

The Problem with Impostor Syndrome*

One of the great wins for identity politics has been a broadening of the conversation around mental health, and to the extent that this has also coincided with a swell in the number of white-collar workers, it has also tended to focus on the many ways in which the office impacts our wellbeing. Scroll through the pages of most magazines in 2019 and you'll find stories shedding light on various mental health conditions and treatments. This is the kind of admission that even a decade ago could have been tantamount to social and professional ostracism. But it has been so far normalised that we now broadly accept that at one time or another most of us will suffer from conditions such as anxiety and depression, and as a society we are better poised than ever before to both identify the symptoms and find possible avenues for help.

During the Lost Decade, I and many others found solace in the writings of Mark Fisher. Among other things, Fisher helped to frame the depression, anxiety and other mental health conditions we were experiencing as the natural response to the rather unnatural forces of late capitalism, and helped me to understand that, far from being

incidental to it, the mental health conditions we were being taught to cope with within the modern workplace were almost a necessity of its very existence.

In recent years, however, the advertising industry has keenly and shamelessly exploited issues of identity politics for the purposes of pushing products. Issues including gender parity and feminism are regularly quoted by banks, clothing brands, food stores and gym companies to help bolster their progressive credentials — and mental health awareness is no exception. In what seems like an almost perfect symbol of neoliberalism's ability to corrupt our most deeply held truths, companies that are guilty of some of the most brazen and unapologetic exploitation of their workers and complicit in a consumer culture that is responsible for leaving millions of people feeling inadequate, now brandish slogans telling us to open up and let the rivers of internal anguish run free. To fully comprehend the extent of this, consider the fact that on World Mental Health Day 2018, 1.8 million people following the Burger King UK Twitter account received a message telling them, "You're beautiful, you're loved, you matter...." The irony being that, with income insecurity being one of the major contributors to depression and anxiety, Burger King still pays its workers the bare minimum.⁵⁴

But of course none of that matters when companies can function entirely at the fictional level of "brands", dreamed up for them by the copywriters and creative strategists who populate the thousands of design studios littered across London. Countless graduates of arts and humanities courses make up these teams, and are mined by the industry for their relevant takes. This, combined with

the frenzied attempts by greying advertising execs to stay relevant, goes some way to explaining the #activism trend we've seen creeping into the corporate advertising space. What Wallace described as "advertising posing as art" is something close to an "advertorial", whose name, a bizarre portmanteau illustrative of advertising's new Frankenstein proportions, is now common fare in most magazine offices. So convoluted are the mechanisms of advertising today, that an "advertorial" is an article intended to be read like any other, but funded by a brand for the purposes of promoting awareness and brand loyalty. Supplanting the magazine's own editorial line, it must adhere to whatever requirements the brand stipulates, meaning the reader is duped into consuming what they think is editorial content, only to be delivered subtle messages encouraging them to buy more products.

As a young writer working in magazines, my job often involved producing these articles, and in doing so I began to build a clear picture of how advertising can extend its reach beyond traditional formats and slowly also conquer the platforms that were once reserved for challenging power. The points raised by Wallace can also be extended to advertising that masquerades as activism, whose tactics go a long way in corrupting our language and stripping our lives of a certain sensitivity; because no sooner have we found a way to articulate our feelings, than it's commandeered by an advertising industry which by default reduces it to cliché, leaving us once again unable to articulate ourselves — or as Wallace puts it, becoming emotionally "impotent". When everything is fair game to advertisers, and even our most heartfelt sentiments can be swiftly

transformed into ad copy, our only other recourse is irony — that uncomfortable eye-roll as we speak the word out of the side of our mouths, scared of sounding like a Lloyds TSB ad and preferring to seem like we only half mean what we are saying. It's either that or avoiding sincerity altogether, and neither seems particularly conducive to solving the mental health crisis or the pandemic levels of loneliness we're currently suffering under.

In this brave new world, where scores of graduates are tasked with imbuing brands with a "personality" and "tone of voice", even the worst scandal will not prove fatal, as consumers become the victims of a long and drawn-out campaign to believe in falsehood. Try working at a creative agency for half a day and count how many times you hear the admission that, while something might not be true, "we can still get away with saying it". This mass-level gaslighting leaves all of us more vulnerable to manipulation, and more vulnerable to the accusation that we're responsible for a vast many more of society's ills than is actually the case.

When a tactic like this stands to encroach on issues as fundamental as our mental health, the damaging repercussions can never be underestimated. It's a tendency that was most eloquently communicated by Fisher when he argued that much of the discussion around mental health has led to the erroneous belief that the strains felt from living in a ruthlessly capitalist society are in fact the product of some psychological shortcoming. Trite messages telling consumers to "love themselves" or "reach out" have the harmful effect of making it seem as though mental health is really no more complicated than that, placing

modern workplace, it also constitutes a vast amount of unremunerated and uncredited labour.

This is the phenomenon referred to by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as "code-switching".⁵⁶ By automatically favouring the powerful, and by extension perpetuating the status quo, neoliberalism has thereby succeeded in supplanting the behaviours and values of the middle-class incumbent power-keepers onto our most deeply-held perceptions of what constitutes professionalism, quality and even sound mental health. Rather than debunking this mechanism and exposing its highly rigged and troubled origins, the media has overwhelmingly subscribed to the pathology of impostor syndrome, administering advice to working-class people on how to better conform and "iron out" any divergent aspects of their character and outer appearance in order to succeed. This represents a woeful ineptitude for critiquing the power structures that govern society, being complicit in a value judgement that ascribes deficiency and even mental derangement to anyone who now diverges from the very narrow set of middle-class signifiers approved by the modern workplace.

My advice to anyone reading this is to resist this line of reasoning. While it might go against the ideas peddled by most self-help and management books, I would suggest that rather than internalising the structural shame imposed by the corporate workplace, as well as by certain seats of learning and certain social circles, it is important for all of us to remain vigilant to the many ways in which it dehumanizes and strips us of our identity. To lose sight of this, and to attribute that feeling to some psychological shortcoming, is to internalise capitalism and to lose sight of

our essential identity — and, by extension, our creativity too. Fraudulence within a system that is itself fraudulent, rigged and insincere is essentially a misnomer. Conversely, that sense of fraudulence might just be the guiding light we need to navigate neoliberalism's wild west of corrupted symbolism, meaning and truth.

For this reason we must also resist the logic that employers make their hiring decisions based on ability alone, and not how far the candidate in question complies with a set of very superficial factors, as well as their perceived willingness to forfeit their time, energies and identity for the purposes of advancing the corporation. The ego-boosting assertion that any organisation hires only the best and brightest candidates has been used for too long to persuade people to participate in a capitalist system that debases them in real terms.

We must also start to question the assumptions that lead us to believe the innate quality of certain elite institutions. When dismal reports are published about how few working-class, state school and minority candidates are accepted into places like Oxford and Cambridge, the burden is still nevertheless placed at the door of the excluded. Rather than painting the admissions criteria as deficient in its overemphasis on a very narrow set of attributes that are common to the middle and upper classes, the message is always the same: working-class children need to learn to become more confident and to more closely resemble their middle-class and privately-educated peers in speech and delivery. This, we are told, is the necessary route to success, at the expense of any measure of altruism, kindness or compassion. And

while we read opinion pieces all the time about the need to overhaul and strip out prejudice from these hulking great prestigious institutions, I would argue that we are essentially missing the point by even conceiving of them as prestigious, thereby perpetuating their power and ability to wield elitism. What will it take for us to realise that the idea of confidence is one fixed and defined by reigning powers that need to be dismantled through ridicule and loss of respect? That humility, and being observant, fastidious, caring and concerned for others are far more important than one's ability to confidently handle a job interview?

Because the one lesson I've learned from being exposed to some of these places is that the prejudice being reported isn't incidental to, or separate from, the institution, but paramount to its continued existence and success. If we are truly going to challenge the assumptions of capitalism, then we must begin with the behaviours lauded by employers and dictated by the market leaders in education. The more we do this, the more we demystify and thus dismantle the mythological supremacy of not only private schools and Oxbridge, but also the establishment media outlets who hire disproportionately from this pool of candidates.

This is the first act of theft that will be necessary in truly overhauling the current climate and creating a legitimate challenge to a neoliberal culture: decolonizing our thinking and stripping these elite institutions of their respect, prestige and revenue. Having understood the mechanisms by which some of the market leaders in the media, arts and culture seek to secure their own futures

and perpetuate the myth of their superiority for the sake of justifying their continued existence, we begin to naturally start questioning their supposed authority. We can take this one step further by cancelling our various subscriptions, boycotting their programming and investing our time and resources on cultural output of a more authentic and grassroots variety. As writers, artists, musicians, and film-makers we must also contribute more to independent organisations — publishing houses, record labels, production companies, magazines, broadcasters and gallery spaces — that have proliferated in recent years thanks to the efforts of hardworking visionary people with a view to helping us transform our collective culture. Not relying on the off-chance that the establishment will permit us access, and judging ourselves to be deficient or to have failed if they don't, but being vigilant to their often highly rigged selection and hiring policies, and rejecting the logic of their highly proscriptive rules of taste.

The stigma of self-publishing must be eradicated, and is being, by a younger generation who seem to be embracing it more fervently and without the residual shame felt by those graduates of the Lost Decade, trapped between the hope of a more egalitarian future and an elitist past built on notions of social mobility. We have to dispense with the notion that without endorsement by a major corporation, our creative efforts are null and void, or else spend the rest of our lives communicating nothing. Capitalism might debase us in almost every other way, but we cannot allow it to steal our means of expression when alternative avenues are available, simply because of our own outdated dependency on a rigged system of validation. There is

for money that we feel no moral objection in taking and either investing it, or using the freedom it affords us to contribute to these alternative outlets.

This will constitute the second act of theft. No meaningful challenge to either the political or cultural hegemony will ever be achieved if those seeking to carry it out are suffering under the perpetual anxiety of not being able to make rent. Ultimately, the extent to which we engage with the capitalist system in the first instance won't have any bearing on our ability to dismantle it. This, I believe, has been a major oversight of the left-wing cause, which has broadly and needlessly suffered under the burden of living off paltry newspaper commissioning fees, for example, in the false belief that this constitutes a more noble, and less hypocritical economic model, than temping in an office, doing freelance corporate work, or even doing shifts in a pub. There will be some, lucky supporters of the left who are able to forge authentic careers in this way, but we can't all rely on that model. With the exception of industries trading directly in human misery — the arms trade, for example, and most betting companies — there should be no guilt for having to resort to whatever means necessary to survive the market economy, particularly for those whose backgrounds were often unstable and precarious.

In fact, that experience can not only provide you with the financial security to pursue more creative goals, but also furnish you with experience that will allow you to better understand the mechanisms by which the neoliberal system operates. For some, it will be possible to also do this in a way that undermines businesses so large and so

unwieldy that they will hardly notice your half-completed efforts as hired staff or freelancers — and even more for the fact that, under the plethora of what David Graeber has termed “bullshit jobs”, there are few real ways of even measuring our performance. This, I should add, is a privilege of anyone able to work within certain areas of the service sector, and specifically the so-called “creative industries”, as performance targets are a tyranny of low-paid retail and hospitality work that must not be underestimated. But should you be lucky enough to find yourself being courted by the creative industries for the purposes of mining your creative talent, remember that it is built on hot air and stupidity, making it ripe for exploitation by a shrewd impostor wanting to subsidise their earnings while freelancing or self-publishing work that ultimately serves to discredit and undermine it. I would recommend doing so without remorse.

With the exception of anyone working for a left-wing publication, think-tank or other organisation directly involved in the dismantling of neoliberal politics, I would also strongly recommend that you don't accept the paltry salaries of cultural organisations operating at the same level of any other corporate entity but paying far below a liveable wage on the assertion that the perks and prestige they offer amounts to a fair substitute. This constitutes an act of internalised capitalism arguably even greater than the far more transactional approach of treating work like work and taking as much as you can. See money as an unfortunate necessity that you will have to devote some time to accruing in order to survive, but resist the urge to comply with its attendant jargon and camaraderie.

Smile and nod and take your pay packet at the end of the month and negotiate as much as you can from your employers, who, you must remember, do not own the right to your sense of guilt or embarrassment; whilst at the same time defending your most deeply held sense of self and identity from the psychobabble that seeks to supplant your grip on reality.

The third act of theft comes from cultivating new communities and nurturing those existing communities to which you belong, by stealing the same exclusionary methods of the establishment to use against it. The modern workplace and the rhetoric around social mobility would have us feel ashamed and slightly embarrassed of the families, friends and neighbourhoods who's shared vernacular is the source of our essential identity; and resisting that logic will be essential for challenging the neoliberal system that degrades and humiliates us. So continue to speak in your mother tongue, be that linguistic or accented, in the way that the corporate world and elite institutions have alienated the working-class for decades by using corporate jargon to confound and confuse. Do this as frequently as you can around your boss, who can never be seen to discriminate against you for this reason, but will come to fear you and your mysterious modes of expression. Use it as well in the work you create and put out into the world. Use the internet, harnessing the mimetics of social media to create rapid linguistic change and complex constructions specific to your small community for the purposes of confounding the broadsheet commentators looking on and frantically trying to catch up with every search entry made into urbandictionary.com.

Just as the British establishment has been successful in anthropologizing almost any cultural phenomenon that diverts from its highly prescriptive hegemony, so the working and lower-middle classes can also begin to do the same: using the same methods of clinical analysis and taking our newly attained education to subject the upper classes to the same degradation they have been administering for centuries. In our work, we must steal their tendency to coolly dissect phenomena that appears distant and strange to them, exposing all of the absurdities and false assumptions that perpetuate a highly elitist and discriminatory society.

In so doing we will most likely stumble into the fourth act of theft, which is archaeological. In neoliberalism's march to conquer nearly all aspects of contemporary culture, stories of working-class and marginalised communities have been quashed and forgotten, creating an orphan generation unsure of its own identity and place in history. Crucial to challenging the current status quo will be the effort to instate more working-class history and storytelling, for the purposes of lending younger generations some legacy and sense of belonging. Read and share books by obscure working-class authors, and do the same with music and film, while letting it shape the work that you create, whose aesthetics and vernacular can't help but be informed by this alternative viewpoint. Because, in the steady march to supplant the status quo, it will not just be polemics such as this (or lectures or think-tank reports) that will be crucial, but a visual language and mode of expression that sits far closer to the lived experience of the majority. Anyone working in this effort will be contrib-

in the self-determination of working- and lower-middle-class communities. What I am advocating for is the chance for real people to share real stories, tell real jokes and share real music in a vernacular that is understood by the majority of people alive in this wild west of a free-market economy and under the auspices of a governing class that hasn't the first idea how to relate to it. Unlike the radical redistribution of wealth that will require new policies and new taxation laws, we already have all of the necessary tools for creating a radically new culture, and now simply have to dispense with whatever residual prestige we hold for the old cultural institutions that serve as gatekeepers to the mainstream, and which continually exclude any challenger.

To do this, it's essential to remember that in the market economy, you — your body and your mind — are no more than a commodity in the eyes of your employer, and that any attempt they might make to improve your wellbeing is for the sake of securing profit.

Retain that sense of impostordom, and through it watch the many ways in which the corporate workspace and its attendants dismiss the legitimacy of you and your culture. Watch how your manager talks to the cleaners who attend to his desk. How he speaks to tradespeople on the phone and complains about the transport staff who assisted his journey into work. Watch him try to cultivate friendships with his employees for the sake of ensuring a smooth working relationship, and in spite of all the quiet ways in which he will exploit them at the first given opportunity, like insisting on overtime that is never remunerated and sending them halfway across the world

to traipse the hallways of soulless conference centres and laugh at the very idea that this could ever be presented as a perk. Watch as your boss tries to be more relatable by lampooning a black culture that he otherwise fears in his day-to-day life spent in the sterile, white-washed environs of his twee Victorian terraced house; as he ironically, and drunkenly, delivers renditions of hip-hop and RnB songs during the annual Christmas party, his go-to numbers being Wu-Tang's "Pinky Ring" or Lauryn Hill's "Doo-Wop" — songs he pretended to enjoy during his three years of fun at university. Watch him with a coolness and a distance that allows you to keenly exploit him in the same way that he is exploiting you. Take your money and run, is what I'm saying, without ever getting sucked into the softer parts of the corporate culture that are really nothing more than a thinly veiled attempt to make the process of abasement necessitated by the modern workplace more amenable and friendly. This will be particularly relevant to the kinds of workplace emerging in the tech and creative industries, whose "crew-neck capitalism" belies a more dehumanizing kind than the earlier suit-and-briefcase version.

With this approach, you will be able to better navigate a system that most of us are sadly all forced to partake in, using the experience as a way of learning the systems of capitalism in order to dismantle them. With that money and in your spare time, find ways of putting that experience as an impostor to good use: writing about your experiences, harnessing the dynamics you witness to mount political movements and build shared communities with a view to creating a more empowered workforce; working with journalists to expose illegal and exploitative

behaviours. Wherever possible, do this on the company's time. Join a union and work with their teams to establish what you can and can't say in the public domain; and keep donating part of that money to your socialist representatives in parliament, whose assumption of power will be the quickest and most reliable way of ensuring that justice for all of us who are dehumanized by these corporate entities is finally brought to bear.