

## The New American Dream: Neoliberal Transformation as Character Development in *Schitt's Creek*

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This article contextualizes the popular sitcom *Schitt's Creek* within an era of unprecedented economic inequality and growing disdain for the ultrawealthy. Via its over-the-top and self-effacing humor, the program invites audiences to discipline the Rose family for their former life of leisure and ultimately celebrate as each character is transformed into an ideal neoliberal subject via economic precarity and entrepreneurship. Through an analysis of the show's 6 seasons, this essay articulates how the myth of the American Dream has adapted to neoliberal ideology that prizes precarity as a state of possibility and rejects leisure as laziness. *Schitt's Creek* is emblematic of the way televisual rhetorics leverage myth and morality to maintain support for capitalism in times of crisis.

*Keywords: neoliberalism, myth, American Dream, television and materialism*

*Schitt's Creek* (Levy, 2015) is an award-winning sitcom that features a family of multimillionaires being stripped of their wealth and forced to move to the titular small town. The family's patriarch, Johnny Rose, was the CEO of a large video rental chain until an embezzlement scandal caused the company to collapse. Johnny, his wife, former soap opera actress Moira Rose, and their two adult children, David and Alexis, move into a run-down motel and are forced to live with the indignities of poverty and rural living. Despite such a brutal change in circumstances, the show frames the family's downfall as an economic justice and the family's suffering as comedic and deserved. I argue that *Schitt's Creek* is indicative of the growing anger toward the upper classes in an age of unprecedented wealth inequality. The show features what, in the real world, seems unthinkable: the ultrawealthy being held accountable. Audiences are invited to laugh at the Roses' misfortunes and revel in their economic ineptitude in a rural context. This narrative of wealth retribution may appear to have a critical edge: a morality tale against capitalist excess. However, in this essay, I contend that the six-season arc of *Schitt's Creek* represents a realignment of the American Dream rather than a rejection of it. The Roses are not punished for being wealthy; they are punished for being bad neoliberal citizens.

The Rose family's character development is indicative of a shift in the mythos of the American Dream necessitated by market forces. Before their misfortune, the Roses exemplified an outdated economic arrangement: a single patriarch ruling over a dying industry, a wife who lacks a viable career or motherly sensibilities, and two adult children completely dependent on their parents. In the past, this arrangement was the pinnacle of the American Dream: an entrepreneur-turned-CEO whose success enabled him and his family

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to rest on their laurels and enjoy the excesses of capital. In the new economy, where all individuals are constantly expected to be hypervigilant in the face of increasing economic instability, such a lifestyle is untenable. Johnny, once a young entrepreneur, begins the show as an absentee owner who is easily robbed by the person running his company. The rest of the family, fully dependent on Johnny's income to subsidize their luxurious lifestyles, lose everything because they cannot support themselves in the neoliberal economy.

Over the course of the show's six seasons, each member of the Rose family is forced to shed their former identities and find success in the new economy. Taking on the role of self-sufficient entrepreneurs, Johnny becomes co-owner of a chain of motels, David opens a highly gentrified consignment shop, and Alexis opens a public relations firm. Just as workers have been forced to adapt to neoliberal austerity and precarity through countless crises, the narrative of the American Dream in has likewise adapted. The industrial standard of the "organization man" who valued company loyalty and stable employment has been replaced by the neoliberal ideal of the "entrepreneurial man" (Gill, 2013). Success is no longer defined by luxury and leisure for oneself and one's family; economic instability and constant reinvention are the new, inescapable markers of hard work and morality. The Rose family transforms themselves into the ideal neoliberal citizens: self-made entrepreneurs who learn morality, thrift, and responsibility through their business endeavors. In the end, they are gifted back their previous wealth, but in ways that are acceptable to neoliberal ideals.

In this essay, I argue that *Schitt's Creek* (Levy, 2015) represents a new, reactionary defense of the capitalist crises engendered by neoliberalism (see Harvey, 2005). Through humor and spectacle, the program's audience is taught to revile leisure and economic stability as laziness and to assign morality to wealth that is self-sufficient in constant precarity. I contend that this arrangement performs two functions for neoliberal capitalism. First, audiences are given space to mock the wealthy and to revel in their fictional downfall, but such ire is limited to the few ultrawealthy who do not pretend to be self-sufficient entrepreneurs—regardless of their path to wealth or actual entrepreneurial abilities. Second, audiences are taught to understand their own economic precarity as an opportunity for limitless reinvention of the entrepreneurial self. Constant capitalist crisis is no longer a failure of the system but a chance for good neoliberal citizens to prove their worth. I read *Schitt's Creek* as a symptomatic text that illustrates how capitalism acclimates audiences to shifting economic and ideological frameworks. The program invites audiences to exchange one set of market myths for another to sustain the "common sense" of moral capitalist accumulation. This essay brings together rhetorical scholarship on narrative mythology with ideological critiques of "common sense" influenced by the Marxist theories of Antonio Gramsci to make sense of how televisual rhetorics cultivate within audiences a self-defeating attachment to economic struggle and crisis.

### **Myth and Materialism**

The myth of the American Dream is central to narratives spanning across centuries and mediums. The Dream consists of interrelated materialistic and moralistic elements: individuals must both *work hard* and *be ethical* to overcome obstacles and attain economic success (Fisher, 1973). Weiss (1969) traces the myth to Horatio Alger, whose Gilded Age novels featured young male protagonists triumphing over adversity through hard work and moral character. Cultural artifacts echo the myth of the American Dream when "protagonists face daunting obstacles toward individual success, confront personal barriers to achievement,

work diligently to succeed (often failing on more than one occasion) and, in the final moment, reap personal and/or financial rewards" (Hoerl, 2008, p. 5). Such myths do not exist in a vacuum; they are mediated by the economic system in which stories are conceptualized, produced, and circulated. In capitalist societies, myths are circulated by capitalist industries via commercial products, be they news stories, video games, or television shows. The myth of the American Dream functions to instill hard work in the working classes and to naturalize capitalism's hardships.

Fisher (1973) notes that the American Dream as "grounded on the puritan work ethic and relate[d] to the values of efforts, persistence, playing the game, initiative, self-reliance, achievement and success" (p. 160). Žižek (1991) argues that such puritan ideals were key to the early success of capitalism, instilling within the masses an ethic of work paramount to their relationship with God. By conflating economic success, hard work, and morality, the American Dream suggests that those in power have their positions because they are inherently good and just, whereas those facing poverty and economic exploitation are either lazy (and thus, immoral) or simply in the midst of their own hero's journey. Thus, the narrative structure of the American Dream myth helps naturalize hardships that are the direct result of the capitalist mode of production. As Winn (2003) elaborates "The Dream assures Americans that no class system hampers their advancement even though many Americans experience structural class limitations daily" (p. 308). Poverty, racism, and other forms of oppression are flattened into individual misfortunes that require individual perseverance (Cloud, 1996; Hoerl, 2008; McMullen & Solomon, 1994). The ubiquity of the myth within popular media has amplified its impact, becoming a system of logic difficult to escape.

The myth of the American Dream naturalizes capitalism through by codifying its ideology into "common sense." Dorsey and Harlow (2003) argue that the function of myths is to be "touchstones for human behavior within a community and the criteria for meaning in that community's existence" (p. 62). As myths become thoroughly diffused throughout a given society, the underlying logic of the mythic structure is codified into what Gramsci (1971) termed common sense, or that "which is uncritically absorbed by the various social and cultural environments in which the moral individuality of the average man [sic] is develop" (p. 419). Hoerl (2002, 2008) argues that the American Dream is vital to understanding the ways in which the capitalist hegemony is able to maintain public support in the face of massive economic, political, and social changes. To understand the central role that myths play in supporting capitalist hegemony, one must look at the ways myths evolve to suit ever-changing material relations. In this essay, I explore how the shift from industrialism to neoliberalism necessitates a change in the protagonist of the narrative of the American Dream: from the "organization man" to the "entrepreneurial man."

### **From Organization to Entrepreneur**

The central protagonist of the American Dream has evolved through countless iterations in its long history: from cowboys and pioneers to Britney Spears. For much of the 20th century, the ideal subject of the American Dream was the organization man. Fordist industrialization necessitated workers who were hardworking, self-motivated, and loyal to their employers, and who conformed to normative moral and aesthetic ideals of masculinity (Gill, 2013). The American Dream could be achieved if an individual put all his efforts toward the success of his company. The prototype of the so-called organization man was grounded in the application of Protestant morality, work ethic, and the lure of social mobility (Bennett, 1990). The

myth emphasized an economic arrangement that relied on patriarchal notions of the nuclear family: a working husband, an economically dependent wife, and 2.5 children. Victories in labor organizing meant that company loyalty and job security were highly prized and readily given, and success for such a family was measured by luxury and leisure. The white picket fence in a quiet corner of suburbia was aspirational, if only in theory (Hoerl, 2002). In reality, the American Dream was closed off to the vast majority: women, racial and ethnic minorities, and those trapped in cycles of poverty (Weiss, 1969). In the later portion of the 20th century, this American Dream was stripped from even the ideal organization man. Companies raced to new and lightly regulated labor markets far from Cleveland, Detroit, or Pittsburgh, leaving entire workforces jobless. A new form of capitalism, neoliberalism, forced a radical retelling of the myth of the American Dream—one that reverberates to this day.

Neoliberalism is an economic and political paradigm born from crisis and class warfare. It emerged as a response to the failures and instability of the previous capitalist hegemony, Keynesianism (Grossberg, 2005). In the 1970s and 1980s, the victories of labor movements in the West, stagnating economic growth, and high levels of taxation threatened the wealth of the capitalist class and the infinite expansion which capitalism demands (Harvey, 2005). In response, a more brutal and austere form of capitalism was established: one in which precarity is ever present. Since the 1980s, government austerity, deregulation of markets, and weakened unions has radically transformed the global economy. Corporations increasingly rely on technology and international shipping to exploit poorly regulated international labor markets (Harvey, 2005). Supply lines have become infinitely more complex, frustrating attempts at labor organizing and class identification (Greene, 2004). In the so-called gig economy, workers are increasingly being rebranded as “independent contractors” to avoid labor laws and the risk of unionization (Kelly, 2019).

On both the macro and micro levels, this economic arrangement has engendered crisis. For the first time in its history, wages in the United States have stagnated while the cost of living has continued to rise (Mishel, Gould, & Bivens, 2015). According to studies gathered by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2019), the millennial generation has been hit especially hard, burdened with massive amounts of student debt, lower levels of homeownership, and less net worth than previous generations. As the white picket fence ideal of the American Dream fades to oblivion, the capitalist class accrued unthinkable levels of wealth and power (Harvey, 2005). Between March 18, 2020, and March 18, 2021, alone, billionaires increased their fortunes by 54% (Picchi, 2021). Rather than remaining stagnant and exposing the brutality of neoliberalism’s class warfare, the myth of the American Dream evolved to center a new, neoliberal subject.

In the neoliberal era, the ideal of the American Dream shifted to accommodate new economic demands. Whereas the organization man prized comfort as a natural reward for hard work and ethicality, the precarity of the neoliberal market meant that for the new entrepreneurial man, work must be a reward in itself. According to Gill (2013), the ideal of the entrepreneurial man comprised three tropes: entrepreneurial capitalism, ethical familiarity, and traditional and alternative masculinities. The first may seem self-explanatory, but entrepreneurialism under neoliberalism does not require every person to start their own business. Rather, entrepreneurialism for the vast majority is a state of mind: an attitude toward work that reconstitutes subjects as self-sufficient capitalists (Brown, 2015). Individuals are meant to “hustle,” or carve creative and lucrative lines of work in addition to or in the absence of traditional employment, and are expected to find meaning and self-expression by commodifying their lives (Duffy, 2016).

In addition to being innovative, the entrepreneurial man is tasked with being relatable, humble, and self-sacrificial (Gill, 2013). Even while accumulating billions of dollars at the expense of millions of workers, the entrepreneurial CEO must demonstrate their “bootstraps” credibility through origin stories of long hours, financial hardships, and the risk of losing it all. That final part is important. The entrepreneurial man is a *man* because of the ways in which they are shown to take risks—to be bold in the face of innovation (Duncan, 2014). Rather than examining the economic system that requires the constant precarity of economic failure, the myth of the entrepreneurial man invites audiences to equate risk with freedom and possibility. Failure must be individualized because structural inequality must remain mystified. The real failure is relying on the system.

The shift to neoliberal logics in television has been well documented by communication scholars. Reality television has been particularly useful in examining the construction of new, neoliberal norms. Arguably the most popular format of neoliberal reality television is the subgenre of life intervention programming, in which a show’s expert(s) briefly intrude into the lives of a person or business considered to be a failure by the show’s normative values and proposes solutions to regulate future behavior. There are countless instances of this format, from cooking shows to fashion to pet ownership. Ouellette and Hay (2008) argue that life intervention programming is a neoliberal replacement for the civic-minded television once mandated by government regulation. Whereas once The Learning Channel (TLC) was once home to a wide variety of documentary-style educational content, it now is host to cultural touchstones like *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo* (Lexton, 2012).

Far from abandoning television’s role in civic education, such programming now educates its audiences on the norms of neoliberal citizenship. The original *Queer Eye* (Collins & Williams, 2003) series, for instance, encouraged straight “fashion victims” accept to personal responsibility for their economic hardships (Sender, 2006). In the case of *Honey Boo Boo* (Lexton, 2012), Rennels (2015) argues that the show functions to discipline its working-class, white protagonist via surveillance and spectacle. As audiences enjoy the grotesque spectacle, such as

Mama June’s deformed toe or Alana grabbing the fat of her stomach and using it as a puppet, we are invited to . . . gaze upon, laugh at, and learn what not to do and who not to be in the United States today. (Rennels, 2015, p. 275)

Through the lens of the camera, audiences are trained to discipline the poor and mock their suffering as personal failings.

Although it is scripted rather than “reality,” I argue that *Schitt’s Creek* (Levy, 2015) functions similarly—allowing middle- and working-class audiences an outlet to relieve their anger and laugh at the ultrarich while simultaneously fostering consensus for neoliberal ideology. At its heart, *Schitt’s Creek* is a morality tale: the Roses begin the show portrayed as lazy, snobbish, and out of touch until they are forced to transform into acceptable neoliberal citizens. Just as the contestants of reality television are disciplined for their respective failures on reality television, *Schitt’s Creek* disciplines the Rose family for their previous life of leisure. Audiences are invited to laugh at each affectation of the family’s former wealth: Moira’s fake accent, David’s ridiculous wardrobe, Johnny’s incredulous demeanor. This type of mockery is almost exclusively reserved for the poor or

socially undesirable. *Schitt's Creek* in contrast, seizes on a moment of unprecedented wealth inequality and widespread anger toward the capitalist class and directs it at the Rose family.

### **Analysis**

The show's characterization of Rose family can be divided into three distinct eras, perfectly paralleling the structure of the American Dream. Johnny, Moira, David, and Alexis each "face daunting obstacles toward individual success, confront personal barriers to achievement, work diligently to succeed (often failing on more than one occasion) and, in the final moment, reap personal and/or financial rewards" (Hoerl, 2008, p. 59). The early seasons of the show, where I begin my analysis, largely focus on disciplining the Roses for their wealthy affections, their disagreeable personalities, and above all their total failure to be self-sufficient. By the third season, the narrative begins to shift in the family's favor, and the second section of my analysis highlights the slow, sometimes painful transformation Johnny, Moira, David, and Alexis undertake as they succumb to neoliberal logics. In the final season and in the final section of the analysis, each member of the family is rewarded for their transformation with independent and successful lives, healthy and mature relationships, and the new American Dream. The Roses' wealth and status are restored, and it is framed as a moment of triumph, emphasizing that the show does not object to wealth or capitalist exploitation, only to the outdated economic arrangement that the family once modeled.

### ***Four Pieces of Schitt***

In the show's first season, the Rose family is portrayed as unsympathetic and pitiful: from the awkward and outdated professionalism of Johnny to the shrill, Kardashiansque lilt of Alexis. The show's pilot perfectly encapsulates the show's initial framing of the family. The episode begins with an aerial view of an unknown estate: a massive mansion whose size is mirrored by its lavish interior. Immediately following these establishing shots, federal agents pound on the door and invade the mansion. It is important to note that the Rose family itself is totally absent from the scene; they do not appear on camera until after the Feds have already begun confiscating their property. This leaves the audience with no ability to empathize with the family whose lives have just been uprooted. The Roses become passive onlookers of their own destruction rather than protagonists through which the audience is meant to identify.

Even as the characters are introduced, they maintain a largely passive role, whining and helplessly clinging to a few personal possessions as their wealth is stripped from them. Moira lies on the floor, screaming and ordering her maids to save her wig collection. David fruitlessly yells at passing officers as they ignore him and continue their work. Alexis wanders around the mansion on her phone, narrating their plight to her boyfriend, Savros, who seems to be largely ignoring her. Only Johnny, the family's patriarch, seems to be actively gathering possessions, but even he is mostly reduced to complaining. He grumbles to Moira that the business manager who embezzled from their company "was family to me . . . 'Leave your finances to me,' he said. Son of a bitch!" (Levy & Ciccoritti, 2015a, 0:50). Rose Video, the source of the family's wealth and the second largest chain of video rentals in the country, collapsed after Johnny's business manager failed to pay taxes and escaped to the Grand Caymans. Overnight, the family goes from opulent wealth to precarity.

On paper, the Roses' downfall is a tragedy. The show does not frame it as such. The Roses may be victims of circumstance, but the audience is given very little opportunity to empathize with them. Each family member is introduced as pathetic, immature, and helpless rather than innocent victims of a life-altering injustice. One could easily imagine Moira's introduction, for instance, as tearful rather than comedic. Rather than hysterically shouting to the frantic staff about the imagined names and friendships of the wigs in her collection, Moira could simply sit in a chair and weep as her possessions are taken. This small change would radically shift the framing of the family's calamity, but *Schitt's Creek* (Levy, 2015) methodically avoids portraying its opening moments as tragic. Instead, the show frames the Roses' loss of wealth as something necessary, unavoidable, and ultimately just. The audience is not meant to identify with the Roses; they are meant to revel in their misery. When Moira whines that she has "been stripped of every morsel of pleasure I earned in this life," the audience is meant to recognize that she has not earned her wealth (Levy & Ciccoritti, 2015a, 0:45). When Moira calls Alexis a "selfish, duplicitous whore" and a "spoiled child," the audience is meant to agree with the sentiment (Levy & Ciccoritti, 2015a, 12:14). Nothing in the show's pilot confirms the former nor contradicts the latter—the Roses are one-dimensional punching bags for a middle-class audience's collective self-righteousness.

Despite having achieved the pinnacle of success in a bygone era of capitalism, each member of the Rose family is disciplined by the show for their adherence to an outdated American Dream. The Roses' former lifestyle is in direct opposition to the logics and ideology of neoliberalism, and therefore audiences are encouraged to scorn the family until each member is finally transformed into the ideal neoliberal subject. Because of his position in his family and the business, Johnny is the most obvious example of how the show treats the norms of the organization man. As the CEO of a massive company, Johnny could easily be framed as a talented entrepreneur who has simply fallen on hard times. In fact, this is the way he sees himself. But the show goes out of its way to demonstrate that Johnny's innate entrepreneurial instincts are no longer economically viable. Johnny's first line on the show emphasizes that he has been resting on his laurels for decades, taking a passive role at his own company while his assistants rob him blind.

In the first few seasons, Johnny faces ridicule almost constantly, and the show very rarely frames this mockery as anything but humorous. Each time he tries to remind someone of his former position as CEO of the second largest home video rental chain in the nation, he is immediately met with scorn: "Yeah, and look how that turned out," one of the townspeople reminds him (Levy & Fox, 2016a, 4:28). Johnny's only consistent supporter is his wife, Moira, who still sees him as the dashing entrepreneur of his youth. Yet Moira is also shown to be an unreliable narrator, prone to hysteria and clinging to the delusions of an acting career that has long since passed. In the hierarchies of industrial capitalism and the organization man, Moira held a prime position: the wife of a wealthy man with a glamorous career to keep herself entertained and an army of nannies to keep the kids away. Under neoliberal logics, her career is viewed less optimistically: as an economic burden to her husband and a bad mother to her children. Neoliberal mothers must do it all, and they must do it independently, rather than relying on an industry to one day accept them (Giles, 2014).

Dependence is most notable in figures of David and Alexis, grown adults who are constantly referred to as children. Entirely dependent on their family's fortune, David and Alexis represent the worst stereotypes of trust fund children. Once a symbol of status, now children of privilege are deemed unacceptable. In the neoliberal economy, even Kylie Jenner, heiress of the Kardashian fortune, must be

rebranded as an entrepreneur. In early seasons of the show, David is portrayed as being the portrait of a loser. He has never had a successful relationship, all of his friends disappeared with his money, and his singular achievement is revealed to be a fraud: His parents secretly paid his clients at his art gallery in New York. Alexis begins the show equally (if not more) unsympathetic as David. She is initially portrayed as disorganized, vain, irritable, sexually promiscuous, and disloyal. Immediately upon arriving in Schitt's Creek, she plots to leave her family and be "rescued" by her boyfriend's private plane. When that plan fails, she is forced to do community service because of a previously acquired drunk driving charge, and she relentlessly pursues the town's social misfit, whom she randomly made out with at a party. Alexis, like David, is totally financially dependent on either her parents or her various boyfriends. Although patriarchal norms are less hostile to financially dependent women, the show makes her dependence intolerable by revealing that she failed high school because she was too busy globe-trotting with boyfriends.

Ingeniously, the show frames the family's economic failures as relational failures. Because of the distance enabled (and encouraged) by the norms surrounding the organization man, the Rose family is shown to be highly disconnected. When it is revealed that Moira and Johnny do not remember David's and Alexis's middle names, the parents begin to fear the family has become too distant. "Terrible parents?" Johnny scoffs. "We sent them to the best boarding schools. We hired the best nannies. We did everything right" (Levy & Ciccoritti, 2015c, 2:40). But of course, the show demonstrates time and again that they did not do everything right, and that David and Alexis have no work ethic and little regard for their parents. Johnny's comment, while dismissed as comedically out of touch by the show, encapsulates the ideals of the organizational man, in which boarding schools and nannies were markers of success. In the neoliberal economy, frivolities like childcare are makers of failure: an inability to take personal responsibility for your reproductive choices and, for women, a failure to achieve the feminist dream of "having it all." Admitting defeat, Johnny relents, "It would be nice to get to know them better" (Levy & Ciccoritti, 2015c, 2:55).

Even the family's early attempts at familial bonding are mediated through outdated economics. Johnny announces, "If we're gonna get through this ordeal together, we have got to get reacquainted. Now, back at Rose Video, we had management retreats, where we would play fun, team-building exercises" (Levy & Ciccoritti, 2015c, 9:30). David immediately retorts, "You also had company-wide spa days" (Levy & Ciccoritti, 2015c, 9:30). In the era of austerity and the gig economy, such lavish company benefits seems laughably out of touch. Of course, this outdated arrangement is compounded by the fact that Johnny is attempting to relate to his own children through such bureaucratic methods. Familial bonding, the show seems to suggest, can occur only through neoliberalism. The arc of the show's six seasons is predicated on the somewhat paradoxical notion that the Roses become closer as a family as they each become economically independent neoliberal subjects. Through learning neoliberal logics in the town of Schitt's Creek, Johnny, David, Moira, and Alexis each transform themselves into characters worthy of love, respect, and audience empathy.

### ***Trepidatious Transformation***

The family's six-season transformation is slow-going but fairly linear. Upon being thrust into the small town of Schitt's Creek, each character must abandon their previously held economic conventions and "mature" into self-made entrepreneurs. The family's ability to do so is never questioned. "We're gonna fix

this town up bit by bit, then we'll sell it," Johnny assures them. "We're Roses, and there's nothing we can't do" (Levy & Ciccoritti, 2015b, 0:45). This attitude highlights the Rose family's mythic quality—an innate entrepreneurial spirit that allows them to thrive in any economic circumstance. Early attempts at entrepreneurship demonstrate the Roses' difficulty transitioning from the logics of the organization man to that of the new economic paradigm.

In episode eight of the first season, the family is sent a multi-level marketing starter kit by one of their rich former friends. Moira immediately rejects it as an insult. David, entranced by the lure of the packet's brochure, insists that the scheme could be lucrative. After being convinced by David, the pair begin scheming ways to get the new car that the brochure offers. Emphasizing the family's mythic entrepreneurial spirit but also their initial disdain for the residents of Schitt's Creek, Moira scoffs at "how hard could it be" to sell skincare products to unsophisticated townies (Levy & Ciccoritti, 2015d, 4:55). David and Moira decide to host a luncheon for their female acquaintances featuring champagne, hors d'oeuvres, and shameless product promotion. Unfortunately, despite their extremely passive-aggressive sales pitch, it is revealed that the entire town participated in the same MLM scam two years ago, to little success. Like the gullible town members, the Roses fail because of their reliance on outdated schemes.

As the most prolific attempted entrepreneur of his family, Johnny is met with a long series of failures. He sets up an office in a garage to start planning his next business venture. Episode after episode, he fruitlessly sits at a desk and waits for inspiration. Eventually, two townspeople, Bob and Roland, mock him for just sitting around and eating muffins all day, so Johnny attempts to demonstrate his business acumen by extrapolating the need for a new bagel business from eating his daily muffin. The town's roughneck mayor, Roland, mockingly gasps, "I just get chills thinking we're sitting right in the middle of the 'Johnny Rose Dream Factory'! Stupid . . ." (Levy & Fox, 2016a, 4:40). Roland constantly reminds Johnny of his failure at Rose Video and initially dismisses any business ideas Johnny concocts.

Roland begins the show as a particularly annoying foil to Johnny. Where Johnny is a no-nonsense corporate type, Roland is portrayed as a casual and unsophisticated imbecile. Roland's early characterization also hints at the way in which the government is portrayed by the show. Emphasizing the self-indulgent nature of governance in Schitt's Creek, the mayor jokes that he will waive the new business licensure fee for a bite of his muffin (which he takes anyway). But despite Roland's mocking and Johnny's insistence that the bagel business was just an example of an idea, Bob believes in the idea wholeheartedly and independently begins researching ways to make it a reality.

To his dismay, Johnny's mythic pension for business takes on a life of its own; the simple townspeople are enthralled by any casual idea Johnny dreams up. Even Roland, who initially mocked the idea in his role as mayor, suddenly becomes offended by his perceived exclusion from the business. Citing Johnny's brag that he started Rose Video with "two thousand bucks and a dream," Bob casually writes him a check for \$2,000 (Levy & Fox, 2016a, 4:35). Flabbergasted, Johnny finally admits that Roland was right about him not doing anything. "It's tough enough coming up with a business idea," he tells Roland, "let alone a money-making idea in a town this small, and I was putting a lot of pressure on myself. Maybe too much pressure" (Levy & Fox, 2016a, 17:30).

In season three, Johnny attempts to start a "Scream-nastics" franchise in Schitt's Creek, until the franchise's director tells him that the town lacks interest in health and fitness. Discouraged after three seasons of failure, Johnny decries, "I don't know if I'm looking after this family as well as I should be" (Levy & Peacocke, 2017a, 9:14). Although his business failures are often played for laughs, they also make him a much more sympathetic character than he was initially. As Moira says, "You're a good man, John Rose, and good men always win" (Levy & Peacocke, 2017a, 19:28). Even in his failure, Johnny is framed as moral for his efforts to economically transform himself, and the family grows closer as a direct result.

As the show continues, each member of the family progresses toward becoming neoliberal subjects in their own way. Both David and Alexis get jobs in the town. David applies for a job as a "brand manager" at what he initially describes as an upscale boutique in neighboring Elmdale. Upon seeing the place, however, David is horrified. "Nothing about it is upscale" he frantically tells his friend, Stevie (Levy & Fox, 2016a, 6:55). He then admits that he had been there before and may have insulted the owner. Despite the shop's "very questionable taste," Stevie convinces David to apply for the position because this is "probably the only job in this town [David] will ever be qualified for" (Levy & Fox, 2016a, 7:55).

Although the Blouse Barn's owner, Wendy, immediately remembers David calling her store "skanky," David convinces her that he could bring a "worldly approach to merchandising and sales tactics" (Levy & Fox, 2016a, 9:50). David quickly takes over the Blouse Barn, transforming it from a casual women's clothing store to an austere, empty showroom. This rebranding is very obviously unsustainable for a small-town shop, and within the course of a few episodes, the store's owner is attempting to use her airline miles to cover the electric bill. "It seems I have overshot my budget with some of the changes you've been implementing" (Levy & Ciccoritti, 2016b, 3:30). Like a good neoliberal citizen, Wendy takes personal responsibility for her company's collapse. "It's not your fault," she tells David. "You were my mistake" (Levy & Ciccoritti, 2016b, 3:40). She then reveals some good news: the store is closing, but a company in Australia (also called the Blouse Barn) is buying the rights to the name for \$10,000. With his worldly knowledge and mythic business abilities, David instantly senses that something is amiss with the company's offer.

David invites himself to the negotiating table and asks his father for advice. Johnny reveals that Rose Video went after multiple companies for using similar names and branding, but he is too caught up in old ways of thinking to offer any helpful advice to the Blouse Barn. Still determined, David enlists Alexis's help because of her hard-won negotiating experience with various law enforcement agents. David and Alexis, pretending to be Wendy's lawyers, manipulate the Australian company into paying a massive (undisclosed) amount of money. Wendy, who was already content with the original amount, gives David \$40,000 for his efforts. When the Roses triumphantly plan how to spend the money, David demonstrates the depth of his transformation into "responsible" neoliberal citizenship. He tells his family, "I can't believe I'm the one to say this, but shouldn't we be trying to save this?" (Levy & Ciccoritti, 2016b, 20:35). Although David, Alexis, and Moira do agree to treat themselves to manicures, this represents a critical turning point in David's character development.

In the same season, Alexis begins working for her sometimes boyfriend, Ted, in his veterinary clinic. Although she is completely unqualified for the position, having dropped out of high school, she uses her family's mythic business abilities to accidentally make her job redundant via technological innovation.

Fortunately, Ted is in love with her, and the issue is never spoken about again. Alexis demonstrates her entrepreneurial abilities when Ted faces competition from a better-marketed rival. Mocking Ted's unwillingness to pose for a sexy ad, Alexis tells David, "The poor thing is like out of it when it comes to selling himself" (Levy & Peacocke, 2017b, 11:05). Citing their popularity with the elderly and people in unhappy marriages, she creates a livestream animal cam featuring adopted bunnies. The stream reaches critical mass when Ted accidentally exposes himself on-screen. Seeing the results of Alexis's campaign and his brief nudity, Ted relents that maybe Alexis was right: sex sells.

Working at Ted's veterinarian office transforms Alexis from a selfish snob to a truly winsome character. She goes back to high school and (just barely) gets her diploma. In one of the show's most touching scenes, Moira foregoes a career opportunity to sing at her daughter's graduation. Once again, neoliberal citizenship is rewarded with greater family connectivity. After passing high school, Alexis decides to enroll in community college to fully transform into a self-sustaining and economically viable individual, or as she puts it, to "invest in herself" (Levy & Gunnarsson, 2018, 13:13). Although the community college (a hallmark of objectionable government spending) is revealed to be too drab for Alexis's newfound ambitions, she continues her trajectory toward economic independence and personal growth.

Moira is the most reluctant to adapt to new economic circumstances until her very sudden pivot to politics. After fuming about the nonexistent groundskeeping at the run-down motel where the family is forced to live, Moira barges into City Hall, where the city council is callously ignoring the grievances of a woman in a wheelchair unable to access the post office. Undeterred, Moira announces she will be heard immediately regardless of the council's agenda. Her demands, of course, are entirely self-serving: a citywide cleanup and new greenery for the motel and the town's diner. "I deserve better," she declares before quickly correcting herself: "We deserve better! And I won't take no for an answer" (Levy & Ciccoritti, 2016a, 13:00). Thoroughly intimidated but always self-serving, Roland agrees but takes credit for the idea. Ronnie, the council's only competent member, congratulates Moira afterward on her success. "You're a pain in the ass, but you get stuff done," she says (Levy & Ciccoritti, 2016a, 17:11). Of course, Moira takes this as a compliment.

As a result of her now infamous standoff, the townspeople begin to speculate that Moira should run for city council. Moira is initially disinterested. "I'd sooner poke my eyes out with hat pins," she tells her husband (Levy & Fox, 2016b, 0:50). Despite Moira's rejection, Johnny is immediately intrigued by the idea and begins to formulate his own candidacy for the position. When Johnny hints at his plans to Moira, she tells him he has much bigger plans than just running for council. Acutely aware that he has no such plans, Johnny says the position could give the family "leverage" in the town. When Moira points to the inefficiency of the city government, Johnny argues that his business acumen will allow him to "wrangle" the government's "monkeys." This attitude toward governance—that it is unimportant, inefficient, secondary to business, and ultimately a form of personal leverage—is emblematic of the show's position toward the political system. According to Harvey (2005), one of neoliberalism's defining characteristics is an antipathy for government action in the lives of individuals—unless those individuals represent the interests of the capitalist class.

### ***Ideal Neoliberal Subjects***

As promised, Moira leverages her position on city council to help her family transform into fully fledged neoliberal subjects. When the absentee owner of the motel dies suddenly, David's friend Stevie

inherits the family's living quarters. Desperate to continue living there rent-free, Moira and Johnny scheme to get the motel recognized as a historic landmark so it can be renovated with municipal funds. When that fails, Stevie—who has never cared about her job as the motel's manager—considers selling the motel. Frantically, Johnny offers to be her business partner. Stevie's real estate agent immediately recognizes the absurdity of the proposed arrangement. He tells her, "I would advise against partnering with somebody who has no capital, no contacts, no industry experience" (Levy & Fox, 2017, 18:45). Every word of this is true, so Johnny weakly rebuts, "I did run a big corporation, and I'm perfectly capable of handling this. And I think it's something I want to do" (Levy & Fox, 2017, 19:00). Out of options, Stevie accepts Johnny's offer.

The partnership does not go well at first. Episodes later, Johnny does not even know how to reserve rooms without Stevie. He is reluctant to do manual tasks like plumbing and cleaning, and when he does attempt to help, he often makes matters worse. But slowly, Johnny's passion for the business grows, and he begins to take a more hands-on approach in the motel. After he assures Stevie that he is there to stay despite his lack of financial stake in the business, the motel is renamed the Rosebud Motel (a combination of Johnny and Stevie's last name). Ownership is an essential element of neoliberal ideology; workers are meant to be driven by a sense of ownership (either via real financial stakes or simply their own state of precarity) to work passionately beyond the bare minimum.

By finally embodying this neoliberal norm, Johnny begins to overcome the barrier of his organization man mentality. As his new conformity grows, the motel is rewarded with regional honors, new clients, and the goal of every capitalist entity: expansion. Along the way, Johnny inspires the townspeople into neoliberal subjectivity too. Stevie, at first reluctant, realizes in season six that running the motel is actually her dream. Roland, the town's idiot mayor, becomes respectable enough to invest in the business as it expands.

Johnny is not the only Rose who experiences an economic transformation. After single-handedly destroying a small business a season earlier, David decides to lease the town's general store after it closes. Assisted by Moira's position on the council, David begins planning his new business idea: Rose Apothecary. Despite being a highly gentrified, high-end retail store in a small town, it succeeds where a basic supply store could not. And David's newfound entrepreneurial spirit is rewarded with the character's first stable relationship in the show (possibly ever). To remove any lingering doubts that being an entrepreneur and being worthy of love are interconnected, David's love interest, Patrick, is also his new business partner. The store's opening is a massive success, even while the customers complain of high prices and David's lack of customer service.

In time, the store becomes devoid of customers, and the pair become mildly concerned. Patrick decides they should host an open mic night at the store to drive business. In one of the most romantic scenes on television, Patrick serenades David with an acoustic cover of Tina Turner's "Simply the Best." Again emphasizing the connection between business success and personal happiness, the store seems to instantly recover after Patrick sings a song, despite the event having nothing to do with the store's merchandise and actually costing the business money (they provided free champagne). However, via the

logic of *Schitt's Creek* (Levy, 2015), the business flourishes, and David and Patrick work toward achieving the penultimate heteronormative life goal: marriage. The show's commendable choice to include an openly pansexual character with lovers of multiple genders is systematically reduced to a more conventional love story—a lifestyle more readily commodified by neoliberal capitalism (Duggan, 2003; Henderson, 2013).

Alexis also completes her journey to productive neoliberal subjectivity. After earning a business degree at the community college, she chooses to leave her job at the veterinarian office to pursue her dreams. This is framed by the show to be a very rational decision, with her boss in shock that she would selflessly give up her position to someone more qualified. Now unemployed, Alexis decides to open her own public relations firm. In a small town with few resources and very little need for PR, Alexis is given a nepotistic role: representing her mother's lackluster acting career. Using her mythic abilities, Alexis helps transform Moira's career from a has-been soap opera actress to a streaming service phenomenon. Sensing the upswing in her career, Alexis makes a hard decision, choosing her career over her relationship to Ted. Once again, this is framed as a mature, rational decision, and the two spend their last dinner in silence, content with their choices.

The final season of *Schitt's Creek* perfectly encapsulates the themes and character development that define the show. Having transformed from the spoiled, unsavory products of an outdated economic system into the ideal neoliberal subjects, the Roses are now able to move about the world freely. Johnny, having been transformed from an absent CEO to a hands-on entrepreneur, finds himself empowered to start a new empire. Securing funding from a venture capitalist group in New York, Johnny, Stevie, and Roland find themselves in a position to purchase and franchise hundreds of motels across the country. Their new business will effectively gentrify motels, transforming them into boutique experiences for wealthy clientele.

Johnny's new business is, of course, the ultimate expression of the neoliberal economic paradigm: take an existing service that serves an important function for the working people, use venture capital to take over the service from small business owners, make aesthetic changes to make it appealing to the middle class, and price the new service so working-class people can no longer afford it. The show frames this gentrification as the ultimate success story, allowing Stevie and Roland to maintain their small town lives and Johnny to escape it. David, having gained a small business and a small-town husband, makes the hard decision to stay in the town. He and Patrick buy a cottage—fulfilling the American Dream of home ownership—and settle in their new lives together with the assurance that their business will expand by supplying Rosebud Motel franchise with their branded toiletries. Moira, whose career was revived thanks to an innovative Alexis, gets to relive her glory days in a revival of *Sunrise Bay*. Alexis herself moves to New York, framed as mature and independent for the first time.

### **Closing Discussion**

We are living through a singular moment of economic transformation; one in which industrial norms are being rejected, instability is being institutionalized, and wealth inequality continues to rise unabated. As capitalism changes, the myths used to maintain support for capitalism must change in kind. The American Dream, once predicated on the corporate loyalty of the organization man leading to luxury and leisure for oneself and one's family, has transformed under neoliberal capitalism. The goal of the "entrepreneurial man"

is to grind and grind forever, accumulating more riches and taking larger risks in an economy assumed to be unstable. Each character in *Schitt's Creek* undertakes this same adjustment: once living lives of comfort and indulgence until their world collapses and they are forced to embrace the turbulence of small business ownership. Upon successful completion of their neoliberal transformation, the Roses are granted love, respect, and money.

*Schitt's Creek* teaches its audience to be good neoliberal subjects. The popular program affords its audience the levity of mocking the ultrawealthy of yesteryear while providing new justifications for the rich and powerful of today. In the logic of the show, the wealthy are not objectionable because they exploit workers and rig the economy in their favor; it is only the outdated, out-of-touch titans of industry who are offensive for their laziness and leisure. The entrepreneurs of the new economy thrive in a constant state of precarity and individual risk. For all its charm, *Schitt's Creek* teaches its audience to understand such precarity as morally and economically superior to the safety of a more regulated economy. Just as the myth of the American Dream naturalizes capitalist oppression and exploitation, the narrative of *Schitt's Creek* naturalizes the deep structural instabilities endemic to neoliberalism. The ultrawealthy, despite what the show suggests, *do* live lives of unimaginable luxury and leisure, and they have transformed the economy so that such a life is inaccessible to all but their small, privileged group. Through humor, discipline, and character development, *Schitt's Creek* invites its audience to embrace that transformation.

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