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Theorizing #Girlboss Culture: Mediated Neoliberal Feminisms from Influencers to Multi-level Marketing Schemes

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by

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Abstract

I define girlboss feminism as emergent, mediated formations of neoliberal feminism that equate feminist empowerment with financial success, market competition, individualized work-life balance, and curated digital and physical presences driven by self-monetization. I look toward how the mediation of girlboss feminism utilizes branded and affective engagements with representational politics, discourses of authenticity and rebellion, as well as meritocratic aspiration to promote cultural interest in conceptualizing feminism in ways that are divorced from collective, intersectional struggle. I question the stakes involved in reducing feminist interrogations and commitments to discourses of representation, visibility, and meritocracy. I argue that while girlboss feminism may facilitate individual opportunities for stability and advancement under neoliberal constraints, the proliferation of girlboss feminism as an emergent and mediated thread of neoliberal feminism plays a vital role in perpetuating the severe inequalities required to sustain racial capitalism as an oppressive political-economic and socio-cultural framework. I look to three key spaces: wellness culture, self-help coaching, and multi-level marketing to understand how feminism and racial capitalism grow intertwined via mediated formations of girlboss culture. In charting these formations, I initiate conversations that investigate the nuances and complications of feminist movement work under racial capitalism. I hope that identifying these emergent threads of neoliberal feminism provides insight on how intersectional and liberatory modes of collective struggle might remain more nimble, and generate more political power, than incarnations of feminism that reinforce an oppressive status quo.

Introduction

In the Spring semester of 2021, I talked with my Digital Feminisms class about how concepts of feminism take on varied meanings under racial capitalism. Following Cedric Robinson and Jodi Melamed, we discussed how capital needs to continuously accumulate, and perpetuate relations of severe inequality in order to sustain itself as a political-economic system and series of cultural logics. After reading Melamed, we needed to make the connection between racial capitalism and feminism. I asked them, “where do we see feminism conceptualized in pop culture as acquiring wealth and power to perpetuate structures of racial capitalism? In other words, where do we see feminism defined as getting a piece of the pie that reinforces systemic inequities and colonial legacies...a feminism defined as getting power and money?” A few students responded, “Oh, that’s girlboss culture.” As I’d been working on a dissertation project seeking to illuminate what “girlboss feminism” was, I asked them to define girlboss culture, and the connection it had to reproducing and sustaining racial capitalism. “It’s toxic positivity on Instagram -- those memes that say you just need to be positive and you’ll be successful. Those inspirational picture quotes. It’s supporting Vice President Kamala Harris because of her intersecting identities, despite the fact that she’s incarcerated so many Black and brown folks, when she claims to support those communities. It’s peak white feminism. It’s looking out for yourself and no one else. It’s a performance of feminism.” Their thinking aligned with what I was actively investigating in mediated spaces. Thanks to this brilliant community, our discussions helped me think through and consolidate a working definition of girlboss feminism. Girlboss feminism is fundamentally a product of racial capitalism in how it defines social change through the narrow constraints of capital accumulation, and its associated preservation of hierarchies and inequities. Girlboss feminism emerges from colonial legacies and structures of power that are predicated on maintaining inequalities based on race, ability, and normative gender expression. In contemporary culture today, white feminism is a shorthand for expressions of

feminism that are highly individualistic, divorced from collective struggle, and perpetuate various forms of systemic privilege and oppression. While girlboss feminism aligns with these understandings of white feminism, I seek to deepen the conversation around how racial capitalism and feminism intersect in mediated realms. The intersection of racial capitalism and feminism produces emergent cultural threads that shift and evolve conceptualizations of feminism in tandem with neoliberal structures. Girlboss feminism is a mediated formation that takes shape through narratives claiming that anyone can attain wealth, regardless of gender, race, ability, and so on -- so long as you work hard, think positively, and rise above any obstacles thrown at you. By leveraging mediated spaces to perpetuate such aspirational narratives, girlboss feminism naturalizes and obscures the conditions of severe inequality endemic to racial capitalism. Girlboss feminism is inspirational picture quotes, Instagram memes, and sales pitches that claim one's mindset and behavior is the only thing standing between them and being a millionaire. This mediated content works to further entrench racial capitalism as a governing cultural rationality and the architecture for social and political relations.

In this chapter, I first explore how girlboss feminism emerged as a formation of neoliberal cultural politics, drawing a connection between mediated socio-cultural material and the expansion of neoliberalism as a prevailing set of logics. This requires a historicization of feminism as a social movement, and associated interrogation of how racial capitalism and the feminist movement grew into overlapping forces. I then move into a discussion around understanding the girlboss as a mediated cultural text that supports the expansion of racial capitalism through facilitating cultural commitments to entrepreneurship. By generating opportunities for affective connections to entrepreneurship as a cultural logic, girlboss feminism works to equate feminist empowerment with financial success, market competition, individualized work-life balance, and curated digital and physical presences driven by self-

monetization. Finally, I look toward how the mediation of girlboss feminism utilizes branded and affective engagements with representational politics, discourses of authenticity and rebellion, as well as meritocratic aspiration to promote cultural interest in conceptualizing feminism in ways that are divorced from collective, intersectional struggle.[1] This chapter questions the stakes involved in reducing feminist interrogations and commitments to discourses of representation, visibility, and meritocracy. I argue that while girlboss feminism may facilitate individual opportunities for stability and advancement under neoliberal constraints, the proliferation of girlboss feminism as an emergent and mediated thread of neoliberal feminism plays a vital role in perpetuating the severe inequalities required to sustain racial capitalism as an oppressive political-economic and socio-cultural framework.

[1] I follow Black feminist theorists and activists such as Kimberle Crenshaw, Vivian May, Patricia Hill Collins, Audre Lorde, and many others in defining intersectionality as a feminist framework that embraces multiplicity to discover how identities, experiences, structures, and institutions produce varied relationships to systemic privilege and oppression. Intersectionality values cultivating bridges between theory and practice to shift material realities and restructure systems in service of producing liberatory futures, and recognizes that centering those with multiple marginalizations enables us to build more complete and transformative grassroots solutions.

Chapter 1: Theorizing #Girlboss Feminism

Historicizing Feminism, Racial Capitalism, and Neoliberal Cultural Politics

From Beyonce unveiling a giant sign reading FEMINIST during the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards to actress Emma Watson's viral "Why I'm a Feminist" speech, key watershed moments facilitated a twenty-tens cultural zeitgeist for feminism. The concept of feminism seemed to suddenly become mainstream in the post-2010 media landscape. Pop journalism started focusing on getting celebrities to ask the million-dollar question: "are you a feminist?"[2] With this cultural attention, feminist identification grew into a pivot point, distinguishing celebrities as either "progressive" or behind the times. Yet, what it means to be progressive in the Western cultural imaginary gains shape through the political and economic forces that structure experience and reality. When those political and economic forces prioritize market-driven logics and practices, mainstream conceptions of progressivism are constrained by capitalist values of self-responsibilization. Our post-2010 era of feminism is the defining historical period for girlboss feminism, and this thread of contemporary feminism emerged within a framework of shifting neoliberal cultural politics. This set of cultural politics can be understood as the social and cultural practices, processes, texts, and techniques that proliferate neoliberalism as a governing rationality. Neoliberalism shapes understandings of progressivism in accordance with how cultural changes can best accommodate the expansion of capital. In order to understand girlboss

[2] By 2010, feminist interrogation grew into a popular question often peppered into celebrity interviews. With a rise in popularity for blogs such as Feministing, Bitch, and Jezebel in the mid-2000s, these sites blending pop culture criticism and feminist politics facilitated news cycles around responses to the "are you a feminist?" question starting around 2007. Celebrities such as Lady Gaga, former Spice Girl Geri Halliwell, and Taylor Swift all declared they were not feminists prior to 2010. With popular feminist blogs increasing conversation and criticism around these responses in 2007-2010, the post 2010 years marked a mainstream culture shift where celebrities did not want to be on the receiving end of bad press generated by the blogosphere. Andi Zeisler charts this 2010s feminist cultural zeitgeist in her 2017 book *We Were Feminists Once: From Riot Grrrl to CoverGirl®, the Buying and Selling of a Political Movement*.

feminism's relevance and impact as a formation of neoliberal cultural politics, I must first historicize feminism as a social movement, and the relationship racial capitalism shares to the trajectory of this movement.

Since the 1960s, the concept of feminism, and its associated social movements, shifted and evolved in relation to cultural and political forces. 60s era feminist advocates understood the feminist movement as two distinct threads, with the liberal activism of groups like the National Organization of Women (NOW) and the National League of Women Voters (the League) situated in contrast to radical women's liberation. While mainstream orgs like NOW began with a focus on labor politics and union organizing, these liberal outfits drifted toward a focus on specific policy changes, such as the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and equal pay. This narrow emphasis on policy change deflected attention from a variety of intersectional struggles, as the ERA and equal pay initiatives failed to account for issues affecting low-income, Black, brown, and Indigenous women. The ERA and equal pay legislation galvanized support from middle to upper class white women, as advocating for an end to gender-based discrimination in the realms of property ownership, employment, and divorce law spoke to issues of concern to women from higher economic brackets. Access to healthcare and affordable housing were just a few pressing issues sidelined in favor of policy legislation centered around equal pay, property rights, and other concerns of middle/upper class white women. By foregrounding the voices and concerns of white middle/upper class women, the women's movement grew into a force intended to support the upward mobility of (some) women by facilitating their acquisition of capital and property. To be clear, this shift toward defining feminist movement through capitalist orientations pushed back against key voices advocating for intersectionality in the 1970s.

Black feminist socialists such as Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Audre Lorde pioneered the concept of identity politics, highlighting how drawing threads between the personal and political was an effort to dismantle capitalism. In the 1977 Combahee River Collective statement, a foundational piece of Black feminist thought, the collective identified the urgency of centering an understanding of interlocking oppressions when building political agendas, and linked intersecting experiences of oppression based on social categorization to the expansion of global capitalism. The Combahee River Collective insisted that revolutionary feminist change will emerge from abolishing structures of racial capitalism that function to sustain and perpetuate hierarchies of social categories and economic exploitation. In order to fully capture how structures of racial capitalism produce inequality, and brainstorm interventions to dismantle that inequity, the Combahee River Collective argued that Black lesbian women's positionalities elucidate systems of interlocking oppression, and centering these positionalities would enable us to build more complete grassroots solutions that account for everyone. Understanding that we all cannot be free until Black women are free, the Combahee River Collective pushed the mainstream feminist movement to change course, and refuse to conceptualize feminism in tandem with capitalist expansion.[3] Knowing that only middle-upper class white women stood to benefit from merging feminism with capitalist orientations, the Combahee River Collective recognized that feminism growing into a mechanism for capitalist growth would undermine the movement's revolutionary potential.

[3] In *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*, activist-scholar Dr. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor interviews founding members of the collective to reflect on the legacy of the Combahee River Collective statement, and its critical importance to contemporary activist work today. Yamahtta-Taylor emphasizes the need to recognize and appreciate what interventions and activist possibilities the statement continues to generate, and how it must inform intersectional social movement work.

Combahee River Collective member Audre Lorde called upon feminists to engage social difference as a strength, rather than insisting on obscuring or rejecting intersectional concerns in the name of an illusory sense of unity. Audre Lorde writes,

> Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation (115).

As 70s-era movements splintered, emergent threads of mainstream feminism worked to distort and misname differences by avoiding grappling with how intersectionality complicates movement work. As Jodi Melamed highlights with the concept of racial capitalism, race and other forms of social difference can be leveraged by white supremacy to extract value -- using BIPOC communities and individuals to generate economic and social value in service of reinforcing inequitable social stratification. Race and social difference generate economic and social value for feminism when women are lauded for "overcoming" struggles based on gender, race, disability, and so on to fit themselves into a one-size-fits-all notion of feminist progress. These methods of distorting difference grew into common practice, refusing to address systemic barriers diverse women needed to navigate to fit themselves into a narrow conception of feminist progress.

Mainstream feminism did not heed Combahee River Collective members' calls to action, and moving into the late 70s and 80s era, visible feminist movement grew increasingly focused on enhancing women's market competitiveness. In configuring the feminist movement as a mechanism for women's economic growth and independence, the movement's aims developed a narrow emphasis on cultivating women as a market actors. Women's capacities for career growth, consumer potential, and personal ambition became synonymous with feminist advancement. Sociologist Hester Eisenstein

argues that the feminist movement's preoccupation with women's market competitiveness facilitated the transformation of feminism from a collective movement to one centered on individual, personal ambition (65). As this dominant strand of feminism emphasizing individualism and responsibility grew, US mainstream feminism emerged as an identity and cultural project compatible with neoliberalism. Situated as an emergent formation in the history of American liberal capitalism, neoliberalism represents an evolution of liberalism as a political philosophy cohering around capitalist economies. Characterized by an emphasis on freedom, personal liberty, private property ownership, and contested distinctions between private and public realms, traditional American liberalism created a ripe foundation for Reagan-era policies to build upon. Reagan, in tandem with Thatcher in England, ushered in a new political and economic era driven toward privatization, deregulation, the marketization of public resources, and market competition. Centered on reigning in labor power, reifying class distinctions, and gutting social safety nets, neoliberalism used liberalism's rhetoric of freedom, personal responsibility, and liberty to reinscribe social hierarchies.

Cultural theorist Lisa Duggan argues that "neoliberalism, a late twentieth-century incarnation of liberalism, organizes material and political life in terms of race, gender, and seuxality as well as economic class and nationality, or ethnicity and religion." Liberalism traditionally produced a contested relationship between private and public realms, with questions of social identity, inequality, and power relegated to concerns of the private realm. The Reagan period inspired a new era of "culture wars" during which liberal rhetoric became a vehicle for espousing racist, sexist, and homophobic ideologies. Media caricatures such as the "welfare queen" and the cruel humor of depicting the 80s AIDS crisis as a "gay plague" portrayed issues of systemic social inequality as individualized personal failings. Casting

complicated social problems as misuses of personal responsibility and opportunity rationalized the government's inaction on and exacerbation of such issues as poverty and lack of access to vital social services. Through the Reagan era's engagement with identity and cultural projects as a source of rationalizing political and economic policy centered on drastically scaling back public resources and facilitating the upward redistribution of wealth, we see how identity and cultural projects can function as apparatuses for neoliberal ideology. The contested divisions between public and private space grew into a productive space of ideological opportunity through which identity and cultural projects became embedded in the neoliberal project. With images of welfare queens of color and criminalized Black men ingrained in the American popular imagination, the 1990s experienced a continued gutting of the American social safety net. As the process of redefining systemic inequity to be the result of individual failings (lack of hard work, personal responsibility, etc.) wove itself into the fabric of cultural and political life, political leaders justified the unraveling of social safety nets and enforcing "tough on crime" measures that disproportionately impacted low-income communities of color. Bill Clinton completely overturned welfare legislation to make social services inaccessible to poor women of color, expanded the "war on drugs" to increase the incarceration of people of color for non-violent drug offenses, and perpetuated Reagan's legacy of wedding American politics with oppressive cultural myths. As corporations gained more power, and a lack of social welfare programs exacerbated social inequalities, the downward redistribution movements of the 60s and 70s gradually became increasingly splintered. This splintering took the form of social movements losing momentum, with various activists involved in these movements seeking to assimilate into a new political order centered on increased corporatization and growing social inequities.

Duggan argues that the history of American Liberal capitalism has traditionally separated class politics from identity politics, ultimately disabling the growth of radical social movements.

In the 60s and 70s, the distinction between class and identity politics took shape in the transition from feminism's focus on labor and downward economic redistribution toward an increasing emphasis on cultivating women as competitive market actors. The emergence of 70s/80s era individualistic, lifestyle feminism centered women's struggles for gender equality in the form of equal pay, non-discriminatory employment opportunities, and property ownership. These struggles fail to account for myriad forms of inequality emerging from intersectional identities, such as race, disability, and class. How does housing discrimination take shape for Black women? What struggles for securing comprehensive healthcare does someone with chronic health issues face? What challenges do undocumented women face in paying for college? The historical evolution of feminist aims marks not only a divergence between class and identity politics, but a dismissal of accounting for the diversity of concerns impacting all women. This lack of accounting for and refusal to address intersectional issues points to feminism's failure to grow as a radical, inclusive movement. In embracing a set of politics centered solely on gender equality, the feminist movement effectively foregrounded white, upwardly mobile women's concerns. As these concerns -- the desire to be a competitive market actor, to attain individual career and economic advancement, to earn as much as their male counterparts, to increase their consumer buying power -- firmly reified neoliberal principles of personal responsibility, freedom, and private ownership, the feminist movement evolved into an identity-based cultural project of neoliberalism.

Social causes that supported the upward distribution of resources and rejected imperatives toward mutual aid or collective, intersectional struggle took hold as the dominant force of cultural politics. Identity and cultural projects, such as 80s-era "relief" efforts like USA for Africa, work to ensure resistance is accounted for and recast as players in the neoliberal project. USA for Africa, a celebrity-led initiative created to address hunger in Africa, represented

the emergence of neoliberal era cultural projects that prioritize charity over solidarity. USA for Africa frames non-Western cultures as needy and deserving of pity, rather than understanding Africans' lack of access to resources as a product of Western imperialism's destabilization of global economies to generate opportunities for privatization. Leaders of the 60s and 70s era Black Power movement, such as Stokely Carmichael, illuminated the connections between the oppression of Black communities in the USA and African nations, highlighting how racial capitalism produces conditions that marginalize Black communities at home and abroad. The Black radical tradition drew these linkages in an effort to create global solidarity networks that stood a chance at overthrowing capitalism internationally.[4] USA for Africa demonstrates a profound divergence from conceptualizing social problems in relation to political economic critique, instead opting to characterize social problems produced by racial capitalism as an issue somewhere else, and no fault of the American quest to expand capitalism globally. By refusing to address root causes of Africans' lack of access to clean water and food, USA for Africa constructs Africans as deserving of charity, rather than communities marginalized by the neoliberal project requiring American's solidarity in efforts to resist global capitalism.

The evolution of feminism from a struggle toward downward redistribution into a project of individual market success also demonstrates a reconfiguration of resistance into participation. Accounting for resistance in an ongoing way subsumes contingency, and neoliberalism maintains governance over social and cultural life by assimilating oppositional factions into its fold. Neoliberalism utilizes feminism in the same way it utilizes culture and identity projects that emerged

[4] In *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, Cedric Robinson elucidates the transformative and radical potential of transnational solidarity networks intended to undermine and abolish global racial capitalism.

out of other deradicalized and depoliticized social movements.[5] We also see this ethos of transforming radical work into identity and cultural work that props up neoliberal structures embodied in contemporary diversity and inclusion work. In academic spaces, diversity and inclusion work often takes shape as cosmetic interventions to the university system's rooted inequalities based on hierarchy and social categorization. This results in inequitable demands for invisible labor and undue cultural taxation placed on Black colleagues. Often asked to unpack pain and trauma as evidence for systemic racism at work, diversity and inclusion work disregards the continuous burden this places on Black colleagues in academia. When Black experiences are discussed in academia, there is often a hyper focus on pain and trauma, rather than the multi-dimensional elements of Black life-- such as uplifting Black joy, pleasure, and reparations. This contributes to the erasure and sidelining of Black experiences. This is what James M. Thomas means by the term "diversity regimes": the institutionalization of diversity that works to obscure, sideline, and even magnify, existing racial inequalities. I point to diversity regimes as an example of an identity and cultural project that buttresses neoliberal structures, rather than interrogating systemic solutions which require an attention to both political-economic critique and identity politics.

Identity and cultural projects that perpetuate various dimensions of precarity and marginalization highlight how social causes can function as a vital wing of expanding neoliberal

[5] Arlene Dávila highlights that an emphasis on building cultural economies through arguments that culture enhances GDP and social cohesion, works to obscure forms of social inequality produced by neoliberal restructuring since the 1980s. Dávila notes how cultural production is framed as a social good, divorcing conversations from an attention to how structures such as racism and classism produce inequitable experiences of cultural economies. Alexandra Chasin also highlights how, since the 1990s, the LGBTQ+ movement grew into a vital force of producing capital, as varied industries came to recognize LGBTQ+ communities as key markets to advertise to and generate revenue from. Similarly, Miranda Joseph argues that the concept of LGBTQ+ community itself became essential cultural material for the expansion of capital.

structures. These identity and cultural projects that prop up the status quo are often fundable, as foundations and corporations with a vested interest in the status quo support their proliferation. As social safety nets were aggressively eroded throughout the late '80s through the Clinton years, nonprofits and charities experienced increasing pressure to take foundation and corporate funding. With narratives of systemic change out of vogue for funders, these entities adopted engagement strategies that steered clear of mass mobilization rhetoric, and instead focused the potential for social change on the individual donor. Rather than articulating social change as possible through large-scale cultural shifts, nonprofits and charities instructed the everyday person that "with your donation of $5, YOU can create a better world."[6] The individual, and their capacities to donate, shift behaviors, and take personal responsibility for a social cause, came to take precedence in a landscape of shifting neoliberal politics. With this historical and cultural backdrop shaping the emergence and cultivation of neoliberal cultural politics, we see a particular terrain that 2010-era understandings of feminism gained popularity and buy-in through.

Our post 2010 media landscape centered the focus of social change on individual empowerment and choice. 2013 saw the release of Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg's book *Lean In* -- part memoir, part self-help book, part business for dummies guide, yet holistically a manual for achieving feminist empowerment through getting a seat at the table of lucrative, decision-making board rooms. This is a feminism characterized by individual advancement, rather than a collective orientation toward structural change. Sandberg's text became a bestseller, evidencing cultural resonance with a particular brand of feminism centered

[6] In *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times,* Sarah Banet-Weiser and Roopali Mukherjee discuss the cultural shift toward consumer-based activist participation under neoliberal contexts. From buying (RED) products to fight AIDS to buying "Caring Cups" at the Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf to support fair trade, an emphasis on "ethical" consumption often supplants collective, grassroots participation under contemporary capitalist structures.

on self-actualization, and making more money. Catherine Rottenberg argues that Sandberg's feminism highlights the emergence of neoliberal feminism, defined as a particular feminist ethic or orientation grounded by the values of personal responsibility, competitiveness, and trickle-down change. Neoliberal feminism locates change at the individual level, arguing that if women take enough responsibility for their work-life balances, promotions, wellness, etc., those modes of self-responsibilization will shift social and cultural structures toward gender equality. Neoliberal feminism sees social change through a lens of individual behavior modification and attitude adjustment. In other words, feminism gains definition through the individual woman working hard "enough" to be well, create balance, and advance their careers.

Defining feminism through hard work, balance, and career advancement illustrates how neoliberal feminism is a product of racial capitalism. Neoliberal feminism promotes capital accumulation by perpetuating inequitable labor and social relations. Following Cedric Robinson's conceptualization of racial capitalism in *Black Marxism*, Jodi Melamed highlights how

> Capital can only be capital when it is accumulating, and it can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups—capitalists with the means of production/workers without the means of subsistence, creditors/debtors, conquerors of land made property/the dispossessed and removed. These antinomies of accumulation require loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value, and racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires.

Neoliberal feminism operates as an ideological and applied regime of accumulation sustained by perpetuating inequitable relations among human groups. Neoliberal feminism seeks to position women as having the upper hand in hierarchical dynamics among production and workers, conquerors and the dispossessed -- rendering some disposable and unequal in accordance with the logics of racialized differentiation that justifies some as having, and some

as going without. Neoliberal feminism rationalizes these inequalities by pointing to women's capacity to become the capitalists, conquerors, and creditors as an "equality win." Equating feminist progress with upward mobility and personal responsibility became crystallized with Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In.* In looking toward how the book was received, we see how a cultural affinity for neoliberal feminism sustains cultural values of white supremacy such as entrepreneurship and self-responsibilization.

#Girlboss Feminism, Discourses of Entrepreneurship, and Economies of Visibility

With widespread conversations around celebrity feminist identification occurring in conjunction with a cultural draw toward Sandberg's lean in philosophy, Sophia Amorosu's memoir *#Girlboss* popped up amidst this cultural zeitgeist of celebrity feminist identification. In 2014, the word girlboss grew into an omnipresent force. Touted as *Lean In* for millenials, Girlboss packaged the neoliberal feminist politics of Sandberg's text in the rhetoric, aesthetics, and attitude of newly popularized, celebrity-endorsed feminism. These interconnections between pop culture and neoliberal politics grew out of integrating the values of contemporary business into visible, mediated realms. Contemporary business culture espouses values of entrepreneurship, and this dedication to entrepreneurship extends beyond business settings and ripples through culture. I see entrepreneurship acting as a conceptually layered and key neoliberal value, as entrepreneurship represents multifaceted imperatives of responsibilization. Entrepreneurship embodies the need to continuously monetize one's activities, interests, and presences across professional and personal contexts. I understand entrepreneurship as extending beyond the creation of a self-managed, professional business venture, and a reflection of how we understand individuals' desires, needs, and interests as markets. Following Wendy Brown, I see neoliberalism functioning as a political rationality through which neoliberal logics govern our

personal preferences and choices. Brown sees a distinct "marketization" of our preferences and choices, demonstrating how these decisions occur in accordance with market logics. She argues that under neoliberalism, "human beings become market actors and nothing but, and every field of activity is seen as a market" (8). Understanding oneself as a market actor takes shape as making decisions in accordance with a logic of competition, as opposed to a logic of human flourishing. Brown writes, "neoliberalism construes even non-wealth generating spheres—such as learning, dating, or exercising—in market terms, submits them to market metrics, and governs them with market techniques and practices" (10). Understanding the concept of entrepreneurship as extending to non-wealth generating sphere gestures at the integration of business culture and popular culture. Not only can we be entrepreneurial in the workplace, we can turn our social media presences, personal hobbies, and other facets of intimacy into entrepreneurial ventures. Entrepreneurship blurs lines between professional and personal realms, generating increased overlap between business culture's values and pop culture's interests. Business culture looks to pop culture for vital energy and material to energize practices and structures centered on valorizing logics of competition and personal responsibility. In turn, popular culture now centers entrepreneurship in various ways, and love for entrepreneurship takes shape in what individuals and cultural material gains reverence, attention, and celebrity. Investing popular culture with entrepreneurial logics and values works to continuously produce and expand a mainstream current of neoliberal politics, where values of self-responsibilization embed themselves in everyday realities and experiences. The intimate relationship between business and pop culture cultivates a mainstream affinity for neoliberalism, and naturalizes the relationships of severe inequality endemic to racial capitalism.

The relationship between business and pop culture generates affective attachments to entrepreneurship, and these affective attachments contribute to producing a culture of neoliberalism. As Patricia Ventura notes, neoliberal culture operates as a "structure of feeling, and various apparatus and rationalities support this structure of feeling" (2). Borrowing from Raymond Williams, Ventura identifies this structure of feeling as "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt" (2). In order to garner cultural interest and investments, neoliberal politics engages cultural texts as a way to disseminate neoliberal values and draw audiences in. Cultural texts promoting entrepreneurialism, meritocracy, and competition clarify and reinforce the relationship between business and popular culture by enabling audiences to live and feel these values. Through these texts, neoliberal values embed themselves in everyday life, cultivating understandings of what it means to be a successful neoliberal subject: entrepreneurial and personally responsible for life's challenges and obstacles.

The girlboss is an expansive, mediated cultural text that buttresses racial capitalism. She offers a face, set of aesthetics, and various pop cultural entry points for committing to neoliberal values. The girlboss produces affective connections to entrepreneurship, molding imaginations to equate feminist empowerment with financial success, market competition, individualized work-life balance, and curated digital and physical presences driven by self-monetization. Those lived and felt experiences of empowerment manifest commitments to neoliberal values. By associating neoliberal values with these lived and felt experiences of empowerment, the girlboss bridges business culture's priorities with pop culture's impact. Business culture valorizes entrepreneurial thinking and ethics, while pop culture filters those objectives through mediated realms that understand feminism as a celebrity-endorsed, individualized project of self-responsibilization. The girlboss creates affective buy-in for entrepreneurship by making it appealing and desirable.

The girlboss works to make entrepreneurial ethics, values, and goals legible to mainstream contexts, shaping the priorities of contemporary business into a cool and trendy package. She works to expand cultural understandings of entrepreneurship beyond a solely professional venture, and instruct audiences on how to be an *entrepreneurial subject*. To be an entrepreneurial subject is to monetize all facets of one's existence, structuring one's orientation to the world through the lens of market competition. Entrepreneurial subjects assume total responsibility for their ventures, divorcing themselves from the capacity to see those in their personal and professional spheres as comrades in shared struggle, rather than competition. Philip Mirowski charts the cultural shift toward prioritizing an entrepreneurial self by noting,

> It is predominantly the story of an entrepreneurial self equipped with promiscuous notions of identity and selfhood, surrounded by simulacra of other such selves. It tags every possible disaster as the consequences of risk-bearing, the personal fallout from making "bad choices" in investments. It is a world where competition is the primary virtue, and solidarity a sign of weakness. Consequently, it revels in the public shaming of the failed and the hapless.

Our cultural preoccupation with the entrepreneurial self deems that the inability to develop wealth is an inability to fulfill neoliberal conception of success.[7] With that, one falls short in striving and achieving excellence if they fall behind in competing against those around them who have also internalized equating wealth accumulation and generative investment with success. As an entrepreneurial subject, one sees the content they post to social media, the activities they engage their children in, their romantic and friendship connections, and so on as

[7] In *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown*, Philip Mirowski charts how potential critiques to neoliberalism get subsumed by the internalization of cultural values centered on competition and wealth accumulation. The political Left often fails to see how these neoliberal cultural values impact their capacities to imagine and cultivate anti-capitalist futures. The girlboss represents an outgrowth of how Leftist movement goals grew distorted by their increasing commitments to neoliberal cultural values, and this is embodied in the prioritization of cultivating entrepreneurial selves.

pieces in the larger framework of financial prosperity. Effective entrepreneurial subjectivity reflects the capacity to maintain and grow a comprehensive brand, and one's brand encompasses all facets of one's personal, family, and professional lives. The girlboss integrates feminist ethics based on self-responsibilization into this understanding of entrepreneurial subjectivity, intertwining feminist empowerment with the ability to be the best entrepreneurial subject. To effectively balance one's work and personal life and successfully build your brand is at the heart of achieving girlboss status, and this status simultaneously informs audiences on what form the prosperous, ideal neoliberal subject can take.

The girlboss engages economies of visibility to define entrepreneurship and feminism in tandem, using representation to oversimplify complicated interactions and relationships with identity and power. According to Sarah Banet-Weiser, economies of visibility function to situate visual representation of race and gender categories as an end in itself, what is visible becomes what *is* (22). Economies of visibility come to supplant an interrogation of politics with a satisfaction in the visual representation of race and gender categories. Instead of examining the structural factors through which race and gender gain cultural definition, mainstream audiences grow content with simply the visibility of race and gender. Exploring what it means to be a feminist, or what constitutes racism, grows less important in contemporary economies of visibility. Rather, the visibility of identifying as a feminist or anti-racist takes precedent to those complicated intellectual and political inquiries. Economies of visibility structure our understandings of entrepreneurship and feminism. As economies of visibility reduce political complexity to the visibility of identification, the girlboss leverages these structures to muddy the distinctions between entrepreneur and feminist. As girlboss presence increases in networked spaces, these categories grow to be one in the same: to be a powerful woman is to be a feminist and vice versa. Merging these categories redefines feminism; rather than seeing feminism as a collective-oriented social movement with varied social and political objectives,

feminism grows into an individualized project of brand building. The girlboss uses entrepreneurial and feminist identification as a means of avoiding complex political concerns. Economies of visibility tend to contradict intersectional engagements with identity and power, as intersectional analysis requires exploring facets of experience and knowledge production emerging from relationships to structural power. By situating visibility as an end in itself, we skirt those messy and generative interrogations of systemic power. The presence of women in corporate settings, the presence of women candidates, and the presence of financial success all offer symbolic manifestations of feminism. Neoliberal feminism thrives on these symbols, as they reduce feminism to a simple recipe of women's presence as THE feminist win. The girlboss is a manifestation of this visibility, a reminder that women can get a "piece of the pie."

The girlboss intervenes in problems and issues produced by modes of systemic power that generate economic precarity, social isolation, and obstacles to growth. The girlboss offers solutions for wellness, community building, and personal advancement by defining problem-solving through logics of capital. But this approach hinders intersectional dialogue that interrogates the multifaceted and systemic nature of economic and social inequity. In producing a cultural legibility for neoliberal politics while working to account for problems and issues generated by social systems, the girlboss turns feminism into a mechanism for reinforcing systemic power. Yet, in recognizing how girlboss solutions and problem-solving emerge under the pressure of neoliberal contexts, we see how she simultaneously produces spaces of opportunity for women. Girlboss feminism captures the larger set of social and cultural dynamics energized by girlboss activities; these dynamics encompass various costs and affordances created by both generating pop cultural resonance with neoliberal feminist politics and defining problem-solving through a logics of capital. Investigating the complexities of girlboss feminism poses opportunities for generating interventions with the nuance and agility necessary for responding to structural power that adapts and reconfigures to maintain dominance.

Wealth, Health, & My Best Self: How to Be a Girlboss

By identifying feminism as a process of entrepreneurial brand building, the girlboss' circulation through economies of visibility centers on the continuous expansion of the girlboss brand. The girlboss educates audiences on how to cultivate entrepreneurial subjectivities through personal brand building, and this education functions in accordance with the logics of contemporary media. I look to how girlboss culture curates a mediated universe that is instructive for social media users. This mediated universe teaches aspiring girlbosses how to be ideal neoliberal subjects, leveraging feminism, media, and branding to be their best entrepreneurial selves.

From Instagram memes and branded Girlboss platforms to TV shows and commodity products, the girlboss functions as a transmedia amalgamation of content and logics defining what the girlboss is. The girlboss universe spans diverse platforms, formats, techniques, and practices, highlighting discourses of entrepreneurship, the representational politics central to economies of visibility, and aspirational meritocratic narratives. In following my Digital Feminisms students' lead, I believe their examples of Instagram inspirational picture quotes, and what VP Kamala Harris represents in the cultural imagination, provides key content to further understand girlboss logics. Inspirational picture quotes often feature some kind of motivational text accompanied by an aesthetic background. The background is often a particular color or image that responds to a girlboss accounts' branding. The font is often stylized as cursive or a crisp Helvetica. These elements of inspirational picture quotes are important to note as they gesture at a kind of uniformity that grows recognizable as it traverses social media platforms. Seeing these aesthetic dimensions enables my students to predict what kind of message the content's text will feature. The messages communicated in the picture quote often center on promoting positivity as the key mechanism to personal and professional growth. Text

such as “good vibes only...staying happy is a MUST...believe that by focusing on positive thoughts, you will attract positive experiences” highlights how girlboss positivity is framed as the key to generating personal and professional success. These inspirational picture quotes target aspiring entrepreneurs, noting how the key to building a successful business is building a consistently positive mindset. Barbara Ehrenreich argues that contemporary cultures of positivity support ideologies of neoliberal individualism by understanding personal failure as a product of negativity or inadequate optimism. Girlbosses situate positive thinking as an entry point to success. As Ehrenreich points out, neoliberal cultures of positivity attribute misfortune or failure to a flaw in one’s attitude or behavior. By viewing success in direct correlation to thinking or acting in the “right ways,” girlbosses teach social media users that personal change is what stands between them and success. Girlbosses engage neoliberal positivity as a tool for deflecting from structural factors that may contribute to precarity and a lack of job stability, instructing aspiring girlbosses to instead look inward if they want to discover the success of consistent entrepreneurial work and meritocratic success.

The 2020 election of President Joe Biden and VP Kamala Harris continues to spark discussions around the limitations of representational politics. As my students noted, Kamala Harris’ intersecting identities as a Black and South Asian woman often compel journalists to frame her appointment as a feminist win. Yet, Kamala Harris’ political track record evidences her resistance to intersectional politics. Harris fought to block gender-affirming care for trans prisoners in 2015. Harris was a key proponent for 2018 FOSTA/SESTA legislation that increased the criminalization of sex work by

conflating consensual sex work with sex trafficking.[8] FOSTA/SESTA shut down online realms such as Backpage and Craigslist that sex workers utilized to communicate with one another about various predatory clients and promote sex workers' safety. In her time as California Attorney General, Harris worked to prevent measures that would reduce prison overcrowding and release prisoners incarcerated for non-violent drug charges. As Harris' political record highlights her lack of support for trans prisoners, sex workers, and freeing marginalized communities from carceral structures that punish the poor for non-violent drug offenses, we may question how her appointment is lauded as a feminist win. If we see this celebration of Harris through an intersectional lens, we understand why her appointment warrants critique. If we see this celebration of Harris in relation to girlboss feminism's economies of visibility, her mere presence as a Black South Asian woman in a powerful position is a win for representational politics. Representational politics divorce identity politics from capitalist critique, contradicting the Combahee River Collective's initial conceptualization of identity politics as inextricably linked to political-economic justice. When we reduce a feminist win to a person with marginalized identities' presence within economies of visibility, we construct girlboss feminism as a simple politics of incorporating more identities into positions of power within the same oppressive structures. Girlboss feminism takes shape as incorporating women and folks with diverse identities into realms where they can make decisions that make life harder for marginalized communities, even if they are representatives of those very communities.

[8] Initiatives that aim to crack down on sex trafficking often disregard the complicated dynamics of choice, circumstance, and agency that factor into consensual sex work. FOSTA/SESTA conflated sex trafficking, nonconsensual transport and egregious labor abuses of individuals, with consensual sex work -- creating a situation where sex workers were exposed to greater harm and denied agency. In the US, the most frequently trafficked individuals are undocumented agricultural workers. For more on how choice, circumstance, and agency takes shape in sex workers' experiences, see Melissa Gira Grant's 2014 book *Playing the Whore*. Grant, a former sex worker, offers introductory insight into the politics of sex work.

Girlboss Feminism in Digital Spaces

In digital space, constructions of girlboss feminism evidence a further narrowing of feminism to branded, monetized terms. Media users engaging with girlboss content and producing their own girlboss content collaborate on generating understandings of what it means to be feminist, defining feminism in tandem with entrepreneurship. On Instagram, the #girlboss hashtag amalgamates digital content that ranges from sharing tips for being a competitive #ladypreneur in the marketplace to inspirational quotes emphasizing the importance of engaging positivity and remaining focused while building one's brand. The account @ladypreneur advises users on what it takes to create a brand with the potential for expansion, sharing a screenshot of a tweet reading: "It doesn't matter if the market is saturated, identify a need, identify the people with that need, and position your product/service as the solution." While @bossedupquotes urges users to see financial prosperity on the horizon, sharing the quote "I'm smelling a whole lot of 'I'm making money moves' in 2020." These bits of wisdom and advice contribute to understanding feminist progress as securing chances for monetary growth. As the #girlboss hashtag amasses these tips and quotes calling upon women to increase their bank accounts, the hashtag #feminist or #feminism often finds itself nestled among the #girlboss, #ladypreneur, #bossbabe and other variations of feminized entrepreneurship-related social media tags that decorate the captions of these posts. Visibility of the #feminist or #feminism hashtag becomes an end in itself here, engaging economies of visibility to declare feminism without discussion. The presence of the #feminist or #feminism hashtag is enough to identify these tips and quotes as fodder for gender justice. Success is the headliner of girlboss feminism, and political dialogue takes a backseat to personal and professional ventures that ultimately secure the money bag.

To be successful means creating an empire out of oneself. In the girlboss universe, the individual is capable of monetizing themselves from the businesses they take on, to the personal decisions they make. “Money moves” can range from finding an investor for your business, to upgrading some element of one’s personal life. Another #girlboss hashtag share reads, “I’m obsessed with upgrading my life in every single aspect. I wanna be a better woman all around.” The notion of upgrading in the girlboss universe encourages users to maximize entrepreneurship of the self in personal and professional realms. To be entrepreneurial is to be consistently improving — having better relationships and taking care of your health are complements to accumulating material possessions like homes, cars, and savings accounts. Users define all of these activities as enhancing one’s capacity for financial prosperity. @bossedupquotes declares “claiming comfortable wealth, good health, and the best version of myself.” The best version of oneself is wealthy and healthy, converging personal enrichment and professional growth to define the ideal feminist subject.

When the Girlboss media startup (touted as a LinkedIn for millennial women) launched in early 2019, girlboss culture further expanded across digital spaces. The Girlboss platform, marketed as a “less stiff and stale” professional networking site, asks users to share “not just what they do, but who they are.” The site requires users to share their work experience alongside a horoscope reading and witty fill-in-the-blank bio, with the bio aimed at showcasing aspects of their personality. The Girlboss platform represents neoliberal culture’s shift toward marketing personality as a component of successful capitalist subjectivities. Similar to Instagram’s motivational content merging personal and professional upgrades to attain success, the personal becomes a vital selling point in girlboss culture. A pattern of desirable personality traits emerges through the platform’s user engagement, highlighting the role of collective intelligence in shaping conceptions of the ideal empowered woman. Users with influence on the platform, those that generate profitable connections and develop followings, evidence a sense

of humor, confidence, and most notably, authenticity. Conversation threads around what burnout feels like, navigating failure, and overcoming fears around salary negotiation garner attention and build interest, speaking to how vulnerability is not only relatable, but a selling point. In the Girlboss daily email newsletter, this emphasis on vulnerability takes shape as entrepreneurs sharing personal difficulties amidst COVID, lamenting the irritations of online dating woes, and challenges with monitoring social media intake during quarantine.

In her analysis of beauty and lifestyle bloggers, Brooke Erin Duffy highlights the role of authenticity in expanding one's brand. Duffy notes that authenticity represents the demands for self-promotion created by emotional capitalism, defined by Eva Illouz as the complicated intersections of intimacy and political/economic models of exchange. Girlboss users respond to emotional capitalism's norms of engaging what is personal and intimate as modes of profitability. This profitability centers on reinforcing gendered expectations of women's capacity for expressing vulnerability, pointing to how emotional capitalism operates through structures of gender essentialism. Women are expected to be vulnerable, and emotional capitalism engages this norm as an opportunity for extracting value. Through the repetitive selling of their own relatability and authenticity, Girlboss users structure the marketing of personality traits as a key feature of gaining influence. Consequently, users cultivate platform norms around "authentic" self-promotion through their consistent efforts to appear a relatable "girls' girl." This collective intelligence regarding what sells personality-wise takes shape through user engagement, demonstrating the key role users play in shaping understandings of what sells. Users modeling what sells informs audiences how to leverage ideal personality traits, gendered expectations, and professional savvy to cultivate an entrepreneurial subjectivity that monetizes intimate space and the workplace.

Girlboss Feminism, Counterculture, and the Profitability of Rebellion

Despite a short broadcast run, the 2016 Netflix-produced television show *Girlboss* represented how girlboss culture engaged streaming television as an instructive space. Across digital platforms, girlboss culture facilitates understandings of women's empowerment and entrepreneurship that equates feminist progress with monetizing personal and professional activities. The *Girlboss* television show worked to incorporate rebellion into conceptions of feminist-minded entrepreneurial subjectivity, with various elements of digital space following suit. The girlboss TV show opens with a diatribe from Sophia Amorosu's character, played by Britt Robertson. Amorosu laments:

> Adulthood is where dreams go to die. grow up, get a job, become a drone. That's it. Then it's over. Society just wants to put everyone in a box. Well, guess what society. There is no box. Cause, I mean, if I thought the rest of my life would be spent as a mindless cog in a machine, I swear I'd just get a tattoo across my face that says: 'Really, man?' Just need to figure a way to grow up without becoming a boring adult.

Rebellion functions as a mechanism for expanding entrepreneurial subjectivity to account for millennial disaffection. With emotional capitalism working to intertwine intimacy and commitments to inequitable economic/political systems, the Girlboss TV show's emphasis on the affective qualities of reluctant adulthood, limited economic opportunities, and resistance to conformity engages an affective resonance with entrepreneurship. There is an awareness here of what millennials don't want, laced with an attention to transforming that resistance into desire. Millennials may not want to toil away at an unfulfilling job that pays the bills, but what can be done to make ends meet and do the gritty work of growing up? Entrepreneurship answers this query, entering like a beam of light, clad in distressed denim. You can *be your own boss*, says Sophia. The option to become one's own boss emerges as the neon road diverging from the bleak, gray path of adulthood. These roads both lead toward reinforcing structures of economic

precarity and social hierarchy, yet one looks and feels much more exciting. There are cogs in the machine of both paths, yet one has a well-dressed woman controlling the machine.

Girlboss feminism's engagement with defiance offers neoliberal feminist politics a key mode of adaptability. In *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, Pierre Dardot & Christian Laval argue that neoliberalism's adaptation-oriented strategy produces a malleability for neoliberal ideologies to maintain governance. Referencing Walter Lippmann's thought,[9] Dardot and Laval chart how a flexible conformity takes shape between humans and institutions, and how this malleability in producing conformity is necessary for neoliberal ideologies to dominate cultural life. By portraying the girlboss as defiant and rebellious, she generates cultural commitments through the illusion of contingency. She appears to be a countercultural thread resisting dominant culture, yet the underlying ideologies, practices, and expressions of the girlboss reify a conformity to existing neoliberal institutions. She is a manifestation of neoliberalism's adaptability in how she appears to challenge the status quo, yet assures compliance with it. A keen distrust of abstract "powers that be" shows up often in girlboss feminist rhetoric, highlighting how a construction of defiance can serve to preemptively neutralize systemic critique. If you frame girlboss feminism as a rejection of the powers that be, without defining what those powers are or how your work may function to reinforce their dominance, you assimilate millennial disaffection into the neoliberal fold. The girlboss presents herself as the alternative route to oppressive and dead-end capitalist grinding, yet her creativity constructs a fresh mode of survival under a familiar neoliberal framework. The

[9] The Colloque Walter Lippmann, a conference of intellectuals organized in Paris in August 1938, played a key role in the intellectual formation of neoliberalism as a political-economic and socio-cultural framework. Economists and journalists such as Walter Lippmann, Friedrich Hayek, and Alexander Rustow were in attendance. At the conference, Alexander Rustow coined the phrase neoliberalism. In the Birth of Biopolitics, Michel Foucault highlights the importance of this conference in establishing the foundations of contemporary neoliberal thought.

girlboss is not your mother's CEO in a canary-yellow pant suit -- she rejects authority, monotony, and the Talbots sale rack. Neoliberalism will always need inroads to counterculture and youth culture to retain adaptability, and the girlboss functions as a millennial-era entry point for the neoliberal project to stay relevant, nimble, and dressed right.

With the girlboss, we see the look, feel, and energy of an anti-authoritarian feminist ethic presented as a mechanism for revitalizing capitalism. Feminism embodies politics, discourses, and varied aesthetics intertwined with a mainstream cultural memory that associates bra burning, man hating, and protest with the term. While the girlboss works to define feminism in association with neoliberal values of meritocracy, entrepreneurship, and wealth accumulation, there is a tension at play between historical memory and this neoliberal recoding. The mainstream cultural imaginary accounts for downward redistribution movements of the '60s and '70s in accordance with how media represented these struggles. '60s and '70s media portrayed the feminist movement as threats to preserving heteronormative family units, patriotism, and the stability of social, political, and economic order.[10] In looking to this historical conception of feminism as a countercultural threat, the work of redefining feminism in the image of the neoliberal project began with the emergence of corporate feminisms in the 80s, and continues today with the impact of Sheryl Sandberg's Lean In philosophy and the emergence of girlboss culture. Efforts toward redefinition operate in tension with the memory of feminism's countercultural history, and girlboss feminism uses this tension to its advantage.

Counterculture acts like a bubbling undercurrent to both pop and business culture. Counterculture is the terrain of the strange, edgy, weird, and rebellious, continuously offering

[10] Christian Broadcast Network founder Pat Robertson famously argued that feminism encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians. This argument, made in 1988, reflected how conservative spaces sowed fear and disgust for the feminist movement in order to trivialize its efforts.

fresh material to business and pop culture in ways that generate interest, expand audiences, and facilitate consumption. Since the 1950s, business culture evolved away from the rigid confines of organizational capitalism's suit and tie man and toward the free-thinking, outside-the-box thinkers often poached from countercultural realms. From the hippy turned CEO, to the punk turned brand executive, the youthful and creative energy of counterculture has continuously reinvigorated business culture, providing capitalism an ear to the ground of shifting cultural tides. The girlboss is a continuation of that legacy, transforming the countercultural energy of feminist movement and diverse subcultures into vital fodder for capitalism's adaptability. That countercultural energy keeps capitalist workplaces relevant by investing a creative edge that connects business culture to youth culture. Neoliberalism requires the efficiency, flexibility, and self-responsibilization of entrepreneurialism, and girlboss feminism offers a vital countercultural edge to a political and economic landscape necessitating entrepreneurial innovation. While the need for entrepreneurial creativity emerges from competitive structures of precarity and instability, girlboss feminism obscures cultural conditions facilitating the necessity of entrepreneurship. A particular countercultural energy fuels how the girlboss engages the zeitgeist of post 2010 popularized, celebrity-oriented feminism. Celebrity engagement with feminism structures understandings of feminism as badass and irreverent. From Emma Watson to Beyonce, headlines praising visible celebrity feminists laud these women as rejecting convention. We see this intrigue in the denial of tradition and refusal of authority present in both business and pop culture, and the girlboss weaves this interest through her branding of entrepreneurship. While intertwining entrepreneurial identity with rebellion and a rejection of the status quo existed since the creative thinker supplanted the 1950s suit and tie man, the girlboss works to popularize and gender this defiance through mediated networks.

The girlboss takes up countercultural rebellion as a mechanism for producing gendered, affective commitments to entrepreneurship. The girlboss not only represents the visual,

rhetorical, and ideological material espousing values of self-responsibilization, individualism, and competition, she makes those values look cool and feminine. While the rebels of Silicon Valley made waves by shifting stuffy business cultures away from explicit hierarchy, trading suits for sandals, the girlboss replaces a pant suit with a crisp leather jacket. Girlboss companies have a particular look and feel that engages femininity, rebellion, and business savvy. Millennial pink, bold yet feminine fonts, and smart yet cheeky taglines equate rebellion and entrepreneurship on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. From logos to websites to Instagram stories, girlboss aesthetics dress qualities we associate with masculinity -- assertiveness, aggression, dominance -- in visuals that are culturally defined as feminine. For instance, phrases such as “crush competitors” or “build your empire” are set in pink, delicate fonts. Dardot and Laval note that in order to produce “limits to the exercise of power,” the neoliberal project controls how transgressing gender norms is represented (3). Challenges to the construction of normative gender -- that is, interruptions in enacting gender based on normative rules and practices -- become accounted for by neoliberal culture in an effort to impose limitations on resisting power. The girlboss uses entrepreneurship to reinscribe normative understandings of gender by accounting for gender transgressions. Accounting for gender transgressions is intertwined with the politics of representation central to economies of visibility. When accounting for gender diversity gets reduced to the visibility of trans and gender non-conforming folks in girlboss spaces, this skirts deeper dialogues around how constructions of masculinity and femininity define girlboss spaces. For example, girlboss spaces such as Instagram accounts like @bossladiesmindset will feature trans and gender non-conforming folks in diversity photographs (pictures that intentionally curate a mix of folks with intersecting identities). Yet, @bossladiesmindset does not incorporate gender diversity into their branding by opting for gender-neutral language or resistance to binary rhetoric. Despite the presence of gender non-conforming and trans folks in photos, their social media presence continues to construct gender

in terms of a male/female binary by directing captions to “ladies” and “sis.” With this, gender expressions that defy existing normative standards become subsumed into the construction of normative gender as a means of rendering defiant expression legible. Aesthetic trends of girlboss culture facilitate a collective intelligence in their own right, creating particular standards for girlboss gender transgressions that reify gender normativity.

The Underdog Narrative: Constructing a Feminist Myth of Meritocracy

The *Girlboss* TV show tells an underdog story: a key ingredient of entrepreneurial brand building. The origin story of the Girlboss offers a narrative of how to transform the seemingly unprofitable, defiant space of rebellion into a money-making venture. It’s ironically a conformity story of non-conformity, using Amorosu’s tale to demonstrate how someone that seemingly lacks monetizable personality traits can turn into an ideal entrepreneurial subject with connections and influence. With Amorosu’s rags to riches narrative, we see how the element of taming rebellion by transforming it for profit embodies an underdog spirit. The concept of the underdog shares a close affinity with neoliberal conceptions of meritocracy: the idea that every social subject is on a level playing field where upward mobility is possible. Meritocracy contends that we can pull ourselves up by our bootstraps to create our own success. The Girlboss universe cultivates norms around sharing one’s underdog story, with Amorosu’s platform and hashtag usage proliferating feel-good tales of overcoming challenges to “make” it.

Self-help literature of self-identified boss bitches and boss babes, such as Sophia Amorosu’s #Girlboss and Nicole Lapin’s “Boss Bitch,” works in tandem with the *Girlboss* television show and digital space to produce a collective intelligence around meritocracy. These self-help texts use a common formula for their story arc: I experienced this significant challenge,

this challenge almost broke me, but I rose above the challenge and built a successful brand. In her book *Becoming Super Woman: A Simple 12-Step Plan to Go from Burnout to Balance*, Lapin discusses how she experienced an emergency hospitalization resulting from burnout. In the book, Lapin uses an underdog narrative of rising above her mental health struggles to create the lucrative empire she runs today. This empire thrives on teaching people key steps to become the "hero of their own narrative" and transform their underdog tales into an example of the American dream. The underdog narrative functions to generate a profound sense of relatability to a girlboss' brand, as a transparency about failure and hardship resonates with audiences. The girlboss garners attention with a compelling story arc that evidences the grit and determination to make it out on top, despite modes of precarity and isolation endemic to neoliberal contexts. The feminism of the underdog narrative emerges as the individual capacity to face obstacles as a woman, and overcome them. Rather than engaging with what shapes the systemic nature of particular obstacles, or how certain challenges look different for folks based on their intersecting identities, we see a product. That product is the underdog that won despite sexism, racism, classism, or ableism. The visibility of winning here takes precedent to why or how one needed to fight, effectively skirting dialogue around the complexities of structural barriers to upward mobility.

When considering impulses toward consumption and production of girlboss content, we see how the girlboss cultivates a model of neoliberal excellence that speaks to cultural desires for attaining the American dream. She offers a template of entrepreneurial subjectivity that shapes the American dream into a feminist narrative. By engaging stories of a gendered underdog, monetizing vulnerability and rebellion, and equating personal enrichment with wealth building, the girlboss enacts a particular bootstraps mythology: This mythology leverages the visibility of feminist hashtags, mentions, and references as a selling point, yet rejects political interrogation to accompany the rhetoric. The American dream gets a new and exciting

makeover with the girlboss, yet retains the familiar narrative contours of individualism and self-responsibilization that rationalize capitalism's continued adaptability.

In the chapters that follow, I explore how girlboss feminism takes shape through aspirational, meritocratic narratives, politics of representation that reject collective, intersectional struggle, and discourses of entrepreneurship. My interrogation of girlboss feminism highlights how this emergent, mediated thread of neoliberal feminism naturalizes systemic inequities, recoding feminist progress as individual advancement. I look to three key spaces: wellness culture, self-help coaching, and multi-level marketing communities to understand how feminism and racial capitalism grow intertwined via constructions of girlboss culture. The narratives, modes of visibility, and rhetoric that define girlboss feminism enables us to see how the girlboss represents emergent formations of neoliberal cultural politics. In charting these formations, I initiate conversations that investigate the nuances and complications of feminist movement work under racial capitalism. I hope that identifying these emergent threads of neoliberal feminism provides insight on how intersectional and liberatory modes of collective struggle might remain more nimble, and generate more political power, than incarnations of feminism that reinforce an oppressive status quo.

Chapter 2: The #Girlbosses of Neoliberal Wellness Culture

A Brief Cultural History of Neoliberal Wellness Culture

"Healthy by choice, not by chance."

"Beautiful body, built by you."

"Better health through better living"

We hear these slogans often from the contemporary health and wellness industry, a now 4.2 trillion dollar outfit. This omnipresent industry produces marketing declarations to take charge of one's health, make better choices, and sculpting one's own health destiny, extending these demands from TV ads to Instagram promotions. In the mid-twentieth century, Western culture's fascination with wellness crested as new conceptions of health, and associated preoccupations with maintaining health, took shape.[11] Physician Halbert Dunn identified wellness as a combination of physical, physiological, and psychological health in the 1959 article "High-Level Wellness for Man and Society." Described as a harmonious blend of body and spirit, "wellness" captured Dunn's concern for an increasingly populated and anxious world rife with medical knowledge yet plagued by dwindling resources. In *Keywords: The New Language of Capitalism*, John Patrick Leary notes how wellness emerged from a "pessimism about modernity, but has endured through its open-ended positivity." We saw this association between wellness and positivity take shape with the onset of 70s era wellness culture, often critiqued as a "middle-

[11] While I focus on Western culture's conceptualization of wellness here, So Yeon Leem captures how the anxieties of maintaining wellness and associated power dynamics between industry professionals and patients manifest at a plastic surgery clinic in South Korea. In "The Anxious Production of Beauty: Unruly Bodies, Surgical Anxiety and Invisible Care," Leem articulates the fraught power plays that exist between standards of beauty & wellness and patient & doctor's conceptions of how to achieve these standards. This article helps elucidate how the production of beauty and wellness is co-constituted by social subjects and industries.

class cult."[12] Dr. John Travis, founder of the Wellness Resource Center, helped make wellness a household name by defining it as "self-care" and an ongoing state of physical and spiritual growth, to Dan Rather on a 1979 episode of *60 Minutes*. Travis highlighted wellness culture's distrust of "establishment" physicians and health-care institutions, infusing wellness culture's origins with a distinctly rebellious spirit. The ethos of Travis' work aligned with the countercultural spirit of 70s era Silicon Valley, replete with ex-hippies bent on remedying social ills through technology. Both wellness culture and tech culture emerged as spaces that favored personal creativity and self-expression over establishment politics**.**

In this chapter, I look to how wellness culture, like tech culture, transformed countercultural energy into a vital force for expanding the neoliberal project. From the late 70s onward, American wellness thrived on discourses of entrepreneurship and personal responsibility, seeking to maximize the profitability of rebellion and celebrity cults of personality. I first historicize how American wellness thrived on this ethos of "cool capitalism," and then turn to how patriarchal voices of wellness ultimately set a precedent for a new era of women entrepreneurs monetizing rebellion and anti-establishment branding. This cultural shift toward women-centric wellness entrepreneurship is embodied in actress Gwyneth Paltrow's Goop brand, which merges cool capitalist rebellion with girlboss feminism: defined here through Goop's anti-intersectional wellness ideology that reinforces Eurocentric standards of beauty, ableism, and racial capitalism.

Hippies Turned Entrepreneurs

[12] During this time frame, we also saw more linkages created conceptions of productivity and worker surveillance. In "Limitless Worker Surveillance," Ifeoma Ajunwa, Kate Crawford and Jason Schultz discuss how the health data collected from workplace wellness programs also functioned as a key mechanism of worker surveillance. We now see the reduction of union protections and increased availability of technology connected to innovations in collecting health data as a form of monitoring productivity and exercising control over workers' professional and personal lives.

In *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, The Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*, Fred Turner traces the story of the Whole Earth Network: a group of San Francisco Bay-area entrepreneurs that synthesized an emerging Silicon Valley vision of digital utopianism with the relics of a 60s-era flower power ethos. The Whole Earth Network saw the world as a network that could be manipulated and reprogrammed for harmony. The Whole Earth Network ultimately grew into the successful tech publication *WIRED* Magazine, and cultivated notions of the internet as symbolic of a new economic era driven by deregulation and flexibility (7). The Whole Earth Network in effect created a new technological elite composed of ex-hippies and Silicon Valley executives that saw technology as capable of solving political and social problems. Media scholar Evgeny Morozov refers to this impulse as "solutionism." He argues that this tendency of Silicon Valley executives to create quick fixes for pressing issues diverts from understanding large, complex social problems into writing yet more apps (5).

Solutionism also shaped the mindsets of early wellness culture participants by marrying a consumerist ideology with physical and spiritual growth. Products and services promising wellness brought those with disposable income into the fold, generating devotion to emergent brands that framed failures of health as failures of personal responsibility. The solution for one's health issue was in the product, service, or belief system for sale, and a lack of resolution and ensuing wellness was therefore attributed to user error. This ethos of solutionism stood in contrast to parallel forces advocating for collaborative health education in the 70s feminist movement, such as the Boston Women's Health Collective. The 1972 publication *Our Bodies, Ourselves* spoke frankly on issues of wellness, such as reproductive health and abortion care, that did not circulate in mainstream health dialogues prior to this seminal health text's release. With the Boston Women's Health Collective sparking conversations about health and wellness in ways that resisted the patriarchal dominance, they served as a notable current of medical

establishment distrust. This current supported exclusionary gender essentialist and transphobic politics, shaping a thread of wellness that (problematically) supported cisgender women alone.[13] While the Boston Women's Health Collective diverged from patriarchal wellness figures touting solutionism of the day, these parallel forces each shaped an affinity for questioning authority in 70s era wellness.

The 70s era wellness community also featured health food pioneers such as Source Family cult leader Father Yod and Bikram Yoga creator Bikram Choudhury, towering figures who sold their ideologies and personalities as primary marketing tools. Through music, televised media appearances, and celebrity devotion, Yod and Choudhury contributed to making wellness a household name. These leaders each framed their brands as the pathway to physical and spiritual growth identifying their work as the solution to wellness.[14] While Silicon Valley frames their creations as the remedy to social and political problems, cults of personality in the wellness community framed their practices and ideologies as the remedy to health issues.[15] An ethos of solutionism shares an intimate connection with Western individualism. Commitment to a particular figure's solution evidences an investment in that brand's entrepreneurialism. People are committing to the individual that can best pitch their solution. In the case of wellness culture, the burden of getting well becomes the work of the individual consumer, the individual devotee to the entrepreneur's brand. Whether one is immersing themselves in a hot yoga regimen or a

[13] The founders of the Boston Women's Health Collective addressed this legacy of transphobia in an afterword to the 2014 book "Trans Bodies, Trans Selves," highlighting how they've grown in their understanding about the complexities of gender identity, gendered language in reference to bodies and experiences, and seek to do better in advocating for folks of all gender identities, expressions, and experiences.
[14] In "The Quality-of-Life (QOL) Research Movement: Past, Present, and Future," Joseph M. Sirgy et al. trace the history of social indicators, or the Quality-of-Life research movement. This history charts how media and marketing exercised a profound impact on shaping conceptions of wellness solutions.
[15] In the 1800s, rigid conceptualizations of beauty and wellness took shape through eugenics perspectives. For more history on this, Sabrina Strings details the Kellogg corporation's intimate connection to proliferating normative understandings of the linkages between beauty, wellness, and eugenics in the book *Fearing the Black Body.*

diet of natural foods, the individual pledges allegiance to the entrepreneur when they convince themselves that “this” wellness path is “the” path.

As the countercultural rebellion of (formerly) hippie enterprises such as wellness and tech entered into the Reagan era, corporate forces took hold of both industries. In tech, shifts toward deregulation presented opportunities for techies to create new alignments with corporate powers requiring their tech abilities. As a result, the Whole Earth dream of reprogramming and coding for harmony grew to be synonymous with harmonious investor relationships. In wellness, shifts toward reflexive consumerism grew increasingly prominent, and the buying and selling of spiritual and physical growth became a thriving market. Television emerged as a primary source of consumerist engagement, with limited channels spotlighting advertisements for wellness fads commanding the attention of media audiences. Brands captured audiences’ imaginations with promises of health, beauty, and well-being. The commodification of wellness spoke to an individualistic culture bent on believing that self-healing was the entry point to wellness. With the shift to corporate power under Reagan, the 1980s espoused a discourse of personal responsibility befitting of an expanding wellness culture. The neoliberal discourse of personal responsibility is intimately connected to Reagan’s conceptualization of the American dream as a myth of meritocracy. The American Dream contends that if one assumes *enough* personal responsibility for their life and competes or strives effectively for success, they will succeed. This perspective disregards how structural inequity shapes experiences and opportunities, particularly health outcomes. Western wellness culture engaged a cultural devotion to personal responsibility discourse in the form of defining illness, or a lack of wellness, as failure.[16] A failure

[16] In addition to conceptualizing a lack of wellness as a failure of personal responsibility, neoliberal culture also framed a lack of wellness as a product of inefficiency. In “Toward an Efficiency Week,” Robert LaJeunesse articulates a cost-benefit analysis of reducing the work week for the sake of maximizing health and efficiency. LaJeunesse’s work in equating the goals of health with pushes toward efficiency is now seen in various aspects of wellness culture (employee wellness program, product branding, etc.).

of effort, a failure of eating the "right" foods, a failure of not being spiritual enough. Considering structural inequity, such as access to healthcare, produces and exacerbates a lack of wellness, a recognition of these systemic forces contradicts reflexive consumerism. A particular brand, product, or service convinces the consumer that purchasing and self-healing is the gateway to better health, rather than socialized healthcare or universal basic income. A lack of wellness also gains definition through corporate interests, with markers of health, such as weight and fitness, framed as goals requiring constant striving in the form of purchases and body modification.[17]

The 1980s discourse of personal responsibility enabled a thriving wellness market to expand beyond consumerist choices and loyalty. Wellness grew to be associated with not only a consumer's commitment to a particular ideology, product, or entrepreneur, but a project of individual behavior modification as well. The onus of responsibility for one's health outcomes centered on the individual's choices, and wellness companies took care to frame their brands as the right set of choices. By shaping health as a project of personal responsibility, individual consumers participated in reinforcing capitalist modes of domination centered on shifting governance from the state to the subject.[18] Reagan's conception of personal responsibility contended that the management of health and wellness is the purview of the individual, as opposed to being a state-sponsored investment in the public good. Rather than offering the public resources to ensure wellness, such as comprehensive healthcare and economic opportunities that don't jeopardize one's health, a Reaganomics ideology contended that a lack

[17] T.J. Jackson Lears' work is foundational in understanding the role of consumer culture (dating this phenomenon from the traveling peddlers of early modern Europe through twentieth-century corporations) in shaping the anxieties and aspirations of social subjects.

[18] For a deeper history on continuing controversies in health-related fields regarding personal and social responsibility for health, M. Minkler's 1999 report entitled "Personal Responsibility for Health? A Review of the Arguments and the Evidence at Century's End" interrogates the contested meaning of "personal responsibility for health."

of wellness was the direct result of a lack of personal responsibility.

With the emergence of personal responsibility discourse, wellness became a technology of the self, defined by Foucault as a way for individuals to take charge of their own physical and spiritual forms in service of reinforcing power. He writes,

> technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform I themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.

Technologies of the self act as self-policing mechanisms through which individuals participate in strengthening the forces that dominate or exploit them.[19] When wellness overlapped with cultural imperatives for self-responsibilization, wellness grew into an opportunity for individuals to self-police by self-healing. The project of self-healing absolves the state of the burden to care for its citizens, or address their role in perpetuating forces that produce a lack of wellness, rendering the individual in total charge of their health outcomes. Starting in the 1980s, self-healing took shape as modifying one's behavior and attitude in search of total wellness. 80s-era self-healing deflected from how systemic forces of privilege and oppression impact wellness, instead centering each individual as equally capable of achieving their wellness dreams. Since the 90s, wellness grew intertwined with conceptions of capitalist productivity, with the encouragement of self-responsibilization being rewarded by white-collar companies. Maintaining a healthy workforce that proactively managed their own well-being equated to maintaining a thriving, efficient company. When questioning the "hard return" on employee wellness programs,

[19] In "The biopolitics of global health: Life and death in neoliberal time," Katherine E. Kenny argues that contemporary wellness metrics, such as the DALY metric (the Disability Adjusted Life Year metric in the World Bank's *Investing in Health* report) produces an "*economization of life* by disaggregating lifetimes into component units of time and reassembling life as a revenue stream to be maximized through practices of self-investment in one's own health." This reconfigures the individual as an entrepreneur of the self with ultimate responsibility for managing one's own health outcomes.

the *Harvard Business Review* found that healthy employees "cost companies less." The *Harvard Business Review* stressed the importance of seeing wellness as a strategic initiative, rather than a social necessity.[20]

Patriarchy and Wellness: From the Source Family to Dr. Oz

Since the 70s, the wellness entrepreneur has represented a combination of celebrity and "cool capitalist" rebellion.[21] These facets of popular wellness figures work to disseminate understandings of wellness as a vital dimension of the neoliberal project. Cults of personality sell a particular self embodying a range of ideologies and practices that audiences buy into. These ideologies and practices equate wellness with adopting a particular lifestyle and following the path an entrepreneur advises to take. The cool capitalism of 70s wellness entrepreneurs invokes anti-establishment politics to bring audiences into a capitalist enterprise. With Father Yod, formerly known as Jim Baker, young people were brought into the Source Family fold with the allure of a free-spirited, white-robed existence outside the constraints of normative society. Yod's outspoken resistance to mainstream culture was a selling point to younger flower children seeking an alternative lifestyle. One of his 13 wives, Isis Aquarian joined the Source Family in her twenties and was appointed documentarian of the group from 1972 through 1977. Followers of the Source Family, like Aquarian, came into the fold through Yod's Hollywood restaurant (a ground zero for recruitment) and subsequently came to offer free labor for the restaurant, building Yod's fortune. In the 2012 documentary *The Source,* we see how Father Yod (in his

[20] Employee wellness programs are part of larger movements toward tracking and quantifying health and productivity, such as the Quantified Self. In the article "Digital health and the biopolitics of the Quantified Self," Btihaj Ajanae examines the rationalities and ideologies undergirding self-tracking culture, and how this manifests in movements such as the Quantified Self.

[21] In the 2015 book *Cool Capitalism*, Jim McGuigan developed the concept of cool capitalism to articulate how capitalism adapts to subsume contingency, cloaking capitalist ideologies in different contemporary trends to remain relevant.

60s and 70s) brought teenage women into the cult in order to form polyamorous partnerships with them. Robin, Yod's estranged first wife, highlighted how Yod's partners grew younger and younger over the years, and those around him feared questioning the inequitable power dynamics present in these relationships. The young women were enamored with Yod, and he opted for younger partners in order ensure they would be impressionable and adhere to a submissive role as one of many partners (some becoming wives).[22]

Similarly, the Bikram Yoga empire thrived off of aspiring yoga practitioners spending thousands of dollars for classes with the infamous Bikram Choudhury, whose reputation produced a certain allure that compelled people to take that financial risk. Aspiring Bikram yoga practitioners were captivated by Choudhury's outspoken and brash demeanor that earned him celebrity clients like Raquel Welch and Martin Sheen. In the Netflix documentary *Bikram: Yogi, Guru, Predator,* survivors of Choudhury's abuse offer detailed accounts of how the Bikram founder leveraged his wealth and position to harm aspiring yoga practitioners. Director of the film Eva Orner noted, "This is a pre #MeToo story that's being told in a post #MeToo world, and he got away with it, which is chilling." Orner provides space for survivors, such as Larissa Anderson and Sarah Baughn, former students of Choudhury and Bikram teachers, to tell their stories. Anderson and Baughn note how initially coming forward about their experiences of sexual assault and mental abuse resulted in social ostracism, with people turning a blind eye to Choudhury's patterns of predatory behavior. Both Yod and Choudhury used their power to manipulate women in various ways, from grooming underage women to engaging in patterns of sexual violence. Both Yod and Choudhury cloaked themselves in a bad boy persona that leveraged rebellion as a recruitment strategy. This incarnation of wellness entrepreneurship,

[22] For further detailed accounts of Father Yod's manipulation and history on the Source Family, see former Source Family member Isis Aquarian's bestselling 2020 book *The Source Family: The Untold Story of Father Yod, Ya Ho Wa 13 and The Source Family*. Isis Aquarian was one of Father Yod's 13 women, also known as his 13 romantic and sexual partners.

defined by cool capitalism, celebrity personas, and toxic masculinity, cultivated a particular archetype of wellness culture branding that carried into subsequent decades.

Moving into the 90s/00s-era, Oprah Winfrey's popular daytime talk show offered emergent wellness figures a cultural megaphone, as recurring guests on her show rocketed to fame. Through the Oprah show, America learned of Dr. Mehmet Oz, a medical doctor offering advice about fitness, dieting, and beauty. His advice garnered much criticism from the medical community, as he often proposed solutions without scientific backing. Most notably, in a Senate hearing on consumer fraud in diet product advertising, Dr. Oz faced criticism for perpetuating weight-loss scams through providing the pseudoscientific advice used by scammers to exploit consumers. Dr. Oz' oft-criticized advice taught Oprah's largely female audience how to be healthy and well. While his conceptions of health and wellness received pushback from the medical community and government officials, his ideas influenced the cultural imagination in significant ways. He instructed women on how to be well by defining wellness as a set of guidelines for how to be thin, how to look younger, and how to be beautiful. He taught women that to manage their wellness was to aspire to be physically desirable. In the realm of Dr. Oz's advice, women could self-manage their wellness by adhering to a series of suggested diet and beauty choices.

The Dr. Oz ethos of self-responsibilizing one's health meant reinforcing patriarchal beauty standards. This ethos took the spotlight when The Dr. Oz Show received backlash for a 2010 segment featuring a woman who lost 200 pounds. Dr. Oz decided to feature the woman's weight-loss journey with a group of women donning "sexy nurse outfits" and dancing in red lingerie. The use of red lingerie to celebrate weight loss also communicated the ideology that certain bodies are "acceptable" to be featured in lingerie. The segment spotlighted the common fatphobic narratives Dr. Oz favored around weight loss journeys, misogynistic tropes that

trivialize the nursing profession, and conceptions of what bodies are deemed as sexy. For Dr. Oz, the focus of weight loss journeys centered on equating understandings of health with thinness, without drawing attention to potential patterns of control and restriction that characterize disordered eating and often produce extreme weight loss results. Celebrations of weight-loss journeys, such as those featured by Oz, often use scales such as Body Mass Index (BMI) to classify "acceptable" weight ranges for an individual. The emergence of the BMI is deeply intertwined in racist histories, as the standardization of this measure in the late 19th and early 20th century was rooted in medical eugenics.[23] The Dr. Oz Show's common use of extreme weight-loss journeys as television fodder highlights how Oz's conceptions of wellness gain definition through the convergence of fatphobia, racism, and misogyny.

Dr. Oz continued 70s era wellness logics on a number of fronts. Since the 70s, we saw men generate cults of personality that sold consumers an entrepreneurial self-peddling particular ideologies and practices. Consumers bought into men with charming, arresting personas that communicated wellness opportunities outside the confines of traditional medical establishments. While Dr. Oz is a medical doctor, he brands himself as being an accessible, no-frills alternative to the tiring norms of medical institutions. From Father Yod to Dr. Oz, we see how cults of personality grew into bonafide celebrity, and engaged this celebrity power to bring consumers into a particular wellness framework. The cultural influence of Dr. Oz rippled through pop culture, as women latched on to health and beauty regimens he endorsed. For the Dr. Oz brand, wellness operated in tandem with patriarchy, instructing women to buy products and engage in practices that enhanced their desirability to men. This advice often evidenced blind spots produced by white privilege, class inequity, and disability bias as resounding suggestions

[23] In *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fatphobia,* Sabrina Strings details the history of standardizing the BMI. She discusses how racist and eugenicist ideas converged with medical knowledge in the late 19th and early twentieth centuries, creating the idea that the fatter, black body (especially those of black women) was "primitive" and "gross" and racially inferior.

for wellness assumed the subject of health management was a non-disabled white woman with disposable income.[24] The gendered, racialized, and ableist dimensions of contemporary wellness highlight how this technology of neoliberal capitalism functions to enact varying levels of domination. While conceptions and experiences of a lack of wellness can often be traced to the ideologies and impacts of systematized oppression, cultural figures like Dr. Oz positioned the neoliberal subject as the master of their own health destiny.

For Dr. Oz, mastering one's own health destiny is synonymous with conforming to BMI classifications of weight that continue to be used as benchmarks of health, despite their racist origins. The Dr. Oz website features a thread entitled "Half Their Size Success Stories" where Dr. Oz fans share their extreme weight loss journeys. The stories featured are overwhelmingly women's narratives, highlighting how Dr. Oz's intended audience for weight loss tips is gendered, compelling women to subscribe to the weight-loss goals and standards provided. The advice featured here is centered on intense restriction framed as portion control. One fan named Jenny advocates for a "rigidly structured diet plan, suggesting others buy scales and measuring spoons to follow through with limiting their portions." Half their Size Success Stories also presume that those embarking on weight-loss journeys can make all of their own meals easily, which disregards experiences of disability that rely on easy to make or prepared meals to accommodate physical challenges. Anything packaged or easy is framed as a lazy and unhealthy choice. One fan named Jayme writes that she used to "live on prepackaged frozen foods that she heated up in the microwave because they were so convenient. Now she creates her own microwavable portion-controlled meals." Not only does framing easy or prepackaged food exclude experiences of disability, but these suggestions also presume followers have

[24] It's key to highlight how the conceptual formation of various diseases is historically gendered, and to recognize the intersectional dimensions of how we conceptualize disease in general. For more history on the gendered attribution of disease, see Elaine Abelson's "Women and Kleptomania," in Women and Health in America: Historical Readings, ed. Judith Walzer Leavitt.

significant time and resources to eat in Dr. Oz-endorsed ways. This entails an assumption of class privilege. Dr. Oz refers to these fans as “weight-loss heroes,” constructing a mold of beauty and wellness, rooted in racist modes of standardization and ableist assumptions, that women should strive to fulfill.

From Dr. Oz to Goop: Girlboss Feminism Enters Neoliberal Wellness Culture

In 2008, actress Gwyneth Paltrow began releasing nutritional newsletters, “sharing recipes for banana nut muffins and turkey ragu.”[25] By 2009, her listserv grew to 150,000 subscribers, and she brought in branding maven Peter Arnell to brainstorm next steps for her endeavor. After Arnell told Paltrow that “all successful internet companies have double o’s in their name,” Goop was born. A play on Paltrow’s initials, the actress wanted to have a company name that “means nothing but could mean anything.” Goop now stands as a $250 million wellness enterprise of skin care, advice columns, recipes for every diet, and supplements galore. We also can’t forget about the host of infamous products Goop peddles. There is the jade egg, intended to be inserted into the vagina, which claims to do everything from balance hormone levels to strengthen the pelvic floor. There is the sex dust, composed of “ancient ingredients from ho shou wu to cacao and maca [that] send sensitivity and power to all the right places, supporting primordial energy and vital essence.” Paltrow’s suggestions to undergo intensive vaginal steaming came under fire with gynecologists arguing that there’s no scientific evidence backing vaginal steaming as a cleaning procedure (but it can lead to second-degree burns). Then there were the “healing stickers" of 2017 which claimed to be made of the "conductive carbon material" NASA uses to make spacesuits (NASA debunked the claim).

[25] The Goop interactive historical timeline at goop.com notes that their “first newsletter was sent to 10,377 subscribers in 2008. It featured recipes for Turkey Ragu and Banana-Nut Muffins.”

Goop's entrance into the public consciousness not only garnered criticism from NASA scientists, gynecologists, writers, and comedians alike, but generated conversation about Goop's air of cool-girl, celebrity-cult status. Paltrow does more than "stoke health anxieties with pseudoscience" as *Atlantic* writer Amanda Mull highlighted in a 2019 piece. She equates wellness with a level of top-dollar purchasing that's reserved for women of a particular socioeconomic status (your monthly "sex dust" alone will set you back $60 for a 2 oz. jar). Paltrow is, after all, a member of the Hollywood elite, which infuses Goop with a level of celebrity devotion. Prior to starting Goop, the Academy Award-winner established herself as an "It girl" in the 90s with a sense of style, slew of boyfriends, and friend group that situated her in the proverbial Hollywood A-list. Fast forward to her current status as the face of a wellness brand, and she has become a contested, and at times reviled, pop culture figure. Popular critiques of Goop invest the brand with a dimension of infamy that, when paired with Gywneth's established It-girl status, makes for a brand of rebellion that drives cultural interest. Gywneth's brand of rebellion is reminiscent of 70's era wellness bad boys in how it fuses a distrust of modern medicine with a celebrity edge that provides a foundation for cults of personality to flourish. People place their trust in Gywneth for health advice, not because she offers an informed alternative take on contemporary healthcare, but because she is Gywneth Paltrow. She is regarded by Western mainstream culture as one of the most beautiful women, and her longstanding it-girl status offers her a cool factor that functions as a selling point. Pop culture jokes around Gwyneth being a dominating queen bee only serve to reinforce an alluringly rebellious edge. *Saturday Night Live* produced a satiric bit of Goop staffer Baskin Johns being fearful of "Gwyneth watching" and joked that Goop may not test on animals, but they do test on staff. Consumers (and seemingly staff) want to be like Gwyneth, and this brings them into the fold of whatever sex dust or jade eggs she is peddling.

P.D. Marshall argues that celebrity culture has a pedagogical function; the public comes to understand who they are through celebrity culture. We see celebrities as models to fashion our self-brands in the image of. Marshall writes, “celebrity culture articulates a way of thinking about individuality and producing the individual self through the public world.” The public uses celebrity culture as a means of understanding themselves, and Gwyneth’s brand plays an instructive role in teaching people how they perceive their own ways of being and knowing. As Sarah Banet-Weiser points out, branding is a process that has extended beyond a business model to become both reliant on, and reflective of, our most basic social and cultural relations. Companies and celebrities are brands insofar that they not only function to generate monetary wealth, but to also impact how consumers and fans understand their identities and relationships. Gwyneth’s brand, a convergence of celebrity and company, plays a pedagogical role in teaching audiences not only that Goop facilitates understandings of wellness standards (beauty, ability, normative gender expression), but also what relationship these characteristics share to feminism.

Gywneth argues that critiques about Goop are an attack on women’s rights, defining her brand as an embodiment of contemporary feminist politics. In a podcast interview with #Girlboss author Sophia Amoruso, Paltrow attributed criticisms made against Goop to people’s fears about women’s independence and agency. After Amoruso noted, “women have always found alternative ways to heal ourselves and experiment with what works.” Paltrow responded by saying,

> I think it’s very true around women’s sexual health and psychological health. There’s something that feels inherently dangerous to people about women being completely autonomous in that way.

Paltrow’s retorts to critics, ranging from NASA representatives to notable medical professionals, demonstrate the use of neoliberal feminist tropes in service of reinforcing

systemic power. Paltrow works to silence critique by arguing that criticism made against her brand is a step backwards for feminism. Reducing the conversation about feminism to support for Goop highlights Sarah Banet-Weiser's concept of economies of visibility. As economies of visibility reduce political complexity to the visibility of identification, Paltrow leverages these structures to muddy the distinctions between entrepreneur and feminist. Merging these categories redefines feminism; rather than seeing feminism as a collective-oriented social movement with varied social and political objectives, feminism grows into an individualized project of brand building. For Paltrow, feminism is a project of growing Goop's brand, and in order to build the Goop brand, she stunts criticisms that threaten her brand's growth. Goop functions to engage visibility as an end to itself. According to Paltrow's logic, if Goop is identified as embodying women's rights and feminist goals, then that declaration supplants the need for generative interrogations of systemic power. By defining feminism as a project of entrepreneurial brand-building, Paltrow instructs us on how she conceptualizes feminism through how this brand's values take shape. Goop values a neoliberal feminist ethos that asks consumers to take responsibility for manifesting standards of wellness that hinge on reifying gender normativity, ableism, and fatphobia.

Dr. Oz popularized an ethos of self-responsibilizing for one's health journey, and equated the success of self-responsibilization for health with manifesting patriarchal beauty standards. Gwyneth represents what's possible when women take enough personal responsibility for their wellness journey. Goop feels like a logical outgrowth of a white patriarchal wellness culture not only because Gwyneth serves as a successful face of upholding Eurocentric beauty standards, but because she manifests those ideologies *while speaking out against them*. For years, women listened to cultural figures like Dr. Oz tell them how to self-manage their wellness. The cults of personality, from Father Yod to Dr. Oz, came to drown out women-centered health perspectives that offered a foil to these dynamic, yet manipulative, figures. Advice from figures like Dr. Oz

often failed to take into account women's diverse experiences and challenges with wellness, yet garnered more attention and fanfare than lesser-known, women-led wellness initiatives, such as Our Bodies, Ourselves[26], which offered a space divorced from patriarchal influence. Goop offers a space that fuses the cult of personality reminiscent of Oz while sparking dialogues addressing a range of health concerns often neglected by male wellness figures. Unlike collectives such as Our Bodies, Ourselves, Goop follows Dr. Oz' legacy by not only centering patriarchal beauty standards, but neoliberal conceptions of self-healing. Goop asks individual women to assume responsibility for their health in ways that deflects from recognizing structural inequity's role in producing non-wellness. Like Oz, Goop centers a non-disabled, well-off white woman as their audience, constructing a mold of self-managed wellness accessible to women of particular identities and experiences.

For both Dr. Oz and Goop, being well takes shape as having a particular physicality that conforms to ableist norms. Being well takes shape as consuming foods and supplements, while adhering to particular regimens, that entail a price point reserved for those of a particular socioeconomic status. Being well takes shape as looking like Gwyneth Paltrow. While we used to have Dr. Oz informing us how to eat, how to exercise, and what to look like, we supplanted that patriarchal voice with a living manifestation of patriarchal standards. Having Paltrow serve as the face of a wellness brand is a key selling point as she embodies a set of idealized beauty standards deemed desirable by patriarchal structures. While Goop may make bold statements such as "all bodies are beautiful," we find that this assertion contradicted by the media representation that constitutes the Goop brand. Fatphobia, ableism, and cissexism are woven throughout the Goop brand, equating their conception of wellness with a particular expression of gender, body size, and ability. Cissexism takes shape in Goop media through gendering body

[26] The outgrowth of the Boston Women's Health Collective embracing more gender diversity and intersectional perspectives on health.

parts, identifying the vagina as “female anatomy.” Cissexism manifests as refusing to engage gender fluidity in their brand, as Goop centers cis women’s voices as their brand identity. Goop fails to offer plus-size representation, as well as individuals with diverse abilities. Fatphobia manifests in the normalization of diet culture, as Goop wellness products support cleanses and purity function as a guise for dieting. Goop’s ableism is present in every product that purports to cure an ailment or remedy an illness, claiming that “this” expensive item will be a solution. We saw an ethos of solutionism present from 70s wellness figures through Dr. Oz. This argument of centering health answers on a new form of snake oil for those who may be struggling with chronic illness and disabilities not only exploits vulnerability, but reinforces the notion that someone needs to be “cured” in order to be “well” and “happy.”[27]

The Wellness Ideology of Goop Feminism

In the Netflix series *Goop Lab*, Gwyneth explores a variety of wellness topics alongside her staff. In the episode entitled “The Pleasure is Ours,” Gwyneth and the Goop staff dive into cultural conceptions and taboos around sex and pleasure with acclaimed sex educator Betty Dodson. This episode offers key insights into the Goop wellness ideology and its relationship to cisnormativity, whiteness, and ableism. When we enter into the Netflix Goop Lab, we’re immediately met with an introduction to how wellness is defined by the company. Paltrow states, “It’s all about laddering up to one thing — which is the optimization of self…” Self-optimization functions as the ultimate goal of wellness for Goop, rooting the company’s branding in a framework of Western individualism. The emphasis on a self-led wellness journey is paired with

[27] In *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, Robert McRuer advocates for a “critically disabled position” where to *crip* is to unearth and expose and navigate the ambiguities and messiness that defy order. I understand neoliberal conceptions of perfection defined by Goop’s wellness ideology as a form of order that erroneously positions non-disability as a mode of perfection. I advocate for engaging a critically disabled position to embrace the ambiguities and messiness which subvert exclusionary modes of neoliberal perfection and wellness.

a distinctly non-intersectional feminist ethos. In “The Pleasure is Ours” episode, we see how the Goop brand shapes itself around an understanding of feminism that distorts, minimizes, or rejects social difference. In identifying how feminists prevent movement progress, Audre Lorde notes:

> Certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation (115).

By understanding how wellness looks different for folks of different abilities, for those of trans experience, for those with gender non-conforming identities, for those who are not white, for those from poor or working-class backgrounds, we begin to tackle what intersectional dialogues in wellness spaces look like. Goop instead seeks to distort and misname those differences for the sake of maintaining brand coherence. The Goop brand is about self-optimization, and curating the experience of women taking responsibility for their health journey without recognizing how systemic power shapes our wellness outcomes in varying ways. Goop seeks to create a particular model of women’s wellness that rejects the complications and complexities that arise from intersectional dialogues. Self-optimization divorces itself from a collective, intersectional understanding of wellness because the individualistic Goop path to health was constructed for a cisgender, wealthy, non-disabled white woman. If you don’t manage to conform to that path, then wellness remains out of reach for you. This wellness ideology, rooted in reifying various forms of systemic power, defines the Goop brand of feminism.

Cisnormativity frames the Goop discussion around sex and pleasure from the outset with Paltrow noting how vaginas are their favorite subject. An emphasis on vaginas as female anatomy is seen throughout this episode, highlighting how womanhood and genitalia are defined as one and the same for Goop. Betty Dodson highlights how “the disassociation with

one's body and the female genitals" is a key obstacle to overcome in the pursuit of pleasure. Defining womanhood and genitalia in tandem explicitly leaves women of trans experience and non-binary folks out the conversation, demonstrating Goop's adherence to a trans-exclusionary feminist ideology. Since 70s-era women's liberation, the feminist movement has seen the presence of trans-exclusionary feminism in both liberal and radical-oriented feminist circles. Aforementioned histories of the Boston Women's Health Collective, and how their Our Bodies, Ourselves collaborations left trans and gender non-conforming folks out of 70s health dialogues, highlight how these exclusionary practices took shape. Trans-exclusionary feminism repudiates understandings of biological sex as a social construct, maintaining that biological sex is not subject to fluidity. Various characteristics that compose biological sex — gonads, chromosomes, hormones, and genitalia — are subject to change, which negates claims that biological sex is a static trait. However, social norms perpetuate understandings of biological sex as determined by the presence of genitalia, and these norms continue to have a stronghold on the cultural imagination, as well as certain feminist circles. Trans-exclusionary feminists deny that biological sex is fluid, and identify certain body parts as distinctly gendered. In Dean Spade's essay "About Purportedly Gendered Body Parts", he notes how we can talk about penises, vulvas, ovaries, etc. without assigning these parts a gender. Rather than saying things like "female body parts," we can "skip the assumption that those body parts correlate with a gender" and opt for language that refused biological determinism such as "bodies with vaginas" or "bodies with ovaries." Surely, Gwyneth Paltrow, the Goop staff, and Betty Dodson may have not been intending to align their feminism with a trans-exclusionary ideology. Yet, the impact of identifying vaginas as female, and women as people with vaginas, serves to leave many women and non-binary folks out of the Goop pleasure conversation.[28]

[28] In addition to this episode, Gwyneth Paltrow has also made tone-deaf remarks about trans identities and expression. For instance, in 2013, Paltrow remarked that she "wears more makeup than a transvestite," which sparked much criticism in digital culture.

While Goop is seeking to enable women to step into their sexual power, they're doing so within a patriarchal framework of biological determinism and gender essentialism. The Pleasure is Ours episode features significant conversation around getting in touch with a divine femininity that is submissive and receptive. During an eye-gazing exercise (where Goop staffers stared intently at one another for several minutes without breaking eye-contact), a self-described pleasure mentor, intuitive healer, and sex educator named Isabella Frappier urged staffers to "look into your left side eye…it is your feminine, your receiving…" This Goop preoccupation with embracing qualities of the feminine takes shape in various aspects of contemporary women's wellness that engage 70s-era, flower-child imagery. Since Goop was established in 2008, they've inspired the creation of other women-centric brands that follow in their footsteps with touting 70s nostalgia and regressive gender ideas. Brands such as Canadian skin-care line Living Libations engage both 70s-era aesthetics and gender ideologies in their marketing. Under retro bubble-font headlines, Living Libations presents information to women about how bras pose dangers to their anatomy's "biological purposes." Similar to Goop, Living Libations genders anatomy as a way of calling women to embrace their biological, divine essence. Living Libations claims "breasts ebb and flow with the moon and the tides of birth. They are strapped down and pushed up – all while being discouraged from their biological calling." According to the brand, breasts have a biological calling to provide milk, and essential oils, breastfeeding, and removing one's bra enables this anatomical feature to fulfill its divine duty. The claims being made here around breast health align with Goop's outlook, as Dr. Habib Sadeghi made the claim that tight bras were connected to a restriction of lymph nodes around the breast, thereby preventing "toxins from being processed through them and flushed out of the body." Pain specialist Dr. Jen Gunter, as well as the American Cancer Society, debunked this Goop claim and Goop fired back, accusing Gunter of being "in the pocket of big lingerie." The claims made by Living Libations and Goop are reminiscent of a 70s-era wellness culture grounded in a

pseudoscientific outlook that is ripe with distrust for contemporary medicine. This battle we see between pseudoscientific claims and research-based findings originated with entities like John Travis' Wellness Resource Center, and continue on through the contested advice of Goop experts. I'm interested in how the pseudoscientific claims that define these brands' rebellious edge are energized by a reinforcement of biological determinism and gender essentialism. The discussion around bras speaks to more than just the harmful dissemination of debunked scientific claims about cancer. There is also a propagation of cisnormativity at work through gendering anatomy and associating a biological imperative with breasts that rejects a nuanced understanding of biological sex. By claiming that breasts have a biological calling, and your left side-eye is associated with "feminine submission or receptivity," Goop, Living Libations, and other companies in this current zeitgeist of regressive women's empowerment branding, teach audiences that one's biological sex is a fixed determinant of destiny and that gender is an expression of innate, static traits.

Racial Capitalism in the Goop Lab

In the episode "The Healing Trip," Goop staff travel to Jamaica to experience a psychedelic mushroom trip. The United States classifies psychedelic mushrooms as illegal "because they contain the chemical compound psilocybin, which is listed in Schedule I of the federal Controlled Substances Act."[29] Since magic mushrooms are legal in Jamaica, the Goop staff headed to the island for a wellness trip. The trend of Westerners heading elsewhere for drug experiences did not start with Goop, yet Goop continues a legacy of white tourists with financial privilege seeking drug experiences in other countries. We saw this same principle at work in the Netflix show *Unwell*, where white tourists significantly impacted local economies in South America to

[29] Information according to Department of Justice National Drug Intelligence Center.

accommodate their desire for cultural (drug-induced) experiences. When reflecting on the impact of ayahuasca tourism, Indigenous communities recounted how their traditions, customs, and livelihoods were shifting due to this tourism. While ayahuasca brought new forms of income to local residents, the influx of white visitors generated new demands and expectations that asked indigenous leaders to change their long-held practices to satisfy tourists. Drug tourism produces complicated cultural exchanges shaped by dynamics of power and privilege, with white visitors often (either intentionally or unintentionally) refusing accountability for their role in distorting and reshaping sacred cultural practices.[30]

Goop staff jumped at the chance to do drugs in Jamaica, and only a few Goopers were selected to participate. Reasons for wanting to go on the trip ranged from seeking a psycho-spiritual experience and more creative freedom to unpacking varying traumas. The all-white pack of four Goopers flew to Jamaica, meeting up with three white therapists from MAPS (the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies). The MAPS therapists intended to assist the Goopers in their mushroom trip, remaining present to work through any strong emotions and experiences that came up while tripping. Upon arrival, the therapists and Goop staffers sat in a circle to discuss the mushroom journey that awaited them. One therapist present noted that the use of mushrooms for medicinal purposes is rooted in indigenous traditions, and the show cut momentarily to an antiquated picture of an unidentified member of an unidentified indigenous group. The vague mention of indigenous traditions functioned as a footnote to the trip: there was no further discussion with details about what indigenous communities engage in these practices, or what cultural histories deserve further unpacking to contextualize the use of

[30] In their dissertation entitled “Spirituality for Sale: An Analysis of Ayahuasca Tourism,” Christine L. Homan critically examines how structures of knowledge, power, image, and representation take shape in ayahuasca tourism, and how this speaks to ethical issues of commodifying and appropriating Amazonian culture and spiritual traditions. This also speaks to Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of the “anti-conquest”: a dynamic through which the European/Western subject looks to maintain innocence while asserting Western, capitalist hegemony.

medicinal mushrooms.

Goop's brand of feminism speaks to various dimensions of racial capitalism, defined by Nancy Leong as a white person or institution extracting value from non-white racial identity. The setting of the Goop mushroom trip was beautiful: lush, tropical scenery and remote, sandy beaches served as the backdrop for Goopers detaching from reality. Yet, not one Jamaican person made their way onto this episode, despite Jamaican land serving as the conduit for these wealthy Westerners to work through childhood trauma and limitations to their creative expression. There was a clear extractive quality at play in "The Healing Trip." Westerners used land, with an extensive history of colonization, as a vessel for their own spiritual and emotional growth, extracting the benefits of this geographic location to enable their experience. By not engaging with any elements of Jamaican history or people, the Goop staff divorce their experience from cultural context that may better inform why mushrooms are legal in Jamaica, and why this setting made their experience possible. Jamaica itself has a rich indigenous history, with communities such as the Arawakan people engaging in various forms of spiritual healing. These traditions and practices were impacted by Spanish and British colonization, as the Arawakan people faced enslavement and death at the hands of colonists. Recognizing these colonial legacies, and the indigenous practices impacted by them, would generate a more nuanced understanding of the tourists' relationship to the land that makes their spiritual and emotional growth possible. Yet, in delving into the complexities of how privilege operates in relation to tourism, land, and colonization, this would contradict how Goop feminism articulates spiritual growth.

Similar to the ayahuasca tourists in *Unwell*, the Goopers opt for a superficial relationship with indigenous communities and histories that exploits indigenous knowledge for Western tourists' spiritual development. There is usually little information offered about how mushrooms

and ayahuasca are traditionally used, and if that information is offered, it's not engaged as a rubric to follow for the tourist drug experience. Tourists seek to create their own, self-curated experience of the drugs. By divorcing the experience of the drugs from indigenous practice, Westerners position indigenous tradition as an amorphous framework that they can plug their sense of individualism into. If indigeneity is left vague and non-specific, the particular tourist can use indigeneity as a conduit for their self-improvement. So long as indigeneity functions conceptually in contrast to Westernization, the idea operates in the Western imagination as a blank slate through which to release the stresses produced by the Western world. Rendering indigeneity as an abstract concept accommodates the white tourist in "finding themselves" and seeking an elusive sense of authenticity or vulnerability denied to them by the workings of capitalism. Structuring indigeneity in Western imaginations as vague complements a duality of innocence and exploitation present in these forms of spiritual tourism. Mary Louise Pratt articulates how the maintenance of innocence and vulnerability defines the imperialist, Western traveler. The traveler fashions themselves as innocently seeking experience and enlightenment, while mandating that indigeneous practices and structures they navigate be catered to them. By using drugs on Jamaican soil as a way to navigate their own traumas, the Goopers function as "European bourgeois subjects seeking to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony" (7). The Goopers are innocently ignorant to Jamaican indigenous practices and customs, yet use Jamaican soil and the privilege of drug legalization to explore their pasts via dominating Jamaican space.

In the "Pleasure is Ours" episode, non-white identities are used to define Goop's brand of sexual freedom. The episode continuously loops back to the experiences of one Goop staffer from Hong Kong, as she discovers her own path to sexual liberation. Lexi's narrative focuses on how she was unable to actualize herself as a sexual being in China, and Goop is now opening her eyes to what sexual freedom looks like. The episode articulates Chinese cultural norms as

regressive by highlighting how this staffer could not express herself fully as a cisgender woman in China. On the surface, the inclusion of this staffer's narrative communicates the Goop brand's commitment to diversity. Yet, this representation not only functions as a tokenizing mechanism, but Lexi's story works to demonstrate how the Goop articulation of sexuality enables freedoms that Eastern culture denies. There is a Western exceptionalism intertwined with Goop's conception of sexual liberation, with Western women's expression depicted as progressive and an embodiment of democratic freedom. This articulation of freedom extracts from non-white identities and experiences, defining what liberation is by identifying that it is not found through Chinese culture. We see Goop constructing a dynamic of neoliberal multiculturalism here, where diversity emerges as a talking point, and fails to go beyond a cosmetic engagement with social difference.[31] Lexi's articulation of experience rationalizes Western imperialism, creating a diversity regime that accommodates Goop's extraction of value from non-white identities and experiences. Diversity regimes, defined by James M. Thomas as the institutionalization of diversity that works to obscure, sideline, and even magnify, existing racial inequalities, takes shape here as offering the presence of social difference to support a conception of Western liberal feminist sexual freedom. Lexi's narrative gets flattened to bolster the articulation of cis-centric, Western feminist freedom here, rather than dedicating time to unpacking the complexities of how race, gender, and sexuality manifest in Lexi's experience.

Goop's Ableism: The Implications of Offering "Cures"

[31] In *Represent and Destroy,* Jodi Melamed articulates how ideologies of democracy, nationalism, and multiculturalism are key to racial capitalist processes of spatial and social differentiation that truncate relationality for capital accumulation.

In *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*, disability studies scholar Eli Clare explores how “cure” functions conceptually to inspire various modes of aspiration. By normalizing the aspiration and pursuit of elusive “cures,” medical professionals and wellness brands generate curative logics that can push for the return to an imagined and impossible past prior to disability. Clare highlights the ambivalence of “cure” by noting how this concept must make space for patients who do desire cures, such as remedies for chronic pain, cancer, and Alzheimer’s. Yet, Clare investigates the murky waters created by a wellness culture that promotes curative logics, and engages these logics to conceptualize disability as non-desirable and demand non-disabled ways of being and feeling. There is a violence intertwined with mandating experiences of non-disability, as this structures understandings of those who experience various forms of disability as aberrant and non-normative in the cultural imagination. Robert McRuer also speaks to constructions of non-disability as symbols of perfections without room for aberration. Pushing back against curative logic requires the cripping of thought, understood by McRuer as an unearthing that traverses ambiguities and messiness in defiance of order or perfection. I take issue with the elements of wellness culture that promote neoliberal conceptions of perfection that positions non-disability as an enlightened, elevated, or ideal state. The pseudoscience often goes hand in hand with curative logics of perfection, as opposed to grounded and informed medical perspectives that create space for ambiguity and mess. Engaging a “critically disabled position,” as McRuer advocates for, means embracing the ambiguities and messiness which subvert idealized modes of neoliberal perfection and wellness, and pushing back against the forms of pseudoscience that produce imaginaries where perfection exists. The promise of cures is often where pseudoscience drowns out informed perspectives, and imaginaries generate harmful material consequences.

The keyword “cure” comes up often on the Goop site, as there are a range of articles purporting cures to chronic conditions ranging from autoimmune disorders to arthritis to

insomnia. When discussing potential cures for each of these conditions, Goop puts forward the potential of diet regimens and herbal solutions to remedy health struggles. With the onset of COVID-19 in early 2020, Goop "experts" such as Dominique Fradin-Read stepped in to offer alleged cures for coronavirus, telling thousands of viewers on Instagram Live that injections are one of the best ways to prevent and fight COVID-19. Fradin-Read, owner of Los Angeles-based wellness company VitaLifeMD, claimed the COVID-19 remedy was "FDA approved and works just like magic." In October of 2020, Democratic congressman Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi, who leads the House Subcommittee on Economic and Consumer Policy, called for the FDA and the Federal Trade Commission to take action against Fradin-Read for these deceptive claims. Beyond defining cures through misleading logics, Goop's standards of wellness conceptualize cures as an entry point to actualizing a definition of wellness that rejects meaningfully grappling with disability.

Goop's standards of wellness engage curative logics in relation to neoliberal self-responsibilization. In an article entitled "Could Diet Cure Arthritis," Goop enlists the perspective of Dr. Steven Gundry[32] to highlight how simply removing lectins, proteins found in plants and some milk products, from their diet could be the potential cure for arthritic patients. Gundry notes that he's advised patients to remove such foods as quinoa, nightshade vegetables (such as potatoes, goji berries, tomatoes) and milk, and they have "healed themselves." Similarly, in an article entitled "A (Simple) Cure for Autoimmune Disease," Dr. Gundry advises those experiencing such conditions as lupus, Crohn's, MS, rheumatoid arthritis, and colitis to eliminate all lectins from their diet. According to Gundry, eliminating lectins and increasing polyphenols,

[32] Gundry is referred to as an autoimmunity expert by Goop, yet his recommendations have been dismissed by medical professionals such as Robert H. Eckel, past president of the American Heart Association. Eckel argues that Gundry's diet advice contradicts recommendations made by the American Cancer Society, American Heart Association, and American Diabetes Association. Eckel has also noted that Gundry fails to use control patients in his studies, which makes Gundry's claims problematic.

which he describes as the “dark pigments in berries, chocolate, and coffee beans, which I have shown manipulate both our genes and those of our microbiome to improve multiple markers of inflammation.” Gundry notes that eating a piece of 72 percent or greater dark chocolate per day and using a “really good olive oil” is the ticket to increasing one’s polyphenols. He writes,

> In October of 2016, I presented a paper at The Pasteur Institute in Paris showing 78 patients with autoimmune diseases like lupus, Crohn’s, MS, rheumatoid arthritis, and colitis who were cured by these manipulations. Autoimmune disease comes from the gut and is cured in the gut. If you have an autoimmune disease, treat your gut, and the “disease” will subside.

Gundry’s advice to Goop readers highlights how curative logics engage a self-healing approach to shape understandings of chronic conditions. Goop puts forward paths for healing that involve simple changes to diet: an approach that requires the individual to modify their own behavior to generate wellness. By supporting the notion that the individual can heal themselves, healing is then equated with the absence of arthritis or autoimmune conditions. Goop’s standards of wellness call for the eradication of disability, rather than a nuanced engagement of what it looks like to grapple with that disability. A non-disabled state of being is thus positioned as the embodiment of wellness, and an “uncured” state of being is defined as aberrant and in need of intervention. To embrace “uncured” modes of being means to grapple with the complexity of wellness, and further explore how various forms of disability manifest to impact the human experience.

In addition to the experience of disability, Goop defines a state of unwellness as failing to subscribe to patriarchal standards of thinness. A curative logic weaves its way into discussions of weight loss in the Goop community, as finding the “silver bullet” to shedding pounds and “feeling well” pops up often. Goop goes so far as defining fatness as an embodied expression of pain. In an article entitled “The Tenets of Losing Weight,” Goop staff conversed with Dr. Habib

Sadeghi (the doctor who also argued for the connection between bras and cancer) about the relationship between our thoughts and weight. Sadeghi invokes The Law of Attraction, a philosophy created by Chicken Soup for the Soul Enterprises founder Jack Canfield maintaining that the universe creates and provides for you based on what your thoughts are focused on. Sadeghi argues that we can focus our thoughts on manifesting "better health and a better body." This conversation raises questions around how Goop defines a good body, and the insistence on losing weight to move toward a better body indicates that fatness is objectively at odds with Goop's conception of acceptable embodiment.

Sadeghi notes, "A patient who is overweight or obese can't hide their condition. Their pain has to be on display for the world to see every day." This troubling connection between emotional "unwellness" and physical "unwellness" works to justify the reinforcement of standards of beauty that equate thinness with happiness, health, and purity. In *Fearing the Black Body,* Sabrina Strings highlights the historical roots of positioning thinness as an ideal expression of embodiment, noting how the Western origins of anti-fat bias emerged from conceptions of white superiority. Prior to the 1800s, curvaceousness and fatness was understood as an expression of wealth and sensuality. Sabrina Strings delves into how there was a turn from seeing curvaceous women as an ideal, with Renaissance painters such as Raphael and Botticelli defining this ideal, toward using the distinction between thinness and curvaceousness as a form of social hierarchy. She writes, *"*Racial discourse was deployed by elite Europeans and white Americans to create social distinctions between themselves and so-called greedy and fat racial Others." Artists, elites, and other influential groups fostered cultural attitudes around equating whiteness with thinness and modesty, while non-whiteness grew to be equated with curvaceousness and a lack of respectability. Goop equates a lack of thinness with undesirability, and reinforces this conception of defining ideal embodiment through standards of Eurocentric whiteness**.** As Strings highlights, conceptions of ideal bodies are

grounded in eugenics, with figures like John Harvey Kellogg, founder of the Kellogg Corporation, shaping late 19th century and early twentieth century scientific discourse. Medical dialogues during this time period uplifted eugenics, seeking to use scientific claims as the basis for perpetuating severe racial inequalities. We saw how this took shape through the standardization of the BMI (Body Mass Index), and Kellogg was a key voice in advocating for this racist technology. Kellogg shaped conceptions of purity in relation to wellness, arguing that a vegetarian lifestyle that abstained from smoking tobacco, drinking alcoholic beverages, and sexual activity demonstrated moral aptitude. Goop's discourses around purity advocate for modes of "clean living" championed by Kellogg, and promote the notion that thinness and "pure" diets are the key to feeling good. On the goop website, the goop Clean program, featuring meal-replacement shakes, supplements, and approved fresh foods, gets a glowing endorsement from Paltrow as a detox regimen. For $475, you can purchase the 21-day detox plan to find purity and happiness through extreme diet restriction. Goop's support for detox programs like Clean evidences how they intertwine discourses of fatphobia and purity to produce understandings of wellness as a perfected state of dietary control, rooted in white supremacy, that venerates unhealthy relationships to restriction. After doing the detox plan, Gwyneth offered her review saying, "I feel pure and happy and much lighter (I dropped the extra pounds that I had gained during a majorly fun and delicious "relax and enjoy life phase" about a month ago)."

Conclusion

As I wrap up this chapter, I consider what makes girlboss wellness different from its robe-clad, Bikram-centric, and Oprah-endorsed predecessors. We've charted how wellness culture grew intertwined with neoliberal ideologies, thriving on an ethos of cool capitalism and celebrity clout. With wellness and neoliberal values developing an intimate relationship via cults of personality and framing varied doctrines of self-responsibilization as trendy, this set the stage

for the emergence of the cool girls of wellness. Gywneth Paltrow's Goop embodies a new moment of neoliberal wellness culture where representational politics offer a key selling point. The visibility of a female wellness empire grows in a new adaptation-oriented strategy, where capitalism shapeshifts to respond to a new generation of consumer culture that seeks to leverage the presence of social difference. Economies of visibility skirt the complicated conversations that come with enabling social difference to inform the structures that extract value from it. Social difference is decoration, celebrity is currency, and rebellion still sells in an attention economy. Goop leverages social difference, celebrity, and rebellion to maintain audiences' attention in a fragmented digital culture. In doing so, neoliberal wellness remains a nimble culture of capitalism, experiencing a new formation in Goop that speaks to what holds people's attention and successfully regenerates oppressive discourses of self-responsibilization.

Chapter 3: Visualizing and Manifesting Capitalist Success: American Self-Help as Neoliberal Education from Televangelist Preachers to Girlboss Influencers

Change Starts from Within

How do we win friends and influence people? What are the habits of highly effective people? These questions circulated through 90s and early 2000s-era Western culture, gesturing at a cultural desire to find happiness, motivation, and purpose. The perpetual search for these elusive goals equated to a late 20th century boom in motivational speakers and self-help literature. The contemporary self-industry reduced the pursuit of complicated ontological questions to simple answers. You can win friends and influence people. You can be a highly effective person. You can find success. How? Recognize that change starts from within. This ethos pervades Western culture's self-help industry, instructing audiences that seeking greater ontological fulfillment is purely a matter of individual behavioral, mental, and emotional adjustments. In this chapter, I look to how contemporary self-help produced an emergent thread of girlboss feminism, defined here as a mediated cultural formation that supports the expansion of racial capitalism through facilitating commitments to discourses of meritocracy and representational politics. I first offer a brief cultural history of American self-help as a mediated genre and culture of capitalism. I then turn to how American self-help grew to overlap with neoliberal conceptualizations of feminism, and how this intersection now manifests in digital culture as girlboss influencer spaces.

Acres of Diamonds and Bootstraps Fables

While we may associate self-help with energetic people wearing head-set microphones and running around packed and excited conference halls, we can trace the genesis of modern self-help to Philadelphia Baptist Minister Russell Conwell's 1890 text *Acres of Diamonds.* Published during a time of significant economic depression and worker strikes in the United States, the text spoke to a shifting cultural and political landscape catalyzed by industrialization. Anti-capitalist sentiments abounded amongst agrarian workers organizing against emerging robber barons' control of industries such as banking and railroads. The dawn of industrial capitalism inspired a new era of cultural narratives surrounding the possibilities of wealth accumulation, capturing the hearts and minds of impoverished communities. There was a clear tension at play during this time between commitments to overthrowing a budding capitalist regime or joining capitalist ranks based on the promise of building one's own fortune. Conwell's text played a key role in spreading that promise. *Acres of Diamonds* tells the story of a poor farmer who leaves his home in search of amassing riches, only to find that the farmer who purchased his old land discovers "acres of diamonds" after digging a well in the backyard. Conwell told the story to audiences around the world, cultivating a late 19th-century celebrity of his own. The tale pioneered a lasting self-help concept: you already have everything you need to change your life.

Conwell planted the seeds for contemporary self-help ideologies by arguing that the capacity to change your life is already within one's grasp, and positively changing one's life equates to building wealth. The popularity of Conwell's text points to the role that self-help plays in instructing audiences on how to be capitalist subjects. By channeling audiences' dissatisfaction with economic depression and growing wealth disparities into a project of individual change, Conwell pioneered the use of self-help to quell dissent. If we redirect a population's anxieties about various modes of precarity into a focus on personal responsibility, we relieve political-economic forces that perpetuate systematized oppression from taking responsibility for their own failings. Those systemic failings are recast as personal, moral failings

that the individual has control over. *Acres of Diamonds* was one of the first cultural works to move social subjects from questioning authority to questioning themselves. The text served as a guide for aspiring capitalists who believed they could achieve wealth and prosperity if they utilized personal tools already at their disposal. *Acres of Diamonds* was published in the same decade of social unrest as Horatio Alger's oft-cited stories of bootstrapping. Alger's novels recounted tales of young boys who worked hard and picked themselves up out of poverty. These novels emerged as reference points for the possibilities of attaining the American Dream, defined by turn-of-the-century industrial capitalists as the belief that every single American — regardless of race, socioeconomic status, ability, etc. — can build wealth. Conwell and Alger's texts worked to ingrain this myth of meritocracy in the American cultural imagination, and this ethos lives on through how we discuss success as a culture. American self-help offers a key lens through which we can understand how capitalist-defined conceptions of success circulate to take on new dimensions and modes of adaptability suitable to contemporary cultural and political-economic contexts.

From Prosperity Gospel to Contemporary Self-Help: Magical Thinking and the American Dream

Norman Vincent Peale's 1952 book *The Power of Positive Thinking* further developed understandings of personal change being a gateway to prosperity. Peale's text uses a variety of case studies that cite how altering one's thoughts is the key to success. *The Power of Positive Thinking* argues that by visualizing one's success, and focusing only on positive thoughts, one can achieve prosperity. Peale was a religious man, engaging an attention to God as a mechanism for shifting negative thought patterns. Both Peale and Conwell highlight a reverence to Christianity, equating financial growth with religious or spiritual growth. By intertwining a commitment to Christian theology with financial and personal advancement, both Peale and

Conwell rooted threads of contemporary self-help in Christian doctrine. Positive thinking shapes modern preachers' sermons, asking devoted followers to continuously reject any ideas or reflections that are negative.

The popularity of Peale and Conwell's texts took shape in tandem with emergent trends in 1950s-era Christianity, with the increasing presence of revivals sweeping across America. Known as the Healing Revivals of the 1950s, seminal figures such as Oral Roberts made use of new mediums to spark interest and recruit media consumers into the Christian fold. Radio and television grew into key tools for disseminating Christian ideology in the 1950s, giving rise to a new kind of preacher: the televangelist. Televangelists employed a wide variety of strategies for engaging audiences. Preachers such as Billy Graham decried the moral ills of modern society, urging listeners and viewers to repent for their sins and declare Jesus Christ as their lord and savior. Recruitment strategies centered on the urgency of salvation contrasted with Oral Roberts' smiling requests for donations in the name of seed-faith. Seed-faith doctrine is rooted in the Bible verse Matthew 17:20 that reads, "If you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there', and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you." Roberts identified the seed as followers' expression of faith in Jesus, which would be rewarded with financial blessings and physical well-being. Seed-faith doctrine provided the roots for contemporary Christian understandings of the direct relationship shared between depth of faith and worldly prosperity. Roberts' televised ministry worked to expose an extensive viewership to seed-faith doctrine, with quarterly prime time specials running regularly from 1969 through 1980. Roberts generated Christian interest through dramatics and charisma, healing people of various ailments and invoking Godly power with a warm grin. Concurrent televangelist programs like Jerry Falwell's "Old Gospel Hour" opted for a more stern and self-righteous demeanor that engaged audiences seeking a blander and comfortably conventional ministry. As Barbara Ehrenreich notes in *Bright-Sided*, the fire-and-brimstone approaches of televangelists

like Jerry Falwell steadily gave way to sunnier, friendlier evangelizing.[33]

Following the popularity of Roberts' tele-ministry, a new movement known as prosperity gospel emerged in Christianity during the late twentieth century. Prosperity gospel emphasized positive thinking as a gateway to deepening one's relationship to Christ. Like seed-faith doctrine, prosperity gospel structures positive thinking as a quid pro quo relationship with God — if you have that seed of faith in Jesus and believe that he will look upon you favorably, a positive attitude toward God will be rewarded. Engaging Peale's strategies of manifestation and visualization, prosperity gospel focuses heavily on how controlling one's thoughts to believe in and "visualize" God's blessings will manifest those blessings. Prosperity gospel tells audiences that finding wealth, health, and success is an expression of God's will. Upward mobility is a direct result of spiritual devotion. Evangelicals such as Billy Graham continuously rejected the prosperity gospel doctrine arguing that "you cannot serve both God and money." Despite these intra-Christianity disagreements, prosperity gospel grew from Oral Roberts' seed-faith televised ministry and direct-mailer campaigns into a slew of energetic megachurches. Famed pastors of prosperity gospel such as Joel Osteen and Joyce Meyer preach that any kind of hardship is the product of a lack of faith, and increased faith produces reduced hardship. If one elevates their devotion to Jesus, they will avoid economic, interpersonal, or health troubles.

We can trace prosperity gospel's popularity in relation to distinct social, political, and economic shifts in American culture. The 1950s economic boom gave rise to a postwar America fervently tied to the belief in upward mobility. Following World War II, a renewed sense of

[33] In *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking has Undermined America,* Barbara Ehrenreich argues that contemporary cultures of positivity support ideologies of neoliberal individualism by understanding personal failure as a product of negativity or inadequate optimism. As Ehrenreich points out, neoliberal cultures of positivity attribute misfortune or failure to a flaw in one's attitude or behavior.

possibility swept America, with an ardent patriotism intertwining itself with conceptions of access and progress. People believed that the suburban markers of success — a good job, disposable income for conspicuous consumption, nuclear family, well-manicured lawn — were accessible and attainable to all those who desired these status symbols. Rather than remaining the purview of a wealthy, elite class, the American Dream felt within reach during the postwar period. It's no coincidence that Oral Robert's ministry significantly grew during this period, as he convinced his predominantly lower-income audiences that financial blessings were possible for them. Roberts' gospel complimented cultural messages disseminated via advertising during the 50s that reinforced the idea that anyone could have their white picket fence if they worked hard enough. Roberts' ministry claimed that if you pair that hard work with devout prayer visualizing the picket fence, there was no stopping anyone in manifesting their own American Dream.

Although 1950s postwar culture and Roberts' ministry established the prosperity gospel as a popular doctrine of Christianity, it was the Reagan era that pushed prosperity gospel into the mainstream cultural imagination. Characterized by a self-interested and market-oriented logic, the Reagan era convinced American culture that the grit and determination of the individual takes precedent to social welfare: a logic that rationalized the decimation of vital New Deal-era social programs and initiated the overriding dominance of privatization.[34] Reaganomics complimented the prosperity gospel ethos of personal responsibility. Prosperity gospel followers believe that hardship is never the result of a dwindling social safety net or systemic inequities, but the individual's lack of dedication and faith. Hardship is a private matter, born of private

[34] In *The Twilight of Equality. Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy,* Lisa Duggan discusses how Alongside objectives to shrink public resources and dismantle the New Deal, the 70s era saw the creation of financial restructuring projects (the IMF, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization) and "emergent multicultural / equality projects" compatible with the upward distribution of resources (XII). Ruth Wilson Gilmore's article "In the Shadow of the Shadow State" articulates how this push toward dismantling a social safety net took shape, and gave rise to the nonprofit industrial complex (defined by Dylan Rodriguez as a "set of symbiotic relationships that link political and financial technologies of state and owning class control with surveillance over public political ideology.")

issues — hardship is not a public concern, born of society's failings. Taking personal responsibility for one's devotion to Christ and resultant financial blessings works in tandem with Reagan's firm adherence to bootstrap theory. Tammy Faye Bakker and Jim Bakker, a now-infamous prosperity gospel couple, premiered their Praise the Lord television studios in 1983 with a warm message from Ronald Reagan. Reagan noted how the duo helped Americans "endure and triumph," highlighting the intimate relationship prosperity doctrine shared to neoliberalism's increasing dominance as a political rationality during the 80s-era.[35] Neoliberalism thrived on locating the onus of responsibility on the individual to remedy hardship, rather than looking to larger forces of deregulation and privatization as generating personal difficulties. The myth of meritocracy grew central to neoliberal ideology, invoking Alger and Conwell's conceptions of bootstrapping to rationalize social and economic precarity. If one couldn't pick themselves up by their bootstraps to rise out of poverty or overcome hardship, their adversity could be attributed to personal or moral failures.

Prosperity gospel works to disseminate and naturalize neoliberal ideology as a prevailing logic. If prosperity gospel followers believe that hardship or fortune shares a direct relationship to their personal faith, they take personal responsibility for their own upward mobility. Prosperity gospel adherents "self-responsibilize" for their own success: they attribute hardship to their own self-perceived personal or moral failings as Christians. Rather than looking toward systemic modes of injustice — the cyclical nature of poverty, discrimination based on identity, etc. — that can prevent success and generate hardship, prosperity gospel convinces followers that they must look inward at ostensible shortcomings as the seeds of misfortune. This method of deflecting from systemic causes of hardship toward inward reflection has particularly impacted

[35] In their dissertation entitled "Blessed: A History of American Prosperity Gospel," Catherine Christiane Bowler introduces readers to the major figures and features of the twentieth-century American prosperity gospel. Bowler articulates the intimate relationships that prosperity gospel leaders developed with Reagan to provide insight on how neoliberal politics informed the growth of prosperity gospel spaces.

minoritized communities that gravitate toward prosperity gospel. In *Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics*, Lester Spence highlights how prosperity gospel facilitated the neoliberalization of the Black church. Spence argues that the Black church's dedication to prosperity gospel works to not only generate vast wealth disparities between megachurch pastors and congregants, but also to shape Black communities' political imaginations. While vast social inequities underscore the need for reparations, Spence emphasizes how Black churches turn congregants' attention away from politicizing hardship and instead frame hardship as the product of character flaws.

In order to avoid misfortune, one must visualize their success through prayer in order to manifest fortune. Norman Vincent Peale's strategies of visualization and manifestation inform contemporary prosperity gospel preachers such as Joel Osteen and Joyce Meyer as these tactics focus heavily on positive thinking. Perpetual positivity functions as a key mechanism of prosperity gospel's ethos of self-responsibilization: if you shift your attitudes and behaviors toward visualizing blessings, you must dispel any conception of what can prevent those blessings. As long as you center your attention on the "positive" outcome of attaining wealth and health, you will receive that. Prosperity gospel's strategies of visualization and manifestation contributed heavily to the 2007-2010 housing crash, as pastors encouraged congregants to envision the material wealth they desired and take risks to achieve that. This led to many megachurch worshippers taking on various forms of subprime lending, which fueled a housing crisis and the associated 2008 multinational financial crisis. Osteen's encouragement of congregants to build the life they want and take financial risks may have resulted in people making bad investments, yet neoliberal ideology dictates that this failure is the result of the individual alone. Philip Mirowski notes how neoliberalism "tags every possible disaster as the

consequences of risk-bearing, the personal fallout from making "bad choices" in investments."[36] Discourses of personal responsibility relieve institutions of accountability for encouraging bad investments, and attributing one's failures to the advice of a trusted guide, such as Osteen, can be dismissed as negativity. According to prosperity doctrine, negativity emerges when you have doubts, critiques, or uncertainties. Casting positivity and negativity in binary opposition proves to be a reductive way of avoiding difficult, yet necessary, explorations of insight and experience. Simplifying dialogues to focus on the "positive" offers an effective way of skirting investigations of problems that require more complex and nuanced frameworks. Focusing solely on the positive leads to magical thinking that rationalizes subprime lending as a good thing if it is a part of one's visualization of success. Yet, if we attribute growth to personal visualizations and emphases on what is "positive," we reinforce the notion that systemic issues can be reduced to personal change. Prosperity gospel equates the experience of poverty with a lack of God's blessings and commitment to one's own spiritual growth. Poverty is reduced to an unwillingness of the individual to dedicate oneself to Jesus.

Key facets of mainstream Christian doctrine ground contemporary self-help ideologies in American culture. In tracing a history of prosperity gospel, we see how positivity and bootstrap theory ground this Christian ethos. The techniques of visualization and manifestation act as vital strategies for ensuring that social subjects' attention turns inward to see economic mobility as a project determined by self-responsibilization. These lessons prove to be vital to popular self-help coaches, who engage Christian legacies to define self-help as a critical support for the expansion of the neoliberal project. Prosperity gospel instructs people of Christian faith that

[36] In *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown*, Philip Mirowski charts how potential critiques to neoliberalism get subsumed by the internalization of cultural values centered on competition and wealth accumulation. He explores in detail how in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash, the culprits of the crash skirted responsibility, and neoliberalism stabilized itself through defining failure as a matter of personal responsibility.

financial growth is the direct result of their own capacity for modifying their thoughts and behavior toward positivity and manifesting success. Self-help coaches espouse similar teachings outside the megachurch walls. Like prosperity pastors, coaches instruct followers that change comes from within, and you need to modify your mental and behavioral processes to find success. Prosperity doctrine and self-help operate to produce ideal neoliberal subjects: those who reject an engagement with systemic critique and turn inward to say "I am all that is standing between me and being a millionaire" — those who identify their behavior, thoughts, and patterns as the barrier to upward mobility, rather than rampant social and economic inequities. Thinking positively, manifesting, and visualizing all serve key functions in teaching social subjects that the problem is them, not capitalism. From megachurches to conference rooms to digital spaces, people receive an education on how to be good neoliberal subjects by learning that change starts from within. The face of contemporary self-help figures has shifted in recent years — we have seen neoliberal life coaching strategies extend beyond the bible-cradling arms of televangelists and toward the sleek and charming purview of pop culture icons. These icons translate various tenets of prosperity doctrine into lucrative coaching enterprises. When we think of contemporary self-help, two names often resonate, demonstrating their indelible mark on the self-help industry: Tony Robbins and Sheryl Sandberg. In the following section, I explore Tony Robbins and Sheryl Sandberg's coaching philosophies — how their rhetoric and coaching strategies weave together the magical thinking of prosperity doctrine and bootstraps ideology, the implications this has for the expansion of the neoliberal project, and how particular conceptualizations of feminism grew into important mechanisms of coaching us to be "good" neoliberal subjects.

From Tony Robbins to Sheryl Sandberg, Change Starts from Within

In the late 80's, America grew infatuated with Tony Robbins. Robbins, originally an apprentice to

notable motivational speaker Jim Rohn, became a household name through bestselling books, infomercials, and seminars. His 1987 book *Unlimited Power* and 1993 book *Awaken the Giant Within: How to Take Immediate Control of Your Mental, Emotional, Physical, and Financial Destiny!* positioned Robbins as a leader in the self-help industry. His books center on encouraging readers to change their lives through raising their own personal standards and mastering the behavior and attitude changes required to consistently enact those standards. Regarded as a master of the psychology of change, Robbins amassed a fortune through establishing himself as a silver bullet for struggling people. Whatever struggle someone faced, Robbins convinced his readers, infomercial watchers, and seminar participants that they were in complete control of their destinies, and the only thing standing in the way of their success was themselves.

Robbins' seminars, such as his "Date with Destiny" events, developed a reputation for being particularly grueling. Costing each participant up to $7,995 per event, the "Date with Destiny" seminar required participants to spend an immense amount of hours engaged in their own self-improvement, leaving little time for rest. Working around the clock in sessions designed to unpack trauma and despair, the lack of sleep often made people susceptible to mental and emotional breakdowns. A former security guard to Robbins noted that it was not uncommon for participants to crack under the pressure and break down in a variety of ways (panic attacks, mental breaks). Robbins pairs sleep deprivation with intense expectations for divulging pain during his Dates with Destiny. Regarded by Robbins as "interventions," the motivational speaker will select audience members to share deeply painful life events in front of the crowd. For his followers, Robbins' trademark toughness is understood as the gateway to releasing self-limiting beliefs. Robbins has noted that he "purged his vocabulary of disempowering language and thus a feeling that can devastate even the stoutest of hearts."

Robbins' philosophy of discovering personal change via behavior and attitude changes places a heavy focus on rhetorical power. He believes that words can change your life, and ridding your vocabulary of what he considers "negative" language is key to success. For Robbins, negative language encompasses any words that evidence strong emotion. Someone may say "I am depressed" and Robbins notes that changing this word usage to something like "I am a bit down" is central to becoming happier. Similarly, someone may say "Sh**, I am angry," to which Robbins would suggest you follow his wife Sage's advice to replace this expression of rage with "Sugar doodles." When considering following the Robbins family advice for dispelling negative emotion, this raises questions around how effective "sugar doodles" is in effectively processing the human range of feeling. The logic of tempering emotion through shifted language highlights a mind over matter ethos — Robbins believes you can will you way beyond depression, trauma, and any variation of mental health struggle. Life coaches may not purport to be licensed mental health professionals, yet coaches like Robbins indelibly impact vulnerable folks seeking their guidance. If you convince people that depression can be resolved through referring to depressed feelings as something else, that tactic of sweeping issues under the rug can backfire -- as evidenced by Date with Destiny participants.

Refusing to be a "victim" comes up often in Robbins speeches — he instructs followers to not only eliminate the word victim from their vocabulary, but to ideologically reject any engagement with victimhood. This leads to harmful misunderstandings of trauma that regard any discussion of abuse as "playing the victim." Participants may recount sexual assaults and various experiences with abuse, to which Robbins often responds with a characteristic harshness. He once cut off a sexual assault survivor sharing her trauma by saying "she's fucking using all this stuff to try and control men."[37] A holistic rejection of victimhood that denies

[37] In 2019, several news outlets such as NBC News, The Cut, and Vice published journalistic pieces on Tony Robbins problematic strategies and behavior after nine women came forward detailing their

survivors the ability to meaningfully grapple with trauma works to incorporate a bootstrap ideology into understandings of trauma. One is supposed to just "get over it" through shifted language and a willful commitment to "being better." To Robbins, sexual assault survivors can pick themselves up by their bootstraps by denying their experiences and the impact of those experiences on their lives. Robbins' expression of bootstrap ideology in coaching sexual assault survivors can produce secondary trauma, as he reinforces cultural ideas of victim-blaming through expressed hostility. Victim-blaming is a key tool for sustaining rape culture, understood as the normalization of sexual violence through various practices and policies. By pathologizing survivors' recounting of assault as a desire to control the men around them, Robbins' aggressive rejection of grappling with what accountability and healing looks like for survivors evidences how misogyny and bootstrap ideology can work in tandem. Robbins pairs bootstrap sentiments with victim-blaming to produce coaching dynamics that identify systemic gender-based violence as an excuse, an unwillingness to move forward, a weakness. The tactic of blaming survivors of gendered violence for their reactions to abuse highlights the stakes involved for promoting a "change comes from within" philosophy. If we refuse to pair strategies of individual behavior modification or attitude adjustment with an attention to how structural oppression produces complex engagements with healing and personal change, then self-help becomes a mechanism of reinforcing structural oppression. Tony Robbins' practices provide insight into how coaching can serve as a deflection from systemic power — when the individual becomes responsible for generating easy remedies to complicated social and political issues, the state is relieved of the burden for addressing the impact of its varying modes of violence.

Cultural interest in Tony Robbins' coaching set the stage for Sheryl Sandberg. America grew

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experiences of Tony Robbins' sexual misconduct. These nine women's stories propelled a detailed investigation by Buzzfeed reporters, who released transcripts, recordings, and narratives provided by the survivors. Thank you to these women for their bravery in coming forward and illuminating these deeper understandings of Robbins' tactics and behavior.

infatuated with a style of self-help that defined the key to monetary and personal success as individual change. Sheryl Sandberg entered into the mainstream cultural imagination in the late 2010s, armed with a new project of individual behavior modification and attitude change that carried a twist. Sandberg fused Robbins-style coaching and an ostensible feminist consciousness — positioning her work as a multicultural project of diversity and equality ripe for neoliberal consumption. Published in 2013, Sheryl Sandberg's book *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* sparked extensive conversations on how American culture conceptualizes feminism and what feminist progress looks like. Sandberg's Lean In philosophy argues that the key to feminist progress is individual change: women need to gain more seats at decision-making tables, and the only thing standing between women and greater representation in the corporate workforce is themselves. *Lean In* espouses the belief that increased corporate power for women produces a trickle-down effect, where more representation equals positive change. In order to enhance women's representation in the workforce, women need to take a hard look at themselves and recognize the barriers they are creating for themselves on the path to a high salary and boardroom seat. As Catherine Rotteberg argues in *Neoliberal Feminism*, Sandberg's philosophy works to relieve the state of responsibility for addressing rampant social and political inequities, refocusing attention on the individual's need to change their behavior and attitude to overcome such inequities. *Lean In* redefines feminism: rather than being a collective-oriented project of systemic change, feminism gets recoded as an individualized effort toward personal change. This recasts feminism as a mechanism for expanding the neoliberal project.

Feminism is recast as a way to disseminate and strengthen neoliberal rationality through centering feminist discussion on the individual maintenance of work-life-family balance. Catherine Rottenberg is particularly concerned with how the notion of a happy work-life-family balance provides a vital axis for neoliberal feminism to operate on. According to Rottenberg, this focus hollows the potential of liberal feminism to have a systemic critique of power, enabling the

further re-entrenchment of neoliberal rationality (12). When we redirect the focus of feminism toward work-life-family balance, women assume personal responsibility for managing care work, and equate feminism with the successful maintenance of work-life-family balance. With key mainstream voices like Sheryl Sandberg defining feminism as an individual project of successful balance to ensure financial prosperity, feminism becomes a key facet of neoliberalism's growth. Rottenberg argues,

> neoliberalism *needs* feminism as it relies on reproduction and care work in order to reproduce and maintain human capital - yet neoliberalism has no lexicon for care work as it renders everything into generic human capital (disavowing gender) and eroding public-private distinctions by the infiltration of market rationality into all spheres (16).

Just as neoliberalism *needs* commitments to feminism that take responsibility for reproducing and maintaining human capital, I would argue that neoliberalism *needs* the coaching support of people such as Joel Osteen, Tony Robbins, and Sheryl Sandberg. Neoliberalism needs educational guides to teach people what success looks like in neoliberal contexts. Prosperity gospel televangelists and coaches like Tony Robbins intertwine conceptions of success with neoliberal rationality, positioning popular modes of self-help as instructive tools for audiences, educating them on how to be good, prosperous capitalist subjects. Sheryl Sandberg represents an important pivot point for mainstream self-help, wherein feminism and neoliberal rationality work in tandem to provide that education — this makes feminist coaching compatible with and necessary to neoliberal growth. Sandberg specifically teaches women what success looks in neoliberal contexts, and she considers what women need to think about, behave like, and how they need to feel in order to commit to visions of success that compliment neoliberal expansion.

There is bigger cultural work at play with Sheryl Sandberg's philosophy than an appeal to a particular demographic. On the surface, Sandberg is reaching out to a demographic that has been de-centered in coaching spaces, and recruiting greater numbers of people into

understanding and pursuing neoliberal conceptions of success. While that strength in numbers via readership is key to disseminating particular cultural logics, *how* Sandberg genders her coaching efforts reflect a narrowing of feminism that excludes particular marginalized groups, while uplifting certain women. Sandberg's gendering of self-help works to racialize and class what minoritized demographics are brought into the neoliberal fold. Sandberg is appealing to a particular woman: she is speaking to a white woman with class privilege that is able to navigate the corporate world in ways that are interconnected with her racial and socioeconomic positionality. *Lean In* produces a one-size-fits-all model of feminist success that not only defines feminist change as an individualized project, but also evidences distinct blind spots around how her strategies are complicated by everyday manifestations of white supremacy, socioeconomic limitations, and ableism.

Like prosperity preachers and Tony Robbins, Sandberg engages techniques of visualization and manifestation to convince audiences that change comes from within. *Lean In* encourages readers to visualize and manifest their success, and does so through encouraging a magical thinking that glosses over systemic inequities. Sandberg's version of magical thinking believes that all women can will themselves into successful positions, and that the only standing between them and corporate dominance is their own negativity. In Sandberg's view, negativity takes shape as a lack of confidence and willpower to advance. Similar to Joel Osteen and Tony Robbins, Sandberg uses positivity as a strategy for deflecting from systemic obstacles. An attention to how racism, classism, or ableism impacts workplace experiences is easily dismissed as negativity. If we delve into how white supremacist work culture pushes women and gender non-conforming people of color out of the workforce, we see how perfectionism, urgency, and the cultural taxation of educating co-workers on racism generates toxic environments. If we delve into how class privilege pushes those that come from lower socioeconomic brackets out of the workforce, we see how assumptions about access to

resources can be isolating. If we delve into how ableism pushes people with disabilities out of the workforce, we see how a reluctance to bend to various accommodations creates inflexible work spaces. All of these dynamics of workspaces highlight how a one-size-fits-all understanding of feminist success produces hostility to folks with diverse identities and experiences.

Lean In highlights an understanding of diversity that emerges from racial capitalism. Under racial capitalism, diversity is beneficial insofar that it generates profits and supports brand enhancement. Neoliberal feminism thrives on these reductive understandings of diversity because they engage representation as an end unto itself. Positioning representation as the "end all be all" of political progress evidences Sarah Banet-Weiser's argument that economies of visibility limit feminist potentialities. Having women represented in a company checks a diversity box, and the visibility of any woman in a company, regardless of that person's policies or practices, embodies a "feminist win." *Lean In* works to assimilate particular conceptualizations of diversity into mainstream self-help, demonstrating how diversity can be engaged to support the expansion of the neoliberal project. As Jodi Melamed highlights with the concept of racial capitalism, race and other forms of social difference can be leveraged by white supremacy to extract value. Race and social difference generate economic and social value for feminism when women are lauded for "overcoming" struggles based on gender, race, disability, and so on to fit themselves into a one-size-fits-all notion of feminist progress. While these narrow conceptions of feminism might champion particular women, such as Sandberg, they flatten discussions of diversity and equity to sheer visibility and empty representation. Visibility and representation do not equate to championing feminism when diverse folks in leadership make decisions that perpetuate rigid hierarchies and stratification. Reducing the conversation to visibility and representation skirts any form of a systems-based critique necessary for enacting intersectional change in the workplace and beyond. Sheryl Sandberg creates a blueprint for

advancement that refuses to acknowledge how an analysis of race, class, and ability necessitates looking beyond manifesting confidence and willpower to climb the corporate ladder. Visualizing and manifesting a positive attitude may only get someone so far if they are navigating workplace cultures that marginalize their voices, experiences, and needs. Magical thinking functions as a technology of racial capitalism when it diverts attention from workplace inequities toward the individual and says "if you cannot manifest success despite these challenges, and will them away with a positive attitude, you are the problem."

Manifesting and Visualizing Girlboss Status

The impact of Sheryl Sandberg's conception of neoliberal feminism rippled throughout mainstream culture in the late 2010s. Sandberg's text sold over 5 million copies worldwide (while about 12,500 copies continue to be sold every month) evidencing cultural resonance with a particular brand of feminism centered on self-actualization and generating capital. Feminism experienced a certain zeitgeist in the 2010s-era, with a number of celebrities claiming feminist identification. This identification came to be equated with Sandberg-style feminism, a politics defined through demonstrating individual confidence and financial prosperity. With Sophia Amorosu's memoir #Girlboss popping up amidst this cultural zeitgeist of celebrity feminist identification, the word girlboss grew into a omnipresent force. Touted as *Lean In* for millennials, Girlboss packaged the neoliberal feminist politics of Sandberg's text in the rhetoric, aesthetics, and attitude of newly popularized, celebrity-endorsed feminism. Girlboss feminism emerged as a key thread of neoliberal feminism: a formation of Sandberg-style politics that engages various cultural material in more expansive, mediated ways. Girlboss feminism leverages digital spaces in particular to disseminate neoliberal feminist logics through rhetoric, aesthetics, and attitudes that resonate with millennial and Gen Z audiences.

A key mediated cultural space that proliferates neoliberal feminist ideologies is girlboss influencer culture. Girlboss feminism manifests on digital platforms like Instagram through accounts that instruct audiences on how to attain feminist success. Girlboss influencer culture encompass the range of widely-followed accounts that equate feminist progress with individual change. Accounts like @thefemalehustlers, @womanceomindset, and @createcultivate, have significant followings, ranging between 600k and 1 million followers each. On platforms like Instagram, large followings like this place accounts in the category of "influencer." Significant followings often equate to extensive reshares of content and amplified visibility in the Instagram algorithm. With influencer status, comes the ability to impact the attitudes, politics, and imaginations of followers. @thefemalehustlers, @womanceomindset, and @createcultivate impact followers through how they define feminist success, and engage followers in these understandings of feminist progress. The extensive amount of accounts that offer content similar to the aforementioned influencers, and seek to develop comparable followings, represents girlboss feminism's reach. Girlboss feminism extends beyond the readership of Sandberg's *Lean In*, and engages millions of social media users that like, share, or bookmark girlboss influencer content. This content represents a key evolution of not only participation in neoliberal feminist thought, but how self-help coaching takes shape in contemporary culture. Self-help ideologies now gain cultural ground outside of conference halls, televangelist broadcasts, and book clubs — mainstream self-help concepts now find audiences and generate impact through digital space. Girlboss influencer culture embodies an amalgamation of popular self-help strategies, from manifestation and visualization to the power of positive thinking, as a means of educating social media users on how to find change from within and attain feminist progress — in other words, how to be a girlboss.

How do we visualize and manifest feminist success? According to girlboss influencers like @womanceomindset, we use the power of positive thinking, paired with grit and

determination, to discover financial growth. @womanceomindset is an Instagram community dedicated to “helping #femaleentrepreneurs grow their Instagrams organically and boost their sales" encourages followers to enroll in their @womanceoacademy to learn how to make six figures. The account invokes the teachings of The Law of Attraction to instruct audiences on how to visualize success in order to manifest its possibilities. Undoubtedly inspired by Norman Vincent Peale’s text *The Power of Positive Thinking*, the Law of Attraction argues that people produce the conditions and experiences that characterize their existence purely through what they think about. Popularized by the 2006 film *The Secret,* the Law of Attraction gained positive mainstream attention from cultural figures like Oprah and Ellen Degeneres. Due to the success of the movie, producer Rhonda Byrne penned a self-help book of the same name, which sold over 35 million copies worldwide. Regarded as a self-help phenomenon, popular coaches like Tony Robbins worked to spread the Law of Attraction as a key self-help philosophy by referring to the Law when discussing mindset changes. @womanceomindset’s posts about the Law of Attraction on their Instagram encourage followers to see their thought process, paired with hard work, as predictive of their financial gain. The account defines the Law of Attraction for followers stating “The Law of Attraction is the belief that by focusing on positive thoughts, people can bring positive experiences into their lives.” This philosophy then takes shape in other posts that read “WATCH ME MANIFEST EVERYTHING I WANT” and “Staying happy is a MUST. Ignoring negativity is a MUST.” The Law of Attraction compliments understandings of bootstrap ideology, as it demonstrates that anyone can think positively enough and work hard enough to become financially prosperous. @womanceomindset puts the Law of Attraction and bootstrap ideology in conversation with feminist rhetoric to cultivate understandings of success. Feminist success gains definition as an individual project of thought control, behavior modification, and meritocratic work output.

@womanmindsetceo takes a general message of manifesting and visualizing success

via individual attitude adjustment and behavior changes, one popularized by televangelists and coaches alike, but stylizes it in pink font. Pink, traditionally understood as a color of femininity within binary gender frameworks, is an intentional aesthetic choice used to communicate “this message is for women.” The gendering of this message remains at the superficial level of aesthetic interest to skirt complex discussions of economic advancement for a diversity of identities and experiences. Repackaging the same message that televangelists and coaches deliver to a general audience in pink works to construct a monolithic conception of “women.” While race, class, ability, sexual orientation, and diverse expressions and experiences of gender all generate varying conditions that impact economic advancement, the Law of Attraction sees economic opportunity emerging from a level playing field. To take this ethos and stylize it as feminine reflects a politics of representation through which visibility functions as the end point of change. Like Sandberg’s Lean In, the gendering of this message, and associated understandings of success, take shape as a one-size-fits-all conception of feminist advancement. The pink acknowledges that “women” are an important audience to uplift and support, yet the Law of Attraction simultaneously renders experiences of marginalization stemming from social hierarchy to be a non-issue: ALL people can think their way to success according to this philosophy. Stylizing bootstraps ideology in pink says that women are included in the myth of meritocracy, and their identity has no bearing on the capacity to attain the American Dream. The visibility of a pink monolith renders the variations of gendered experiences that challenge and complicate the American Dream to be invisible. Representational politics creates a contradictory space wherein marginalized folks are spotlighted, yet given no space to share the complexities of their experiences.

@womanmindsetceo demonstrates how girlboss influencers engage diverse representation within a framework of racial capitalism. Racial capitalism uplifts diversity insofar that diversity serves to reinforce existing structures of exploitation and domination. Companies,

brands, and organizations extract value from non-white identities and experiences, enhancing their image by appearing to care about a diversity of people. As Jodi Melamed points out, a politics of representation seeks to extract value from diversity, rather than attending to how Black freedom struggles, Indigenous sovereignty movements, lifeworlds of Latinx migrants, and communities of color teach us how racial oppression is intertwined with economic oppression. Neoliberal multiculturalism thrives on monolithic representation that defines the visibility of marginalized identities in upwardly mobile positions as evidence that challenges produced by racial capitalism can be surmounted. Melamed highlights how neoliberal multiculturalism

> treats human experience and vectors of oppression anchored in stigmatized identities as distinct and serial rather than intersectional and heterogenous, so that the way the dividing line is really drawn between the valued and devalued remains mysterious. That is, it is only seen partially and from the point of view of liberalism's obfuscating generalities ("individuals," "citizens," "women," "African Americans.").

Girlboss influencer culture works to bolster Melamed's concept of neoliberal multiculturalism by resisting an exploration of how oppressions based on gender, race, and socioeconomic status intersect and complicate the capacity to gain upward mobility. Instead, girlboss accounts engage the category of women as an obfuscated generality that compliments meritocratic ideologies at the heart of racial capitalism. The presence of women as CEOS is provided as evidence that stigmatized identities can thrive under racial capitalism, and there is no need to challenge how devaluation that characterizes intersectional and heterogenous experiences operates. The cruelty of inequities that prevent thriving under racial capitalism are thus rendered invisible when monolithic, generalized representations of success take center stage. When accounts like @womanceomindset claim that **all women** have the capacity to visualize and manifest wealth via The Law of Attraction, dynamics of racial capitalism that complicate understandings of success as a project of thought control are easily dismissed as negativity. The Law of Attraction mandates a rejection of complexity and acceptance of simplicity. Positivity

works as a form of mental control, generating a kind of obedience among social subjects to neoliberal structures that actively denies attention to systemic barriers produced by racial capitalism.

@createcultivate is the digital presence of a media company of the same name that hosts a celebrity-filled annual conference that carries a hefty price tag ($300 for general admission). The celebrity allure around the conference (and smaller-scale business summits), with people like Kate Hudson and Cameron Diaz making appearances, has made Create and Cultivate a key hub for aspiring boss babes looking to build businesses and wealth. The media company's Instagram presence educates followers on what they do, and how their work sees diversity as a profit point. @createcultivate brings up the concept of diversity often, and defines the concepts' utility in relation to monetary gain. One post reads "A Founder's #1 Money Tip For Small Business Entrepreneurs: DIVERSIFY," highlighting how diversity is key to monetization. Diversifying one's leadership and staff grows intertwined with the concept of diversifying revenue. While diversifying revenue can refer to any number of strategies that expand where and how a company generates income, what diversifying a company looks like is left vague. There is a resounding theme of diversity being a positive thing, as diversity of representation is enmeshed with a concept of diversifying revenue. Creating an ideological association between business tactics and representational politics positions the word diversity as a resounding buzzword — diversity remains a vague idea with numerous seemingly positive mental associations to generate a conceptual malleability. Diversity functions as what Melamed refers to as an obfuscating generality that resists nuance, detail, and complexity. Accounts like @createcultivate and @womanmindsetceo may feature photos of women of color or spotlight their business, but there is little discussion from these accounts on how to center diverse identities in the workforce as intersectional and heterogenous. How do we dismantle dynamics of white supremacy in workplaces to create supportive spaces for women of color? How do we

address the ways that assumptions around ability create hostility toward people with disabilities? How do we ensure that diverse staff are heard, valued, and respected when working within a hierarchical organization? Questions that look toward diversity as an engagement with social difference, and mechanism for shifting understandings of labor and workplaces to center intersectional / heterogenous identities and experiences are disregarded. Instead, diversity operates in the realm of obscurity and generalization for the sake of avoiding such questions. Vagueness keeps the idea conceptually nimble in order to adapt to various contexts and purposes.[38] Diversity is taken up as a technology for reinforcing existing workplace structures that thrive on hierarchy and bootstraps mythologies. The success of diverse folks evidences how anyone can become a boss with worker subordinates, as long as they work hard enough within existing, inequitable frameworks. @creativecultivate showcases how the representational politics of neoliberal multiculturalism use diversity to buttress meritocratic ideologies. Visibility of diversity as a concept, and the visibility of diverse people, is used to supplant engagements with diversity that stand to shift organizational structures and logics.

Clocking at over 3 million followers, @thefemalehustlers enjoys an extensive digital reach in the girlboss influencer circuit. Described as “a new breed of disruptors,” @thefemalehustlers specialize in offering inspirational picture quotes in some combination of black, pink, or gray shading. Similar to fellow girlboss influencers, the account leans heavily on encouraging followers to shift their thought processes and mindsets in favor of building wealth. As neoliberal feminism hinges on self-responsibilizing for one’s work-life-personal balance, @thefemalehustlers teaches followers that striking balance is key to their success.

[38] In *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, Pierre Dardot & Christian Laval argue that neoliberalism’s adaptation-oriented strategy produces a malleability for neoliberal ideologies to maintain governance. If we keep diversity conceptually vague, it produces opportunities to generate a flexible conformity between humans and institutions. This malleability in producing conformity is necessary for neoliberal ideologies to dominate cultural life.

@thefemalehustlers take Sheryl Sandberg's ethos of self-responsibilizing for balance and filter it through culturally-appropriative slang. The account leans heavily on engaging AAVE (African American Vernacular English) as a rhetorical strategy for resonating with audiences. One post reads "Thug that shit out, babe" in reference to maintaining the willpower necessary for seeing goals through. Another post, which takes the words of a Black woman named Chiamaka and made them viral, reads

> "Sis is drinking her water. Sis is eating healthy. Sis is in the gym. Sis is taking care of her skin. Sis is reading her books. Sis is doing the work + healing herself. Sis is practicing self-love + self-care. Sis is walking in purpose. Sis is me. I am sis."

Cultural appropriation takes shape as circulating aesthetics and traditions of marginalized cultures one does not belong to, and generating social and financial capital from that circulation. Often, the use of those aesthetics and traditions on the part of marginalized folks is historically dismissed and deemed unprofessional or undesirable. Yet, when someone with social power and privilege takes up and circulates that cultural material as part of their image or brand, it is recoded as trendy, while divorcing the cultural material from associated traditions. @thefemalehustlers highlights a key rhetorical strategy of girlboss influencer culture that is grounded in cultural appropriation.[39] Various white girlboss influencers will engage AAVE as a method of resonating with audiences and boosting their own social capital. Girlboss influencers that appropriate AAVE bring people into a philosophy of self-responsibilizing for balance by making it seem trendy and fresh. These influencers work to disseminate a neoliberal feminist education, instructing followers that taking personal responsibility for balance is key to becoming a girlboss. In doing so, they not only show followers what it means to be a thriving capitalist subject, but they demonstrate how growth can be earned through colonizing rhetorics and

[39] In Lester Spence's book *Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics*, he charts how hustle culture and perpetual grinding impacts Black communities. We see how girlboss culture takes up this neoliberal concept emerging from Black spaces and appropriates it to promote aspirational, meritocratic narratives.

aesthetics for growing one's social and monetary capital.

Girlboss influencer culture embodies an outgrowth of American self-help culture. From books to pulpits to digital spaces, the resounding chorus of "change coming from within" ripples through this manifestation of capitalist culture. Girlboss influencer culture merged a neoliberal understanding of feminism with this American phenomenon, producing an emergent and mediated formation of self-help that instructs Gen Z and millennials on how to manifest and visualize their way into being good capitalist subjects. This vital education on how to be a good capitalist traverses social media, recruiting aspiring coaches who believe that not only can they discover wealth, health, and their best self, but they can teach you how to as well.

Chapter 4: Who Wants to be a #BossBabe?: Community and Capital in Multi-Level Marketing Schemes

"LuLaRoe has gifted me in so many different ways. Community, sisterhood, friendship, and being a stay at home mom! Thank you for being a Huge part of my success! Live. Laugh. Shop." - Sarah Roelke, LuLaRoe consultant

Language plays a central role in articulating cultural norms and modes of social organization. Keywords act as familiar elements of language that are not only "key" in how they circulate widely, but in how they come to facilitate the negotiation of shared meaning. As Raymond Williams points out, keywords "unlock something hidden" through their capacity to represent how dominant ideologies gain power, shape perspective, and frame worldviews. Community functions as a keyword in contemporary culture through its rampant circulation and malleable application in a variety of circumstances. A sense of community is often understood as a vital need, gesturing at the imperative for social belonging in one's personal and professional growth. Activists reference the necessity of building community when fighting for diverse social justice aims. Companies aim to facilitate a sense of community among workers in order to maximize workplace efficiency and employee satisfaction. Spiritual leaders see community as the foundation of their work's resonance and prosperity. When reflecting on community as a keyword, Raymond Williams notes: what is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all other terms of social organization (state, nation, society, etc.) it seems never to be used unfavorably, and never to be given and positive opposing or distinguishing term" (76). Community often gains definition through its conceptualization as a fundamental attribute of healthy society. The word often finds itself situated as an objectively positive idea that does not warrant critique. Yet, how might we deepen our understandings of community to see gradients of costs and affordances in association with this concept, rather than treating this idea as holistically "good"? How might the notion of community be engaged as a tool for enacting harm? How do we interrogate our conceptualizations of community to see how this idea might help *and* hinder the production of more equitable, anti-capitalist futures? In this chapter, I look to how the

concept of community grew intertwined with capital, and the role these overlapping forces played in shaping feminist movement. I then turn to how multi-level marketing schemes embody a formation of girlboss feminism that leverages mediated spaces to proliferate understandings of feminist community that accommodate the expansion of the neoliberal project.

In *Against the Romance of Community,* Miranda Joseph argues that idealizations of community function to legitimate social hierarchies, as the circulation of this concept reflects its fetishization; in fetishizing community, we become "blind to the ways we might intervene in the enactment of domination and exploitation." It is often taken for granted that community operates as a distinct organizing logic outside of capitalism, facilitating blindness to idealized community's complicity in reinforcing social hierarchy. Joseph interrogates the a priori quality of community and associated nostalgia with it, offering historical evidence of community's deployment from the Enlightenment era through the twentieth century. These accounts challenge the notion that community and capital operate as a binary, arguing that "community functions in complicity with "society," enabling capitalism and the liberal state." A profound site which structures community as an enabling force for capitalism is non-profit organizations. Joseph discusses how nonprofits stand in for community metonymically, supplanting possibilities for the cultivation of community outside of state-sanctioned organizations.[40] Joseph writes, "one gives to one's community or to "the community" by contributing labor or money to a nonprofit; nonprofits are asked to represent communities politically, to speak for the communities for which they are metonyms." As nonprofits often function to reproduce capital by sustaining themselves via corporations and foundation money, conceptualizing nonprofits as a stand-in for the concept of community

[40] Ruth Wilson Gilmore's article "In the Shadow of the Shadow State" articulates how the push toward dismantling a social safety net took shape in the 80s-90s, and gave rise to the nonprofit industrial complex (defined by Dylan Rodriguez as a "set of symbiotic relationships that link political and financial technologies of state and owning class control with surveillance over public political ideology.") The 2007 book *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, edited by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, explores how the nonprofit industrial complex takes shape, and the stakes this has for social movements.

creates a key linkage between community and capital accumulation.[41] Pulling from Derrida, Joseph maintains that capital and community's supplementary relation is embodied through each structure being unable to survive on its own, with capital and community continuously supplanting each other in order to resolve the contradictions (of abstraction and particularities) endemic to capitalism.

Community and capital operate in tandem to both demobilize social movements and shape the cultural imagination's conception of political, economic, and social possibilities. Community's supplementary relationship to capitalism takes shape in ways that engages social movement rhetoric in service of neoliberal expansion. In *Selling Out,* Alexandra Chasin probes how we narrativize the LGBT movement. Chasin notes how LGBT identities, communities, and the movement itself are shaped by economic processes. Chasin looks to the relationship shared between LGBT commercial life and the organization of the political movement. To ground her interrogation of this relationship, Chasin asks "how do identity politics function in the marketplace?" She notes how gay identity politics is intertwined with liberal discourse. We see the rhetoric of privacy, choice, free expression, and individual rights present throughout activist work, pointing to how this rhetoric appeals to a capitalistic marketplace informed by liberal ideologies. The focus on possession and property, appeals to legal reform, and coding of identity as a marketable and monetizable personal feature are not only manifestations of liberal discourse, but also operate within the LGBT movement as bridges to the marketplace. The LGBT movement represents key ways that movement language and concepts offer

[41] As discussed in my first chapter, social safety nets were aggressively eroded throughout the late '80s through the Clinton years. As a result, nonprofits and charities experienced increasing pressure to take foundation and corporate funding. With narratives of systemic change out of vogue for funders, these entities adopted engagement strategies that steered clear of mass mobilization rhetoric, and instead focused the potential for social change on the individual donor. The energy of decentralized social movements focused on redistribution transferred into the production of a "shadow state," as Ruth Wilson Gilmore terms the nonprofit system.

opportunities for monetization while demobilizing efforts toward collective struggle.

Social movements' efforts to define community amidst shifting political-economic contexts demonstrates the complicated relationship shared between capital and community. The feminist movement highlights how conceptualizations of community can work to depoliticize intersectional struggle, and frame the notion of community as a technology of racial capitalism. When women's liberation of the 60s and 70s began focusing less on grassroots activism, and more on assimilating feminist causes into nonprofit and NGO institutions, this shifted popular conceptions of the feminist movement. Feminism grew into a project of individual personal and professional growth, emphasizing a discourse of rights and choice. Diverting from a focus on collective struggle that centered the redistribution of wealth and promotion of anti-racism (among other intersectional issues) enabled certain women with racial and class privileges to gain upward mobility. With these privileged women running key organizations and shaping mainstream feminist agendas, feminism developed a more intimate and complimentary relationship to capital. In turn, intersectional issues grew sidelined in favor of getting a piece of the capitalist pie, and feminism was recast as a player in the neoliberal project. From the 80s through the present day, popular feminism emerged as a neoliberal force, with mainstream feminism gaining definition as acquiring greater individual power within capitalist structures of exploitation and domination. As Catherine Rottenberg points out, neoliberal feminism can be understood as conceptualizing feminist through the lens of individual behavior modification and attitude adjustment: women working to optimize themselves to succeed within capitalist contexts is now the prevailing understanding of mainstream feminism. Neoliberal feminism is about climbing the rungs of social hierarchy, rather than seeing the ladder itself as a structure of exploitation and domination that must be critiqued and reimagined.

Definitions of community work to rationalize the social hierarchies produced by racial

capitalism when feminist community becomes synonymous with professional networking. Neoliberal feminism conceptualizes community as beneficial insofar that it optimizes individual women's advancement under capitalism. Building neoliberal feminist community operates as an extensive networking project, through which women use other women to get ahead professionally. Digital communities, such as Boss Babes RVA and Girlboss Media, popped up in the last few years to support women navigating entrepreneurship and contemporary work structures. These platforms promise community to women navigating a gig-driven world on their own. These digital communities not only teach participants that community is only valuable insofar that it facilitates individual gain, but they also play an instructive role for participants in rationalizing precarity and neutralizing systemic critique. The digital content shared and conversations facilitated by these platforms center personal ambition and growth as the fundamental stepping stone to economic stability and advancement. By making community a tool for self-optimization within capitalist hierarchy, these digital communities work to rationalize the hierarchical structures that systematically leave marginalized women behind. Joseph writes, "it is precisely in generating and legitimating social hierarchy that "community" supplements (enables, fills a void in) capitalism." By drawing this supplementary relationship between capital and community, Joseph calls us to identify how particularities can legitimate social hierarchies by divorcing community from materiality – fabricating this distinction renders community a tool of capitalist expansion, as it is no longer within the realm of politicization. Defining feminist community as networking divorces community from materiality: while feminist community can be a tool harnessed for generating systemic change that resists hierarchy and redistributes wealth, conceptualizing feminist community as networking deflects from the material conditions that reinforce precarity for marginalized folks.

While feminists of the 60s and 70s era critiqued the isolation produced by the patriarchal nuclear family, these conversations fell to the wayside as the 80s era shifted movement focus

toward institutionalizing feminist causes and maximizing individual financial prosperity. The emergence of neoliberal feminism framed the cultivation of family units as a project of individual balance. Happiness and success in maintaining family structures became understood as the result of effectively balancing work life and family life. Neoliberal feminism frames any sense of dissatisfaction with family life as an individualized problem, rather than critiquing the patriarchal family as an oppressive institution centered on devaluing the invisible labor of domestic duties and emotional support. Through a neoliberal feminist ethos, women are expected to assume responsibility for care work, and their inability to manage this successfully is the result of poor balance. This ethos skirts a larger conversation around how gendered divisions of labor persisted in patriarchal family structures since feminists of the 60s and 70s identified the rampant unhappiness experienced among housewives. Neoliberal feminism worked to reorient how feminists engage with the institutions of marriage and the family. Rather than seeing these institutions as deserving of rigorous critique and exploring possibilities for restructuring them, neoliberal feminism asked women to change as a means of accommodating these institutions' growth. From the 80s onward, women were expected to climb organizational ladders *while* continuing to meet societal expectations as mothers and wives. Women able to do this juggling act often require the support of nannies and other forms of housework help. In effect, women with privilege and means outsource their work-life balancing efforts to often underpaid domestic workers. Neoliberal feminism created a set of social dynamics where balance is available to those with financial means, and the struggle to find balance is cast as a lack of personal savvy or responsibility.

Those who struggle to discover balance often seek economic opportunities that are flexible and promise upward mobility. Economic precarity fuels the need to find jobs that enable women to manage domestic responsibilities and find economic stability and/or independence. Not only does financial necessity motivate the search for flexible jobs — the isolation produced by

patriarchal family units also sparks interest in jobs that promise a sense of community. As mainstream, neoliberal feminism refuses to contend with how patriarchal marriage and family institutions continue to place the onus of responsibility for care work on women, this popular feminist ideology also fails to meaningfully address the mothers and wives' social isolation created by patriarchal family life. Since the early 1900s, anarchist and socialist feminists, such as Emma Goldman and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, encouraged feminist thought to contend with the gendered restrictions produced by marriage. In recent years, queer abolitionists fought back against the LGBT movement's narrowing to be a project of marriage equality, citing marriage's historical relationship to colonialism and reifying social hierarchies.[42] Neoliberal feminism skirted discussions interrogating the institution of marriage's historical relationship to reproducing inequities, focusing the conversation on enhancing women's balance skills. With women bearing the brunt of constant balance, there are limited opportunities and encouragement for developing relationships outside of the home. Since the 1980s, social supports for working-class families dwindled while Reagan-era messaging around personal responsibility centered the pressure for making ends meet squarely on individual families. Amidst a lack of social supports and increasing cultural pressure around resolving hardship within individual family units, women find themselves responsible for managing care and economic difficulties in a socially-atomized way. Jobs that promise a sense of community outside the home resonates with people's vulnerabilities, producing an affective allure around the possibilities of joining a community, while gaining economic stability and independence.

Community is an idea rife with contradiction, emotion, and monetization in the realm of multi-level marketing schemes (MLMs). The Federal Trade Commission defines multi-level marketing

[42] The video series "Marriage Will Never Set us Free" delves into queer abolitionist critiques of the fight for marriage equality, highlighting how this narrow focus on marriage diverted funding and attention from intersectional issues disproportionately impacting the LGBTQ+ community like healthcare, homelessness, and job opportunities.

schemes as companies that sell their products or services through person-to-person sales. When joining an MLM, you can make money either by recruiting new retail customers, or by "recruiting new distributors and earning commissions based on what they buy and their sales to retail customers. Your recruits, the people they recruit, and so on, become your sales network, or 'downline.'" According to the FTC, if you generate income through selling to retail customers, and your income is *not* contingent on recruiting a downline, then an MLM is not a pyramid scheme. MLMs first entered into the cultural imagination during the mid-twentieth century. With promises of sisterhood, community, and entrepreneurship, MLMs such as the makeup giant Avon and food storage maven Tupperware brought women seeking new economic opportunities into the direct-selling fold. Avon's recruitment materials note "connectivity and community have always been critical to Avon's direct-selling model." In 2018, Tupperware's CEO Tricia Stitzel highlighted the company was "on a mission to grow [their] community of sellers by 1 million." Avon and Tupperware blazed the MLM trail by offering women a chance at earning income and cultivating community. While MLMs existed since the Tupperware and Avon parties of the 1950s, MLMs expanded in unprecedented ways during the 1990s.

It's important to trace the emergence of women-centric multi-level marketing schemes in relation to the emergence of neoliberal feminism as a prevailing cultural ideology. Multi-level marketing schemes grew into an omnipresent force in the 1990s as neoliberalism ascended into a governing economic and cultural rationality. Discourses of personal responsibility, recoding social support as "entitlements", and overcoming systemic barriers through sheer grit impact public policy and social relations. As Hester Eisenstein points out, with the decline of labor feminism in the 60s and 70s, the rise of a mainstream feminism compatible with the expansion of capitalist agendas emerged in the 80s and 90s (65). As this dominant strand of feminism emphasizing individualism and responsibility grew, US mainstream feminism emerged as what Lisa Duggan refers to as a "multicultural/equality project" compatible with neoliberal objectives

(64). Mainstream feminism of the 80s and 90s began to favor institutions such as nonprofits, companies, and other organization that cast feminism in a depoliticized light, defining feminism simply as the capacity to earn economic opportunity. Since the 1990s, contemporary MLMs functioned as a key site of disseminating neoliberal feminist logics such as individualism and self-responsiblizing for work-life balance. In the 1990s, Tupperware played an instructive role for women, teaching them that the American dream could be accessed through reusable containers of various colors, sizes, and purposes. By the 1990s, 90% of US homes owned at least one item of Tupperware, and this was thanks in large part to the rapid expansion of Tupperware parties across American suburbs.[43] Tupperware parties became a site not only for women to flex their sales pitches, but also to develop camaraderie with fellow housewives seeking community and economic independence. The phrase "Tupperware party" grew synonymous with the cultivation of social networks outside patriarchal family units, a promise of autonomy, and the ability to aspire beyond limiting domestic spheres. With Tupperware parties, we saw an emerging cultural gravitation toward neoliberal feminist discourses of self-responsibilization, as these discourses provided a remedy for patriarchal isolation and economic precarity.

Moving into the 00s-era, neoliberal feminism experienced a cultural zeitgeist with the publication of Sheryl Sandberg's bestselling text *Lean In.* Sandberg's *Lean In* philosophy argues that the key to feminist progress is individual change: women need to gain more seats at decision-making tables, and the only thing standing between women and greater representation in the corporate workforce is themselves. *Lean In* espouses the belief that increased corporate power for women produces a trickle-down effect, where more representation equals positive change. In order to enhance women's representation in the workforce, women need to take a hard look at themselves and recognize the barriers they are creating for themselves on the path

[43] In 2011, Tupperware was preparing to do a brand relaunch. To mark this relaunch five decades after the first Tupperware party, BBC news investigated the impact Tupperware parties had on women's lives.

to a high salary and boardroom seat. The popularity of Lean In extended to a renewed interest in celebrity feminist identification in the 2010s. While celebrities began claiming feminism, they identified their understanding of feminism distinctly through a Sandberg-inspired frame. With Sophia Amorosu's memoir #Girlboss popping up amidst this cultural zeitgeist of celebrity feminist identification, the word girlboss grew into a omnipresent force. Touted as Lean In for millennials, Girlboss packaged the neoliberal feminist politics of Sandberg's text in the rhetoric, aesthetics, and attitude of newly popularized, celebrity-endorsed feminism. Girlboss feminism is a key thread of neoliberal feminism: girlboss feminism acts as a formation of neoliberal feminist politics that engages various cultural material in more expansive, mediated ways. Girlboss feminism leverages digital spaces to disseminate neoliberal feminist logics through rhetoric, aesthetics, and attitudes that resonate with millennial and Gen Z audiences. Multi-level marketing schemes act as a key mediated site through which neoliberal feminist ideologies gain cultural resonance. In MLM spaces, naturalizing these logics takes shape as engaging various mediated spaces to define opportunity in service of neoliberal expansion. Girlboss rhetoric functions as a key mechanism for building neoliberal feminism's resonance, engaging discourses of community as a key mechanism for expanding neoliberal feminism's reach. Girlboss rhetoric, defined as language, symbols, and other visual material that proliferate neoliberal feminist ideologies via mediated spaces, works to generate discourses of community that intertwine neoliberal feminist ideologies and MLM work. On the digital platform TikTok, we can see how MLM spaces engage girlboss rhetoric by following the #MLMbossbabe hashtag. This hashtag charts how MLM participants aim to recruit social media users in their networks by offering the promises of a boss babe community. MLM participants frame the MLM boss babe community as a site of expansive opportunity, through which you'll find friends *and* financial prosperity. In the form of comedic parodies, users like @get.bent.babe humorously depict delivering an MLM pitch, based on their own experiences with being on the receiving end of such pitches. @get.bent.babe's user name is a subversive take on the common strategy of

MLM participants to use affectionate terms in their recruitment, often referring to potential recruits as “hun” or “babe.” In one of their MLM parodies, @get.bent.babe looks into the camera and says “Hey girl. You may have heard I started my own home-based business and am coaching other women to start their own businesses. Do you wanna be a boss babe? BOSS BABE? BOSS BABE? (with the vocalized repetition of BOSS BABE accompanied by the words stylized in hot pink, oversized font across the screen)”[44] This humorous take on an MLM pitch highlights not only MLM recruiters’ common emphasis on the allure of entrepreneurship, but the use of girlboss rhetoric to draw participants in to the MLM community as well. Referring to potential recruits as girlbosses, boss babes, or hun (and using visualized depictions of this language in MLM participants’ social media presences as well) has become such a familiar signifier of MLM communities and associated recruitment tactics, that it’s grown into the subject of parody.

In the following section, I’ll explore how MLM’s take up the concept of community in tactical ways that define community as useful insofar that it offers individual advancement and acts as a mechanism to control behavior and attitudes in service of neoliberal expansion. For MLMs, community engagement is instructive for participants — learning how to be a community member is learning how to be a good neoliberal subject. A community member is someone who assumes complete responsibility for their failure to recruit and meet sales goals; they never critique the MLM system for their hardship, despite the fact that these structures are often set up to make success in them impossible. A community member believes that lucrative

[44] In 2020, TikTok became the first digital platform to ban content from its platform that seeks to recruit others to pyramid schemes, and other “get rich quick” ploys. TikTok added language to their community guidelines clarifying their stance on the dissemination of pyramid scheme content. Platform representatives noted they put "multiple measures in place to reduce the spread of misleading content, including content that aims to deceive people for financial gain." TikTok’s stance on MLMs highlights how often the app was being used as an MLM recruitment tool.

entrepreneurship is within reach — becoming a girlboss or boss babe in the MLM space is a clear possibility so long as you fight hard enough for financial freedom. Being an MLM community member means adhering to such beliefs that may defy practical logic, yet firmly reinforce a myth of meritocracy: you must believe that the MLM world is a level-playing field where everyone can climb the ranks and become a girlboss entrepreneur. Additionally, collective communities imagined by MLM spaces provide an ostensible remedy for precarity and isolation produced by white hetero-patriarchal capitalist structures, generating affective interest and commitment to these understandings of community. Women find themselves drawn into MLM spaces not only to earn money, but to find friends, have fun (particularly in rural and suburban areas where there are limited opportunities for camaraderie), and feel a sense of belonging in spaces outside the nuclear family unit. MLM worlds appear to create opportunities that meet affective and economic needs denied to social subjects under capitalism. MLMs not only teach participants that community is a tool for becoming a successful neoliberal subject, but also a means for fulfilling needs unmet by contemporary political and social structures.

LuLaRoe: Engaging Community as a Technology of Power

Founded in 2012, LuLaRoe is a multi-level marketing company specializing in women's clothing. Known for their brightly-hued and boldly-patterned leggings, the company grew into a household name as suburban women began joining the company in droves from 2014 to 2018. Between 2015 and 2017, the company grew from 2,000 distributors to more than 80,000 distributors. Distributors, also known as consultants, spend between $5,000 and $10,000 for a starter kit of miscellaneous clothing items (leggings, dresses, jeans, and other casual fare). Consultants have no control over the items they receive — they can't pick and choose items they know are popular and will sell, for instance — but need to sell around at least 30 of the miscellaneous pieces of clothing per week just to earn back the seed money they invested in

their kits. When you recruit someone you get 5% of the money they spent on order, and then receive 3% of money spent on orders for those your downline brings into the LuLaRoe fold. Some LuLaRoe consultants rise the ranks to trainer, coach, or mentor, flex their networks, and recruit enough women willing to preach the LuLaRoe gospel to earn them a decent payday. Yet, the vast majority of LuLaRoe consultants are left with a bright heap of leggings that no one will buy and a $5,000-$10,000 hole of debt. Understanding that the business model sets up everyday women — often stay-at-home moms and military wives — to lose money, it's easy to wonder what compels women to join an often futile endeavor. One logical answer to that is witnessing the possibilities of ascending the LuLaRoe ranks. Women who see others grow into trainers, coaches, and mentors see their success as a potential glimmer into their own future. Yet, those with experience gaining financial prosperity in LuLaRoe highlight how that dream is fleeting. The company's narrative of empowerment and success sustains the continuation of inequitable business practices and an imaginary of sisterhood and community that disciplines employees to think, look, and behave in ways that prioritize brand integrity and assigning structural blame to individual workers.

Courtney Harwood of Greenville, North Carolina achieved the coveted status of LuLaRoe mentor, building a downline of 3500 consultants. She received bonuses each month based on the percentages of those her downline recruited into LuLaRoe. At the peak of her LuLaRoe career, she received bonus checks of up to $50,000 a month. As the company began to face lawsuits alleging their business model operated as a pyramid scheme, the company changed their bonus structure to abide by FTC regulations. Rather than being calculated based on inventory bought, bonuses became calculated based on clothes sold. In other words, bonuses were now based on sales rather than recruitment to deter criticism that recruitment drove company profits. Courtney saw her bonuses drop dramatically, and was the first mentor to leave LuLaRoe. Courtney's story, featured in the Vice Documentary "Why Women are Leaving Their

Side Hustle: Leaving LuLaRoe" highlights how LuLaRoe's conception of community is grounded in teaching participants to embody neoliberal feminist ideologies. LuLaRoe asks that the higher echelon of mentors showcase their financial prosperity. The company encourages mentors to live lavishly and spend extravagantly. Buying expensive cars, taking pricey vacations, and hosting elaborate dinners is all seen as demonstrative of what a girlboss or boss babe is. The LuLaRoe convention contributes to this idealized girlboss lifestyle, as the company's annual conference features pop stars, light shows, and parties that center the success of mentors. Mentors serve as the key speakers at these events, placing those who have acquired wealth from LuLaRoe on a pedestal. With this model of financial wealth cast as the possibility of what they can become, consultants learn that they must strive for this status, and that individual financial prosperity is synonymous with women's advancement. The community holds up this ideal of the girlboss living lavishly as their aspiration, and see the collective as a powerful tool to facilitate their acquisition of individual wealth.

For those committed to LuLaRoe, the community is understood as a vast network of immediate friends that want you to succeed. These women conceptualize the LuLaRoe community as both a conduit for individual advancement, and as a support system that loves and boosts them. Yet, this support is contingent upon upholding LuLaRoe norms and refusing to critique anything about the company. Former LuLaRoe trainer Roberta Blevins highlights how this imagined community takes shape:

> [When joining LuLaRoe] I didn't have friends because my daughter was so young, and I was stuck at home and instantly I had this huge network of women that just wanted the best for me. They became like sisters.

When someone is invested in the LuLaRoe mission they express that investment through subscribing to purchasing excessive inventory, recruiting other women to spend thousands of dollars for inventory they often cannot sell enough of to break even, and agrees to not complain

about faulty products or shady business practices. Stepping outside of these bounds, and evidencing a less than 100% investment in LuLaRoe, is grounds for losing community. Before leaving LuLaRoe, Roberta Blevins reached out to her community about faulty leggings smelling like mildew. She posted in a LuLaRoe Facebook group about it, only to find the comment was deleted. She then received a direct message from a group administrator saying “she can’t post that kind of stuff because it’s negative and other people will see it and they might have second thoughts about joining LuLaRoe.” After feeling like her critique was pushed to the wayside, Blevins finally spoke out about the company’s failure to issue timely refunds for faulty products, let alone admit that products were delivered wet, moldy, torn, etc. She expressed her grievances in a personal Facebook post, and received angry messages and rapid unfriending in return by those she considered her community. Blevins’ experiences demonstrate how the LuLaRoe community only exists insofar that all participants collaborate on sustaining the LuLaRoe community imaginary. The imaginary is a space of meritocratic possibilities, where everyone can become the girlboss of their dreams. The imaginary has quality products that are always delivered on time and in mint condition. The imaginary is a sisterhood of unwavering support. In order to preserve this imaginary, the formation of cracks is speedily repaired to maintain the girlboss dream.

The LuLaRoe community functions as a technology of power, defined by Foucault as a mode of control “which determines the conduct of individuals and submits them to certain ends or domination.” This works to objectivize the subject, resulting in an expression of discipline or obedience enacted by the subject. The individual consultant employed by LuLaRoe functions as the subject dominated and controlled by the community. The LuLaRoe community retains a firm grip on consultant’s conduct and imagination, ensuring that they remain under the thumb of the company. Maintaining control over consultant’s conduct and imagination necessitates producing and sustaining illusory possibilities of meritocratic success, where everyone can become a

wealthy LuLaRoe girlboss. When this vision of success is continuously reproduced through the expression of wealth and extravagance from company representatives living beyond their means, it sustains the LuLaRoe girlboss aspirational narrative. This narrative inspires obedience among consultants, as they believe submitting to the control of the community will bring them closer to realizing this aspirational narrative. Technologies of power often work in tandem with technologies of the self, defined as the ways that individuals

> effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform I themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.

In order for the LuLaRoe community to enact domination over consultants' behavior and psyches, the community needs individual participation. Each consultant must reify the aspirational girlboss narrative by expressing their belief in its possibility. This belief finds expression through consultants' modifying their bodies and ways of being to attain the idealized girlboss dream. This dream acts as the ultimate mode of happiness or perfection lifted up by the community — the possibility of achieving this rationalizes subjugating oneself to the community's domination.

Roberta Blevins highlights that you have to "look a certain and be a certain way" in order to be part of the LuLaRoe community. LuLaRoe founder DeAnne Stidham even encouraged consultants, particularly those with coach and mentor status, to seek gastric weight-loss surgery if they did not fit patriarchal standards of beauty. Consultant Stacy Kristina recounted being "told by DeAnne herself that she likes her leaders to be a size small or medium." In order to ensure that her leaders reflected a LuLaRoe conception of bodily perfection, DeAnne pressured consultants to go to Tijuana, Mexico and receive the gastric surgery, creating a group chat called "Tijuana Skinnies" with certain coaches and mentors that she deemed too heavy to

positively represent the LuLaRoe brand. In this group chat, DeAnne would hound chosen consultants to pay $5,000 to her gastric surgery contact via PayPal and set up travel. Courtney Harwood recalls how she did not feel comfortable heading to Mexico for surgery and opted to get an Orbera treatment instead, where a small, saline-filled balloon is inserted in your stomach to make you feel fuller faster. When she had near fatal complications from the Orbera balloon, LuLaRoe owners still pressured her to get the gastric sleeve in Mexico. The immense control that LuLaRoe owners exerted over leaders informs how the LuLaRoe community conceptualizes the ideal girlboss. As Blevins notes, the need to look a certain way in order to embody LuLaRoe perfection sets a standard that all consultants recognize as the mode of appearance which they must strive for. Striving toward this patriarchal standard of beauty functions as a normative way of participating in the community.

Not only do consultants seek to have a particular appearance in order to realize their identity as LuLaRoe community members, they also strive to think and behave in ways that prioritize LuLaRoe's brand integrity — at times in defiance of logic, personal stability, and interpersonal relationships. Obedience to the LuLaRoe community takes shape as individual members adhering to consistent positivity. When Roberta Blevins aired her grievances about faulty products and untimely refunds in a Facebook group, the dismissive response to her post was not unusual. When the Facebook administrator argued that Blevins was not allowed to post anything "negative," this highlighted how negativity is synonymous with thinking and behaving in ways that contradict the brand's integrity, and how maintaining that integrity is paramount to sustaining the community. Many other LuLaRoe consultants recount having their posts deleted that voice disagreement and critique, or generally pose questions about the efficacy of the LuLaRoe system. Considering how often critiques of MLMs were silenced by Facebook moderators, many began turning to Reddit and YouTube as a space to air grievances. Former MLM participants share their LuLaRoe stories in the subreddit thread r/antiMLM. One thread

(with a robust 660 comments) entitled “From a former LuLaRoe consultant” by u/Kookoosoo notes “Anyone can fall into MLMs, and this is down to how they are marketed and the emphasis on uplines posting unrelenting positivity on social media.” Similar sentiments extend to YouTube. A thriving anti-MLM YouTube community formed in 2017 and “Why I Left LuLaRoe” turned into a standard YouTube video format in recent years.[45] YouTube users such as antiMLM Bethany developed a following for post criticisms of LuLaRoe, enabling perspectives that defy LuLaRoe’s demands for constant positivity to be heard. Barbara Ehrenreich argues that contemporary cultures of positivity support ideologies of neoliberal individualism by understanding personal failure as a product of negativity or inadequate optimism, rather than precarity generated by neoliberal forces. [46] LuLaRoe consultants situate positive thinking as the key mechanism for establishing their membership as a community participant and an entry point to their success in the company. As Ehrenreich points out, neoliberal cultures of positivity attribute misfortune or failure to a flaw in one’s attitude or behavior. By viewing success in direct correlation to thinking or acting in the “right ways,” the LuLaRoe community teaches members that personal change is what stands between them and success.

When faced with criticism about the business model’s structural obstacles to gaining success, Mark Stidham, LuLaRoe CEO and husband of founder Deanne Stidham, responded with: “I’ve heard some whining lately, “oh the inventory is stale” — no YOU are stale, your customers are stale…get out and find new customers.”[47] This retort highlights how LuLaRoe

[45] In 2021, The Atlantic published an article entitled ‘Multilevel Marketing and the Rise of “Anti-MLM” YouTube,’ highlighting how MLM distributors’ use of the pandemic as a recruitment tool (approaching those who have lost income and are experiencing precarity as key potential downline) sparked backlash and helped boost interest in MLM criticisms. More anti-MLM YouTubers popped up urging people not to join, and more existing anti-MLM YouTubers gained followers and views. With that, the r/antiMLM thread attracted more posts and views during the last year.

[46] Will Davies’ 2015 book The Happiness Industry: How Government and Big Business Sold Us Well-Being expands on how cultures of positivity, and conceptions of happiness, serve to reinforce various dimensions of market logic in neoliberal contexts.

[47] These comments were stated in a YouTube video created by Stidham, and featured in the Vice documentary “Why Women are Quitting their Side Hustle: Leaving LuLaRoe.”

leadership cultivates norms of individualizing failure, rather than looking toward what obstacles to success are created by their business model. Community members reinforce these tactics of individualizing failure (or success) by engaging neoliberal positivity as a tool for deflecting from factors that may be impeding success. Not only does the LuLaRoe company structure create obstacles to generating financial prosperity by relying on recruitment as the key revenue source, the community also works to deflect from systemic factors that may contribute to economic precarity and a lack of job stability. Access to healthcare, childcare, and a lack of generational wealth caused by systemic racism are all potential impediments to using LuLaRoe as a stepping stone toward girlboss status. The community instructs aspiring girlbosses to look inward if they want to discover the success of entrepreneurial work and status, rather than recognize and acknowledge challenges that may be standing in the way of them moving upward and making money.

LimeLife : The Power of Sharing Vulnerability in Community

Started in 1952 by founder Al Cohen, LimeLife by Alcone is a multi-level marketing company centered on cosmetics and skincare. Initially created to offer theatrical makeup services and products to 1950's starlets, LimeLife is now a cosmetics and skincare line for the masses. Led by CEO Michelle Mallardi Gay and her niece Madison Mallardi, LimeLife's business model hinges on recruiting "beauty guides" to buy and sell their products. New guides join the company by purchasing "beauty kits" that cost between $99 and $169. Beauty kits contain a variety of products guides are expected to sell at prices marked above retail value. Similar to LuLaRoe consultants, LimeLife guides do not control the combination of products they receive — whatever the kits they receive include, guides must sell that grab bag of products. Tactics for getting people to buy LimeLife products include having pop-up parties, contests, giveaways, and live tutorials on social media, as well as personal solicitation of connections on one's digital

networks. A former LimeLife guide named Claire noted that LimeLife consistently encourages employees to “go live” daily and offer makeup tutorials in real-time as a way to sell the product. Despite having hundreds of viewers per tutorial, Claire still struggled to sell products.[48]

While falling behind in making sales goals, Claire felt building pressure from group chats composed of fellow guides (who shared a common upline contact) to stay positive and not discuss any challenges she was experiencing. Further, Claire identified clear issues with star products — such as LimeLife makeup foundation creating oily complexions — but was told this was a result of user error, and she just needed to learn how to use the products better. These strategies of deflecting criticism came from the top rungs of leadership and were echoed in group chats and on LimeLife social media boards. Similar to LuLaRoe, we see how the pressure to remain positive and refrain from criticism defines the LimeLife community. The LimeLife community exercises power and domination over beauty guides by mandating that they maintain a personal brand that reinforces the company brand. LimeLife beauty guides’ expression of their personal brands operates as a technology of self, as guides modify their thoughts, behaviors, and ways of being to attain a standard of success within the company. This curation of personal branding reinforces the company’s function as a technology of power. Personal branding expresses discipline and obedience to the company’s image and structure. Multi-level marketing schemes like Limelife engage branding as a way of not only sustaining their business objectives, but as a means of shaping how people relate to and interact with one another. These dynamics of sociality and understandings of personal identity are a key force that stitches together MLMs’ capacities for growth. Sarah Banet-Weiser highlights that branding has extended beyond a business model to become both reliant on, and reflective of, our most

[48] Claire shared her first-hand experience with selling LimeLife on the website The Anti-MLM Coalition, a growing archive of anti-MLM cultural material.

basic social and cultural relations.[49] The dynamics of branding now reach past how we conceptualize a business entity, and impact how individuals engage with one another and the world around them. Multi-level marketing communities utilize these contemporary logics of branding in how they exercise power, as brand logic offers a framework for how consultants demonstrate discipline. LimeLife consultants see their social and interpersonal interactions as synonymous with the maintenance of LimeLife's brand integrity. Every element of social and cultural relationality emerges as an opportunity to achieve success within LimeLife and grow the company's power. For LimeLife beauty guides, one's individual and personal sphere *is* the LimeLife marketplace. The muddied distinction between these realms expands the LimeLife community as a technology of power in how the community can engage individual consultants as decentralized nodes of their own brand. When each individual beauty guide offers up their own personal worlds as extensions of the LimeLife marketplace, beauty guides demonstrate that their personal brand is the LimeLife brand. In a subreddit discussing LimeLife social media content, user Bane2019a shares a post from LimeLife consultant seeking recruits in their social media networks. The LimeLife consultant's post reads:

> If you joined: what would your reason be? I gained so much from this experience; from money, to friendship, to self worth. You name it I've gained it. I originally joined for the extra money, but after a year, I realized that there was so much more to selling makeup and skincare than I thought there was. I'm in love with what I do. I'm in love with bringing self worth and love to so many women. The confidence women (and men) have gained from not only me but my sisters from finally finding something that helps their skin

[49] Sarah Banet-Weiser conceptualizes branding as a neoliberal cultural phenomenon, impacting our personal and professional spheres of existence. She builds an expansive theory of brand culture in her 2012 book *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*. Her 2013 conversations with Henry Jenkins on his blog *Confessions of an Aca Fan* also help elucidate and apply key elements of how she theorizes brand culture.

> needs: it's life changing! There's only 3 days left before this opportunity disappears- so join now for only $69 and become my 70th reason why I joined.

This consultant articulates how their affective world functions as a LimeLife marketplace. Expressions of love for selling get intertwined with a love for self and others. Coworkers are reframed as “sisters,” highlighting constructions of an extended LimeLife community as decidedly familial. The consultant offers up their personal sphere as a way to generate communal intimacies in search of profitability. Reframing the desperate need to make a sale as an opportunity demonstrates how the concept of community becomes a strategy consultants call upon while seeking economic stability.

While LimeLife consultants offer up their personal spheres as extensions of the LimeLife marketplace, they are also asked to prioritize their attendance at a key annual community event: LimeLife Palooza. LimeLife leadership emphasizes the importance of the yearly conference, noting how sessions and events offer prime opportunities to learn how to grow one’s LimeLife consultant business. The Dream, a podcast investigating diverse cultures of capitalism, focuses their first season on multi-level marketing schemes. One of their podcasters ventured into an investigative look at LimeLife, joining the company as a beauty guide. She experienced familiar difficulties similar to the aforementioned consultants. While struggling to generate interest among her personal spheres in purchasing LimeLife, she opted to attend LimeLife Palooza in hopes that this event could offer some insight on how to grow her business. Her experience at LimeLife Palooza demonstrates how the annual community falls short in offering consultants’ practical advice for succeeding in direct sales. Much to her surprise, instead of focusing on sales strategies and tactics to boost revenue, conference sessions operated primarily as venues for sharing personal LimeLife stories. While sharing these stories could offer an entry point for engaging personal narrative as a sales or recruitment tool, the storytelling element of sessions failed to lead to deeper conversations about business growth. One by one, women shared their

reasons for getting involved in LimeLife. They recounted struggles with supporting children with disabilities, reduced incomes because of spouses being unemployed, and difficulties with making ends meet. One consultant shared a heart-wrenching story of grappling with suicidal ideation. This intimate level of sharing enabled those in attendance to resonate with one another, as the vast majority of those who shelled out the money for flights, conference fees, and other expenses did so in the desperate hope that this conference would ameliorate their struggles. The conference is presented as a key entry point to getting your consultant business moving and growing, and the consultants' emotional narratives highlighted why they needed that to happen.

Vulnerability plays a profound role in building LimeLife community. With consultants expected to share deeply personal narratives around precarity, loss, and struggle, these periods of sharing are used as springboards to reinforce the LimeLife's ethos of neoliberal individualism. After women recount these intimate stories, the LimeLife facilitator urges each consultant to see that they are capable of LimeLife success. Rather than offer practical sales strategies or actionable advice, the facilitator uses these sharing exercises as a pivot toward LimeLife branding. The facilitator reminds consultants that they are strong and capable despite these struggles, and that they just need to believe in their own potential to build a business. The facilitator highlights that the only standing between these women and their success is their mindset — if they are determined enough, they will success. The pivot that takes shape between sharing vulnerability and reifying the company's bootstraps-minded ethos demonstrates how LimeLife leverages affect as a technology of power. LimeLife uses emotions to generate obedience and discipline among consultants to the LimeLife community, as vulnerability creates an attachment to the LimeLife company. People *feel* connected when they divulge deeply personal stories, and who they share these stories with indicates the production of a bond. In the case of LimeLife, the production of this bond draws a thread between affective

experience and ideological commitment. As Sara Ahmed notes, emotions are capable of doing things, and they produce commitments to particular collectives and communities. She writes,

> emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments. Rather than seeing emotions as psychological dispositions, we need to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective.[50]

MLMs such as LimeLife demonstrate the capacity for emotions to sustain neoliberal feminism as a set of ideologies and practices. Using the expression of consultants' vulnerabilities as a tool for drawing women deeper in a brand not only generates commitments to LimeLife, but to the imaginaries that LimeLife produces around what is possible. Expressions of vulnerability in LimeLife spaces work to connect the individual consultant to collective MLM imaginaries where aspirational narratives come to fruition and the MLM community is just as invested in your success as you are. Vulnerability mediates this linkage between individual dreams and understandings of possibility emerging from a collective brand identity that hinges on meritocratic fables. The individual offers up their affective worlds in hopes of experiencing increased proximity to wealth and stability. The LimeLife community shapes these understandings of possibility, collectively defining aspirational narratives as a tangible goal. The individual consultant's psyche comes to associate the expression of vulnerability with the potential for realizing meritocratic dreams: this draws a harmful thread between genuine affective experience — real longing, desperation, and desire for stability and prosperity — and delusions that appear viable through the community's shared participation in keeping up the facade.

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[50] Sara Ahmed builds this theory of how emotions engage in vital cultural work in the 2004 article "Affective Economies."

doTERRA: Remedying Isolation with Essential Oils

In the Netflix show *Unwell*, an episode entitled *Essential Oils* explores how essential oils are taken up for different therapeutic purposes. We see how Julie Marshall, a mom from Boulder, Colorado, successfully utilizes aromatherapy to ease the anxiety her daughter with autism experiences. The episode addresses informed medical perspectives on essential oils, such as Dr. Joy Bowles, who focuses on the effect of essential oils on cognitive function in dementia patients. Bowles highlights that essential oils can be an effective key coping mechanism, not a cure. *Unwell: Essential Oils* then moves into the expansive world of essential oils MLMs. doTERRA, a Utah-based MLM which employs over 50,000 "wellness advocates," is one MLM featured in the documentary. Founded in 2008, doTERRA has intimate connections with Mormon culture, with many of their employees being stay-at-home moms affiliated with the LDS (Latter Day Saints) Church.[51] doTERRA received critical attention in 2020 after doTERRA distributors advised that essential oils had immune-boosting properties that could prevent or cure COVID-19. The Federal Trade Commission issued a warning to the company to stop making unfounded health claims.[52] doTERRA consultants frequently reference the medicinal properties and health benefits of oils. Wellness advocate Allison Huish featured in the Unwell documentary notes that frankincense helped cure a brain tumor she had as a child, and advocates for ingesting essential oils for health purposes and flavor enhancements. While integrative medicine specialists at John Hopkins advise against ever ingesting essential oils, the MLM oils community suggests a host of ways that oils can be ingested for various ailments.[53]

[51] doTERRA's Essential Leadership Recognition Magazine highlights how many involved with doTERRA are also involved with the LDS church.
[52] This information is detailed in the 2020 Federal Trade Commission Report entitled "Warning Letter to doTERRA International, LLC."
[53] The Sidney Kimmel Comprehensive Care Center at Johns Hopkins offers this insight on alternative medicine on their website.

As we saw with LimeLife, one's personal, affective realms offer a vital thread connecting individual psyches with collective MLM imaginaries. This serves to generate commitments to aspirational narratives, with participants believing that some form of prosperity is possible through being a part of the LimeLife collective. In the essential oils community, we see how affective engagements produce commitments to a belief in the fulfillment of needs that are unmet by white heteronormative capitalist patriarchy. The essential oils community has deep ties to Mormon culture, which advocates for a rigidly patriarchal domestic sphere, and women experience pressure to remain stay-at-home mothers.[54] Further, Mormon communities also express deep skepticism of traditional medical and governmental establishments, as evidenced by the widespread hesitancy to receive vaccinations among Mormons.[55] Not only do members of the essential oils community provide essential oils MLMs with access to personal, affective realms in hopes of finding health options for their families outside of Big Pharma's grip, they also offer up this access in hopes of satisfying their desires for friends and connections outside of the isolation produced by insular family structures. In this section, I turn to how the essential oils community responds to the need for mental stimulation and community often denied by the isolating conditions of hierarchical domestic spheres.

In her famous 1914 essay "Marriage and Love," anarchist philosopher Emma Goldman offered a groundbreaking critique of marriage, highlighting how marriage limits women's capacity for self-actualization. She noted how the institution of marriage prepares women for a life of boredom, subjugation, and economic indebtedness to their spouses. While the institution of marriage has evolved to incorporate more expansive understandings of shared gender roles and a diversity of relationships, the fundamental contours of the institution that Goldman

[54] Angela Pear's 1998 article entitled "Collective and Equal? The Soteriology of Women in Mormonism" explores how patriarchal power impacts familial and relationship norms in the Mormon faith.
[55] NPR Utah published a piece on attitudes toward vaccinations in 2019.

articulates manifest in doTERRA women's experiences. As queer abolitionist Eric Stanley points out,

> Marriage is essentially a financial and legal contract that allocates the movement of property, power and privilege from one person to another. Historically it has been a way of consolidating family power amongst and between men, through women.

Essential oils consultants are often stay-at-home mothers who experience the pressure of running a domestic sphere, and being unable to earn money or form connections outside of this sphere. Their power in the household resides in maintaining the home, and this can be restrictive. Essential oils consultant and devout Christian Laura Warford articulates the restrictions created by being a stay-at-home mom, and how essential oils offer greater freedom, noting:

> You can lose yourself outside of being Mommy. I can be creative now. I can use my gifts that I didn't even know I had before this. I can have adult conversations with people. I went from making zero dollars a month to over zero dollars a month.[56]

Warford's experiences highlight how there are affective needs beyond generating income that invest essential oils MLMs with a compelling allure. There is the element of being able to exercise one's creativity, apply skills, and find camaraderie with other adults. These experiences are often lacking in traditional marital structures where wives and mothers find themselves relegated to the home. Like Warford emphasizes, stay-at-home moms can find themselves only being able to interact with children, and experiencing the mental strain of lacking creative outlets, as well as venues for building and exercising skills. Warford seems less concerned with generating ample income than finding stimulation outside domestic life, and many doTERRA

[56] In 2017, Rachel Monroe's piece entitled "How Essential Oils Became the Cure for our Age of Anxiety" for the *New Yorker* detailed how essential oils have grown into a big business, and interviews various consultants from essential oils MLMs. Laura Warford offered these insights to Monroe for the *New Yorker* piece.

wellness advocates also experience the restrictiveness of traditional domestic structures, compelling them to seek other outlets.

In the Netflix documentary *Unwell: Essential Oils*, Allison Huish encourages potential recruits to join by noting how becoming a doTERRA wellness advocate is a great opportunity to find alternative therapies for health issues while maintaining one's domestic commitments. Huish is an MLM success story. She has reached "Diamond" status in the doTERRA company, meaning that she has amassed a downline large enough to earn her $20,000 per month paychecks. 16,000 wellness advocates comprise Huish's downline, so each of those wellness advocates offer Huish a portion of their sales. According to Huish, the larger someone's downline, "the more lives you've touched, and that's when the paychecks really start to grow. I became a six-figure income with doTERRA." While on a call with one wellness advocate in Huish's downline about increasing sales, the advocate noted that she believes recruits will show up "when God wants them to." Unlike LuLaRoe and LimeLife, the urgent need to generate income does not feel like a key theme to address in recruitment. doTerra even notes in their advice for wellness advocates formulating pitches that

> usually, (the potential recruit) is not thinking, "Is doTERRA going to make me a lot of money?" like you might assume. Instead, the person is likely thinking, "Is doTERRA the best investment for our health I could make for me and my family?

Framing doTERRA as an investment for health and family provides insight into what reasons often compel wellness advocates join the MLM. As we saw through comments made by Warford and Huish's downline, there is a sense of seeking certain manifestations of community through the MLM. Those involved with essential oils are looking for others that offer them camaraderie, yet also align with their values. We see a desire to have meaningful conversations with others, connect with and impact people, and experience this all within a framework that accommodates women's faith and commitment to remaining a stay-at-home mother. doTERRA wellness

advocates often find their recruits through faith-based networks, bringing other stay-at-home moms who want to find an outlet, pursue health alternatives, and discover communities with like-minded values about domestic structures. doTerra leverages a convergence of faith-based and digital networks to recruit new wellness advocates.

In a digital era, capital is dead labor, and the living labor it survives on is networking.[57] Networking produces vital data and the opportunities for mining further data. In doTERRA spaces, one's personal, affective worlds are a primary source of recruitment. In order to recruit, one must mine their personal networks for vital data. Community becomes a vital life force through its power to expand MLM networks and offer up connections who might purchase MLM products and join the MLM as participants. Networking is a key resource in religious MLM contexts, as connections based on faith provide an ease of access to vital data and potential recruits that come on board seeking a sense of autonomy and friendship that insular religious households don't always accommodate. In a subreddit called "I cut ties with doTERRA today" user kaitiekat notes how she joined doTERRA initially because other members of her church talked the company up. They write, "I'd been convinced by friends I knew (from church especially) that doTerra was the absolute ish." Another former doTERRA wellness consultant, The Catholic Homemaker, notes in a YouTube video entitled "Anti MLM doTERRA Essential Oils" that she was recruited to doTERRA through someone in her church. Recruitments in faith-based networks often take shape as wellness advocates reaching out on social media, and using the connection each shares to a particular faith institution as the entry point for a pitch. Former doTERRA wellness advocates highlight how using church networks to recruit and sell doTERRA products provided forms of community and friendship among women that didn't exist prior to their networking. Religious networks not only generate labor that feeds the MLM network

[57] Reference to Karl Marx's quote ""Capital is dead labor, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks" in Capital.

and keeps it running, but creates new opportunities for forming connections between women. While these women may have belonged to the same church, the insularity of traditional domestic life did not lend itself to them having a reason for striking up friendships and connection. doTERRA shifted this social landscape, generating new possibilities for the camaraderie and creativity that comes with forming bonds among adults with similar interests. These opportunities were previously not available to the women involved in selling essential oils, whose primary role had always been homemaker, with interactions limited to caretaking. The appeal of doTERRA often resides in this capacity to generate connection outside of insular domestic spaces, not personal accumulation of wealth. This affective strategy for recruitment ultimately builds the expansive downlines of the MLM essential oils network, reifying an exploitative hierarchy through which “Diamond” upline members like Allison amass wealth. Perpetuating this rigidly top-down structure requires the labor of faith-based, digital networking to produce doTERRA capital.

As I wrap up this chapter, I consider how various MLM spaces leverage the notion of community as a malleable concept. Community emerges as a neoliberal adaptation-oriented strategy in MLMs, with companies seeking to frame connection, friendship, and family in ways that speak to the material and affective desires of participants. MLM community operates as the aspirational girlboss dream of wealth and health, the simple ticket to making ends meet, the friendship you need in an isolated domestic life -- it shapeshifts to become whatever capitalist structures are denying you. As a result, women in vulnerable positions join MLMs, looking to remedy various forms of precarity generated by political-economic structures. As a culture of capitalism, MLMs provide an adaptive response to precarity, offering a contradictory promise of alleviating the hardship they simultaneously reproduce. The resounding question of “Do you want to be a boss babe?” echoes, reverberating with both hope for building elusive empires and despair for the piles of unsold leggings, makeup, and oils that serve as the cracked foundation

of girlboss dreams.

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