

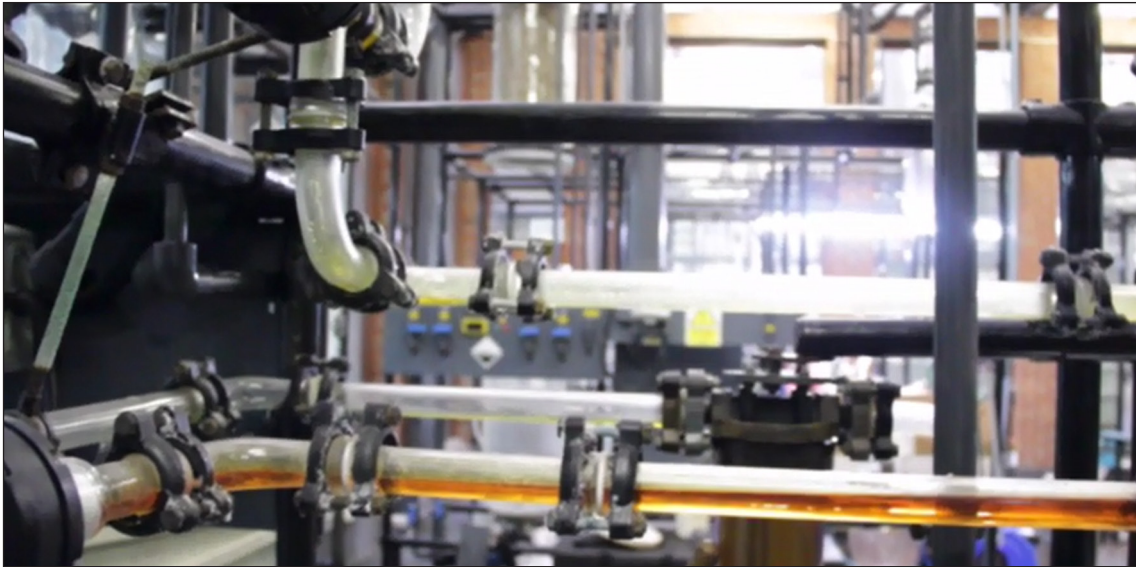


Tainted Love

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The video *Tainted Love* (2023) consists of scenes shot in a gold refinery, juxtaposed with clips of a squirming maternal body, overlaid with definitions of love (from Lomas' lexicography – Provisional list; 2021). It offers a meditation on the value of love in a capitalist system obsessed with profit and commodification, calling into question the value assigned to different modes of production. The unquantifiable value of caring for loved ones contrasts with the solidity of gold – a material with a long history of use in jewellery and talismans associated with love, betrothal and devotion. The text explores links between the invisible labour of familial caring, love and nurture and the concept of emotional labour with reference to Alva Gotby (2023) and the emerging concept of the 'motherload'.





Charlotte Warne Thomas, *Tainted love*, HDvideo, 04:01, 2023.

Borrowed from the 80s pop song by Soft Cell, the film's title *Tainted love* nods towards the idea of love as an intoxicating emotion; a force that can drive those within its clutches to act against their own best interests. But the reliance in English on just a single word to encompass the very broad range of emotions that can be described as 'love', presents a problem when we seek to unpick how different forms of love elicit distinct feelings. This contrasts with the many more nuanced definitions which can be found in other languages from around the globe. Tim Lomas' *Positive Lexicography*¹ lists many dozens of words describing types of love, from erotic and obsessive to fraternal and familial. A handful of these appear as text in the video, chosen for their evocations of the fuzzy area between care, anxiety and tenderness that describe motherly love.

The video is my attempt to probe the physicality, or maybe weight of love that comes with motherhood, that I feel in my own body, long after the hard labour of birthing, breast-feeding and hauling infants in and out of cots was over. In my seemingly heteronormative household, in the privileged position of not being the primary breadwinner, I undertake the lion's share of childcare and domestic work. Like many mothers, the tasks of household management, (encompassing everything from arranging schedules; maintaining stocks of groceries; meal planning and prepping; organising holidays, social calendars and birthday/Christmas celebrations) which are frequently mundane, usually unseen, unacknowledged and yet often overwhelming,

¹ Tim Lomas; *The Positive Lexicography; an evolving index of 'untranslatable' words related to wellbeing from across the world's languages*, 2021 available at <https://www.drtemplomas.com/lexicography/cm4mi> (last accessed 27/04/2023).

fall on me.² Not surprisingly, this additional domestic load puts a strain on the well-being of primary caregivers, who are most often the mothers in Western families.³

This labour is not just mentally exhausting, but encompasses a bodily dimension. It is articulated in the video by fractured clips of belly folds and breasts contained in layers of gold spandex, suggesting a mother's tummy, quickening and undulating with each breath. Juxtaposed against this are shots that pan through a gold factory, presenting the journey of how a precious metal is extracted to create a highly prized commodity. We see the noise, the factory-floor, liquids, chemicals – in precisely measured quantities, undergoing specific processes to ensure their purity as they progress through the facility, ultimately emerging as nuggets of gold. These pure lumps of value have a solid and legible worth, a waiting market, ready to make the magical transformation into profit. In contrast to solid gold, the value of the maternal body in economic markets is unmeasured, undervalued, frequently invisible, and yet it is just as vital economically as the gold. Gold has always been the metal favoured for jewellery associated with love, betrothal and devotion – a material connection between these two contrasting aspects of the video is implied.

As Marxist feminist discourse and social reproduction theory⁴ understand, for capitalism to function, society relies on the unpaid labour of women to support all other economic activity; feeding, caring-for and raising this and the next generation of workers. This work, often referred to as *reproductive labour* because it enables the functioning of capitalism, is centered around that most natural-seeming of entities, the nuclear family.

In the 1970s, Marxist feminists of the 'Wages for Housework' movement theorised the naturalised family unit as a 'social factory', underlined by the infamous first line of Federici's manifesto *Wages against Housework* (of 1975) 'They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work...'. It states:

We must admit that capital has been very successful in hiding our work. It has created a true masterpiece at the expense of women. By denying housework a wage and transforming it into an act of love, capital has killed many birds with one stone. First

² Detailed data and analysis demonstrating the continued gender division of household labour can be found in Bianchi, S. M., Robinson, J. P., & Milkie, M. A. *Changing Rhythms of American Family Life*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006.

³ "Feeling disproportionately responsible for household management, especially child adjustment, was associated with strains on mothers' personal well-being" from Ciciolla, Lucia; Luthar, Suniya S. *Invisible Household Labor and Ramifications for Adjustment: Mothers as Captains of Households Sex Roles* Vol 81 (7-8) pp467-486, 2021, available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8223758/> (last accessed 19/03/24).

⁴ As defined by Susan Ferguson in *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour, and Social Reproduction*, London: Pluto Press, 2019.

of all, it has got a hell of a lot of work almost for free, and it has made sure that women, far from struggling against it, would seek that work as the best thing in life.⁵

In obvious homage to Federici, Alva Gotby's *They call it love: the politics of emotional life*,⁶ unpicks the role of love in contemporary reproductive labour. Work and love are intimately linked; the work of caring for family is imbued with love, while the love we have for family frequently translates as unpaid labour. As Gotby states: 'love can thus be used to extract an ongoing, infinite amount of labour – a work relationship that may stretch over a whole lifetime.' (Gotby 2023, 11)

Gotby builds on sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild's 1983 term 'emotional labour',⁷ which she understands as the 'increased commodification of our emotional capacities' (Gotby 2023, xiii). This naturally includes the work of parental care, undertaken in the name of many emotions, including obligation, duty and social responsibility – but primarily love. Much of this unremarkable work is invisible, hidden in the private domestic realm, such that 'emotional labour is difficult to think about since the better it is done, the more it appears as non-work, both for the laborer and for the recipient of emotional care.' (Gotby 2023, xv)

In *What Mothers do, Especially when it looks like nothing*⁸ psychotherapist Naomi Stadlen came to realise that there were no words adequate to describe the kind of work mothers of infants were doing. For example, one mother said 'I'm not just doing what I'm doing, I'm thinking about it. I'm thinking about what it means, how it's going to affect my child, how it's going to affect the future'.⁹

This is a good description of mothers' emotional labour, which might include such tasks as anticipating people's needs, providing company for the elderly, comforting and monitoring children, managing a household and maintaining harmonious familial relationships. This *psychological caretaking*¹⁰ falls disproportionately on mothers (Ciciolla, Lucia; Luthar, Suniya 2021) causing anxiety such that 'emotional family load had uniformly negative potential consequences including greater family-to-work

⁵ Federici, Silvia. *Wages Against Housework*. Bristol: Falling Wall Press and the Power of Women Collective. 1975.

⁶ Alva Gotby; *They call it love: the politics of emotional life*, London: Verso, 2023.

⁷ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart; Commercialization of Human Feeling*, 1983.

⁸ Naomi Stadlen, *What Mothers do, Especially when it looks like nothing* London: Piatkus, 2004.

⁹ From an interview with Stadlen on BBC Radio 4 Woman's Hour, broadcast 10:00 18/08/2022. Available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m001b44s> (last accessed 06/09/22).

¹⁰ Term borrowed from Ciciolla, Lucia; Luthar, Suniya S. *Invisible Household Labor and Ramifications for Adjustment: Mothers as Captains of Households* Sex Roles Vol 81 (7–8) pp467–486, 2021, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8223758/> (last Accessed 19/03/24).

conflict, sleep problems, family and job exhaustion, and lower life and family satisfaction [for mothers]’.¹¹

Anyone who has ever turned to social media in search of solutions for how to manage the never-ending tide of emotional labour will have encountered the term *mental load*, now widely used to encompass the kind of emotional labour Gotby describes, together with the household management duties referred to above. More recently another term has appeared, particularly on the posts of Instagram mum-influencers who meditate on the unequal division of caring work in their households; the *motherload*. The term is yet to undergo academic scrutiny,¹² but neatly it underscores that it is the mother who can expect to be carrying in her head the domestic mental load, whilst also undertaking the emotional labour.

In the five decades since Federici’s seminal text, the *motherload* has increased as mothers are encouraged to actively engage with their children, and the quality of that engagement has also increased.¹³ Modern mothers who work outside the home now spend *more* time with their children than the stay-at-home mothers of the 1970s.¹⁴ At the same time, the impossibly high standards to which contemporary mothers are held in ‘a society that venerates motherhood while denigrating mothers’¹⁵ (Goldstein-Love, 2023) leaves them overwhelmed and worn out.

And this is the answer to why I feel so exhausted, even though my care work is no longer physically laborious. It is because of the *motherload* – emotional labour is a form of embodied labour: ‘not only in the sense of using the body as a tool for communicating emotion, but also because emotion itself involves bodily as well as cognitive dispositions.... We feel emotions in our bodies – from the tension of anger or anxiety to the warmth of joy’ (Gotby 2023, 4).

¹¹ From abstract of Wayne JH, Mills MJ, Wang YR, Matthews RA, Whitman MV. *Who’s Remembering to Buy the Eggs? The Meaning, Measurement, and Implications of Invisible Family Load*. J Bus Psychol. 2023, May 30:1–26. doi: [10.1007/s10869-023-09887-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-023-09887-7). Epub ahead of print. PMID: 37359080; PMCID: PMC10228438.

¹² It is currently found in the self-help and popular psychology realms; See Ingrid Wassenaar, 2022, *Motherload: Modern Motherhood and How to Survive It*, IPW Books, 2022.

¹³ “There has been a change in social norms and expectations concerning not only what parenting involves, but also what children need. A culture of intensive mothering seems to have emerged. Mothers feel that they need to be experts on child development and spend ever-increasing time interacting with their children. Due to a lack of time, however, they must ensure that the time spent with children is quality time and juggle family duties” p.20, Moro-Egido, A *Changing Trends of Mothers’ Active and Passive Childcare Times* Journal of Family and Economic Issues Vol 33, 2012.

¹⁴ “Mothers who work outside of home may be spending as much time with their children as stay-at-home mothers in the 1960’s and 1970’s did”, from Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, *Changing Rhythms of American Family Life* New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006.

¹⁵ Yael Goldstein-Love, *In Defence of the Anxious Mother* July 24, 2023 <https://slate.com/human-interest/2023/07/mother-anxiety-postpartum-mental-health.html> (ast accessed 31/10/2023).

Of course, understanding that I am exploited by capitalism to undertake unwaged labour in the name of love doesn't make the fierce love I feel for my family any less real. The 'tainted love' about which Soft Cell sung and after which the video is titled, is not the same kind of love that parents feel for their children, which is better expressed by some of Lomas' definitions. And this begs the question, does romantic love or familial love leave women more prone to exploitation? For Federici there is no distinction, but perhaps a more nuanced understanding of different modes of love might help to articulate more precisely the *type* of emotional labour we are doing. In turn, might this highlight more precisely the moments we are prone to exploitation (including self-exploitation), and empower mothers and other unpaid carers to share this burden with other household members, or indeed to shed it completely (in the case of unnecessary domestic jobs for the sake of perfection rather than maintenance)? It is these questions and others regarding the relative value that we place on love, care and invisible labour that I hope this artwork raises for viewers.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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