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#Girlboss Feminism and Emotional Labour in Leigh Stein's *Self Care*

Abstract: Leigh Stein's Self Care: A Novel is a satire of the world of the 'wellness influencer' that targets a breed of corporate white feminism pejoratively known as 'girlboss feminism'. Self Care exposes how digital spaces of girlboss culture mix entrepreneurship and social justice by making the visibility of gender and race an end in itself rather than the means to social change. I argue that this process entails a multi-dimensional affective and emotional labour that resonates with and extends Arlie Russell Hochschild's influential work in a new digital context. The essay explores how such new forms of digital emotional labour become entangled with the contradictions of self-care, a concept that has radical origins but is co-opted by neoliberal feminism. It also examines the function of Stein's only Black character in the novel, drawing attention to newly emergent racialised forms of embodied and emotional labour found in female-founded companies that strive for the appearance of diversity. Based on extensive research into real-life start-ups and girlboss work culture, Self Care raises broader questions about how fiction, and especially satire, through its unique combination of critique and entertainment, can expand on and popularise scholarship that addresses the vexed relationship between emotion and work.

Keywords: Leigh Stein, digital spaces and girlboss feminism, wellness influencer, self-care and race, emotional labour and satire

In *The Managed Heart*, first published in 1983, sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild discusses the displacement of modern assembly-line work by

another kind of labour: the ‘voice-to-voice or face-to-face delivery of service’ that requires managing one’s emotions, with the flight attendant being an archetype (2003: 8). Several decades after her landmark work, with the development of new technologies and applications, this kind of service has shifted into the digital space but still seeks to emulate the personal relationship of the direct encounter. Leigh Stein’s *Self Care: A Novel* (2020a) links emotional labour to the ‘immaterial and affective labour’ of digitally mediated networks (Hillis *et al.* 2015) by satirising the world of the ‘wellness influencer’. The novel targets a breed of corporate white feminism pejoratively known as ‘girlboss feminism’. The term ‘girlboss’ was popularised by former CEO of online fashion business Nasty Gal, Sophia Amoruso who published a memoir with the same title in 2014. Girlboss feminism is the millennial embodiment of Facebook CEO Sheryl Sandberg’s ‘lean-in’ feminism. Catherine Rottenberg (2014) has argued that Sandberg’s feminism, encapsulated in her bestselling *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, is a form of neoliberal feminism that frames feminist liberation in individualistic terms. Grounded by the values of personal responsibility and entrepreneurship, neoliberal feminism points to individual women’s capacity to move into leadership positions as an equality victory for all women. Girlboss feminism repackages these ideas fusing them with online aesthetics, celebrity-endorsed feminist branding, and attitudes that resonate with millennial and Gen Z consumers (Mastrangelo 2021: 19).

Stein’s satire turns to wellness culture to expose how feminism and capitalism become intertwined in digital spaces of girlboss culture. As Frankie Mastrangelo argues about modern lifestyle brand Goop, and as is also true of Stein’s fictional start-up Richual, a stand-in for several real-life women-led companies that sell female empowerment as an affordable luxury, ‘representational politics offer a key selling point’ for the girlboss influencer (2021: 70). Girlboss feminism replaces an examination of structural factors through which gender and race gain cultural definition with, simply, the visibility of gender and race. This is what Sarah Banet-Weiser has called an ‘economy of visibility’ that reduces political complexity to the visibility of identifying as a feminist or anti-racist; within a mediated context, visibility becomes an end in itself rather than the means to social change (2018: 22). The girlboss exploits political categories such as gender and race within this constraining framework of visibility, mixing entrepreneurship and social justice. As I further suggest in this essay, this process entails a multi-dimensional affective and emotional labour that resonates with and extends Hochschild’s analysis in a new digital context.

Self Care switches between the voices of Richual co-founders Devin Avery and Maren Gelb and one of their senior employees, the only

Black woman in the company, Khadijah. As I explore in the essay's key sections, the economies of visibility within which Richual's girlbosses operate are not only illuminated through Khadijah's character which draws attention to racialised forms of embodied and emotional labour found in female-founded companies; they are also entangled with the radical origins and contemporary currency of self-care that gives this novel its title. Stein sets her story in the months following Donald Trump's assumption of the presidency in 2017, a period characterised by strong emotions as well as a renewed focus on self-care across media platforms. In the novel's opening chapter, the Richual girlbosses co-opt Audre Lorde's famous statement from *A Burst of Light* (1988): 'Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare' (Stein 2020a: 8). It is as if citing these words online and outside of their original context is the same thing as fighting racist structures. For the girlboss, the political intentions that animate a variety of feminist and anti-racist practices become a tool to boost her brand and increase user engagement. Anyone reading *Self Care* in 2020, when it was published, would most likely draw links to the corporate response to the protests for Black Lives and against police violence that were heavy on rhetoric and light on substantive change to working conditions for their staff. Wellness platforms, such as Richual, exploit and engineer negative feelings and, taking advantage of the affective investments and intensities present in online settings, extract value from users' lifestyle preferences as well as attitudes and beliefs. Their self-care services are then presented as feminist and progressive antidotes that temporarily alleviate these negative feelings. Crucially, the focus is on affect as distinct from institutional structures or broader social concerns. This is what *Self Care* satirically calls 'detox and retox, the cycle of life' (6)—a phrase that alludes not only to the wellness and luxury products sold to women but also to the ways the endless exchanges with social media reproduce and normalise modes of thinking and feeling in line with their economic logic.

In examining the various ways companies like Richual borrow and jump over 'the wall' between capitalism and social justice, to extend Hochschild's key metaphor of the 'wall between market and non-market life' (2005), *Self Care* therefore illuminates important aspects of emotional labour in the digital wellness space: from the modes of 'surface' and 'deep acting' (Hochschild 2003: 37–38) adopted and encouraged by the girlbosses that also shape their style of training and supervision of their employees, to the manipulation of users' immaterial and affective labour to increase the company's revenue. Many commentators working in the field of social media employment have argued that digital labour is increasingly feminised and is characterised by lower pay, marginal status and

expectations of flexibility, passion, and emotional labour (Duffy and Schwartz 2018). Stein's satire shows this to be true of start-ups that additionally cannot afford the necessary structures to protect their workers, and, perhaps more perversely, of female-founded companies that strive to present themselves as feminist and caring communities, rather than as businesses.

Based on extensive research into real-life start-ups and girlboss work culture, *Self Care* uses a different 'social-psychological eye' (Hochschild 2003: 10) compared to ethnographies or empirical work that have developed Hochschild's concept of emotional labour since its emergence (see Grandey *et al.* 2013). This raises broader questions beyond the scope of this essay about how fiction and especially satire can expand on and popularise scholarship that addresses the vexed relationship between emotion and work. Scholars of satire have examined the fundamentally ambiguous nature of this genre, the ways critique and entertainment pull readers in opposing directions (Declercq 2021: 18). *Self Care* certainly entertains through its 'delicious, hateful details' (Pariseau 2020). But importantly it draws attention to the mechanisms through which emotion work and management are appropriated for commercial purposes, rather than simply creating manipulative characters that readers will enjoy mocking. The novel is insightful in that respect because it is entertaining; and entertaining, because it is insightful. As such it illuminates even more, because of its exaggeration and amplification, distinct variants of emotional labour and critiques how the production and circulation of affect on social media are increasingly linked to market values. Without being didactic or offering a solution, it invites readers to become aware of the phenomena it skewers and even recognise themselves in the satire's mirror. I return to some of these concerns in the essay's conclusion where I briefly discuss how the novel was informed by Stein's personal experience as a founder of a non-profit feminist organisation.

'The Digital Sanctuary Where Women Unload Their Pain': Girlboss Feminism and Discourses of Wellness

Envisaged as a 'community' (Stein 2020a: 21), which connotes ideas of female sisterhood, Richual uses 'social technology to connect, cure, and catalyze women to be global change-makers through the simple act of self-care' (9). The social platform is the child of two 'work wives' (8): Devin, a white rich woman fashioned after Goop's Gwyneth Paltrow; and Maren who belongs to a different social class and describes herself as an intersectional feminist (39). While the app that allows Richual's

users to ‘track [their] meditation minutes and ounces of water consumed and REM sleep and macros and upcoming Mercury retrogrades and see who among [their] friends was best at prioritizing #metime’ (6) presents a thoroughly neoliberal and commodified form of self-care, the satire underscores the social circumstances that have led to such commodification and how girlboss feminism leverages feminism and other forms of social justice for its branding of self-care.

Richual asks women to ‘put themselves first’ (Stein 2020a: 6) because ‘there is no one else you can trust who will’ (97). Traditional self-care discourses are problematically gendered, with women historically being positioned as particularly in need of improvement, but also expected to put others’ needs before their own. For centuries, Maren thinks, women had been told there was something wrong with their bodies and were sold products to ‘take care’ of themselves (88). Richual also sells beauty products, but the key difference is that it is a female-led company. Some commentators have attributed Goop’s success to the historical mistreatment of women by a male-dominated medical industry that has deepened women’s scepticism and prolonged their suffering (Crispin 2018); viewed against this background, Paltrow represents to women what can be made possible when they take control over their wellness journey. Like Goop, Richual is identified as embodying women’s rights and feminist goals even when it continues to disseminate patriarchal beauty standards and neoliberal conceptions of self-care. In line with the economy of visibility, to be a powerful woman becomes synonymous with being a feminist and vice versa.

Paltrow’s question ‘Why do we all not feel well? And what can we do about it?’ that represents Goop’s mission statement (Crispin 2018: 44) is echoed in the novel when Maren proclaims that ‘looking good was an ideal left over from the patriarchy. We were about *feeling* good, and existing as a conduit between the brands that could deliver that feeling and our user base who craved it’ (Stein 2020a: 89, emphasis in original). The rise of the girlboss entrepreneur coincided with the development of direct-to-consumer brands and targeted advertising on social media. The conduit in the above passage refers to this emergent way of selling products and feelings, putting a new spin on Hochschild’s key idea that emotions are part of the product or services an organisation provides. Devin and Maren are also a version of what Elaine Swan (2009) has called ‘personal development workers’ that draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of ‘cultural intermediaries’, roles that provide ‘symbolic and material goods and services in areas such as presentation of the self, and care of the mind and body’ (2). According to Swan, personal development workers who help people undertake this kind of care online represent a growing form of therapeutic work that exceeds traditional helping professions such as medicine or

counselling. At a time when ‘so many women [feel] so bad’ (Stein 2020a: 89), Richual provides ‘the digital sanctuary where women unload their pain’ (6) and get recommendations for products that can offer relief. Stein’s reflections on self-care and its necessity are informed not only by the #MeToo movement which informed part of the satire’s plot,¹ but by a phenomenon that was reported in the media: Google searches for self-care reportedly peaked the week after Donald Trump was elected US president (Meltzer 2016). After the election, calls from activists to practice self-care proliferated as a way of providing a kind of release from civic and activist duties. As one user puts it in the satire: ‘I joined Richual after the election because a friend told me it was a place where I could just chill and take a deep breath, in between calling my reps’ (Stein 2020a: 119). Richual is presented as a company that sees this as an opportunity to capitalise on self-care as a marketing strategy by instrumentalising negative feelings.

Beyond its associations with Goop, Richual is described in ways that resemble the Wing, a private women’s club with prohibitive membership fees that was opened in New York in 2016 by 28-year-old Audrey Gelman. Like the Wing which ‘looks beautiful and expensive, with curvy pink interiors that recall the womb’ (Hess 2020: 24), Richual’s luxurious visual representation matches the feminist brand described on ‘Vogue dot com: “Workplace as Vulva—And Why Not?”’ (Stein 2020a: 13). And like the Wing ‘where Hilary Clinton was greeted like the victor in her post-campaign press tour and where Jennifer Lopez dropped the news of her new skin-care line’ (Hess 2020: 24), Maren notes that Trump’s election ‘was a gift to [Richual]. So was the cover story in *Fast Company*: “Paltrow, Meet Steinem: How Millennials Devin Avery and Maren Gelb Are Making Wellness Woke”’ (Stein 2020a: 31). The broader phenomenon Stein satirises, of which the popularity of self-care discourses is symptomatic, is the loss of faith in public institutions that results in a turn to corporations not only for products that will soothe anxiety but also for ‘moral leadership’ (Stein 2020a, 2020b).

In Stein’s novel, such leadership is satirised when Devin approves a new digital video series called ‘Stay Woke Y’all’ where predominantly white women are encouraged to shame other white women for cultural appropriation and other offences. Pitched as a creative solution to user comments suggesting the Richual site is not as progressive as it should be, the programme is designed to create ‘a sense of tribalism’ drawing on research that suggests that the best way to engage users of a certain demographic (Gen Z) is to generate ‘rage over a common enemy’ (Stein 2020a: 81). As Rakhil Akkali (2020) writes, social media platforms are the new business models for the ‘emotion economy’, an emerging term that alludes to the ways emotions are mapped to the attention economy to

¹ The #MeToo scandal that informs the second half of the novel and that implicates one of Richual’s male investors also involves emotional labour largely undertaken by the company’s female employees.

scale it to a whole new level. *Self Care* voices Devin's initial resistance to this programme and her attempt to regulate her emotional reaction: 'I thought we wanted to help women feel *better* ... I could feel my face getting hot and forced a deep inhalation through my nose' (Stein 2020a: 81–2, emphasis in original). Encouraged by the company's investors to view it as a 'a real opportunity' for diversity and education (84), Devin concludes that 'the only thing women love more than being angry is being angry at those who are angry about the wrong things' (85). Her initial feelings of unease and confusion are distorted by the end of the scene, when she agrees to monetise that anger, but are cleverly retained by Stein. As the chapter ends, 'Devin closed [her] eyes so [she] could disappear from the room for one brief moment and gulped down [her] entire tumbler of infused water. It tasted sour and medicinal, so bad you're convinced it must be good for you' (85). Just like the medicinal but sour tasting water that she gulps, Devin has endorsed a digital series that is 'so bad it must be good'. However ethically dubious it is, it is backed by robust research that shows how their subscriber base can increase exponentially by offering a platform to those users who feel Richual is not diverse enough. The initial gap between what Devin feels and what she should feel about this project—Hochschild's famous 'pinch' that allows us to see an action in relation to emotional convention (2003: 57), in this case Richual's organisational rules—is closed, but there is a sour aftertaste in the mouth.

'The Political is Personal': Selfie-care and Emotional Labour

Devin is responsible for the Richual users for whom self-care is a thoroughly commodified lifestyle. Maren, who, according to Devin, exercises the least self-care, is drawn to a second community of Richual users. She admits being 'jolted' by certain 'vulnerable' posts that challenge her idea of 'wellness as a rich, white, skinny, able-bodied woman nursing a green juice' (60–1). This acknowledgement alongside Lorde's description of self-care as an act of political warfare are some of the few moments the novel gestures towards alternative understandings of self-care. In a neo-liberal age, self-care is individualised, commodified and subject to cultural appropriation. It is increasingly equated with 'selfie-care' (Sharma *et al.* 2017: 14), a photo opportunity or a hashtag, captured digitally and endlessly performed online. Devin's keynote for a conference advertised in the novel is titled 'Our Bodies, our Selfies' (Stein 2020a: 181)—Stein's way of showing how far self-care has travelled from its radical feminist roots in books such as *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, published in 1970 by the

Boston Women's Health Book Collective. In a podcast tracing the competing meanings of self-care, Shahidha Bari (2020) calls Audre Lorde 'the counter poster' to Gwyneth Paltrow and her version of self-care. As Sara Ahmed (2014) has written, at a time when all forms of self-care might risk becoming symptoms of neoliberalism, Lorde's statement 'sharpen[s] an important tool for survival. Drawing attention to the ways health and wellbeing are not distributed equally under neoliberal racial capitalism, Lorde asserts that for those who 'were never meant to survive' (1997: 256), self-care is not a luxury but essential.

The idea of collective care through self-care in Lorde's activism, and in contemporary feminist, anti-racist and disability justice movements, is perverted in Stein's satire. One of Richual's 'Ten Commandments stenciled in fuchsia and sherbet on the wall by reception' is 'the political is personal' (Stein 2020a: 10), an inversion of 'the personal is political' that shows how the politics of feminism has been reduced into an individualised project of brand building. Devin writes in a press release that 'warfare is up to each person to decide for herself' (8–9), a sentence that captures the ways Richual's version of self-care insulates users from engaging with the realities of the world outside the self whilst promoting an adversarial online culture. The permanent state of frenzy and outrage on social media that Richual exploits for more engaging content has nothing of the meaningful emotional work involving anger in Lorde's 'The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism' (1984).² In Stein's satire, Lorde's defence of self-care is cited in the context of a press release designed to restore Maren's image for an ill-conceived tweet against the president's daughter with which the novel opens. Maren's 'self-preservation' is a physical and digital detox retreat Devin encourages her to take and recalls corporate wellness initiatives designed to boost employees' productivity. It is also performative as it will signal that Maren is working on herself to 'realign her spirit and health with the company's core values of respite, recalibration, and resilience' (Stein 2020a: 9).

Maren's mention of Richual's 'vulnerable' posts is Stein's more earnest attempt to acknowledge that self-care can be linked to stories of illness and disability, and that emotional labour, in some of the term's contemporary uses, may be a form of practicing community.³ As Johanna Hedva (2015) has written, reigniting the radical meanings of self-care that we find in Lorde's work, 'the most anti-capitalist protest is to care for another and to care for yourself. To take on the historically feminized and therefore invisible practice of nursing, nurturing, caring. ... A radical kinship, an interdependent sociality, a politics of care'. Maren claims to take seriously the 'responsibility' of creating a community where women can share painful stories (Stein 2020a: 149). However, in the context of what Eva

2 For this alternative notion of emotional labour that is based on Lorde's work and its applications in the context of social welfare, see Gunaratnam and Lewis (2001).

3 On disability, self-care and care work see Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) and Kim and Schalk (2021).

Illouz has called the culture of ‘emotional capitalism’, emotions and the vehicles through which they circulate ‘become entities’ to be ‘inspected, ... quantified and commodified’ (2007: 109). Reviewing Richual’s ‘vulnerable’ community, which despite being smaller maintains ongoing connection with its members, Maren masters the formula to correct the lack of user engagement with the company’s influencers:

A hot white influencer had to confess: her life wasn’t really as perfect as it seemed. She was broken, too ... There was a fine line between authenticity and TMI, and the Richual queen bees knew just how much to reveal and conceal of their trauma to keep their followers thirsty. (Stein 2020a: 61)

As the full passage reveals, this is a strategic deployment of affect on the public stage of the Internet that offers the right props to create a relatable representation: ‘with the right Brené Brown quote below a #nofilter shot of candid vulnerability—maybe a baggy sweater but no pants, hair falling over the eyes’ (61), influencers sponsored by companies can manage periodic accusations of ‘fakeness’ or of selling out. The expectation for flight attendants ‘to bow not only from the waist but from the heart’ (Hochschild 2003: 76) is echoed in Stein’s satirical description of influencers’ emotional labour: once consumers ‘knew the woman behind the butt’ they could continue selling the products that they claimed improved their bodies without having their credibility doubted (Stein 2020a: 95).

These details might appear humorous exaggerations suitable for a satire, but similar strategies are used to restore an online brand, as ethnographies of real-life beauty Influencers and vloggers have shown. Sophie Bishop (2018: 96) describes a specific strain of affective and corporeal work—what she terms ‘authenticity labour’—undertaken in the anxiety video genre to create what Stein’s satire calls ‘the illusion of intimacy’ (2020a: 61). This work is particularly effective when an influencer’s likeability is at stake following a public transgression. In *Self Care*, Maren finds herself in such a position after her tweet, and the press release issued by the company seeks to restore her image in the eyes of Richual’s customers by suggesting she is flawed because she is human. However, the satire is less subtle when it comes to skewering the girlbosses’ training and supervision methods. In one scene, Maren advises an influencer receiving criticism online:

I told her she had two choices: She could capitulate, admit she was wrong, apologize, promise to never again post selfies she took with the orphans she cared for in Mombasa because now she understood

the meaning of white saviorism. Or she and I could go back to her questionnaire, find something from her past that showed that she, too, had suffered, and with a single post we could turn the tides of sympathy in her direction. (Stein 2020a: 99)

The questionnaire referred to above is introduced in an earlier chapter where Maren notes that she developed it after ‘months of lurking and listening to what [their] users were already talking about’ (93). Commentators have noted the blurring of boundaries between consuming and producing in the case of social media users (Terranova 2000; Jarrett 2016), emphasising how socially meaningful work (here the affective labour of supporting one another that is undertaken by Richual’s ‘vulnerable’ community) is exploited by capital. Maren welcomes new influencers by stressing that in addition to selling wellness products, Richual prides itself on ‘the high caliber of influencers [they] recruit to model resilience’ (Stein 2020a: 93). Her email invites new recruits to feel comfortable sharing with their new ‘family’ personal experiences including sexual harassment, mental illness, addiction, and suicidal thoughts because ‘You ARE what has happened to you’ (93). The aesthetic labour influencers customarily perform when engaging in a range of bodily disciplines is here compounded by emotional labour that is strategically deployed.

The questionnaire that Stein satirically amplifies is based on a real survey developed by *Bustle* for their freelance writers (Sorokanich 2020). As Rich Juzwiak (2016) has revealed, *Bustle*, which produces aggregated news alongside make-up and entertainment tips, as well as personal essays, sends its new writers the ‘Bustle Writers: Identity Survey’, which includes 46 items. One question that instructs writers to ‘check all that apply’ contains almost 150 identifiers, and the final question is deliberately open-ended: ‘what else should we know about you/your life/your history/your identity’. This is not only a clear example of the commercialisation of feeling and personal experience in digital sites; it also underscores these companies’ increasing outsourcing of self-care to their own workers, rather than merely selling it to consumers, thus absolving themselves from any responsibility to ensure their employees’ wellbeing.

Bustle’s questionnaire comes with caveats that show how deep companies can delve into an individual’s emotional life while seemingly respecting their privacy. These caveats are echoed in Maren’s email that notes that any answers to the survey will remain confidential and will only be used with employees’ permission to develop the most engaging content (Stein 2020a: 93). While questionnaires like these are optional, Juzwiak’s (2016) article about *Bustle* reveals that many of its employees don’t feel like that. The ultimatum Maren gives to one of the influencers in the satire

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suggests the same. In another scene, Stein confirms Hochschild's point about how 'sophisticated' companies have become in teaching their staff techniques of surface and deep acting and even dictating 'how to imagine and how to feel' (2003: 49). Devin coaches an influencer to reframe the situation by saying 'the fear you're experiencing right now is exactly the vulnerability people want'. She then instructs her what kind of language to use; instead of 'rape', to refer to 'assault'; 'say I've never told anyone this before' (Stein 2020a: 95). Richual has devised a list of criteria and rules for such content (for example, how incest should not be named and how only one post a year can be allowed about dead grandparents). Beneath the satirical veneer we can detect practices of standardisation that narrow employees' script choices. In her discussion of emotional management, specifically deep acting, Hochschild draws an analogy to stage acting and the practice of accumulating a wealth of 'emotion memories' on which actors can draw as resources for their art to create performances that feel 'real'. Some feelings, Hochschild notes, are more valuable as they are associated with other memorable events (2003: 41). In Stein's novel the questionnaire could be viewed as a darker satirical version of such a deposit of emotion memories, with 'bonus points' if an influencer 'could reveal something from your past and at the same time raise awareness about trans issues or police brutality against POC or the anniversary of 9/11' (Stein 2020a: 95).

The reference to bonus points is not an exaggeration if we consider that real-life magazines like *Bustle* reward content that involves some sort of confessional disclosure with a premium (Juzwiak 2016). But Stein also shows how 'stay woke' (2020a: 10), another of Richual's Ten Commandments, further shapes the emotional labour that influencers are required to perform when modelling resilience to resonate with their audiences. Resilience, much like #self-care, has been criticised as 'the psychological project of neoliberalism'. It is an example of Hochschild's 'feeling rules' that diverts attention from political matters and places responsibility on precarious individuals and communities (Christensen *et al.* 2020: 475). 'Stay woke' can be seen as another example of 'feeling rules', this time spelled out publicly in Richual's physical environment and training materials. The above variants of aesthetic, emotional and authenticity labour in the wellness industry become normalised, perpetuating engineered digital performances of self, normative emotions, and empty displays of diversity that are too feeble to enact intersectional change in the workplace and beyond.

‘Two stock photos with women of color for every one stock photo of all white women’: Race and Workplace Culture in Female-founded Start-ups

The literature that examines how race shapes emotional labour has developed since Hochschild’s pioneering work with primarily empirical studies which have taken an intersectional approach to complement a previous focus on gender inequality alone. In her survey of such literature, Adia Harvey Wingfield (2021) argues that in a more racially diverse United States, the emotional labour done by workers of colour is often ‘decoupled from organizational structures and more embedded in broader racial landscapes’ (209). When companies lack explicit rules and norms about the kinds of emotion work expected in response to racial incidents, employees draw from their lived experiences and understanding of the racial dynamics present in society, for example white people’s defensiveness towards racial anger (Wingfield 2021: 204). This is true of Khadijah’s character, as I illustrate below, and is further exacerbated by the fact that start-ups rarely have organisational structures in place to protect their workers. However, *Self Care* also explores the ways emotional burdens on workers are increasingly connected to performative aspects of allyship in companies that take care to appear diverse and inclusive but don’t remunerate employees fairly. As Stein observes in her essay ‘The End of the Girlboss is Here’ (2020b) on the same day in June 2020 when ‘The Wing announced a \$200,000 donation to three racial justice organizations, as reported by *The New York Times*, the company told staff members that it had run out of funds in its Employee Relief Fund and couldn’t offer any more one-time assistance grants of \$500’. Khadijah’s sections, informed by the stories of abusive girlbosses Stein collected while researching the novel,⁴ capture well the contradictions between the image and actual workplace practices of some of these companies, and the effects they have on employees’ wellbeing.

bell hooks writes that ‘in a society that socializes everyone to believe that black women were put here on this earth to be little worker bees who never stop, it is not surprising that we too have trouble calling a halt’ (2015: 41). Khadijah’s character embodies this view but in a specifically millennial context where maintaining an online presence becomes a requirement, almost a form of self-care. Khadijah is an astute observer of digital labour. Her Tumblr, developed for her gender studies class, extends Michel Foucault’s reflections on the panopticon in *Discipline and Punish*; both a prisoner and a guard, she documents ‘the prison of personal branding that put women in their own private cells (their social media profiles),’ and the gendered modes of surveillance perpetuated online: ‘to

4 Alongside the Wing and Nasty Gal, these include underwear brand Think whose CEO was accused of sexual harassment in the workplace, and the luggage brand Away that created a culture of overwork and surveillance (Stein 2020b).

remain beautiful (but real), strong (but vulnerable), unique (but authentic), vocal about their beliefs (but only the ones that everyone else agrees are worth believing in)' (Stein 2020a: 45). 'What would I do once I had plundered every mortifying moment of my youth for a personal essay?'—Khadijah longs to escape such disciplinary regimes that constitute the digital self, but she also wants to succeed as she watches with 'envy and resentment' presumably white and wealthy girls getting prestigious jobs in the media and publishing industries: 'What, was my meme beat at BuzzFeed not highbrow enough?' (46–7).

Like the employees at Away, a direct-to-consumer luggage brand, who were made to feel as if they were 'joining a movement' by founders Stephanie Korey and Jen Rubio, as reported by the *Verge's* appropriately titled article 'Emotional Baggage' (Schiffer 2019), Khadijah celebrates being headhunted by Maren but is soon disillusioned with the realities of working in the start-up. Devin praises her work ethic noting that Khadijah did the job of ten people (Stein 2020a: 15), but as Khadijah notes when Maren compliments her outfit on one occasion, it was as if she 'had just realised there was a human being on the other side of all the emails she sent' (48). Alongside listicles for Black History Month, Khadijah's work involves checking that the scheduled posts 'meet Maren's standard of two stock photos with women of color for every one stock photo of all white women' (140). In a *New York Times*' article about workplace culture at the Wing, the hourly employees are described as being treated like 'the help' by members, while expected by the management to 'model "THE JOY OF SISTERHOOD" and "EXTREME SELF-CARE" T-Shirts' on the company's website (Hess 2020: 26). Like them, Khadijah knows she has been hired to create the impression Richual is a diverse workplace—as one of the satirical press releases included in the novel puts it: 'Here at Richual, we're making history by employing a diverse staff of 100 per cent women who are 100 per cent themselves every day' (Stein 2020a: 148). Khadijah's experience contrasts starkly as she alludes to her emotional and aesthetic labour: 'all the staff photo shoots, where I sat front and center, smiling the token black girl (everyone called each other babe ... but I was only ever Khadijah)—Maren used me when she needed me and I was supposed to be grateful for the opportunity' (220–1). Expectations around aesthetic labour often assume a white, thin, middle-class employee, and in some organisations hairstyles such as braids or Afro are not allowed (Wingfield 2021: 207). At Richual, most of the aesthetic labour is undertaken by Devin who is the 'face' and 'body' (Stein 2020a: 6) of the company, but Khadijah's appearance is exploited for performative reasons too without the benefits of the girlboss. In Richual's media kit photos, Khadijah's 'box braids looked bananas' (16). While employers may not require material adjustments for

workers whose appearance is used to signal a company's diversity (such as changing one's hair), Khadijah's commentary reveals how Black workers' embodied selves are moulded to produce a particular corporate style (Witz *et al.* 2003) and the effects of such practices on their emotional well-being and relations to other workers.

Khadijah is often portrayed finding coping mechanisms for tense feelings that emerge from interpersonal dynamics with her white employers, a key aspect of stress for Black workers (hooks 2015: 42). The satire captures well the microaggressions that exhaust workers of colour through brief and passing comments that readers can reflect on more than the white girlbosses do: 'I agreed that I was white', Devin thinks in one of her chapters, 'but I didn't feel as bad about it as Maren did' (Stein 2020a: 16). In a passage that recalls Claudia Rankine's (2014) powerful reflections on the extremes of invisibility and hypervisibility that Black people experience daily, Devin admits confusion about whether she was supposed to let Khadijah know 'that I knew she was black or if I was supposed to pretend that her blackness never crossed my mind' (Stein 2020a: 17). Maren is concerned about compensating Khadijah fairly, and initially tried to give her 5 per cent of equity in the company 'as reparations' (17). Despite the growing literature on emotional labour and leadership, according to which leaders' emotional labour can impact how valued employees feel (see Iszatt-White 2013), neither Maren nor Devin can find a minute to listen to Khadijah's actual problems, which escalate over the course of the novel putting her under substantial stress. Maren's caring labour as a manager becomes reduced to 'adding emojis to the interns' idiotic posts on Slack so they felt appreciated' (208).

Khadijah's stress over an unplanned pregnancy that she is hiding from her employers is captured vividly through a recurring nightmare she has where Maren tells her 'You weren't supposed to do this' (41). To pave the way for telling the truth about her pregnancy, Khadijah has started practising asking Maren for little things and giving feedback (48–9). Her 'Maternity Leave Script' which she rehearses several times is a clear example of emotion management: it includes corrections such as 'don't apologise', 'too didactic', and 'smile!!!!' (49–50) typed at the top of the document and anticipates potential reactions that Maren might have such as 'I thought we were friends. Why didn't you tell me you wanted to have kids?' (43). More importantly, Khadijah has taken pains to align her own situation with the company's priorities; a key part of her pitch is to show how her request for maternity leave provides the best opportunity to create self-care content specifically for prenatal and postpartum millennials, an untapped market for Richial (221). Her script reveals a key limitation of many start-ups like the ones Stein researched for her satire;

the lack of any human-resources infrastructure, deemed unnecessary in a company that presents itself as a family or where everyone is friends. An HR department and proper employee policies that start-ups often cannot afford would relieve Khadijah from such anxiety-inducing interactions (imagined and real) with her employers. It would protect her from responses such as Maren's when Khadijah finally asks for maternity leave: 'I'm surprised you think you can leave me like this' (221).

Khadijah's routine emotional labour derives from online interactions. Following a thread where users call each other out raises her heart rate 'six points' (122). Being used to checking email at least once in the middle of the night, she often soothes sponsors and influencers who are upset. Controlling emotion displays and moderating comments online can be seen as examples of the kind of emotional labour described by Hochschild (see Gillespie 2018). Khadijah is responsible for Richual's unpaid interns, such as Chloé, who are also instructed to keep up a pleasant atmosphere when interacting with users. Chloé 'was a Richual fan before she became our intern and it showed', Devin remarks, suggesting she was selected for possessing attributes at the point of entry that can be further moulded to contribute to the organisational aesthetics. The reference to the 'pink tissue paper garlands and bowls filled with feminist candy hearts' (74) Chloé takes the liberty of using during a meeting registers the girlboss corporate aesthetic. But Chloé's ability to express the company's visual style also confirms (perhaps more directly than the reference to Khadijah's braids in the media kit photos) that workers are like 'the inanimate elements of the corporate landscape, corporately designed and produced' (Witz *et al.* 2003: 44); increasingly seen not simply as 'software' but as 'hardware' (Witz *et al.* 2003: 33).

In a scene that contributes to one of the many dramas of the satire, Khadijah politely asks Richual users whom she casts as 'aspirational labourers' (Duffy 2017) to contribute feedback, noting that the most 'passionate' members of the working group will be rewarded with 'future (paid) opportunities' (Stein 2020a: 119). But her surface acting collapses later when she is under pressure: 'We didn't care about their ideas for improving their platform. They didn't work at Richual' (122). In moments like this Khadijah seems to exploit users' immaterial and affective labour just like her bosses, but the scene shows how she is expected to complete this task as part of her job. '*You just have to get through this*', she tells herself as she is preparing to ask them to 'trash specific users' in line with the programme 'Stay Woke Y'all' that Devin has approved (122–3, emphasis in original). When her question, 'when you think "white privilege" who do you think of?', backfires and users start posting photos of Devin gleefully unearthing 'layers of offence' in an online 'archaeological dig', Khadijah finds herself immobilised: '*Devin made Richual for you*, I wanted to tell

them ... But I felt frozen, unable to type anything in her defense' (124, emphasis in original). Devin has conveniently delegated the emotionally 'dirty' work to Khadijah, thus shielding herself from any comments that might target her directly.⁵ When this doesn't work, it is Khadijah who must do the damage control. She finds herself having to choose between defending her boss and risking being called an 'Uncle Tom' if she tries to deflect attention away from Devin (124). Her mixed emotions crystallise into an immobilising anxiety that disrupts her capacity to do her job.

A few reviewers of *Self Care* have noted their disappointment with Khadijah's character whom they see as a plot device used by Stein to expose the workplace practices of start-ups even if she is portrayed as the most sympathetic character. They feel 'cheated' (Smith 2020) once Khadijah replaces Maren as COO at the end of the novel but is not given a chapter in her own voice for readers to hear how she feels about it. Unlike the dire state of Black women in the corporate world that forces them to leave their jobs (Levitsky 2020), Stein gives Khadijah a reason to stay in such a stressful and exploitative environment 'until her shares fully vest' (2020a: 219). The wording of the press release statement announcing her promotion—'the youngest black pregnant millennial ever promoted to the C-suite' (241)—makes it unlikely that her tokenistic status in the company will change, adding to the dystopian ending of the novel.

Self Care suggests that far from facilitating caring, girlboss-led technologies like Richual lead to further individualisation, commodification and surveillance. In the article 'Sympathy for the Girlboss' (2021) Stein cites CEO of 'Somewhere Good' Naj Austin's vision for changing the Internet. Austin suggests that what sets her apart as a Black woman from other founders is her intersectional team and mentions that users will be sorted into communities based on common identities and interests. Stein is sceptical about making identity one's differentiator (this is what other millennial female founders have done), and points to her scarring experience of managing a private Facebook community of 40,000 writers built on shared identity. In 2014 Stein co-founded and ran Out of the Binders/BinderCon, a feminist literary non-profit organisation dedicated to advancing the careers of women and gender variant writers. The expectation to work on 'her personal brand' to help fundraising and satisfy her conferences' sponsors (who cared more about the optics and aesthetics of appearing feminist), and a disagreement over the conferences' entry policy (whether infants would be allowed) led to demoralisation and burnout.⁶ Stein resigned in 2017 and started working on her satire. As she concludes 'Sympathy for the Girlboss':

As intrigued as I am by Austin's ambitious plans to make a better Internet, I'm also haunted by what I've learned about how vulnerable female

5 Though used in a different context, I draw here on research on the 'dark side' of emotional labour (Ward and McMurray 2016).

6 Stein has spoken about her personal experience in many interviews and podcasts. See Stein 2020b for a summary.

founders are to online communities that judge success by different metrics than investors do. They face the double imperative of succeeding both in business and at sisterhood. ‘While the men are distant and the “system” too big and vague, one’s “sisters” are close at hand’, Jo Freeman wrote in 1976. (Stein 2021)

While it is true that feminism and capitalism create contradictions that cannot be resolved easily and that girlbosses warrant criticism for prioritising personal goals above women’s collective progress, Stein leaves us with the problem of the double standards by which female bosses are judged compared to men. This problem partly stems from the fact that the female founders she researched for her satire branded themselves as feminists (though Amoruso who did not do so explicitly was publicly held to account in the same way). Stein is ultimately critical of online shaming campaigns whose tools are engineered by powerful social networking sites. She is also haunted by her personal experience as a ‘fallen’ founder of an online community (though a non-profit organisation) that was subjected to a similar form of public shaming: ‘Until we allow women to learn from their mistakes, make amends to those they’ve harmed, and start over, we’ll keep adding names to the endless roll call of women who failed at being everything to everyone’ (Stein 2021). In these lines, which are not meant to downplay the damaging effects on the female employees who maintain the brands of these companies (like Khadijah in Stein’s satire), we can hear faint echoes of the emotion work that is the historical burden of women in their roles not only as wives and mothers but also as bosses.

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