Goldsmiths Research Online

Citation

Persistent URL

Versions

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Woke? Affect, neoliberalism, marginalised identities and consumer culture

Akane Kanai, Monash University & Rosalind Gill, City, University of London

Abstract

Reading the current conjuncture is challenging. Alongside the exigencies of the current global pandemic, we live in a moment of resurgence of right wing nationalism, populism, and a crisis of the left across the West. At the same time, we observe a different kind of political commonsense emerging in consumer culture. Spanning burger chains and oil companies to fast fashion, there is an increasing saturation of 'feel good' and 'positive' messages of female empowerment, LGBTIQ pride, racial and religious diversity and inclusion, and environmental awareness. In this article, we question how radical politics – especially around gender, race and sexuality – is put to work in current moment as a response to crisis/ crises in this context of corporate 'wokeness'. We analyse the texture of woke capitalism – what it re-articulates and disarticulates – using Stuart Hall's ideas of conjuncture, but contribute an explicitly feminist perspective that notes the extent to which these ideological formations operate *affectively*. We draw on contemporary feminist work illustrating the affective operation of neoliberalism in the production of everyday life and subjectivity. Going beyond a simple diagnosis of incorporation and recuperation of radical movements, we use the case study of woke capitalism to suggest the production of new affective movements structuring the ongoing obduracy of neoliberalism.

Introduction

'Rebelling never looked so chic' asserts an advert for a new London apartment block – where the company logo seems designed to look remarkably like that of the climate emergency organisation Extinction Rebellion. 'Unity, acceptance, equality' declares the Twitter homepage of fast-fashion retailer ASOS. 'Introducing Generation Fluid' announces cosmetics company Maybelline. 'Goodbye resolutions, hello empowerment' says upmarket athleisure company Sweaty Betty. 'Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything', Nike proclaims, using a close up image of Colin Kaepernick, a star American football player sidelined by the NFL following his refusal to 'take the knee' for the US national anthem.

The current conjuncture is highly complex – the more so as we struggle to think through the effects of a global pandemic on existing tensions and inequalities. This is a moment in which we repeatedly witness the rise in right wing nationalism, 'authoritarian neoliberalism',[1] and populism. Yet at the same time, we see a corporate environment saturated by messages of rebellion and the seeming championing of identity politics in what is increasingly termed 'woke-washing'[2] or 'woke capitalism'. Spanning activewear that champions 'female power', to banks that roll out glitter-covered 'GayTMs' (Gay ATMS / cash machines) at pride festivals, we observe movements where feminism, queer pride and antiracism are curiously associated with desirable trends and the circulation of normative affective orientations towards capitalism. Of course this trend is not new – corporate actors have long been adept at 'turning rebellion into money', as the British punk band The Clash put it. However, we suggest that we are living in a moment in which these tendencies are dramatically intensifying and, moreover, are connected to the psychologisation and affective work of neoliberalism. In the current conjuncture oil companies claim to be eco-activists, burger chains champion vegan credentials and products from deodorant to vodka are sold promising female empowerment or queer pride. Feeling 'good' – figured as happy, confident, grateful, free – is increasingly connected to previously marginalised identities and oppositional causes. Youthful consumers are called on to be 'defiant', to 'break the rules', and to create their own apparently entirely individual and personal norms and values e.g. 'My Beauty, My Say' (Dove) or 'Forget foundation, choose confidence' (Chanel). For Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Weiser, 'Social action…may be shifting shape into a marketable commodity'.[3] What are the conditions that have allowed this to occur? Why have marginalised identities become subjects of value? What does this apparent corporate wokeness do?

Can we understand this seeming embrace of left wing identity politics as simply incorporation, recuperation, commodification – or something slightly different? In this article, we use the case study of corporate 'wokeness' in order to highlight patterns in this current conjuncture and begin to address the questions above. While there are many elements to this corporate investment in the social 'good',

including the establishment of corporate charities, donations, product lines, and even centres of research,[4] our focus is on *representations* rather than other features of 'woke' corporate culture. We are particularly interested in contemporary advertising. Here, we use 'woke' to signify *the corporate extraction of value from the struggles for recognition led by historically oppressed populations*. In our use of 'woke', we do not wish to undermine its original antiracist and activist sense. Rather, we wish to highlight its contested nature in the current conjuncture, in which it appears that advertising agencies – dominated by highly paid white men[5] – have suddenly somehow reinvented themselves as advocates of feminism, anti-racism, LGBTIQ rights, 'conscious' fashion, and the promotion of plant-based diets. We examine how a veneer of radical politics, especially around gender, race and sexuality – is put to work through woke capitalism in the current moment as a response to capitalist crisis or perhaps- as John Clarke has argued, erupting as a result of *multiple* crises, across relatively autonomous sites.[6] This is particularly potent as corporate wokeness materialises in a broader political context marked - seemingly paradoxically -by right wing nationalism, increasing racism, Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, as well as the heightened visibility of misogyny and homophobia. To make sense of this using conjunctural analysis is, as Larry Grossberg reminds us, to tell 'better stories', where 'better is measured by both the willingness to grapple with empirical complexities, and the ability to open up possible ways of moving forward to a more humane world'.[7]

The paper is situated within a feminist cultural studies tradition, and is focused on contemporary consumer culture in largely Anglo-American contexts. Besides offering an exploration of corporate wokeness the paper has two main aims. First it seeks to contribute to an ongoing body of research that critically interrogates neoliberalism as a *psychic and affective phenomenon* as well as a political and economic one.[8] Secondly it aims to bring a psychosocial- and specifically affective-discursive[9]– approach to conjunctural analysis, arguing that accounts of affect, feelings or emotions are under-explored in this body of work- though the tribute to Stuart Hall of which this forms a part is exceptional in this respect. The paper is divided into 4 substantive sections. In the first we outline our understanding of conjunctural analysis tracing its development from Gramsci, through Hall and others, and explain our attempt to contribute an affective-discursive sensibility to this style of analysis. Next we offer an account of contemporary neoliberalism that stresses its psychic and affective life- its move ever deeper into subjectivity and feelings and show how this trend is intimately connected to media. Thirdly we offer a tentative reading of corporate wokeness, discussing some of the theoretical resources that have been used for analyzing it previously and outlining its contours and dynamics. Fourthly, we suggest that woke capitalism recasts marginalised populations as value adds, reconfiguring oppression in terms of aspiration in ways that are increasingly crucial to the ongoing maintenance of neoliberal common sense. This 'condensation', to use Hall's term,[10] of social justice and capital not only suggests the ever-growing territorialisation of social value by economic value. It also reveals the contradictory mediated status of marginalised and non-normative people in

the current moment, as they are superficially aligned with capital through the operation of woke capitalism, in the context of highly divided and increasingly unequal social formations. Through our affective-discursive analysis, we seek to complicate unidirectional accounts of the current conjuncture, raising further questions in relation to the affective-discursive relation between woke capitalism and the reinvigoration of right wing nationalist politics.

Crisis and consent: applying a conjunctural analysis

The notion of conjuncture was developed from Antonio Gramsci's work and his attempts to describe the specificity of economic, political and cultural forces at a given moment. Gramsci's understanding was broad and sought actively to hold space for *contradictory* dynamics and relations – recognising both long term unfolding power relations but also smaller and more spatially and temporally specific struggles and contestation.[11] The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham (CCCS) was pivotal in taking up this notion and developing it. While, as Stuart Hall noted, we 'can't pluck this 'Sardinian' from his specific and unique political formation' and 'beam him down', expecting him to 'solve our problems for us'[12] his ideas were nevertheless central to the development of a style of analysis that came to shape cultural studies as an approach to scholarship. Jo Littler argues that conjunctural analysis means:

> understanding the particular power dynamics and character of a particular moment. What is specific about the moment we inhabit? What common-sense understandings, what economic decisions, power dynamics, what vested interests and collaborative terrains work to shape its contours? What does this constellation of forces look like? How are these power configurations different from before?'[13]

At least three bodies of work exemplify this conjunctural approach. First, the book project Policing the Crisis[14] which took the moral panic over 'mugging' and examined it as a complex cultural and political phenomenon shaped by shifting right wing norms, processes of racialisation, a changing class landscape, growing consumerism and a media that storied violent crime in highly particular ways. As Littler argues, among the significant features of this groundbreaking analysis are both its interdisciplinarity - bringing together criminology, social policy, media studies, analyses of race and class – and its collaborative nature. A second example might be seen in two feminist books that also came out of the CCCS – Women Take Issue and Off Centre: Feminism and Cultural Studies. While less focused on a singular topic, both collaborative and interdisciplinary collections are striking in generating novel analysis of gender, race and class formations and cultural texts at the time. Women Take Issue took as its argumentative targets both the wider cultural landscape *and* the gender-blindness of existing cultural studies analyses. Here Angela McRobbie's critique of 'subcultures'

research [15] that centred exclusively on men and boys' activities was important, as well as Janice Winship's attempt to apply an ideological analysis to a popular woman's magazine.[16] Off Centre continued these problematics- systematically enlarging culture as a 'site' and interrogating its striation by power– and it also contributed a distinctive take on the emerging 'enterprise culture' of the time, as neoliberalism moved from economic boardrooms and policy texts into everyday life and culture. More recently, Tracey Jensen's *Parenting the Crisis* tracks 'the cultural landscape in which figures of family crisis are orchestrated, editorialized, animated and circulated',[17] and Jamie Hakim offers a conjunctural analysis of changing mediations of the male body and their relationship to neoliberalism.[18]

Perhaps the most well-known conjunctural analysis is Stuart Hall's critique of the 'Great Moving Right Show' and the Thatcherist project in the UK in the 1980s. This work engages with crisis as a terrain through which a new social settlement may be won. Characterised by the synchronisation of global capitalist recession and a crisis of capital accumulation in Britain, the Thatcherist project aimed to disarticulate and neutralise the revelation of longstanding structural contradictions in the global operation of capitalism. Exceeding a narrowly economic focus on Thatcher's policies, Hall's analysis of Thatcherism as persistent, incessant and ongoing efforts on the terrain of subjectivity to win individuals to a new social project, continues to provide rich ways of interrogating current capitalist contradictions. Hall is particularly emphatic in observing the new right's strategies were *formative* rather than defensive, disarticulating existing elements and reconstituting them into a new polarising logic as a response to crisis.

Hall suggests such disarticulation was effected through discursively reconstituting the 'people versus power' antagonism into one of 'people against the state and social democracy' – a notion that still has resonance today in thinking about right wing forms of populism. Collected at the negative pole, Hall argues, were statism, bureaucracy, and the 'creeping collectivism' associated with the postwar consensus, whilst Victorian values, initiative, entrepreneurialism, freedom and 'the people' were condensed at the positive pole (*Hard Road to Renewal,* p142). Following Laclau, Hall positions ideologies as a 'practical material force' operating via multiple discourses connected or 'condensed' at particular points. At these points of condensation, these discourses hail concrete individuals into a social imaginary. The Thatcherist strategy of 'authoritarian populism' condensed a number of moral, philosophical and social questions in such a way as to effect the displacement of political and economic questions of social management as 'moral absolutes' (*Hard Road to Renewal*, p143). Accordingly, a new common sense was established through the recruitment and re-ordering of subjectivities demanded by this reconfiguration of state-society relations.

Following Hall, we argue that an effective conjunctural analysis demands engagement with the articulation and disarticulation of valued subjectivities as a means of understanding the management, change, and intervention effected through neoliberalism(s). We suggest that this analysis is also useful in its engagement with the desires, fears, and fantasies that were so significant in generating consent, producing a means of analysing the conjuncture through an affective analysis. According to Hall, despite widespread claims of economic improvement, no one seriously believed that Great Britain was suddenly a booming economy. Rather, Thatcherism spoke to the 'fears, the anxieties of a lost people… it invites us to think about politics in images. It addresses our collective fantasies' (*Hard Road to Renewal,* p169). These included the mobilising of national pride around values of austerity ('you can't pay yourself more than you earn'), imperial nostalgia for the extraction of profit through colonised labour, and hostility towards the 'enemy within' (trade unionists and 'alien black elements') (*Hard Road to Renewal,* p44).

Here, we pull Hall's emphasis on the construction of subjectivities through discursive condensations into conversation with contemporary feminist media scholarship that considers the affective disciplinary and promissory modes of neoliberal capitalism. We suggest that in understanding the current post-Fordist, neoliberal settlement as the sum of ongoing persistent efforts and strategies, a biopolitical assemblage in which bodies are sorted, used, and optimised,[19] it is important to highlight the centrality of both *media culture and affect* in governmentality and the way it unevenly shapes how populations are implicated within neoliberalism.

Hall's emphasis on the strategies through which concrete social subjects are hailed indicates to us that much of the work of synthesising neoliberalism's contradictory elements must be done by subjects via affective attachments to particular identities – yet this attention to the *affective dimensions of ideology* was under-developed in this work. Hall argued insightfully that authoritarian populism was not an alien force imposed on the masses, but rather sought to make itself 'part of "us"'.[20] He described it as a hegemonic project that sought to sever people's connections with existing discourses and points of identification and re-articulate them to new subject positions such as 'responsible home-owner', 'concerned patriot' and 'self-reliant family'. Through this process of articulating discontent through a novel set of discourses and subjects, authoritarian populism remade common-sense through the construction of new subjectivities. Hall's work offered a compelling account of ideology, an analysis of 'the work of politics' (*A sense of loss*) and an appreciation of the dynamic nature of subjectivity. But he did not give specific attention to how this process of disarticulation-rearticulation worked in psychosocial terms, instead presenting an account mirroring a broader Marxian focus on 'interests'. It has been work that builds on his which explores the affective dimensions of ideology, along with questions about why some new constructions, some subject positions disappear without a trace, while others take hold in the public imagination. We suggest that an affective-discursive approach can help

to address these questions with greater specificity in the current context of 'emotional capitalism',[21] while maintaining the broad framework of Hall's analysis.

The notion of an affective-discursive approach has been most fully developed by Margaret Wetherell in her systematic re-reading and re-articulation of affect theory through the lens of a discourse analyst. Frustrated by the often vague articulation of affect theory, Wetherell is particularly critical of the notion of affect as a 'pre-personal and extra-discursive force hitting and shaping bodies'.[22] Arguing that affect and semiosis are inextricably entangled, Wetherell is concerned to hold onto notions of the subject (similar to Hall in 'Minimal Selves'[23]) for reasons of effectively grappling with social formations of power. Wetherell identifies three key qualities or elements of affect that should be considered in this form of enquiry. These are: affect as socially mediated, affect as patterned, and affect as implicated in the operations of power. First affective activity is considered dynamic, flowing through and alongside social action, but, crucially, in ways that stress the importance of relationality and interconnection. Secondly Wetherell argues that affects are patterned and should be studied in ways that apprehend this – rather than being seen only as random 'moods' or 'intensities.' She argues that affect is:

> practical, communicative and organised. In affective practice, bits of the body … get patterned together with feelings and thoughts, interaction patterns and relationships, narratives and interpretative repertoires, social relations, personal histories, and ways of life (*Affect and Emotion,* pp13-14).

Thirdly, and most importantly for our analysis here, she argues that 'power works through affect, and affect emerges in power' (*Affect and Emotion,* p16). This view is an important corrective to non-representational theories of affect that stress affect for the possibility of ruptures and 'lines of flight'. As Clare Hemmings has argued in an important critique, affect 'often emerges as a rhetorical device whose ultimate goal is to persuade 'paranoid theorists' into a more productive frame of mind.'[24] By contrast, rather than seeing affect as 'biopower from below'[25] that evades, resists and exceeds control, we are interested in using an affective-discursive approach to enrich an understanding of how power works. Sara Ahmed's work on 'affective economies'[26] where certain types of capital come to be linked with particular emotional displays offers a brilliant example of this, as does Imogen Tyler's analysis[27] of the way in which affects like disgust and contempt are mobilised in processes of abjecting particular social groups. We are interested in how passions like desire, rage or shame are bound up with subjecthood and how they become mobilised for political purposes.[28] Our argument is that an affective-discursive approach has much to offer conjunctural analysis through its attention to the place of feeling in relation to subjectivity – see also Clarke's nuanced account of the multiple senses of loss involved in the Brexit vote, and Larry Grossberg's attention to affective economies and

landscapes. We develop this argument below.

The psychic and affective life of neoliberalism

Is the current conjuncture new? Is this moment distinctive or simply a continuation of The Great Moving Right Show? On the one hand we see the return of the right in multiple movements across the West: the Brexit vote in the UK and 2019 election of Boris Johnson's government; the 2018 election of far-right wing president Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil; in the Hungarian crackdown on 'elitist' gender studies in universities;[29] and in anti-refugee rhetoric and increased Islamophobia. Right wing populists such as Donald Trump champion a return to nativist principles through the imposition of tariffs on imports and a nationalist 'America First' policy. Yet there are also counter-movements evident in the resurgence of Black Lives Matter, in the large numbers of young people joining the Labour party to support Jeremy Corbyn as well as in the Women's Strike, feminism for the 99%, and Extinction Rebellion (*This Conjuncture*).

We note we began this article prior to the pandemic, and the global crisis of COVID-19 has both altered the terrain of politics as well as maintaining and amplifying elements of the status quo. We had observed that despite war, climate emergencies and global financial crisis, neoliberal logics have not been displaced as a hegemonic form of governing sociality. COVID-19 seems, in some respects, to have contested the hegemony of austerity politics in the West, with the UK, Australian and Canadian governments spending historic amounts on welfare in light of the widespread slowing of face-to-face economic activities. And yet this crisis has also continued to demonstrate the neoliberal management of subjects in ways that 'discipline and marginalise oppositional social forces' (*Authoritarian Neoliberalism,* p2). Neoliberalism is an interventionist mode of governing, unevenly optimising and harnessing populations as 'living resources', creating new forms of transnational entitlement based on measures of human capital (*Neoliberalism as exception,* p3). We observe clear judgments of whose bodies have been identified as 'dispensable' and whose generate value in decisions on who is afforded the protection of isolation or 'shielding', what activities are to be continued, who may receive government payments and for what. For example, in Australia, vital 'Jobkeeper' welfare payments have excluded temporary residents and workers on casual contracts as recipients, while the new 'Homebuilder' scheme offers grants to property owners conducting renovations costing a minimum of $150,000. In the UK the pandemic has exacerbated inequalities of class, poverty, housing, age, and race and ethnicity highlighting 'the true scale of the social pathology underlying Britain's crisis'.[30]

In the current conjuncture under a global pandemic, then, there continues to be a highlighting of and investment in particular subjectivities as aligned with the goals of prosperous nation-states. This

signal clear resonances with Hall's analysis of authoritarian populism in the Thatcher era in which economic health was rearticulated in terms of desirable and abject personal attributes. In calls to Victorian values and the demonstration of 'character', an economic and social project was articulated on the plane of subjectivity. Yet we suggest a key difference in the *extent* to which neoliberal ideas have now hegemonically insinuated themselves into 'the nooks and crannies of everyday life'[31] such that it informs a reconfiguration of notions of personal responsibility, relational and social obligation, and conceptions of the futurity along lines that are not just radically individualising but also psychologising. An important body of work of research in media and cultural studies has contributed to this understanding of neoliberalism, showing how it is located in attempts to remodel and makeover entrepreneurial and self-motivating modes of subjectivity as 'the new normal'. As Turner notes, the construction of identities is now one of 'the *primary* spheres of activity' of media culture.[32] Many media have been involved in this construction of the individual as a responsibilised subject invested in self-transformation; these include self-help, reality game shows, makeover television and many other genres .[33] Nikolas Rose argues that lifestyle media shapes neoliberal citizens 'who do not need to be governed by others, but will govern themselves, master themselves, care for themselves'.[34] In turn, Hall, Massey and Rustin note the importance of particular media forms in maintaining neoliberal hegemony:

> …consumer and celebrity cultures, the drive for instant gratification, the fantasies of success, the fetishisation of technology, the triumph of 'life-style' over substance, the endless refashioning of the 'self', the commercialisation of 'identity' and the utopias of self-sufficiency. These 'soft' forms of power are as effective in changing social attitudes as are 'hard' forms of power such as legislation to restrict strikes.[35]

A different but complementary research tradition helps us think about neoliberalism's operation at a psychological level – what Lois McNay refers to as the 'economisation of subjectivity'[36] and Wendy Brown calls neoliberalism's 'stealth revolution'[37] designed to remake the subject. This stress on the psychological has also been developed in recent work on the 'confidence cult' or self-esteem industry. A number of authors – including ourselves - have pointed to the vast proliferation of contemporary injunctions to women to develop self-esteem, self-confidence and body love.[38] Advertising, workplaces, global international development programmes, magazines and self-help apps are just some of the sites which enjoin women to 'lean in', 'fake it til you make it', adopt confident 'power poses', and believe that 'confidence is the new sexy' – underscored by the idea that it is lack of self-belief rather than the structural inequalities of neoliberal capitalism that holds women back.

What this work highlights is that neoliberalism increasingly operates through a *psychological register*. However, while others have stressed the *rational* and *calculating* nature of neoliberal subjectivity, we

want to add a different dimension: an interest in the affective life of neoliberalism. This encompasses the qualities and dispositions required to thrive in the current moment – what Anna Bull and Kim Allen call the 'turn to character'[39] in which confidence, resilience and creativity are promoted. Christina Scharff's research on 'entrepreneurial subjectivity' *('The Psychic Life of Neoliberalism*) offers one of the first attempts to explore the neoliberalisation of subjectivity empirically among young women rather than through textual analysis. Interviewing female creative workers, she notes the way in which a neoliberal sensibility or what we might call a mind/body/feeling set had been internalised. Thus her participants frequently spoke of themselves as a business to be worked on and managed; constantly worked to optimise their bodies, psychic dispositions and skills; embraced risk and minimised or repudiated injuries; and expressed the belief that they had to stay 'positive' whatever happened. These attitudes, practices and dispositions were so widely shared across her cohort of sixty-four musicians that it almost appears to us that they had read a manual on 'How to be a good neoliberal subject'- one that foregrounded not just what to *do*, but also how to *feel*.

This psychosocial dimension of neoliberalism, while operating at the micro-level of subjectivity, reveals certain recurring, structured patterns. A focus upon 'positive mental attitude' is increasingly central to contemporary culture. Indeed, as Barbara Ehrenreich has argued 'positive thinking… has made itself useful as an apology for the crueller aspects of the market economy'.[40] In turn, Jo Littler shows how meritocracy as a key undergirding of neoliberalism works not simply through beliefs or practices but also 'meritocratic feeling' (*Against Meritocracy*). We have used Arlie Hochschild's work to posit the existence of 'neoliberal feeling rules'[41] that require continual self-interrogation and the cultivation of positivity, and 'relatability'[42] as the self is increasingly connected to others through the stringent self-presentation requirements of digital culture. There is a growing body of work that explores the wider entanglement between neoliberal capitalism and feelings that Eva Illouz has dubbed 'emotional capitalism'.[43] Others have discussed the way that a 'psy complex',[44] 'state of esteem',[45] 'happiness industry'[46] or 'wellness syndrome'[47] and 'McMindfulness'[48] are implicated in contemporary neoliberalism. More recently, in pandemic conditions, feelings of positivity and togetherness have been mobilised in care-washing, in sentimental expressions of 'gratitude' for keyworkers whose pay and conditions have been systematically undermined by the very politicians now 'celebrating' them[49] and in catchcries of 'we're all in this together'. Like Francesca Sobande we question how this notional togetherness works to invisibilise the highly unequal and varied effects of the pandemic under neoliberal conditions. As she argues: 'there is still a glaring dearth of meaningful analysis of how issues regarding racism, anti-Blackness, classism, ableism, ageism and other intersecting forms of structural oppression significantly shape the different risks that people are dealing with right now, and the likelihood of them receiving adequate and life-saving support and care.'[50]

Building on all this work, we posit that the current terrain of struggle is framed by changed affective dynamics that are differentially addressed and exercised, in a world structured by contradictory capitalist demands that leaves few ways of being 'in place' (Ahmed 2013) for marginalised and non-normative populations, outside of the market. In the UK, we can note the closure of public libraries, youth clubs, LGBT venues, women's centres and refuges, and the cutting of resources for organisations supporting black people. Yet at the same time across particular media and consumer culture that we see the increase of 'feel good', positive and affirmative discourses in which the injunction to invest in the self is addressed to historically marginalised and non-normative people more broadly (*Mediating Neoliberal Capitalism*). It is to this we turn next, in our third substantive section on woke capitalism as an affective structuring force.

Understanding woke advertising: historical erasure, individualisation and capitalist visibility

There are many critical terms for considering the 'rebel sell',[51] numerous examples of which we noted at the beginning of this article. The notion of 'incorporation' was important at an earlier moment (in the 1980s).[52] Like that of 'recuperation' it was a means of describing how the ideas of radical social movements are taken up but emptied of their political force and tied back to normative notions. Myra MacDonald critiqued these ideas for their implication that meanings can be fixed once and for all.[53] 'Commodification' came to the fore in the 1990s as a critical term for engaging with similar processes. Robert Goldman discussed a variety of ways in which advertisers selectively used feminism to engage with women who were fed up with ultra-thin models, perfect beauty and constantly with being told how to improve. The resultant 'commodity feminism' took a wide variety of forms ranging from claiming that brands shared feminist anger, using feminist slogans, or attempting to create a suture between normative femininity and radical feminist politics. More recently, Sarah Banet-Weiser and Roopali Mukherjee have developed the term 'commodity activism' to capture a nexus of issues connected to the way 'corporate relationships with social and political causes… proliferated rather than dwindled under the aegis of neoliberal capital' and alongside this 'social causes reoriented themselves to assimilate rather than oppose the logics of profits and capitalist gain' (*Commodity Activism,* p10).

A differently inflected line of critique is found in the notion of 'cultural appropriation' in the instrumentalisation, decontextualisation and recodification of minority culture as an object for consumption.[54] Saidiya Hartman's extraordinary essay 'The Plot of Her Undoing' captures this as follows: 'The plot of her undoing begins when they expel her from the city, when they make black radical Brooklyn an exhibit in the Museum of Natural History, when all the members of the funk band are white boys, when the faux soul food kitchen in Bushwick serves sriracha and shakshuka, when

someone spray paints tattarattat on a wall in South Jamaica. When they clear the renewed city of all signs of her and the people she loves, it begins.' In one high profile corporate example in 2017, Pepsi was forced to pull an advert accused of trivialising the Black Lives Matter movement.[55] In the Pepsi advert a fake demonstration is depicted in which a crowd of young, attractive people is shown, smiling, hugging and exchanging 'high fives' while holding placards with starkly apolitical messages such as 'join the conversation'. The climax comes when model Kendall Jenner hands a can of Pepsi to a police officer, generating roars of approval from the crowd and an appreciative smile from the officer. As well as misrepresenting the seriousness of the protest and the level of danger faced by Black activists, the scene featuring Jenner was accused of directly appropriating a widely circulated image of Iesha Evans, a woman of colour who stood firm while being charged by riot police during a protest in Baton Rouge – a protest, it should be noted, which was itself against racism and police brutality.

In assessing such campaigns we follow Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee in regarding them neither as 'a clever hoax' and nor as cause for celebration (*Commodity Activism,* p13). Commodity activism or woke capitalism does not merely *reflect* values; rather, it produces a particular imaginary through the *disarticulation and rearticulation* of social struggle and emancipatory utopias. Importantly, woke capitalism does not emerge primarily to intervene in patterns of social oppression, but puts to work certain affects, associations, and forms of subjectivity in reconstructing and reconfiguring social imaginaries in which neoliberalism still 'makes sense'. For example, in relation to the ASOS branding referred to above the very emphasis upon 'equality' 'unity' and gratitude serves to deliberately mystify and obscure the conditions and relations of production, just as Marx argued. It is notable that, ASOS' branding of itself as a progressive organization was developed at precisely the same time that it stands accused of mistreating its workers with humiliating body searches, the use of security guards in the bathrooms, and punishing 'flexi shifts'.[56] Likewise as Jilly Kay and Helen Wood note, fast fashion brand Boohoo's supposedly inspiring messages of hope and togetherness during the pandemic were revealed in mid 2020 to have been produced in dehumanising sweatshops, with workers paid a fraction of the legal minimum wage.[57]

Second, we suggest that such forms of 'affirmative advertising' operate through an *aestheticization of difference*. Discussing an earlier iteration of corporate wokeness, Henry Giroux highlights the way that the famous Benetton adverts directed by Toscani, served to present difference only in order to contain it or harness it. In this way 'racial unity' or 'queer family' are presented in aesthetic terms that disavow histories and realities of oppression.[58] What we see in woke advertising is an attempt to strategically deploy images of minoritised groups (people of colour, people with disabilities, Muslims, queer people) in commercial culture to 'take diversity into account' only to empty any particular differences of their meaning and social significance. In this sense woke advertising is emblematic of

postrace, postfeminism and postqueer discourses[59]. As Anandi Ramamurthy and Kalpana Wilson[60] have argued, this is both a way of responding to activisms and social justice movements around race (and also class, sexuality and disability) while at the same time it represents an upgrading of global capitalism in neoliberal forms. In this context there is no 'outside' to neoliberal capitalism, and everything – including the self – is brandable and capitalisable.[61] Capital has fallen in love with feel good rebellion as something that can create yet more value, add new markets, and construct cultural frameworks that recast marginalisation within a trajectory of 'aspiration' and novelty.

A third means by which this is effected is through the systematic reformulation of social injustice in individual terms. We have previously argued, for example, that seemingly positive 'Love your Body' advertising enjoins women to take on further work and responsibility for their own self-esteem, locating doubts and insecurities as individual issues rather than the product of a cultural context that systematically devalues women's perceptions, decisions and ideas.[62] While such affirmations may appear encouraging in imputing agency in the face of structural inequality, we agree with the assessment of scholars such as Alison Kafer[63] who illustrate its deeply depoliticising and regressive effects, dubbing such representational practices in respect of people with disabilities: 'billboard liberation'. Kafer analyses such individualising dynamics in advertisements run by the US-based privately funded not-for-profit 'Foundation for a Better Life'. In its promotion of the purportedly apolitical notion of a 'better life', the FBL is highly active in advocating for 'personal responsibility and character development', using its website, billboard adverts, and bus shelter posters. Featuring celebrities who have overcome the 'limits of mind and body', Christopher Reeve is cast as 'superhuman'. Similarly,

> Michael J. Fox, depicted in black-and-white with his face partly in shadow, models *optimism* ("Determined to outfox Parkinson's"); Whoopi Goldberg, pictured with lowered head, furrowed brow, and her eyes looking up at the camera through her dreadlocks, "Overcaem [sic] dyslexia" through *hard work*... Helen Keller, depicted as a young girl reading Braille and wearing an abundantly frilly dress, is praised for her foresight because she "could only see possibilities" (*Feminist, Queer, Crip,* p88).

In short, disability is narrativised as an *individual obstacle* to overcome through character strengths such personal accountability, determination, and resilience. We suggest such advertising and similar corporate messaging culture that promise 'overcoming', 'empowerment', 'self-belief' and defiance of social messages tend to hollow out the significance of such rebellion. One's position as marginalised, excluded and highly surveilled subject is translated as a *personal* injury, thus making racial, gendered and sexualised oppression a matter of individual responsibility and attitudinal orientation.

Fourth, these highly visual forms of affective rebellion in corporate imagery represent inequality purely within the frames of capitalist 'visibility/ invisibility'. Too often, the display of visible differences within affirmative advertising are framed as doing good, *in and of themselves*. We note, for example, the recent assurances of the #AllWorthIt L'Oréal campaign (*Affirmative Advertising*).[64] Moving notionally from the individual affirmation of 'Because you're worth it', the campaign features a range of physically diverse and beautifully groomed bodies that signal a momentary departure from the bodily demographic of L'Oreal's usual brand ambassadors. Repeating the refrain 'I'm worth it', 'you're worth it', 'we're all worth it', L'Oréal is cast by these #AllWorthIt ambassadors as a champion for inclusivity and diversity because 'what makes us different is what makes us beautiful', and in turn, the confidence of feeling beautiful enables the accomplishment of 'almost *anything'*. In this move to 'inclusion', political and historical differences of race, class, disability and religion are emptied of their pressing social significance in a generalised injunction to self-confidence.

#AllWorthIt is notable not simply for the kinds of political erasures that we have discussed above, but for its exemplification of the notion that visibility equates to politics, and thus, that media and corporate brands act benignly to 'do good' by making visible certain previously marginalised bodies. This liberal view, informed by the assumption that capitalism is essentially neutral, if not progressive, is widely taken to be common-sense. But these new branded and brandable visibilities are complicated. The point is not that visibility is unimportant. On the contrary it is profoundly important. Demands for visibility and representation are and have been central to almost all social justice movements. Today that has a new significance when the secret corporate algorithms of media giants like YouTube or Instagram quite literally erase or invisibilise certain bodies while promoting and rendering hypervisible others – see for example campaigns such as #IWantToSeeNyome and #DontDeleteMyBody. What requires scrutiny in relation to corporate wokeness, however, are the *conditions* under which and ways in which historically marginalised bodies are accorded visibility. Too often, as Sarah Banet-Weiser argues in relation to popular feminism, economies of visibility 'fundamentally shift politics of visibility so that visibility becomes the end rather than a means to an end'; in short 'the [Feminist] T-shirt *is* the politics' (*Empowered*, p23).[65] *Invisibility*, in the failure to be visually represented by brands and *included* in this imagery, is framed as one of the primary wrongs of consumer citizenship, thus reinstating the importance of capitalist attention economies and the 'leadership' of brands. Thus, in a cyclical motion, woke capitalism reinforces its own claims to authority, positioning brands as leading movements for progress.

Between adding value and going too far: non-dominant people as subjects of woke capitalism

We have argued thus far that woke capitalism exploits the historical politicisation of identity, re-affirming the centrality of capital and re-incorporating movements of resistance, without dismantling the hierarchies to which they refer. It mobilises identity politics for the generation of profit. However, understanding affect to be a social phenomenon and interlaced within patterns of power, we seek to explore some final questions: with the increasing visual representation and mediated 'inclusion' of 'nondominant' people within woke capitalism, what are the impacts on these now notionally valued bodies? [66] In some cases, we may observe unexpected new winners and important cultural movements in the space opened up through woke capitalism. For example, Edward Enniful, the new Black British editor-in-chief of Vogue, has been lauded for a new agenda highlighting the work of activists spanning Black transgender media personality Janet Mock, to British-Pakistani actor Riz Ahmed. In the lifestyle and beauty space, popstar Rihanna's cosmetics and lingerie crossover brand FentyxSavage has sought to centre the agency of bodies usually considered 'add-ons' in campaigns such as L'Oréal's #AllWorthIt campaign discussed above. During the pandemic, Rihanna launched the second season of FentyxSavage in a high profile choreographed fashion show on Amazon Prime. Beyoncé's 2020 visual album 'Black is King' combined high fashion with a programme of highlighting African artists and a 'love letter' to African diaspora in tracks such as 'Brown skinned girls' and 'Find your way back'.

This is a complex terrain. We note that any form of popular culture is subject to possible critique, with, for example, Beyoncé's album notably questioned for its image of Africa that seemed to centre African-Americans, rather than Africans living on the African continent – to say nothing of the politics of Amazon in relation to FentyxSavage. Here, in highlighting what we see as significant cultural interventions, what we aim to question is how existing stratifications of cultural contexts may direct affective energies and impacts. We suggest that as nondominant people are increasingly featured through a lens of 'inspiration' and 'excellence' in starkly unequal conditions, woke capitalism affords increasingly little space for marginalised people to do anything apart from continuously 'explode expectations' in an uplifting way. Nondominant people are recast as visible, neoliberal subjects of *potential* value, their historical experiences of oppression intertwined with an associated generalised sense of positivity, possibility, belief in capitalist futurity, and commitment to self-work. While requiring further intensification of feeling rules that require confidence, 'leaning in', 'hustling', merging associations of diversity with capitalist aims, these now luminous subjects of woke capitalism are mobilised to *add value* to the *affective plausibility* of the new neoliberal meritocracy. They are offered as brand ambassadors not simply for particular corporates but for capitalism itself.

We suggest that as nondominant people and non-normative people become more notionally valued in the corporate media-scape, the increased work towards the happiness becomes ever more crucial but

unevenly distributed and rewarded. That is, they must generate positivity and gratitude *for others* as a condition of acceptance. Sara Ahmed observes that it is important to 'consider how happiness makes the world cohere around, as it were, the right people'.[67] Ahmed points to the way in which contemporary discourses of diversity and inclusion as '"feel good politics"'required the people who are the 'objects' of such policies to enable the good feeling of those who purport to include them – even as simultaneously excluding or undervaluing them, as in the Black influencers paid less by brands than their White counterparts,[68] or examples such as the notorious case of Munro Bergdorf who was fired by L'Oreal for speaking out about racism, but then rehired for their 'diversity board' as Black Lives Matter activism reached a peak following the murder of George Floyd.

Yet, while some marginalised populations are ever more visually represented within circuits of culture, their social status is ever more contested given the unequal affective politics that predicates their inclusion. As forms of 'enlightened' inclusivity have become mainstream in consumer culture through a politics of declaration and visibility, we argue that further feminist and antiracist intervention and critique is required precisely as such movements are seized to make claims that non-dominant people have 'gone too far', a dynamic underpinning the so-called culture wars of the current moment. Sarah Banet-Weiser notes that popular misogyny exploits popular feminism's claims of empowerment and self-belief, seemingly taking such claims on face value but arguing that that women's enhanced capacity directly *injures* men. As such, popular misogyny deploys a language of mourning, injury, loss and anger against the popular feminist vocabulary of empowerment, capacity and productivity. Yet, as Banet-Weiser importantly reminds us:

> ….while popular feminism instantiates primarily as visibility, popular misogyny is not only expressed in an economy of visibility but is also reified into institutions and structures (*Empowered,* p32).

Banet-Weiser thus observes a curious pattern in this conjuncture whereby the visible emergence of popular feminism, precisely due to its compatibility within certain forms of neoliberal culture aligned to productivity, work and the extraction of value, is opportunistically seized by the right to claim the toppling of the social order.

In reaction to the happy 'inclusive' embrace of woke capitalism in the current conjuncture, we see highly emotional repudiations articulated through the language of retreat and exit. There is a reaction against the feeling rules of emotional discipline, and self-work, precisely through the reinstatement of distinctly racialised and patriarchal affective expectations regarding the value and freedoms of white masculinity. Such contestation is wideranging, seen in the vote to 'leave' the European Union, the rise of the so-called alt-right manifested in the explosion of online racism, sexism and homophobia,[69] and

the swell of support in favour of 'Mak[ing] America Great Again'. In these examples, we witness a revolt from the feeling rules normalised by woke capitalism, articulated via what Sharma terms 'sexit',[70] the patriarchal desire to leave these encroachments through reinstating hierarchical relations of gender, race and class.

While such articulations have been couched as a contestation of neoliberalism, there is little to indicate any serious interruption of neoliberal logic. The populism of recent political discourse continues, as under Hall's description of authoritarian populism, to pit a certain portion of the population as 'the people' versus a 'corrupt elite', but utilises discourses of ordering competition ('England first') and tools of the market: selective investment combined with withdrawal and neglect to achieve its goals.[71] Rather than a significant contestation of neoliberalism itself, such racialised and gendered affects determine what *counts as injustice* under neoliberalism. These positions, of course, are not completely novel, or simply derivative of woke capitalism as a form of cultural hegemony. Yet, it is important to be attentive to the destructive consequences that may arise from the relations of force between an effervescent 'woke capitalism' that superficially adopts marginalised identities as new neoliberal mascots, and the long-held affective attachments of some to the security of an unequal social order. Rather similarly to the authoritarian populism Hall so vividly documented some time ago, there is a cry for discipline and order from below: a desire for further forms of stratification that more unambiguously demarcate white patriarchal dominance. There is a deep investment in a clearly hierarchical gender and race order at a time when nondominant peoples, via the affective regulation and promise of woke capitalism, are blamed for loss but also increasingly *indispensable* to the continued 'commonsense' of neoliberalism.

Conclusion

Some clear patterns arise from the affective-discursive conjunctural analysis we have conducted here. We see the incorporation of movements of resistance within woke capitalism and their re-articulation as personal obstacles and injuries that may be overcome through self-motivation, self-belief, and an affective investment in the self. Crucially, the circulation of this corporate messaging relies on the increased visibility of populations that have been historically marginalised, *without dismantling the oppressions that such branding glibly references*. An affective polarity emerges: one, magnetising those hitherto marginalised bodies that are now positioned as the positive, future-oriented subjects of woke neoliberal capitalism required to revive capitalism; the other, circulating narratives of decline and loss of 'deserved' and 'natural' privileges.

Drawing on Hall's framework, we might say that the new moral absolutes turn on contestation over the rightful beneficiaries of a neoliberal settlement – *but not of neoliberalism itself*. Given that crisis is

intertwined with both dismantlement and reconstruction, it is necessary to move beyond simple assessments of the return of the right in the current conjuncture. Through our affective-discursive analysis, we have suggested that identity is a crucial terrain over which contestations of power play out. In the complicated politics of the current landscape in which woke capitalism has arisen, further critical attention is needed in understanding how radical politics is used, instrumentalised and transmuted in neoliberal economies of visibility, and under what terms.

---

[1] Cemal Burak Tansel, 'Authoritarian Neoliberalism: Towards a New Research Agenda', in C. B. Tansel (ed), *States of Discipline: Authoritarian neoliberalism and the contested reproduction of capitalist order*, London, Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, pp1-28. Hereafter 'Authoritarian Neoliberalism'.

[2] Francesca Sobande, 2019, 'Woke-washing: "Intersectional" femvertising and branding "woke" bravery', European Journal of Marketing, DOI 10.1108/EJM-02-2019-0134. Hereafter 'Woke-washing'.

[3] Roopali Mukherjee, & Sarah Banet-Weiser (eds.). *Commodity activism: Cultural resistance in neoliberal times*. NYU Press, 2012, p2. Hereafter *Commodity Activism*; Lee Edwards, *Understanding Public Relations: Theory, Culture and Society,* London, Sage, 2019.

[4] Kim Allen and Anna Bull, 'Following Policy: A Network Ethnography of the UK Character Education Policy Community', *Sociologial Research Online,* 23(2), 438-458, 2018.

[5] Sean Nixon, *Advertising Cultures,* Sage, London, 2004.

[6] John Clarke, 'A sense of loss? Unsettled attachments in the current conjuncture', *New Formations*, 96-97, 2019, pp 132-146. Hereafter *A Sense of Loss*.

[7] Larry Grossberg, 'Cultural studies in search of a method, or Looking for conjunctural analysis.' *New Formations*, 96/7, 2019, p38-68, p59. Hereafter *Cultural studies in search of a method*.

[8] Rosalind Gill and Akane Kanai, 'Mediating Neoliberal Capitalism: affect, subjectivity and inequality', *Journal of Communication*. 68, 2, 2018 318–326, hereafter *Mediating Neoliberal Capitalism*; Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad, 'Confidence Culture and the Remaking of Feminism', New Formations, 91, (2017), pp16–34 (Hereafter 'Confidence culture'); Christina Scharff,'The psychic life of neoliberalism: Mapping the contours of entrepreneurial subjectivity', *Theory, Culture & Society,* 33, (2016), pp107–122. Hereafter 'The psychic life of neoliberalism'.

[9] Margaret Wetherell, *Affect and emotion: A new social science understanding,* London, Sage, 2012. Hereafter *Affect and emotion*.

[10] Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, London, Verso, 1988. Hereafter *The Hard Road to Renewal*.

[11] Jeremy Gilbert, 'This Conjuncture: For Stuart Hall.' *New Formations*, 96/7, 2019, pp 5-37; *Cultural studies in search of a method.* Hereafter *This Conjuncture*.

[12] *The Hard Road to Renewal.*

[13] Jo Littler, Cultural studies and consumer culture' in D. Shaw, A. Chatzidakis andM. Carrington (eds) *Ethics and morality in Consumer Culture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Routledge, New York, 2016, p6

[14] Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis*, London, Macmillan, 1978.

[15] Angela McRobbie, 'Settling Accounts with Subculture: A Feminist Critique', in *Feminism and Youth Culture: From 'Jackie' to 'Just Seventeen'*, London, Macmillan Education UK, 1991, pp16-34.

[16] Janice Winship, *Inside Women's Magazines*, New York, Unwin Hyman, 1987.

[17] Tracey Jensen, *Parenting the Crisis: the Cultural Politics of Parent Blame*, Bristol, Policy Press, 2018, p12.

[18] Jamie Hakim, *Work That Body: Male Bodies in Digital Culture,* London, Rowman & Littlefield, 2019.

[19] Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as exception: Mutations in citizenship and sovereignty*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2017, p3. Hereafter *Neoliberalism as exception*.

[20] *The Hard Road to Renewal,* p6.

[21] Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: the Making of Emotional Capitalism*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2007.

[22] Margaret Wetherell, *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding*, Sage, London, 2012, hereafter, *Affect and Emotion;* Margaret Wetherell, 'The future of affect theory: An interview with Margaret Wetherell'. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2014. https://www.theoryculturesociety.org/the-future-of-affect-theory-an-interview-with-margaret-wetherall/

[23] Stuart Hall 'Minimal Selves', in Lisa Appignanesi (ed), *The Real Me: Postmodernism and the question of identity*. London, The Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1987, pp 44-46.

[24] Clare Hemmings, 'Invoking affect: Cultural theory and the ontological turn'. *Cultural Studies* 19(5), 2005, 548-567, p 551. See also Margaret Wetherell's critique of Eve Sedgwick in *Affect and Emotion.*

[25] Michael Hardt, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire,* New York, Penguin Books, 2005.

[26] Sara Ahmed, *the Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2004. Hereafter *Cultural Politics of Emotion.*

[27] Imogen Tyler, 'Chav mum chav scum', *Feminist Media Studies,* 8(1) 2008, 17-34.

[28] See also Engin Isin Acts, affects, calls. *OpenDemocracy*. 2014. Available at: https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/engin-isin/acts-affects-calls

[29] Anna Zsubori, 'Gender studies banned at university – the Hungarian government's latest attack on equality'. *The Conversation* Oct 9, 2018: https://theconversation.com/gender-studies-banned-at-university-the-hungarian-governments-latest-attack-on-equality-103150

[30] Richard Horton, Covid-19 has exposed the reality of Britain: poverty, insecurity and inequality, The Guardian September 8 2020 https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/sep/08/covid-19-britain-poverty-insecurity-inequality-fairer-society

[31] Jo Littler, *Against meritocracy: Culture, power and myths of mobility*. London, Routledge, 2017, p.2. Hereafter *Against meritocracy*.

[32] Graeme Turner, 'The mass production of celebrity: "Celetoids", reality TV and the "demotic turn"', *International Journal of Cultural Studies,* 9,2, 2006, pp153-165, p154.

[33] Jo Littler and Nick Couldry. Work, Power and Performance: Analysing the 'reality' game of The Apprentice. Cultural Sociology, 5, 2, 2011, pp 263–279; Laurie Ouellette, *Lifestyle TV*. New York, Routledge, 2016; Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, 'Makeover television, governmentality and the good citizen', *Continuum* 22, 4, 2008, pp471-484.

[34] Nikolas Rose 'Governing "Advanced" Liberal Democracies', in A. Barry, T. Osbourne and N. Rose, *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-Liberalism and Rationalities of Government*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996, pp37-64, p45. Hereafter *Governing 'Advanced' Liberal Democracies*.

[35] Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey, Michael Rustin, 'After neoliberalism: analysing the present', in S. Hall, D. Massey and M. Rustin, *After neoliberalism: the Kilburn manifesto*, London, Soundings, 2013, pp3-19, p16.

[36] Lois McNay Self as enterprise: Dilemmas of control and resistance in Foucault's The Birth of Biopolitics. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26, 6, 2009, pp55-77.

[37] *Undoing the Demos.*

[38] Sarah Banet-Weiser, '"Confidence you can carry!": girls in crisis and the market for girls' empowerment organisations', *Continuum,* 29, 2, (2015), pp182–193; Laura Favaro, '"Just be confident girls!": Confidence chic as neoliberal governmentality', in Ana Elias, Rosalind Gill, and Christina Scharff (eds.), *Aesthetic labour: Rethinking beauty politics in neoliberalism*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp 283–299.

[39] Anna Bull and Kim Allen, Introduction: Sociological Interrogations of the Turn to Character, *Sociological Research Online,* 23, 2, 2018, pp392-398

[40] Barbara Ehrenreich, *Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World*. New York & London, Granta, 2010.

[41] *Mediating Neoliberal Capitalism;* Akane Kanai, 'On not taking the self seriously: resilience, relatability and humour in young women's Tumblr blogs', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. 22, 1, 2019, pp60–77.

[42] Akane Kanai, *Gender and relatability in digital culture: Managing affect, intimacy and value*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

[43] Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: the Making of Emotional Capitalism*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2007.

[44] *Governing 'Advanced' Liberal Democracies*.

[45] Barbara Cruikshank, 'Revolutions within: self-government and self-esteem', *Economy and society,* 22, 3, 1993, pp327-344.

[46] William Davies, *The happiness industry: How the government and big business sold us well-being*, London, Verso, 2015.

[47] Carl Cederström and Andre Spicer, *The Wellness Syndrome*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

[48] Ronald Purser, *McMindfulness: How mindfulness became the new capitalist spirituality.* London, Penguin Random House.

[49] Helen Wood and Bev Skeggs 2020 "Clap for carers? From care gratitude to care justice." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (2020): 1367549420928362.

[50] Francesca Sobande, 2020, '"We're all in this together": Commodified notions of connection, care and community in brand responses to COVID-19.' *European Journal of Cultural Studies* online first. DOI: 10.1177/1367549420932294

[51] Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, *The rebel sell: Why the culture can't be jammed,* Chichester,, Capstone, 2004.

[52] Helen Baehr, 'The "liberated woman' in television drama.' *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, 3, 1, 1980, 29-39.

[53] Myra Macdonald, *Representing women myths of femininity in the popular media.* London, Bloomsbury, 1995.

[54] See, e.g. Sandrina de Finney, Playing Indian and other settler stories: disrupting Western narratives of Indigenous girlhood', *Continuum*, 29, 2, 2015, pp169-181.

[55] See also Sobande, 'Woke-washing?' for an analysis of the Pepsi advertisement.

[56] See, e.g. Naila Kabeer, *The power to choose: Bangladeshi women and labour supply decision-making in London and Dhaka,* Verso, New York, 2005.

[57] Kay, J. B., & Wood, H. 2020. Culture and commoning in a time of coronavirus: Introduction to a Cultural Commons special section on COVID-19. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 1367549420928360. See also Hoskins, T. E. (2014). *Stitched up: The anti-capitalist book of fashion* (Vol. 254). London: Pluto Press.

[58] Henry Giroux, 'Beyond Biopolitics of Disposability: Rethinking Neoliberalism in the New Gilded Age', *Social Identities*, 14, 5, 2008, pp587-620.

[59] Paul Gilroy, '"... We Got to Get Over Before We Go Under..." Fragments for a History of Black Vernacular Neoliberalism.' *New Formations,* 80/81, 2013, pp23-38; David T Goldberg, 'Neoliberalizing race'. *Macalester Civic Forum* 1,1, 2009, p14; Roopali Mukherjee, Antiracism limited: A pre-history of post-race. *Cultural Studies*, 30, 1, 2016, pp47-77.

[60] Anandi Ramamurthy and Kalpana Wilson, '"Come and Join the Freedom Lovers!": Racism, appropriation and resistance in Advertising.' In: D. Hund, M. Pickering, and A. Ramamurthy (eds.) *Commodity Racism and Colonial Advertising*, Berlin, Lit Verlag, 2013.

[61] Alison Hearn, '"Meat, Mask, Burden": Probing the contours of the branded self'. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 8, 2, 2008, pp197–21

[62] Rosalind Gill and Akane Kanai, 'Affirmative advertising and the mediated feeling rules of neoliberalism'. In M. Meyers (ed).. *Neoliberalism and the Media*, Routledge, New York, 2019, pp131-146. Hereafter *Affirmative Advertising.*

[63] Alison Kafer, *Feminist, queer, crip*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013.

[64] Rosalind Gill and Akane Kanai, 'Affirmative advertising and the mediated feeling rules of neoliberalism'. In M. Meyers (ed).. *Neoliberalism and the Media*, Routledge, New York, 2019, pp131-146.

[65] Sarah Banet-Weiser, Empowered: Popular feminism and popular misogyny, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2018.

[66] We follow Lauren Berlant in using this term to suggest its affective sense of being part of a historical minority, although we acknowledge that minorities are not necessarily 'unified' or homogenous. Lauren Berlant, *The female complaint: the unfinished business of sentimentality in American culture,* Durham, Duke University Press, 2008.

[67] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness,* Durham, Duke University Press, 2010, p13.

[68] Ashley Carman, 'Black influencers are underpaid, and a new Instagram account is proving it'. *The Verge*, July 14 2020: https://www.theverge.com/21324116/instagram-influencer-pay-gap-account-expose

[69] Angela Nagle, *Kill all normies Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*, London, Zero books, 2017.

[70] Sarah Sharma, 'Exit and the extensions of man', *Transmediale online journal,* https://transmediale.de/content/exit-and-the-extensions-of-man April 2017.

[71] David Zeglen & Neil Ewen, 'National populists: right-wing celebrity politicians in contemporary Europe', Celebrity Studies, 2020, DOI: 10.1080/19392397.2020.1800665