Introduction

According to scholars, journalists, and pundits, the institution of work is now undergoing three significant transformations at the hands of digital technology, all of which are essentially bad news for workers. First, the boundary between work and leisure is being eroded by the migration of leisure to online venues like Facebook and Instagram, rendering activities formerly outside the institution of work increasingly subject to economic exploitation. Second, jobs previously immune to automation are increasingly subject to automation, threatening not only these jobs but, insofar as these jobs represent the last vestige of human labor that cannot be automated, all jobs. Third, the so-called “sharing economy” preys on the unemployed and underemployed, offering low wages, few if any benefits, and no job security in exchange for renting underutilized assets like a spare room in one’s home (Airbnb), or for doing odd jobs or chauffeuring in one’s spare time (TaskRabbit, Uber, Lyft), the coordination of which is facilitated through internet and mobile applications. Considered together, these transformations would seem to suggest that it is not only workers that are now under attack, but the very institution of work itself.

This book is not so much about these imagined transformations—whether to confirm or deny their empirical validity—as it is about the hand-wringing that both accompanies and, I will argue, structures these imagined transformations. Through an in-depth examination of concerns about “playbor” (as the collapse of work and play has been called), automation, and the sharing economy, the book makes a series of related arguments: 1) that these concerns are an expression of anxiety, and that understanding them as such helps to uncover deeper, underlying concerns that have gone unstated and thus unexamined and unquestioned; 2) that these deeper, underlying concerns are not about the material well-being of workers (as they appear to be on the surface),
but rather about the erosion of particular forms of relationality valued by critics—collective, communal, responsible, accountable, sacrificial, and so on—in a word, social; and 3) that framing scholarly and popular concerns surrounding these transformations as expressions of anxiety helps to illuminate how they are part and parcel of a normative project that works to produce the very social subjects that are supposedly endangered by these transformations. In other words, the book aims not only to identify this normative project as such, but to explore how this project is furthered through an anxious response to the loosening of social bonds. It argues that concerns about playbor, automation, and the sharing economy serve as both a smokescreen for valuing the social, and as a vehicle for this valuing and its normative ends.

Following the affective turn in social theory, the book thus explores how a particular “feeling”—anxiety—can function as a political strategy or technique, rather than simply an internal psychological state. Anxiety functions in this way by making specific interventions in a world perceived as worrisome, interventions that aim to resolve the underlying cause of anxiety. In elaborating this argument, the book draws from Sianne Ngai’s and Sara Ahmed’s work on emotion and anxiety, which usefully theorizes the epistemic (rather than ontological or practical) character of these interventions. To take one example, Chapter Three argues that anxieties about automation and job loss do not primarily aim to curtail automation or to ameliorate the negative economic effects of automation—what seem to be the apparent goals of the texts examined—so much as they aim to assert the value of collective forms of governance.

The book is also animated by a particular set of feelings—my own: the shame of desiring and taking pleasure in the antisocial or asocial (and in failing to identify with the social), anger at the imposition of valued forms of relationality, particularly through norms, and by the disavowal of this imposition, but also—as one moves away from these valued forms—a certain indifference.
towards norms that work, in part, through the mobilization of shame. Because values are social in nature, the value of the social itself can only be posited from within the social.

While working on this book, these feelings found a home in what has contentiously been called the “antisocial thesis” in queer theory, a line of thought that identifies the antisocial character of queerness as its most radical political utility, without simply transforming the antisocial into a positive value. (Again, the “social” of antisocial is meant to describe valued forms of relationality; in this framework, one can be relational without being social, as in various forms of anonymous, casual sex, for example). The antisocial thesis is most often associated with queer theorist Leo Bersani, particularly his 1987 essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?” and 1995 book *Homos*, as well as Lee Edelman’s 2004 book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Written across two decades in which respectability politics became increasingly popular—first as a response to the stigmatization of “gay sex” during the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 90s, and then as mainstream LGBT advocacy groups prioritized the legalization of same-sex marriage and inclusion in the military in the 1990s and 2000s—these texts not only blatantly refused the directive that queers become respectable, but asserted the political importance of a queer inability to become respectable, to follow norms, to assert values, to participate in community, in short to be properly social subjects. If this has been an uneasy prospect for many queer scholars on the Left, even the radical Left with its panoply of social commitments, it has nonetheless proven to be an irresistible object of thought and debate, in part because it appeals to a longstanding queer interest in and desire for freedom from governance.

The antisocial thesis, particularly as formulated by Bersani, not only helped to legitimate the feelings, desires, and pleasures that animate the argument of this book, it provided a theoretical foundation for identifying, examining, and critiquing the imposition of sociality. The
book is thus grounded by the contention that if to be queer is not simply to be abnormal, but to be opposed to the normative as a method of social control, then this opposition ought to include the normativity of sociality, particularly insofar as normativity is a function of the social. It is also grounded by the contention that an antisocial critique is made more urgent by what seems to be a widespread disinclination to identify the imposition of the social as such, and by the notion that this identification could engender different and desirable queer politics.

In sitting with these feelings and the thoughts and, eventually, arguments they inspired, I have sometimes thought of this book, with tongue-somewhat-in-cheek, as a kind of “coming out,” insofar as this seems like a particularly inopportune moment, or at least an unpopular one, to draw into question the valuing of community and other forms of collective relationality. With increasing wealth inequality and the persistence of social injustices and inequities, environmental catastrophe looming, and much of the radical Left consequently with neoliberalism in its crosshairs, to be critical of the valuing of social bonds is, for some, to support (if inadvertently) the wrong side in its many guises—capital, capitalists, the market, multinational corporations, and so on, who are seen as sharing this disregard for the social—and also to be insufficiently distressed by those social, political, and environmental issues against which forms of collective relationality are often mobilized. One might think here of the long history of anti-Black violence in the U.S. and, in response to this violence, the Black Lives Matter movement—to take just one pressing, contemporary example. As this book goes to press, the Left is bracing itself for Donald Trump’s presidency, which will surely provide yet another rationale for the strengthening of social ties as a necessary condition for resisting Trump’s heteropatriarchal, white supremacist discourse and agenda. In short, to be critical of the valuing of sociality is to be seen as aligned
with or even to further oppression, subjugation, and exploitation, as if valued forms of
relationality were not also imposed, in part through their very valuing.

Related to the notion that criticism of the social is insufficiently attuned to injustice and
inequity, and perhaps most damning of all objections to the antisocial is the idea that it is
privilege few can afford—and presumably not the kind of privilege that ought to be shared, but
rather destroyed. Perhaps more to the point, even the appeal of the antisocial has become suspect
as a marker of privilege, like a high-pitched whistle that can only be heard by affluent, gay,
cisgendered, white men, despite a number of affinities between the antisocial thesis and other
strands of queer scholarship. This characterization of the antisocial thesis as elitist and racially
obtuse has been advanced most forcefully by José Esteban Muñoz in his 2009 book *Cruising
Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity,* as well at a 2005 MLA panel at which Muñoz,
Edelman, Robert L. Caserio, Judith Jack Halberstam, and Tim Dean sparred over the antisocial
thesis. While Muñoz was apparently sympathetic towards much of Edelman’s argument despite
obvious political differences, Muñoz’s critique of the antisocial thesis as not just insensitive to
other tropes of difference (other than sexuality, that is) but as hostile to intersectionality would
effectively squash whatever intellectual good will the antisocial thesis had previously
entertained, especially with the contemporaneous formulation of queer of color critique. It
seems likely that it is for this reason that the antisocial thesis is a doctrine almost entirely devoid
of subscribers, as Tim Dean has suggested.

For those excluded from privilege, and particularly for those facing “social death,” access
to the social has often been thought (by the Left) to be empowering, as are the subject positions
or identities established through this access. If those of us who wield various kinds of privilege
cannot simply divest ourselves of our privilege—so the argument goes—the least we can do is
act as allies to those without privilege, a process of alignment with the disenfranchised other that works to bring this other into the social and, in so doing, to absolve partially the privileged subject of the ethical burden of its privilege, bringing it back into proximity with the good. Certainly many scholars have taken this route. In this solemn and righteous academic climate, has it become impossible to make a case for what we might think of, in contrast to social death, as social suicide—a voluntary opting-out of the social? Has it become impossible to see the social as a prison rather than as a privilege? Easy for me to say, so the critique goes.

This book is premised on the notion that it is possible to make such a case via the antisocial thesis and, furthermore, that doing so could prove useful in identifying and ultimately transforming relations of power. For example, the attachment to work as an institution through which the social is established and maintained helps to support that institution; to leave behind this attachment—to detach—might draw us closer to a world without work, a political vision that has generated interest in recent years. The book thus aims not only to expose and critique the unidentified and underexamined conservatism of the Left as it is expressed through the anxiety surrounding the transformation of work at the hands of digital technology, but in so doing to demonstrate the “usefulness” of the antisocial thesis, a doctrine seemingly without subscribers.

That said, following the antisocial thesis, the book does not aim to offer a positive program of political resistance, tangled as such visions tend to be with the very same social forms that are the antisocial thesis’s object of critique. Rather than a positive political program, what the antisocial thesis offers might be better described as a position of critique. For example, the book does not embrace as revolutionary or liberatory those purported transformations to the institution of work that trigger critics’ anxiety. Indeed, the book neither confirms nor refutes that these transformations are actually occurring, seeking rather to show
how critics’ understanding of and anxious response to these transformations serve a normative project. In this way, the intervention the book aims to make might best be described as a “calling out,” a gesture that I hope will make space for the antisocial or, rather—insofar as the “anti” remains tied to that which it is against—for something like indifference to the social. If there is refusal in this gesture, it is not a grand political refusal, with the positioning, posturing, and organizing this would entail, but rather a refusal to transform into that which the lines of criticism examined below would have us become.

Organization of the Book

In order to redescribe concerns about playbor, automation, and the sharing economy as expressions of anxiety with normative ends, the first chapter of the book (“Anxiety and the Antisocial”) elaborates a novel theoretical framework, drawing from the antisocial thesis, particularly as formulated by Bersani, as well as recent work on affect and emotion by Sianne Ngai and Sara Ahmed. Weaving together these theoretical strands, the chapter proposes that anxiety is not simply an individual psychological disposition, but can also be ascribed to modes of thought. The chapter then argues that anxiety, as a discursive affect, functions as a “straightening device,” policing antisocial subjects (or non-subjects) and calling them back to valued forms of relationality.²⁰

The following three chapters explore the anxiety surrounding technologically-enabled transformations to the institution of work through three case studies. In each of these cases, the book gathers together a series of academic and/or popular texts—often (but not always) already in conversation with one another—which provides a foundation for analysis and interpretation. While these texts are not homogenous in approach, perspective, or argument, they are
nonetheless often structured by what the book argues is a uniform valuing of social bonds, the presence of which can be uncovered through examining the anxieties that surface in each case. The second chapter (“Playing”) examines anxieties surrounding the transformation of leisure into work—particularly forms of online leisure like social networking that are productive of economic value—as these anxieties have been expressed in a series of contemporary academic texts. In this body of work, critics contend that the leisurely façade of life online masks the economic exploitation of users, on whose backs companies like Google and Facebook have amassed tremendous wealth. The second chapter also considers the related critique of what I term leisure-at-work, as when “creative class” or “no-collar” employees engage in various kinds of leisure—for example, playing games, getting massages, goofing off—while at the office and with the consent and blessing of their employers. The third chapter (“Automating”) examines anxieties surrounding the automation of human labor, as expressed in both popular writing and academic scholarship. The texts considered in this chapter argue that advances in robotics and machine learning are driving a new wave of automation, threatening forms of human labor formerly thought to be immune to automation, perhaps even threatening all forms of human labor. While such fears continually arise and are disproved by history, critics contend that this time will be different. The fourth and final chapter (“Sharing”) examines anxieties surrounding the sharing economy, as expressed in popular and academic arguments that sharing economy jobs offer workers a raw deal—lower salaries, fewer benefits, and little job security—and that workers were essentially forced to take sharing economy jobs in the wake of the Great Recession—all of which has been masked by a veneer of communitarianism.

On the surface, the concerns expressed in these three lines of argument might seem to have little to do with the dismantling of the social. Rather, they would seem to be about the state
of work and the lives and wellbeing of workers, written in an effort to expose and denounce exploitation and promote the growth of satisfying, sustaining jobs. Why then imagine that something else is going on beneath the surface of these arguments and their stated concerns? The impulse to interpret these concerns, rather than accepting them at face value, is motivated by inconsistencies internal to each argument. The second chapter identifies inconsistencies in the redescription of leisure as labor: only certain forms of value-producing leisure register for critics as labor, though by critics’ own definition of labor many other forms of leisure ought to be included, for example forms of leisure paid for with money rather than time. The third chapter identifies inconsistencies in concerns about unemployment and underemployment: in the scholarly and popular texts examined, only automation is identified as a cause for unemployment and underemployment, though if this were truly critics’ concern, many other causes ought to register as significant—the outsourcing of jobs overseas, falling rates of consumer spending, and so on. Finally, the fourth chapter identifies inconsistencies in concerns about the sharing economy: scrutiny is directed towards sharing economy businesses, but not their traditional market counterparts, despite fundamental similarities. In addition, critics argue that sharing economy laborers are economically exploited, but also that the kind of services sold in the sharing economy ought to be offered for free for the good the community; workers are both not compensated enough, and should not be compensated at all.

These inconsistencies open up a central, guiding question of the book: if it is not (or not simply) the securing of workers’ livelihoods and well-being that primarily animates critics, what are they really concerned about and to what end? When a feared object is revealed to be a phantasm, we can ask: what is really feared? As Barry Glassner suggests, “Fear, like desire, tells
us very little about its object.” We might say the same of anxiety, especially insofar as anxiety characteristically attaches to many and varied objects.

Through textual analysis and interpretation in the model of “symptomatic reading,” the book identifies and analyzes a structuring, underlying anxiety in each of these three cases. The second chapter argues that concerns about the exploitation and alienation of “playbor” and workers-at-play are motivated by an underlying discomfort with forms of leisure and pleasure understood as self-indulgent and irresponsible. The third chapter argues that concerns about the extinction of labor at the hands of technology conceal an underlying attachment to governance, whether the governance of the state (which becomes necessary in order to ameliorate the affects of automation), or collective governance (against which our robot overlords serve as a discursive foil). Finally, the fourth chapter argues that concerns about the increasing precarity of labor in the sharing economy are rooted in a rejection of the market and money as inimical to valued social bonds, insofar as money engages actors in antagonistic, self-interested exchange rather than in the supposedly communal, altruistic relations of gift giving. Considering these three cases together, what emerges is a picture of valued forms of relationality—collective, responsible, sacrificial, accountable, and self-governing—under threat by technologically-enabled transformations to the institution of work.

The book’s epilogue considers one final and overarching anxiety that extends beyond the institution of work, that is the anxiety that social and political-economic life have been rendered less material by contemporary forms of media and digital technology, and that this immateriality represents a threat to social and political-economic stability and well-being. To evidence this anxiety as it has been expressed across different registers, the epilogue gathers together an “archive” that includes Spike Jonze’s 2013 film *Her*, speeches given by Barack Obama, and
contemporary advertising campaigns. Considering these sources together, and ruminating on Marx and Engels’ famous statement that “all that is solid melts into air,” the epilogue proposes that the nostalgia for materiality given voice in these texts might be better understood as a desire for the social bonds that have diminished in our apparently immaterial world; the material, in other words, serves as a discursive proxy for the social.

The book argues that in all of these cases, the anxiety surrounding the loss of social bonds does not simply express an attachment to these bonds, but is part and parcel of an attempt to establish or restore these bonds and to eliminate their constitutive other: the self-involved, noncommittal, promiscuous, irresponsible, pleasure-seeking, antisocial, non-subject—a persona non grata par excellence. In each of the three cases examined, the expressed concerns—about playbor, automation, and the sharing economy—do not simply target (respectively) the exploitation of leisure, the elimination of jobs, and the precarity of labor, but also and perhaps more fundamentally irresponsible pleasure, ungovernable anomie, and the dissolution of social bonds, in an effort to call readers back to the social.