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**“I Made Me”: Queer Theory,
Subjection, and Identity in *Dollhouse***

[1] Club music pulses, lights flash, young, scantily clad women dance while young men watch. It’s a typical club scene from what could be any contemporary television show, but for one glaring difference: at the center of it all, captivating everyone’s attention with titillating dance moves, is a man dressed conservatively in khakis and blue button-up shirt. His male admirers watch with looks of feigned confusion that seem to only barely mask their desire. The dancer approaches one of his admirers, and introduces herself as Kiki. The admirer, who at first seems interested, responds with violence. Kiki fights back, getting in the first punch and knocking him flat as she exclaims, “You suck! Trying to hit a girl!” Kiki then rushes to the arms of her savior, Paul. Paul is tall, handsome, and strong: the embodiment of the knight in shining armor. He holds her as she cries, defiantly challenging the confused onlookers: “You got a problem?” (“Belle Chose” 2.3).

[2] This is, of course, a scene from the *Dollhouse*’s “Belle Chose,”¹ a season two episode of Joss Whedon’s mind-bending and deeply subversive exploration of identity and corporate power. In the world of *Dollhouse*, an illegal, high tech organization has developed the ability to wipe people’s personalities and imprint them with manufactured ones for high-priced engagements, both sexual and otherwise. The show follows Echo, a Doll (or “Active”) who, as her original personality Caroline, agreed to five years of service at the Los Angeles Dollhouse in exchange for a large cash payment and the erasure of traumatizing memories (as the narrative progresses, we see that Caroline, like most of the other Dolls, “agreed” to their terms under extreme duress).² Echo and the other Dolls (including Victor, Sierra, and November) are imprinted with personas that they fully embody in order to complete a variety of engagements for the millionaires who can afford the Dollhouse’s exorbitant fees. When not on an engagement, Echo and her fellow Actives exist in a comfortable, underground spa-like space as Dolls – blank minds with the ability to do little more than eat, sleep, and exercise.

The Dollhouse is run by Adelle DeWitt, Topher Brink, the genius programmer who creates the imprints, and Doll Handler Boyd Langton.³ Paul Ballard, an FBI Agent, pursues the Dollhouse until he eventually becomes complicit in its operation. As the series evolves, so does Echo, who begins to maintain elements of her engagement imprints in her Doll state, eventually evolving into a fully-formed subject both constituted by and independent of her dozens of imprints. As we follow Echo's journey, we also learn more about Rossum, the corporation behind the Dollhouse, of which there are twenty-three around the world. Rossum, publicly a medical research company, is revealed to be an incredibly powerful corporation working to weaponize the wiping and imprinting technology used on Dolls. Ultimately, Echo, Paul, Adelle, Topher, November, Victor, and Sierra work together to take down Rossum, with only limited success: while they succeed in destroying Rossum headquarters and kill the founder (who, in a brilliant twist, turns out to be Boyd), they fail at destroying the tech, which leads to what Topher names the "thoughtpocalypse" ("Epitaph One" 1.13; "The Hollow Men" 2.12; "Epitaph Two: Return" 2.13).

[3] In "Belle Chose," the imprints given to Echo and Victor have been accidentally switched; Echo becomes the misogynist male kidnapper Terry Karrens, and Victor becomes Kiki, the party-girl coed programmed to fulfill a Medieval Literature professor's sexual fantasy. The Dollhouse's technology that allows for the erasure and imprinting of personalities means that Victor is not merely playing a part when he is imprinted with Kiki's personality; he *is* Kiki – a constructed female personality in a male body. This is perhaps *Dollhouse's* most recognizably queer moment, a dramatization of one of the foundational tenets of feminist and queer theory: the social construction and performativity of gender as articulated by Judith Butler. Butler writes, "when the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one" (*Gender Trouble* 9). When the performativity of gender is thus conceptualized, essentialist ideas regarding masculine and feminine behavior and identities as essential to the female or male body are unhinged, and gender norms are thus seen as products of hegemonic and oppressive social norms. Kiki's behavior while

inhabiting Victor's body is incongruent not because she violates some essential biological truth about how a male body should behave, but because she violates the social norms required of that male body. And not only is this dramatization of gender as radically independent of physical sex demonstrated through Victor's embodiment of Kiki, but also by Paul's reaction to her. Paul, the epitome of heteronormative masculinity, accepts her as Kiki, embraces and comforts her as he would if she were still embodied by Echo, regardless of the male body she inhabits. What we see here is a powerful and thoroughly queer portrayal of the performativity of gender.

[4] *Dollhouse's* richness for a queer analysis goes far beyond this moment, just as queer theory contains more than just analyses of sexuality and gender. Queer theory seeks to explore the ways in which normalization – sexual, racial, economic, etc. – all function to categorize, limit, and often violently oppress those who exist outside of the narrow hegemonic order. Central to these explorations is the concept of subjectless critique. As David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz articulate in their 2005 article, "What's Queer About Queer Studies Now?,"

[the] "subjectless" critique of queer studies disallows any positing of a proper subject *of* or object *for* the field by insisting that queer has no fixed political referent. Such an understanding orients queer epistemology, despite the historical necessities of "strategic essentialism" (Gayatri Spivak's famous term), as a continuous deconstruction of the tenets of positivism at the heart of identity politics.... A subjectless critique establishes, in Michael Warner's phrase, a focus on "a wide field of normalization" as the site of social violence. (3, original emphasis)

In other words, queer theory has expanded to include an emphasis on the destabilization of the notion of identity and subjectivity as internal processes inherent to an individual core identity. Rather, queer theory posits that external factors, specifically normalizing and oppressive ideologies (i.e., heteronormativity) function to create subjects through social violence. The subjectless critique of queer theory provides a rich and productive analytic for understanding and resisting processes of normalization and essentialist epistemologies, offering critical insights into the power structures under

which we live and die, specifically contemporary neoliberal thought that is built on essentialist epistemologies.

[5] A queer reading of *Dollhouse* focusing on the character arcs of Echo, Paul, and Boyd reveals an insightful and powerfully subversive exploration of identity, subjection, and the violence of neoliberalism. Joss Whedon, who in addition to striving for emotional realism in his work, sees his role as a creator of popular culture as one that can and should create social and political change (Lavery & Burkhead 7). In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, this was done primarily through a feminist portrayal of a female superhero; *Dollhouse*, however, takes a broader and more overtly political stance. As Whedon expressed in a 2009 interview about the show, "a lot of the things that we prize in America might not actually be useful traits, a lot of the things we vilify, to me, are not necessarily harmful, and that's something that's been in my work from the start" (Lavery & Burkhead 189). Of the many potential readings of his work this invites, a reading of *Dollhouse* as a critique of the oppressive ideologies that have dominated American politics and culture for the past thirty years, specifically neoliberalism, reveals the short-lived series to be not only the most progressive of Joss Whedon's work, but one of the most insightfully subversive television texts in recent memory.

[6] A "virulent and brutal form of market capitalism," neoliberalism is an economic philosophy that has developed into a cultural ethos that values above all, profit and market freedom (Giroux 2). The tenets of neoliberalism, including the rule of an unfettered market, privatization, deregulation, and the elimination of social welfare create an economic and social system in which wealth, power, and freedom is increasingly concentrated in the hands of the privileged few. The modern neoliberal state functions primarily to increase the accumulation of capital; it is "a society in which the inalienable rights of individuals (and, recall, corporations are defined as individuals before the law) to private property and the profit rate trump any other conception of inalienable rights" (Harvey 181). Neoliberal ideology posits that the government's primary role, aside from national security, is one of supporting corporate interests and the market, seeking to eliminate government regulation and social welfare (Giroux 2). Under neoliberalism, corporate interests dominate the nation state, to the extent that the nation

state itself becomes little more than the political and social arm of corporate interests.

[7] In *Dollhouse*, neoliberalism is embodied by Rossum, the corporation behind the Dollhouses. As we are told more than once throughout the series, "The Dollhouse deals in fantasy. That is their business, but it is not their purpose" ("Man on the Street" 1.6; "A Spy in the House of Love" 1.9). Indeed, their purpose is far more nefarious than the already troubling existence of the Dollhouses. Rossum, an organization with "ties to every major political power on the planet," is a pharmaceutical and medical research corporation that publicly operates as the leader in Alzheimer's research, while in fact clandestinely working to weaponize the personality wiping and imprinting technology used on the Dolls ("Man in the Street"; "Meet Jane Doe" 2.7). This goal is coupled with their ultimate plan to offer "immortality" to those who can afford it by imprinting existing personalities into a succession of new bodies that have had their own personalities erased and thus become permanent Dolls – a psychic death for the masses in exchange for the immortality of the privileged few. Rossum, which operates through a "web of financial and political connections all over the world, to corporations, to the government," ("A Spy in the House of Love") facilitates this plan by installing a Doll in the federal government to protect their interests and ensure passage of deregulation laws that will allow their work proceed unfettered ("The Public Eye" 2.5; "The Left Hand" 2.6). The government and the profit-driven corporation that actively oppresses and denies value to those without capital are one and the same; they are in alliance to perpetuate the biopolitical schema that preserves access to life to those already in power and uses that power to further oppress those without capital on whom their privilege depends. The eventual consequence of this neoliberal alliance in *Dollhouse* is the utter destruction of civilization (Topher's "thoughtpocalypse") as the weaponized imprinting technology is used to divide the majority of the population into Dumbshows (blank Dolls) and Butchers (murderous fiends), with only a few Actuals (unaffected individuals) remaining ("Epitaph One"; "Epitaph Two: Return").⁴

[8] Fundamental to neoliberal ideology is a belief in the individual's responsibility for his or her own well-being and subjectivity, dismissing any possibility that lack of access to capital, and thus power and freedom, play a

role in perpetuating inequality, discrimination, and violence. The state's role is to preserve the unregulated market and provide unrestricted wealth accumulation and remove itself from individual lives. Thus, "each individual is held responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and well-being. This principle extends to the realms of welfare, education, [and] healthcare.... Individual success or failure is interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings...rather than being attributed to any systemic property" or structural violence (Harvey 65 – 66). Thus, the neoliberal ideology that has dominated American politics for the past three decades posits a state that is supposedly removed from the lives of individual citizens. Queer theory, particularly Judith Butler's concept of subjection, intervenes in this ideology to reveal the separation between the individual and the state as a fiction. Butler defines subjection as the "of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject" (*The Psychic Life of Power* 2). The process by which individuals come to be subjects – both externally and internally – is dependent on his or her relation to the power structures into which he or she is born. Subjection goes beyond subordination; it is the very process of subordination that creates the subject. Dean Spade articulates subjection similarly, as an understanding of how "power relations impact how we know ourselves as subjects through...systems of meaning and control – the ways we understand our own bodies, the things we believe about ourselves and our relationships with other people and institutions" (25). The process by which individuals develop agency and a self-identity is intrinsically linked to—even determined by—one's relation to the state and other structures of power and ideology. (Editors' note: See Herrmann, this issue.) An individual's relationship to and required subordination to power "constitute the subject's self-identity" (Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* 3). Subjection theory asserts that an individual's subjectivity and identity are constituted by power, standing in opposition to neoliberalism's assertions that the state plays no role in determining an individual's social and economic position. Neoliberalism creates a power structure that perpetuates inequality and social violence in the form of uneven access to capital; thus, those born without the privileges and access to capital and power that neoliberalism protects and concentrates in the hands of the few are subjected to and become victims of power in

much more harmful and violent ways. Inherent to subjection theory is the refutation of notions of essentialist identities. Returning to Butler's *Gender Trouble* and the theory of performativity, we see that more than just gender is performative:

To what extent is "identity" a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience? And how do regulatory practices that govern gender also govern culturally intelligible notions of identity? In other words, the "coherence" and "continuity" of the "the person" are not logical or analytic features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility. (23)

Thus, the essentialist notion that individuals possess a core self that exists independently of and prior to external factors is shown, in queer analysis, to be another normalizing fiction that operates as social and structural violence.

[9] *Dollhouse* can be read as a dramatization of these queer modes of thought; indeed, the very premise of the series—that one's identity can be removed and replaced with a manufactured one—is a sci-fi literalization of subjection theory that neatly embodies a rejection of essentialist identity, a rejection that is foundational to queer epistemology. Consider these exchanges between Paul and Topher from the episode "Omega" (1.12):

Paul: So this is it. This is where you steal their souls.

Topher: Yeah, and then we put them in a glass jar with our fireflies.

And later:

Paul: I still don't believe you can wipe away a person's soul.

Topher: Their what?

Paul: Their soul. Who they are, at their core. I don't think that goes away.

Topher: You'd be wrong about that.

While Topher's amorality perhaps prevents us from wholly siding with him in this debate about the soul, the idea of an essential "essence" or core identity is repeatedly interrogated and deconstructed throughout the series.

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Eventually, Paul himself comes to see the idea of an original soul or essence as irrelevant, further destabilizing the concept of identity (“The Hollow Men”). As another example of *Dollhouse*’s rejection of essentialist identity, consider a moment from the original unaired pilot when Topher attempts to convince Boyd that everyone, Doll or not, is programmed by culture and power. Referring to Boyd’s tie, which does not keep him warm, Topher says:

It’s just what grown up men do in our culture. They put a piece of cloth around their necks so they can assert their status and recognize each other as non-threatening kindred. . . . You wear the tie because it never occurred to you not to. You eat eggs every morning but never at night. You feel excitement and companionship when rich men you’ve never met put a ball through a net. . . . You look down for at least half a second if a woman leans forward, and your stomach rumbles every time you drive by a big golden arch, even if you weren’t hungry before. Everybody’s programmed, Boyd. (“Echo” 1.0)

In her essay “‘The Mind Doesn’t Matter, It’s the Body We Want’: Identity and the Body in *Dollhouse*,” Kate Rennebohm says of this moment that even though

Topher’s remarks may have never aired on television . . . the notion that everyone within the world of *Dollhouse* was a Doll—and thus imprinted by the world around them—was prevalent in the show. . . . *Dollhouse*’s implication that we are all Dolls was made fully clear by the end of season one, of course, when the imprinting technology spiraled out of control and stripped (almost) every human of their mind and memories. The idea that anything we think or do could be traced back to the influence of a social norm is a terrifying thought. (7)

Rennebohm goes on to argue that “this kind of cynicism is not what *Dollhouse* is promoting,” positing that the show presents an ethos that proposes that “our bodies constitute our identities” (18). While her reading of the body and its role in shaping identity in the show is compelling, her assertion that *Dollhouse* cannot be read as “promoting” lack of essentialist identity is flawed; rather, a queer analysis shows that the series’ dramatization of the lack of essentialist identity presents not nihilism, but a radical and liberating intervention in the ways in which we think about identity and the self.

[10] The terrifying thought of technology that can erase and replace one's identity (and a serious case of white-knight syndrome) motivates Paul Ballard to investigate the Dollhouse to the eventual termination of his career with the FBI. Throughout the series, he is obsessed with finding Caroline. The show initially positions Paul as the hero who will save the girl and bring down the nefarious Dollhouse; however, as he becomes more involved in his quest, he becomes more involved and complicit in the Dollhouse's operation. When read with a Butlerian conception of subjection, we see that Paul's character arc follows a normative subjection process in which the individual becomes an ideal subject according to the power structure's terms. He is fully subordinated to the oppressive power structure (Rossum/the neoliberal state) and quite literally internalizes their ideology.

[11] Paul's obsession with the Dollhouse makes him a target, and Adelle uses the Dollhouse's resources to manipulate him by imprinting the Doll Victor as the Russian mob informant Lubov to mislead him. The true power of the Dollhouse over Paul becomes abundantly clear, however, in the sixth episode of season one when it is revealed to the viewer, but not to Paul, that his neighbor and new lover Mellie is the Doll known as November, who has been programmed as a sleeper agent to spy on him. And not only is Mellie a sleeper agent, she is a lethal one: with a single phrase, she can be triggered to kill with ruthless efficiency ("Man on the Street"). Immediately before it is revealed that Mellie is a Doll, Paul and Mellie have sex for the first time, a consummation that Rhonda V. Wilcox argues is the "equivalent of [Paul] using her as a [D]oll," regardless of the fact that he does not yet know she is one (par. 8). Wilcox reads this moment as Paul using Mellie as an attempt to prove to himself that he is not obsessed with Caroline, rendering "the discovery, later in the episode, that Mellie is actually a [D]oll...almost redundant" (par. 8). Paul's journey of assimilation into the Dollhouse (and thus Rossum, and thus the power structure of the neoliberal state) is unquestionably deepened when he does finally learn that Mellie is a Doll and chooses to continue his relationship with her. When an NSA spy within the Dollhouse programs Mellie to break her persona to give him a message, he attempts to deny it, but then immediately comes to see its truth and his own complicity in the Dollhouse's manipulation.

Mellie/November: They did this long before you met me. They've been using this body to spy on you for months. The only reason Mellie exists is because of you. . . . Don't tell her anything about the investigation, it will get back to the Dollhouse.... Now you understand how dangerous their technology is. You can't tell Mellie about this. If the Dollhouse knows you know, they will kill you, and they'll make Mellie do it. ("A Spy in the House of Love")

Following this message, November returns to her Mellie persona, and Paul deftly plays the role the Dollhouse has given him by resuming his sexual relationship with her, even though he now knows her to be a Doll. Regardless of his motives, he has become complicit in the exploitation of November's body, becoming further entrenched in the Dollhouse and Rossum.

[12] Paul's entrenchment deepens yet again two episodes later, when he finally gains access to the Dollhouse itself, a physical entry that is symbolic of his further integration into the Dollhouse. Upon seeing the Doll Victor, he remarks with near-hopelessness, "my whole life isn't real" ("Briar Rose" 1.11). He comes to realize the extent the Dollhouse has gone to in order to manipulate him, causing him to question his entire existence, and perhaps it is this revelation that contributes to his decision in the end of the episode to work for the Dollhouse in exchange for November's freedom. While this decision can also be interpreted as an attempt to alleviate his guilt for continuing his romantic and sexual relationship with her, it can additionally be read as his final recognition of the Dollhouse's power over him as subject, even if he hopes to bring it down from the inside. This reading is supported by the brief exchange he has with Madeleine, November's original personality, as she leaves. She asks who he is, and he replies with "I'm nobody," thus rendering himself an anonymous subject of the Dollhouse ("Omega"). Paul's internalization of the power structure's ideology is further dramatized by a fascinating plot twist in the second season. After the rogue Doll Alpha forcibly wipes Paul's mind, rendering him brain dead, Topher devises a way to bring him back by imprinting him with a version of his own personality; Paul literally becomes a Doll version of himself ("A Love Supreme" 2.8; "The Attic" 2.10). His subjection process is complete. He has fully and completely become subordinated to the neoliberal state, his subjectivity created and manipulated by Rossum.

[13] In contrast to Paul, we see Echo's subjection process function as a subversive triumph against the manipulative power structure of the Dollhouse. As the show progresses, Echo becomes increasingly self-aware while in her Doll state; she is able to maintain elements of her various imprints, and when Alpha kidnaps her and uploads every imprint her mind has ever held simultaneously, she is able to maintain all of them and access them at will, even after Topher wipes her ("Omega"). Her narrative arc shifts from seeking a restoration of Caroline to understanding herself as Echo – a wholly new subject simultaneously independent of and constituted by the multiple imprints she is able to maintain. As she tells Paul when trying to convince him that she is a fully developed person, "there's a lot of noise from the chorus girls, but they're not me. There is a me" ("Meet Jane Doe"). Her unique ability to create herself as a subject against the will of the Rossum is made evident in her vehement rebuttal of Adelle's claim that she made her: "I made me," she asserts, rejecting the idea that those who have power over are responsible for her subjectivity ("Stop-Loss" 2.9). Her self-subjection is utterly confusing to Topher, the champion of corporate-created identities.

Boyd: Echo's not a blank slate. She's a person.

Topher: You mean she's self-aware?

Paul: More than that. She can control what and when.

Topher: She can control.... What does that make her? What is she? ("A Love Supreme")

Indeed, Topher's confusion about "what" Echo is further illuminates the extreme radicalness of her subjectivity. Echo becomes so thoroughly developed as an individual that once she has the ability to restore Caroline, she is reluctant to, even though accessing Caroline's memories is the only way to find out the identity of Rossum's founder and then attempt to stop him from using the weaponized tech. She fears that being imprinted with Caroline's personality would destroy her subjectivity as Echo. She does eventually allow herself to be imprinted with Caroline's personality, and rather than destroying Echo, Caroline becomes merely another imprint accessible to her. In a radical refutation of essentialist identity, Echo and

her compatriots accept “the radical constructedness of her ‘essence’” (Hawk par. 16). This shift in the character’s arc away from a restoration of her original identity to the development and celebration of a constructed identity that she forms in resistance to the state and corporate power structures offers a radical rejection of identity essentialism; however, the show works to further complicate Echo’s narrative and thus the show’s political and social critique.

[14] While we can read Echo’s subjection process as a subversive triumph against the power structures that work to violently oppress her agency and subjectivity, the revelation that Boyd, Echo’s handler and strongest ally throughout the series, is Rossum’s founder and responsible for everything that happens in the Dollhouse works to negate Echo’s subversive self-creation. It is revealed in “The Hollow Men” that Boyd is responsible for Caroline’s presence in the Dollhouse in the first place; Rossum’s widespread medical surveillance identified Caroline as having the physical ability to resist the wiping and imprinting process, and they manipulated her into service in the Dollhouse. Her entire evolution and subjection process to become Echo was facilitated by Boyd, and thus Rossum and the neoliberal state. Boyd explains their motivation and ultimate goal to Echo:

Who do you think allowed you to grow as an individual, as Echo? While they were sending you out to bed half of Los Angeles, I was making sure you had the space to become your own person. . . . You’re the key. The key to everything. You’re going to save us all. . . . Inside that body of yours is the key to everlasting life. Every time your nervous system blocks an imprint, it leaves neurochemical tracers in your cerebral spinal column. We tried to replicate it, but we can’t. It’s unique to your physiology. So we’re going to harvest it from you. . . . We’re going to use your spinal fluid to create a vaccine against imprinting. (“The Hollow Men”)

And lest we think that Rossum’s vaccine against imprinting will be made widely available, we have Clyde Randolph, Boyd’s co-founder, to remind us that “just the deserving few” will be saved from the destruction when the tech becomes weaponized (“Getting Closer” 2.11). This revelation that Boyd has been facilitating and manipulating Echo’s subjection process so Rossum can further exploit her body works to repudiate Echo’s role as a subject who

is able to resist the dominant power structures that seek to control her. Rather, like Paul, she is controlled by and subjected to the controlling violence of the corporate state.

[15] Echo and the others are eventually able to kill Boyd and destroy Rossum's headquarters, but they are not able to prevent the tech from getting out of control. Ten years after the near-complete destruction of civilization, Topher, even though he has been driven mad by guilt, is able to develop a way to "reset the world" ("Epitaph Two: Return"). He has figured out a way to undo all of the wiping and imprinting with an explosive blast that sends out a signal that will restore everyone to their original personalities. Echo, along with Victor, Sierra, and their son, chooses to stay underground in the Dollhouse so she is not affected by the reset – she chooses to remain Echo, her constructed identity, rather than return to her "essential" identity as Caroline.

[16] In the effort to gain access to the Dollhouse so Topher can build the tech necessary for the reset, Paul is shot and killed. As a final act of subjection, Echo chooses to add his personality imprint to her own, and the series ends with Echo's personality and Paul's joining in her mind ("Epitaph Two: Return"). Julie Hawk reads this final moment as a queer coupling: "Echo queers her relationship with Paul by allowing deeper penetration than is possible for any human subject. . . . [I]t rearticulates the fulfillment of desire in such a way that she transcends her desire and the mortal and physical constraints of humanity by allowing Paul to be one of her selves" (par. 19; cf. Calvert). Their final coupling is also queer for the ways in which it functions to collapse the normalization of essentialist identity. We have seen Echo build herself as a subject throughout the series, but her choice to take in Paul's imprint is in fact her first and only act of self-creation that is purely motivated by her own desire. Although she wasn't aware of it, her subjection process throughout the series was in service of and controlled by the power structure of the neoliberal state in the form of Boyd/Rossum. This final act of self-subjection occurs as Topher sacrifices himself to reset the world and as Adelle leaves the Dollhouse to help rebuild it, demonstrating that Echo is finally able to use her unique ability to consciously create herself as a subject for her own desires and fulfillment as only possible when the power structure is destroyed. Prior to leaving, Adelle says to Echo:

"Funny that the last fantasy the Dollhouse should fulfill would be yours," referring to Echo/Caroline's determination to take down Rossum. But it is another fantasy, another desire that the destruction of the Dollhouse fulfills for Echo: the ability to finally create herself on her own terms.

[17] Speaking to the fact that many viewers felt betrayed by what they saw as the show's lack of feminism, Whedon says, "hopefully people can take feminist ideals away from this. The idea was very simply, this woman doesn't exist, she literally doesn't exist, and she builds herself from scratch. To me that is the most powerful act" ("Defining Moments"). Echo's journey to build herself from scratch is more than just a feminist ideal; it is a queer ideal as well. This queer reading of *Dollhouse* through the lens of subjection theory reveals the show to be offering a complex critique of neoliberalism through the refutation of essentialist identity. The show confronts the viewer with the reality of subjection: that an essential self does not exist, and that we are constituted by the power structures that control our lives. Ultimately, the series suggests that it is only through the radical destruction of those oppressive power structures that we can begin to form ourselves as subjects on our own terms.

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Notes

- ¹ For an excellent reading of this episode and the character of Kiki, see Cynthea Masson's "Who Painted the Lion? – A Gloss on *Dollhouse's* "Belle Chose.""
- ² Caroline is an anti-corporate terrorist who is working to bring down Rossum when she is ultimately caught and forced into the Dollhouse ("Getting Closer" 2.11).
- ³ Boyd is made Head of Security in "A Spy in the House of Love" (1.9)
- ⁴ The events of the thoughtpocalypse take place ten years after the primary narrative of the series, revealed in the last episode of each season, the never-aired "Epitaph One" (1.13) and the broadcast finale "Epitaph Two: Return" (2.13). The specifics of how the wiping technology has spiraled out of control are never fully revealed, but it is suggested that governments used the tech as acts of war (Mag in "Epitaph Two: Return": "Maybe China laid down another blanket signal").