with the heroine Ariel for Ariel's desired ability to go on land – which will cost her "just your voice." Owen becomes fixated on this phrase, and subjects his family to watching the musical scene repeatedly, ending, each time, with this phrase: "just your voice." How could this child, who lost his voice before the age of three, not be trying to communicate with this attempt at facilitated mimicry? The Suskinds are momentarily excited – Owen has found a way to communicate!, albeit mediated through film and the precise use of VHS technology – until they are told by their psychiatrist that Owen's behavior is mere echolalia, a meaningless repetition of sounds. But then it happens again with "bootylyzwitten," which the family comes to realize derives from *Beauty and the Beast*, and which is the lesson of the movie: Belle, the titular beauty, comes to love the Beast through her realization – and his – that "beauty lies within." Again, how could this not index some otherwise inaccessible and intentional meaning-making of Owen's? How could he not be trying to communicate his interior experience to those around him?

---

[1] Suskind, *Life, Animated*, 23-24.

[2] Suskind, *Life, Animated*, 37.

With "juicervose" and "bootylyzwitten" and a handful of other more complex

interactions as indications that Owen has a means to communicate, however non-

normative, Ron sets about staging an intervention. While Owen is resting in bed, looking

at a book, Ron puts on a puppet of Iago, the parrot sidekick of the nefarious Jafar from

Disney's *Aladdin*,[3] and positions himself so that Owen can see the puppet, but Ron

remains invisible. Speaking as Iago, Ron begins an experimental conversation with

Owen:

> "So, Owen, how ya' doin'?....how does it feel to be you!?"
>
> Through the crease [in Owen's bedsheet], I can see
> him turn toward Iago. It's like he was bumping into an old
> friend.
>
> "I'm not happy. I don't have friends. I can't
> understand what people say."
>
> I have not heard this voice, natural and easy, with
> the traditional rhythm of common speech, since he was
> two.
>
> I'm talking to my son for the first time in five years.
>
> Or Iago is.

The Suskinds discover that Owen can communicate, but it only occurs through the texts,

characters, and interactions provided by Disney films. Ron can initiate an interaction by

affecting a particular accent and performing a line from a Disney film as if he is that

character, and Owen will respond in kind by adopting the affectations of the appropriate

---

[3] Suskind, *Life, Animated*, 55.

character from the film to perform the next line – and, eventually, whole scenes. With their intimate knowledge of the films, Ron can usually find a scene to reenact that is appropriate for a given context. When Owen has a hard day at school, Ron adopts the role of Merlin from *The Sword in the Stone* provoking Owen to adopt the role of a young Arthur. In this way, Ron can produce a socially-meaningful interaction with Owen. Even if it might appear to be mere mimicry of a Disney film, it still provides Ron with a mechanism to communicate with Owen and access his subjective experience. The Suskinds come to accept that Owen is able to find some kind of intimacy and connection through the narratives, characters, contexts, and relationships enabled by his repetitive consumption of Disney films. They go to great lengths to provide Owen with a steadily-growing library of films to memorize and mine for social interactions to mimic. Over time, Owen is able to extrapolate from a character or narrative to improvise both as characters from the Disney stories, and, increasingly, to find a version of himself that is not a reenactment of a character from a Disney film but something more. Ron explains,

> At bedtime, Cornelia talks about Dumbo sleeping in his tree. She just has to throw out one line, like Timothy Q. Mouse saying, '"Come on, Dumbo, you can do it,"' and Owen slips into context, integrates the tree references, and hurries off to bed….Though all of our words are scripted by others, we are literally communicating through these words and the stories they tell.[4]

---

[4] Suskind, *Life, Animated*, 60.

Owen enrolls his family in a complex play of mimicry and interpretation, creating, fundamentally, his own institutional framework for the interpretation of his communicative acts; this is entirely enabled by the facilitating technologies – the VHS device, the films, his parents, psychiatrists, and teachers – who see the Disney films as a legitimate way for Owen to communicate and found his sense of self. Owen animates the characters from the Disney films *as if they are persons and kin*; he makes them lively, and through their interactions, he is able to found a form of subjectivity that is recognizable by those around him, even if it depends upon relationships with non-humans and metatextual forms of communication that indirectly index interior states.

The role of the family has long been remarked upon by psychiatrists and neuroscientists to conceptualize the production of pathology and normalcy. This is emblematized in the mid-20th century work of Harry Harlow. Harlow is best known for his use of "wire mothers" to model the relationship between infants and their mothers; in decades of experiments on maternal attachment, Harlow's laboratory tested the effects of having animate and inanimate caregivers. Harlow's experiments – as dreadful as they are by contemporary standards, depending on the social isolation and distress of generations of monkeys – point to the role than animation plays in subjection. Inanimate relations produce the inhuman and the inhumane. Harlow's experiments show how it is not relationality alone that animates an individual into subjectivity. Animating interdependencies produce subjects. Making subjects of persons depends upon *being animated*, and this animation depends in turn upon play and intimacy to make connections between individuals.

Here's an easy experiment to digest: Harlow takes a mother-infant pair and places them in an empty room. The room opens into another room, and in that other room are toys that tempt the infant to explore them. The infant will eventually go into the other room and play with the toys. Harlow then measures how long that "normal" child will spend time away from her or his mother before she or he goes back to check in with the mother. Once the baseline is established, the experiment is made more complex. Now when the child goes into the toy room, after a few minutes of play, there is a loud, startling noise. The infant runs back to the mother to seek comfort. Once calm, the infant goes back to explore the toys again, and, eventually, there is another loud noise. The infant runs back to the mother to be consoled, summon courage, and head back into the toy room again. A well bonded child, one who is secure in her or his independence and interdependence, will eventually be unperturbed by the loud noise, knowing that mother is only a short distance away in case any true threat reveals itself. Then the experiment gets repeated, this time with poorly bonded infants. These infants, raised by inanimate mothers, start in the empty room with their artificial mother, and the process is repeated. These children spend less time with their artificial mothers, check in with them less, and rely on them less than the well bonded children. Depending on the kind of artificial mother they have, the children are even less likely to rely on her for anything, knowing that an abusive or metal mother is no comfort at all. Instead, they rely on themselves – or are maybe entirely unaware that they may be in danger, having been so poorly socialized that they do not recognize environmental threats as threats to their bodies. Inanimate mothers may be persons, but they fail to make robust subjects of their children.

At its worst, Harlow's work was taken to impugn mothers for the neurological disorders of their children; at its best, Harlow offers a model for the development of subjectivity through interdependence – an animated and animating subjection. By highlighting the role of animacy in his experiments, facilitation becomes the key to subjection. Harlow writes, glibly, that "Mother love is not obtained by putting a quarter in a vending machine. Both mother love for the baby and baby love for the mother result from many variables promoting mutual reaction between the mother and child."[5] What is key in this formulation is the "mutual reaction" that he posits as being the basis of the reciprocal mother-infant bonding predicated not on subjectivity but on ascribed personhood. The mother and infant animate one another. What Harlow and the Suskinds show is that becoming animated in this way, through "mutual reaction," is the basis of connectivity and intimacy. The family can serve this purpose – however it might be configured, and in this context, we should take technology and media more seriously – and the family is the gateway into society and social relationships more broadly. As the child moves into new relations, they carry with them the animacies that have facilitated their earlier connections. The challenge becomes conceptualizing the connections between individuals in the family as the basis of social connectivity more generally, and how the facilitation of a person in the context of the family can inspire transformations in society's facilitation of non-normative subjectivities.

---

5 Harlow and Mears, *The Human Model: Primate Perspectives*, 167.