

The Inescapable Datafication of Individuals and Their Relationships

Italo Calvino's "The Night Driver" and Octavia E. Butler's "Bloodchild" both depict datafication—the process of individuals becoming reduced to quantitative representations and abstract ideas that ignore their distinct characteristics. In "The Night Driver," an unnamed protagonist drives towards an undisclosed location in order to mend a broken relationship, while "Bloodchild" presents an eerie tale of a planet where human bodies have been subjugated into breeding apparatuses for an alien species. While both stories express the concept of datafication in wildly different ways, the underlying process remains the same. Datafication is a ubiquitous and inevitable process, one that begins with interpellation into ideological apparatuses, such as education or religion (Althusser 171), and which affects every facet of digital society.

Datafication has led to the rise of right-wing governments and self-alienation of individuals, and many scholars are desperately searching for viable alternatives—if any exist at all (Fuchs 66). Using Calvino's and Butler's representations of datafication within their short stories, one can begin to understand the process itself, its catastrophic implications, and potential solutions for the phenomenon. Individuals are continually and inescapably datafied, just as the nameless characters in Calvino's "The Night Driver" or the commodified Terrans in Butler's "Bloodchild," abstracted to the point of becoming the very ideologies and systems in which they are steeped.

Italo Calvino's "The Night Driver" begins by quickly making clear that the individual identities of the story's characters are unimportant. The highly quantitative diction of the story contrasts with the frantic yet morose plot to emphasize the uncertainty of the characters. The narrator opens by declaring, "I climbed into the car suddenly, after a quarrel over the telephone with Y. I live in A, Y lives in B" (128), signaling that neither the exact names of characters nor the precise setting of the story is of any concern. Throughout the story, these facts are never

elucidated; readers come to know intimate details about the main character's (hereafter referred to as "X") relationship with Y and even are introduced to X's rival suitor for Y's affections, Z (128), but each character's description never surpasses a seemingly arbitrarily-chosen letter. In this way, the story conveys that the significance lies not in the subjects but rather in their relations to one another, asking readers to consider why X so desires Y and how Z impedes X's relationship to Y. Similarly, readers need not understand A and B as self-contained locations but rather as interchangeable signifiers of the spatial relation of X and Z to Y. In other words, A and B have no qualities outside of the characters they contain, rendering them entirely dispensable. This style of storytelling echoes the Marxist tradition of materialism which upholds analysis of the relation between individuals and their physical environment as the only true methodology of understanding reality (Marx, Engels 149). Christian Fuchs contextualizes this material analysis to present-day consumer society in his book *Karl Marx in the Age of Big Data Capitalism*, where he argues that "digital capitalism is grounded in an antagonism between digital commons and digital commodities" (Fuchs 56). As such, Calvino's reduction of his characters and their locations to mere letters strips them of their identity and relegates them to a sort of digital commodity or commons. This is a particular instance of datafication, or "the neoliberal commodification ... of (almost) everything" (Fuchs 57). In the case of "The Night Driver," it is the human subject who has become datafied, leading to "the collection, storage, control and analysis [of the subject] ... that aim at the economic and political control and targeting of individuals" (Fuchs 58). Moreover, Marx also emphasizes that this abstraction of individuals from their material relations leads to a form of class antagonism (Marx, Engels 150), which is illustrated by X's increasing disdain for Z as the story progresses. In this case, Z represents an oppressor from X's perspective, and it is likely Z feels the same towards X. For example, X's

removal from his material conditions clouds his understanding of his relationship to Z, even though they both perceive Y as being of similar utility; he monologues that “I can establish the proper relationship only if he is for me simply the flash and glare that follow me, or the taillights I follow: because if I start taking into consideration his person...well, there's no telling where I would end” (Calvino 132), conveying that this abstraction from the material is the root of X’s antagonism with Z. Indeed, X eventually admits this truth, stating that “I can no longer accept any situation other than this transformation of ourselves into the messages of ourselves” (133).

The confusion created by leaving nameless the characters in “The Night Driver” is complemented by the disorientation X feels in the face of his datafying environment. At various points throughout the story, X loses his perception of himself or feels as though he has become indistinguishable from his surroundings as he drives. He reflects that “I feel as if I had lost all sense of space and of time: the glowing cones projected by the headlights make the outlines of places sink into vagueness; the numbers of the miles on the signs and the numbers that click over on the dashboard are data that mean nothing to me” (Calvino 129). The disoriented, sinking feeling described here highlights the ways datafication can bewilder subjects as occurred with X. In her book *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, Jodi Dean describes the process of ideological mirroring that closely resembles this process. Dean argues that within ideological apparatuses such as neoliberalism, the ideology functions as a type of totalizing framework that causes subjects to literally become homogenized with that ideology (60). This form of mirroring identities creates a “fragmentation among the identities mobilized in and as civil society” (Dean 65). Because the ideology of neoliberalism promotes infinite growth and allows subjects to imagine countless roles they may play in their environment (whether careers, hobbies, or other identities), interpellated subjects cannot form a cohesive person and instead shatter into these

various illusory realities. In the context of “The Night Driver,” X is steeped in a framework of transitory data that causes him to eventually consider himself no more than a fragmented piece of his datafied environment. He eventually reaches a breaking point, feeling that he cannot even create his own thoughts without complete submission to his datafied environment. X desires to become light, the most fundamental piece of data in the known universe, as he remarks that he “felt the need to transform the things to be said into a cone of light hurled at a hundred miles an hour, to transform myself into this cone of light moving over the superhighway” (Calvino 131).

Rife with possibilities, each of which is fractured away from his true identity through the formation of his environment, X is left with no choice but to consider himself as pure light, a product of infinite existence and infinite uncertainty. For Dean, the removal of objective environmental stasis points from a subject’s identity creates a gradual phenomenon known as the “decline in symbolic efficiency” (Dean 63), wherein reference points are lost and individuals are no longer able to distinguish what is true from what is false. Dean notes that this decline is marked by “our sense that we never really know whether what we say registers with the other as what we mean[,] as well as our sense that we are never quite sure what everybody knows” (64).

X feels this effect regarding his relationship with both Y and Z. When speeding towards Y, he reflects that “the sign in which I want to recognize her ... is this very sign that makes her unrecognizable to me” (Calvino 130-1), realizing that he cannot, at this moment, know the real truth of his relation to Y. Similarly, when considering the possibility that each passing car may be driven by Z, X is eventually forced to admit that “I don't know if it is he” (132), making certain to the reader that any semblance of understanding X may have had of his situation has completely vanished.

While Calvino's "The Night Driver" conveys datafication through the reduction of its characters to their relations and X's assimilation to his environment, Octavia Butler's "Bloodchild" focuses on ways in which characters are physically reduced to commodities. "The Night Driver" hints at such phenomena when it declines to name its characters and locations, but in "Bloodchild," datafication emerges through the subjugation of the Terrans, the human beings of this planet, into bodies that exist only for the utility of the Tlic, the ruling species. Gan, a terran and the main character, when considering his relationship with T'Gatoi, a Tlic who cares for his family, recounts that "her people wanted more of us made available ... [to] be courted, paid, drafted ... She parceled us out to the desperate and sold us to the rich and powerful for their political support" (Butler 2). Here, it's evident that the existence of Terrans is wholly entangled with the physical space they inhabit. Terrans reside in a sort of sanctuary, one where they are allowed certain rights in exchange for the use of their bodies as birthing machines for the Tlic. In this case, the ontological positioning of Terrans relegates them to the status of "other" from the perspective of the Tlic, which, as Stephanie Polsky outlines in her book *The Dark Posthuman*, mirrors the process by which real-world datafication leads to colonialist violence. There are many historical examples of this effect, such as the German expansion in the early twentieth century. Polsky argues that "German colonialism was about forming attachments to environments. For this to be achieved those humans that inhabited them had to be portrayed as indistinct and indistinguishable from their environment" (Polsky 115). In this way, when Terrans are relegated to a subhuman status (or, in this case, "sub-Tlic"), they occupy an animalistic status in the minds of the Tlic which regards them as members of an environment that is theirs to conquer. This process has grim implications; Polsky continues that "this datafication of the enslaved individual would reemerge as a feature of surveillance when the first concentration

camps were set up for Jews in Eastern Europe” (115). Similar outcomes emerge in “Bloodchild,” where, for example, Terrans such as Bram Lomas are subjected to brutal and inescapable torture, leading to pain that is glossed over by the Tlic as illegitimate because of the animalistic status of Terrans in the story. In the case of Lomas, a Terran who has been implanted with Tlic eggs that must be extracted, he is treated with similar regard as Gan, but ultimately is sliced open by T’Gatoi in order to harvest the Tlic eggs from inside of his body. Gan is traumatized by this event, noting “I had never heard such sounds come from anything human. T’Gatoi seemed to pay no attention as she lengthened and deepened the cut” (Butler 9). T’Gatoi’s complete dismissal of the pain experienced by Bram Lomas is only possible because Lomas’ body has been datafied, which enables the total animalization of the Terrans.

Just as characters in “The Night Driver” are inescapably datafied by environmental factors beyond their control, so too are the Terrans in “Bloodchild.” Terrans have no means of escaping their datafied position and as such are forced to always play the role of the subject. The dynamic between Gan and T’Gatoi near the end of the story shows this, as T’Gatoi explains that the subjugation of Terrans is necessary for the survival of the Tlic, stating that “The animals we once used began killing most of our eggs after implantation long before your ancestors arrived ... because your people arrived, we are relearning what it means to be a healthy, thriving people” (Butler 19). The Tlics’ reliance on the Terrans requires them to engage in a constant process of datafying Terrans even before their birth in order to ensure the constant growth of the Tlic civilization. Such processes are readily found in the real world, and Louis Althusser’s understanding of interpellation by ideological apparatuses offers an explanation for how these phenomena are facilitated. In his book *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Althusser claims that “you and I are *always already* subjects, and as such constantly practice the rituals of

ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable, and irreplaceable subjects” (Althusser 172-3). Indeed, the treatment of Terrans by the Tlic reflects this description, as subjects are concrete in their utility for the Tlic, individual and distinguishable in that each of them is named and has discrete relationships with the Tlic, and irreplaceable as the Tlic cannot reproduce without the aid of the Terrans. Yet, because of constant ideological exposition through the agents of their environment, the Tlic are trapped in a cycle of exploitation from which there is no escape, echoing X’s feelings of confusion and helplessness within his own environment in “The Night Driver.”

If Althusser’s analysis is true, then datafication is facilitated through interactions with our environments and those who hold power over us and is inescapable in the status quo. However, this process inevitably leads to colonialism (Polsky 115) and the proliferation of authoritarian right-wing regimes through a cycle of nationalism, patriarchy, and militarism (Fuchs 14). Themes in “The Night Driver” and “Bloodchild” illustrate similar and equally vital aspects of datafication and how it comes to shape the world of its subjects. Characters in each story have their identities distorted until they are unintelligible or homogenized with the system in which they reside. Understanding these processes is imperative for the healthy future development of digital society. As such, it is imperative that datafying systems be broken down and safeguards be developed in order to prevent them from resurfacing. The continued existence of datafication pits subjects against one another (Marx, Engels 150) in a way that is wholly unsustainable, and it is therefore imperative for the wellbeing of humanity that datafying processes are analyzed, deconstructed, and destroyed.

Annotated Bibliography

Althusser, Louis. "Ideology & Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation." Critical Quest, 2012.

In this paper, Althusser works to advance the descriptive Marxist theory of ideology and state power. He first defines repressive state apparatuses (e.g., the law, the military, the courts), and ideological state apparatuses (e.g., the family unit, the church, education). These both function through a mix of ideology and repression, and Althusser argues that the educational apparatus is the dominant apparatus in the status quo. He then uses this framework to argue that interpellation into these apparatuses occurs constantly such that individuals are "always-already" subjects (e.g., how you're interpellated to the familial apparatus the moment you're born). Using this framework, I argue in my paper that datafication occurs through ideological apparatuses and that it is inescapable.

Butler, Octavia E. "Bloodchild." *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, Seven Stories Press, 2022, pp. 1–32.

Calvino, Italo. "The Night Driver." *t zero*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976, pp. 128-36.

Dean, Jodi. "Free Trade." *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, Duke University Press, Durham & London, 2009, pp. 50–73.

In this chapter, Dean begins by providing a definition of neoliberalism and how it came to be the dominant political force in the West. She details that a key part of neoliberalism is the sense that "there is no alternative," which is not true in reality. She then summarizes the four components of fantasy in ideology as Žižek argued through his interpretation of Lacanian psychoanalysis. This background allows her to establish the most applicable section of the paper, which deals with the decline in symbolic efficiency

and the idea of strange attractors. Dean argues that neoliberalism has created a fracturing of truth and identity as individuals literally become microcosms of the market itself, and that this phenomenon splits subjects into categories of consumers and criminals, arbitrarily determined by their relations to the market. I integrate this chapter when establishing the institutions that cause individuals to be reduced to mere subjects of ideology and data.

Fuchs, Christian. "Karl Marx in the Age of Big Data Capitalism." *Digital Objects, Digital Subjects: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Capitalism, Labour and Politics in the Age of Big Data*, 2019, pp. 53–71., <https://doi.org/10.16997/book29.d>.

In this chapter, Fuchs applies a staunchly Marxist approach to analyzing the datafication of modern society. He first defends Marxism's applicability in the present as a research methodology, arguing that the dialectic of capitalism is evident now more than ever. He then uses this approach to analyze the ways by which capitalism has commodified individuals into subjects of data. The most pertinent piece of this chapter helps to address the wider implications of my paper. Fuchs argues that a datafied society is not sustainable and that it has influenced the rise of right-wing groups to political power, before detailing what he believes to be viable alternatives to datafied capitalism.

Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The German Ideology*. Foreign Languages Press, 2022.

This source contains Marx's development of historical materialism in the context of nineteenth-century German philosophy and social theory. It acts as an indictment of idealist modes of thinking that were prominent at the time. I use this source to establish some foundational information for Marxist analysis, such as materialism and class antagonism.

Polsky, Stephanie. “The Dark Posthuman: Social Reproduction, Social Justice, and Artificial Ecology.” *The Dark Posthuman: Dehumanization, Technology, and the Atlantic World*, Punctum Books, 2022, pp. 97–152.

Polsky contextualizes datafication as a form of dehumanization within this source and applies this analysis to various historical events. I use this paper to analyze the real-world effects of datafication, such as the German colonialist expansion of the early twentieth century.