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# The Liminal Work of Online Freelance Writing: Networked Configurations of Gendered Labor, Technologies, Subjectivities

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy

in

Communication (Science Studies)

by

Monika Marie Sengul-Jones

Committee in charge:

Professor Lisa Cartwright, Chair
Professor Dan Hallin
Professor Lilly Irani
Professor Martha Lampland
Professor Elizabeth Losh
Professor Kalindi Vora

2020

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The Dissertation of Monika Marie Sengul-Jones is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California San Diego

2020

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Jan and Randy.

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Portions of "'Being a Better #Freelancer': Gendered and Racialised Aesthetic Labour on Online Freelance Marketplaces," (2017) published in *Aesthetic Labour*, edited by Elias A., Gill R., Scharff C. by Palgrave Macmillan are included in the Introduction. Monika Sengul-Jones is the sole author of all material in this dissertation.

April 20, 2020

Seattle, WA

VITA

| | |
|---|---|
| 2004 | Bachelor of Arts in Comparative History of Ideas, University of Washington |
| 2007 | Masters of Arts in Gender Studies, Central European University |
| 2012 | Masters of Arts in Communication, University of California San Diego |
| 2012-2014 | Teaching Assistant, Department of Communication, University of California San Diego |
| 2014-2016 | Visiting Scholar, Department of Communication, University of Washington |
| 2017-2018 | Wikipedian-in-Residence, Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) |
| 2020 | Doctor of Philosophy in Communication (Science Studies), University of California San Diego |

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

# The Liminal Work of Online Freelance Writing: Networked Configurations of Gendered Labor, Technologies, Subjectivities

by

Monika Marie Sengul-Jones

Doctorate of Philosophy in Communication (Science Studies)

University of California San Diego, 2020

Professor Lisa Cartwright, Chair

This dissertation is a theoretical, interpretative, and empirical study of online freelance writing work in the 2010s in the United States. The aftermath of the 2008 recession saw a rise in remote writing work opportunities and online platforms facilitating and scaffolding such work. A field of precarious work that was predominately occupied by women, the dissertation tracks freelance writing work done on explicitly feminist online platforms for women readers and writing work done by women on crowd work marketplace platforms brokering low-paid content writing piece work. Using ethnographic methods, participant observation, and interpretative, historical textual analysis, this dissertation advances the neologism "liminal work" to ground my analysis over four chapters. Liminal, which comes from the Latin word "threshold," suggests a physical crossing from one place to another. The "liminal work" of freelance writing online is the maintenance of ambiguity, accomplished through attachments to historical and speculative concepts of autonomy and the liberal human subject. I advance this argument with attention to the mythology of entrepreneurialism as a frame that enables contemporary, situated dependencies to perpetuate in platform design. I scope the intersection of historical debates about freedom to access information online before the commercial internet with the gendered work of library service professionals as prefiguring commercial online websites and writerly work. I analyze empirical reports from women doing online freelance writing, interwoven with my own experiences as a researcher and writer. I focus on stories that are told, from

the stories in published articles, stories justifying practical work processes and their logics, to stories about professional alignments, hopes, disappointments, and dependencies. The dissertation diagnoses the liminal work of online freelance writing as a technology of a compulsion to possess a subject position that is not quite realized. My analysis is grounded in theories of feminist infrastructure studies and intersubjectivity, and I give close attention to the function of apostrophe, metaphors and non-representational myths as devices of intersubjective feelings and the networked configurations of technologies and subjectivities that they are realized within. The outcome is a modest recuperation of less visible work histories. This is an interpretation of a snapshot of the inner workings of this moment in the early 21st century economy and a map of the ways that gendered intersections of networked configurations of labor and technologies open up certain futures, and also make destabilization possible. While this work is about the 2010s, the dissertation may stoke the imagination beyond the time of this writing, into the 2020s, a period during which we face yet another, even harsher, economic turndown and an unprecedented reliance on commercial and mediated digital work practices.

## Introduction: The liminal work of online freelance writing

On a cool fall evening in 2015, I stood outside a neighborhood café in Seattle, Washington. I waited to enter because I was absorbed with my smart phone. I was exchanging texts with Frida, a freelance writer in Florida, whom I'd just "met." Earlier that day, we'd both commented on the same article that had been posted in a secret Facebook group for "womxn and nonbinary freelance writers." At one point, I'd boldly shared that I was doing research, a feminist project on freelance writers working online. Since she was a writer who frequently published online, could I interview her?

"I'm in," she texted back, right as I had left my house that evening for my first meeting of a fiction writing group at a café.

"Fantastic," I replied.

"Viva la Fempire!" she wrote back, just as I was arriving at the café.

My heart beamed with excitement. What could be better than an invigorating conversation like this with a new informant in my dissertation project? Though I'd begun my project a few years earlier, my recruitment efforts had grown slowly as I used the sociological technique of a "snowball sampling" to get to know remote freelance writers who were otherwise difficult to locate. I sent her back a smiley face and lots of exclamation points.

"Yes!!!!!!!"

When she didn't reply quickly, I typed a quick sign-off message, looking inside the café, which wasn't full, and noticing a group of people with notebooks, coffee

mugs, and heads down, seated around a long wooden table—that must be the writing group, time to go inside, I thought.

"Let me know when is good! I'm available! Tomorrow maybe?" I typed. Then, I clicked my phone to lock, slung my bag across my shoulder, and headed inside, apologetically late.

I moved past the counter and found the table, sitting down in the empty chair by the facilitator, a local author. Months later, I would discover that this author had started an online freelance marketplace for writers—but I didn't know that at the time. Six people were at the table, writing in silence. Feeling awkward about being late, I asked for instructions on the activity in hushed tones. The prompt was a world-building fantasy, I learned, and we were all to use the same first sentence.

"Use paper and pen quietly, so as not to disturb others by typing," I was told.

I nodded and opened my notepad to give my attention to the fantasy, but I could only think of my mediated encounter with the gregarious Frida, who was far away in Florida. Thanks to the immediacy of replies, her smiley photo, her forthrightness about her many interests—she'd just gotten back from the Harry Potter theme park and shared a photo!—she seemed rather like an old friend. This sense would be further affirmed in our three-hour phone interview, followed up by subsequent emails, chats, and writing exchanges.

Meanwhile, in the café, I was sitting elbow-to-elbow with quiet strangers, with whom I shared a city and a table.

From the heart-racing intimacy of a social media-spawned personal message chat to the awkward quiet of a writers' group at a café on a weekday eve—this introductory vignette captures the movement between modes of connection, affects and techniques of communication, and various writerly labors that have replayed again and again in various formations from 2011 to 2016—a period also disrupted by breaks and accelerations—during which I conducted this dissertation research. From chats and viral articles to platform-specific communication patterns—these are among the rich ethnographic materials that have informed this dissertation.

The dissertation began as an effort to document the working practices of freelance writers online in the aftermath of the 2008 recession in the United States. This was a period of difficult transition for cultural industries such as magazine and newspaper publishing, and particularly difficult for news media and journalists, due to layoffs, closures, and the de-professionalization of the field (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 2016; Duffy, 2013; Hesmondhalgh, 2007; McChesney & Pickard, 2011). The balance between commercial values and journalistic professionalism in news media has been tenuously negotiated throughout the late 20th century (Hallin, 2000). However, that balance was upset with economic challenges by commercial internet industries, which adversely affected cultural and information workers on a global stage (Cohen, 2012; Gill, 2009; Gregg, 2011; Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2010; Huws, 2010; McRobbie, 1998; Neff, 2007, 2012). From my vantage point as a writer and researcher in San Diego, California, and Seattle, Washington, in the United States, I was moved by a feminist curiosity about

how authority was being reconfigured thanks to these online platforms, particularly companies and technologies being used to include freelancers, and how emotions, writing, professional communities, and livelihoods were affected by these reconfigurations.

I began to document the unfolding conditions of the post-2008 recession era in the early 2010s through a range of practices and registers: I've kept my notepads close to jot ideas, sketch scenes, and write down quotes; I've conducted interviews, had chats and online conversations, and been a participant-observer in online work platforms and associated social spaces. My work has been an effort to make sense of the changing, and often precarious, working conditions that freelance writers have navigated when publishing online, through attention to cultural and material-discursive practices, feelings, and vocabularies.

To return to the café—after 25 minutes of writing time, we shared our work. Then we ended by introducing ourselves, saying what we were working on, and discussing how group members could support each other. A few of the people in this group of fiction writers already knew each other. When it was my turn, I explained that I was interested in fiction and also that I was doing research for my dissertation on gender and freelance writers who work online. "Has anyone worked online, like using an online work platform, or for a magazine or news media organization that gets work through platforms? Would anyone like to be interviewed?" I asked. "I'd love to learn about your experiences. My work has been approved by the ethics board," I assured the table.

When I finished my pitch, the faces remained silent. I wondered if I was breaking an unwritten rule about writing groups: Don't attempt to engage the group in a research project. But then I decided the silence indexed a not unexpected weariness that anyone might feel when someone comes along with a pitch, which even in good faith might sound at best only tangential to the purpose of the meeting, and at worst, tinny and intrusive. My aim is transparency, I reminded myself silently. The introductions dissolved into polite conversation. I stood and joined the coffee line. Two other women came to stand behind me. I turned and made small talk. Then one of them said, "I'd like to hear more about your project. I've been working here and there as a freelance writer actually." The other said, "An interesting project. I'm a former newspaper reporter and I now work as a contractor at [tech company]. I've tried out a lot of different avenues to get work that I want to do."

Indeed, U.S. news media industries were reshaped, in social organization and in jurisdiction, with the rise of digital infrastructures and commercial platform governance associated with internet industries in the past decades, and as these two writers' experiences suggest, this reconfiguration has resulted in layoffs and an increase in freelance online writing work opportunities, as well as marked changes in the working practices and journalistic norms (Cohen, 2016; Holton, 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009). My dissertation is an ethnographic, interpretative, and theoretical inquiry into the writerly conditions that have unfolded in the 2010s, which I place in historical context, and the attendant networked configurations of gender, subjectivity, and technologies. My work attends to the hopefulness of writers like Frida

as to how social change can be affected through words—"Viva la Fempire!" For me, her statement is less a comment on the possibilities of my research project, or on her efforts as a writer for magazines and portals online, as it is about the possibilities of writers supporting each other in communities of care. However as the reports from the two writers I met at the writers' group demonstrate, freelancing is sometimes a back-up plan, an opportunity to earn bucks doing sellable work, and can be a risky choice that's easier to shoulder for some more than others—since the work may not pay well or may not last. The creation, distribution, circulation, and monetization of both the writerly communication exceedingly necessary for getting and doing online work and the subsequent online writing are, in part, accomplished through assemblages of human and non-human activities in a commercial media ecosystem.

In this opening to my project, I am introducing the initial research sites of my dissertation, including freelance writers and online work platforms, as well as key themes in this work: affects, sentiments, my interviewees and sites, and the networked material-discursive configurations of the technologies of freelance work. In this dissertation, I think *with* the concept of liminality and advance the neologism "liminal work" to address the legacies and inadequacies in vocabularies to explain the complicated intersections of emotional attachments and psychic attunements with the innerworkings of the technical and the commercial in the neoliberal economy of the 2010s. I will explain in greater detail my methodology and approach to interpreting the recent past, a moment when the future of online writing practice was being worked through and enacted with material-discursive configurations of gender, technologies,

and subjectivities. I'll say now, however, that while the work I do here is focused on the 2010s and the preceding history, this project may be used to stoke the imagination beyond the time of this writing, into the 2020s, a period during which we face yet another, even harsher, economic downturn and an unprecedented reliance on commercial and mediated digital practices.

Approaches to the intersections of the tech industry and remote freelance work in prior published research have foregrounded the role of "work*style"* (Gill, 2002; Gregg, 2011). Scholars have noted heavy discursive emphasis on the "coolness" and "egalitarian" characteristics of tech work and the options that freelancing allegedly provides those who "choose" it. This review helps to delineate the ways in which online work in the 2010s constituted a troubling neoliberal turn in historical patterns introduced during industrial-era capitalism, instituting conditions for the reproduction of insecure and "risky" working conditions (Gill, 2002; Neff et al., 2005) through expressions of empowerment and autonomy. My concern is to name the specific technologies of freelancing online as material-discursive formations of subject positions—in other words, to name the ways that freelancers have identified with, and find meaningful, the structures of power they are embedded within, and the effects of these entanglements on careers, lives, and families. Women in particular have advanced in freelance writing work online in the 2010s, I show, in a manner that situates them on the edges of professionalism, writing as precarious workers in an industry also rendered precarious.

In analyzing discourses, work practices, site design, and social media as

interstitial work places, this project proposes that freelance writing work is an important mode of practice to analyze from multiple disciplinary trajectories, including sociological studies of the cultural industries, new media studies, critical visual culture studies, feminist labor studies, feminist infrastructure studies, and gender and literary criticism studies. A focus on the figure of the freelancer can help us better understand, among other things, the matter of subjectivities, and their formations, in mediated, networked settings. In the 2010s, freelance writing work became one of the largest casual contingent sectors in the cultural industries. This dissertation advances, and theorizes, the relationships, histories, and interconnections between digital processes and contingent writing work in terms of who is doing it and how it happens. My work asks how these insights help us understand labor in a platform economy and the experience of freelancers in relation to the circulation of information in our commercial networked economy. The outcome is a modest recuperation of less visible work histories.

I have been guided by a feminist curiosity about how the reconfiguration of news media with the rise of digital platforms amplified, and marginalized, women freelance writers after the 2008 recession in the United States. As a freelance writer with nearly a decade of working experiences in regional news media, arts publishing, travel, and magazine publishing, I was interested in the strategies and emotional logics writers adopted to navigate their working conditions, as well as the material-discursive processes required to get and do freelance work. Throughout, I was concerned about the relationship of their choices to their circumstances, and the kinds of stories they

told. Stories published in articles, stories justifying work practices and their logics, and stories about professional alignments, hopes, disappointments and dependencies.

Freelance writing and crowd work platforms for writers both predated the economic downturn of 2008, a situation I will describe. But significant changes in the publishing industry accompanied the rise of participatory media and social networking in the 2000s onward, a period later characterized as the "heyday" of "feminist blogging" (Goldberg, 2019). These mark the intersecting trajectories that together make up my focus: the efforts of women writers working remotely online, and the rise of online platforms for freelance work and new opportunities for writers. As well, this was a historical moment typified by an influx of venture capital to participatory media platforms and a rise in, and shift to, women's publications online. Online platforms introduced new prospects for the creation and distribution of ideas and alterations to formations of labor, specifically for creative work.

But there was more to these changes than new opportunities for creative work. Changes in the structure of writing as a professional practice and publishing as an industry led to the deskilling of creative industry work, and specifically of paid writing work. Hyperlinks and platform socialites exacerbated the "unbundling" of news media distribution processes thanks to the heavy emphasis on consumer needs (Carr, 2013; Dijck, 2013; Hagel & Singer, 1999). This process involved the splitting off of news making operations into different businesses to maximize profit. These effects had a profound impact on women, a category of workers more likely to be freelance or part-time rather than full-time staff in creative industries (Baines, 1999; Fost, 2009;

Horowitz, 2014; Hsu, 2014; McKercher, 2009; Network Women in Media, 2002; K. Ross, 2001).

My background working as a freelance writer informs my inquiry, which I write about throughout the dissertation. One's own standpoint, as Sandra Harding (1991) has noted, is a useful site of epistemic privilege from which to launch a study to gain insight not only into a particular subject position, but also about the larger social framework of knowledge and power in which that subject is situated. I include my own perspectives as an ethnographer, using my body as a heuristic (Cerwonka, 2007) to identify the sentiments of contours of power. I began my ethnographic exploration of the lived experiences of other freelance writers in 2011, as I described in the beginning of this introduction. I included a second site in my project in 2015, which I explain in further detail in the methodology section of this chapter.

My analysis draws on my cross-training in communication studies, media studies, gender studies, and science and technology studies. I am building on the formative work of science studies and feminist scholars who have challenged how technological infrastructures, innovation, and labors are conceived through non-human agents and who have marshaled, challenged, and adapted epistemological frameworks to grapple with difference and the legacies of historical struggles around race, colonialism, and domination (Federici, 2014; Haraway, 1989; S. Harding, 1991; Irani, 2018; Mayberry et al., 2001; Star, 1995; Suchman, 1987; Visperas, 2019; Vora, 2015; Wajcman, 1991). Interpretative, digital, and qualitative methods help us better understand the working lives of women in a workforce to which I have also belonged,

and to grasp the larger framework of online journalism, online first-person writing, and internet publishing. Interviews, observations, and writing by freelance writers about their working practices inform the thrust of the dissertation, which I hope will be considered a modest contribution to the larger history of women's labor in news media and internet publishing.

I have brought to this project an interpretive and critical toolkit drawn from cross-disciplinary engagements including the sociology of work, human-computer interaction, literary theory, and affect theory. My effort to use critical and literary methods of interpretation and analysis was necessary in order to extend and deepen the way I addressed the responses and dialogs generated by the overarching research questions that framed the project.

The dissertation has three research questions: How is online freelance writing in English accomplished through digital and emotional processes? How are the occupational affiliations to freelancing advanced through the feelings, language, and technologies experienced in a writer's work life? What has been the role of non-human agents, specifically, commercial, technological configurations, in facilitating these and how does that work? As will be explained, I include among "agents" the various processes and systems that informed work practice among online freelance writers, such as temporality, particular vocabularies, and technicalities of participation.

Nested within these central research questions are subsidiary research inquiries that also framed my investigation of freelancing. How did debates about access to information impact writers in the rise of a commercial platform economy?

And how did technical features become meaningful through this participation? Out of the initial questions emerged then a broader research question: How was the concept of a freelancer as a subject position achieved through the configuration of freelance work I encountered, and what work does this subject position do in shaping women's labor practices, discourses, and everyday life? The answer to this final overarching question unfolds through the description, interpretation, and analysis that follows in this dissertation, through the neologism I advance, liminal work. But it may provisionally be broached here in this introduction, in order to clarify who is "the subject" of the chapters that follow.

When I take up the concept of "liminal" and describe the figure of the online freelancer as doing liminal work, I'm suggesting freelancing is generative of betwixt and between positions, meanings, and acts. Liminal work, where liminal is an adjective modifying work, is accomplished through multiple agential factors and thus facilitates the perpetuation of modes of indeterminacy—that vacillation between pleasure and lack, exclusions and categories. Online freelance writing work involves emotional work and "tacit" knowledges specific to late modernity, leading to what Lauren Berlant, in her book *Cruel Optimism* (2011), describes as a "public feeling" of longing. The desire that everyone is always trying to catch up to, a feeling that is seemingly good, but also the obstacle to one's own flourishing. As I describe in Chapter 2, paradoxically, women's online freelance journalism was essential to the establishment of a new information economy in the 2010s, yet that labor situated them as the most precarious authors within the very social realm their work conjured and shored up.

Throughout this dissertation, I think with “liminality” to give attention to the concept of the subject, and the freelance online writer, as experienced imaginatively and through intersubjective processes of engagement with commercial technologies and apparatuses. I am cautious not to universalize the experiences of the 21 writers I interviewed. Social theorists have helped us see how capitalism shapes business and subjectivities differently in different epoch and geopolitical locales (Dunn, 2004; Ong, 2006). By unpacking the intersubjective and imaginative labors that made up online freelance writing work during my study, my dissertation deepens insight into this instantiation of paid work, and it attends to the centrality of both *feminism* and *intersubjectivity* in considering norms and subject positions in the global economy. Before going further, let’s consider the question of the subject in relation to freelancing.

The paradox of the subject position captured in Berlant’s concept of public feelings of desire, I propose, haunts online freelance writing work. The work is accomplished precisely because of the fragmented, socio-technical processes that freelancers, as a precarious, contingent, gendered, and racialized workforce, bring to their professional identity through the mediums and narratives they use, which re-center their own subjectivity as a sought-after position.

Looking further into the concept of liminality helps to name dependencies and emotive longings that erupt in gendered formations of professional subjectivity as both liminal and successful, or failed. Liminality, which comes from the Latin root word *limen,* means threshold (Thomassen, 2014; Wright, 2011), and its meaning, which I

explain in greater detail in the next section, derives from anthropological work identifying ritualistic circumstances of indeterminacy and ambiguity through which people undergoing social change have transitioned. I adapt this concept to explain how the efforts of freelancers also maintain thresholds of indeterminacy and feelings of longing. In the chapters that follow, I explain the labors of the freelancer through description and analysis not only of what they say, but of their situated practices—understanding embodied and cognitive activity as wedded to the technologies and social circumstances of late modernity in the United States. I document distributed, splintered, intersubjective, and mediated-emotive efforts made by and for freelancers to gain opportunities for compensation, for self-expression, for professional development, for comradery, for understanding, and for authorial rights. But I can't ignore that these efforts seem to renew the figure of this subject as precarious, as marginal—albeit a marginality that occupied a vaunted place in the economic order.

To what extent are the freelancer subject positions I identify neoliberal subjects? In order to address this question, I will consider the classical notion of the sovereign subject. As my research unfolded, I found formulations of the sovereign subject not useful as a theoretical tool to explain the intersections of care work responsibilities and the differences in the faculties of cognition, speech, and mobility among the workers I interviewed. Subjectivity has been a much-contested conceptual category in a range of fields in which I work. The sovereignty of the human subject and attendant theories of human agency, the nature of social relations, the location of creativity—these all have been called into question in post-structuralist and feminist

works, some of which I draw on and build out in this project.

Rather, what informs the present discussion is this: I found explicit and implicit reliance on *the category* of the sovereign subject among my ethnographic and research materials. At times the specter of a sovereign subject overlay my own thinking. Indeed, the concept of sovereign autonomy persists in neoliberal feminist “empowerment” discourse (Banet-Weiser, 2018) and in discussions of copyright and authorial agency. I struggled with how to make sense of this stubborn figure of the subject and the fraught issue of representation. The concept of a sovereign subject position not only inadequately describes how agential action and intersubjective identification unfolds, it also enables conceptual damage to the experiences of my subjects through its modality of reproducing and reconfiguring of social life.

These were my concerns, until I began to see the appearance of this subject as an outcome of workers’ processes of engagement in the commercial market economy, of their (and my) attempts to reconcile ambiguities and tensions that bubbled up across experiences. My aim as a researcher has been to keep the experiences and narratives of freelance writers and their engagements with subjectivity, including their (and my) recurrent summoning of and face-offs with the sovereign subject, at the center, and to analyze their exchanges in a complex networked information economy in which the subject has multiple ways of appearing, working, and being inhabited.

Subjectivity, or the process of becoming a subject, is a key theme in literature on the professions and on theories of inequalities. Michel Foucault’s concept of governmentality and “technologies of the self” have been productively taken up by

feminist cultural theorists (see Bordo, 1993; Ong, 2006), to help explain the ways that power works through visibilities. Foucault's (1995) reading of the spatial organization of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon prison proposes that modern power is typified by the Panopticon, a spatial organization that engenders a psychic sense of indeterminacy on the part of the prisoners who are always wondering—is someone watching me? "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relations in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principal of his own subjection" (pp. 202-3). The Panopticon signals an individualization of space and the ways that soft, humane power, including training and correction, works through the psyche. I motion, throughout this project, to the ways in which specificities of mediated freelance work in commercial networked publics are animated by procedures, techniques, and practices through which power operates.

The overarching research questions of this dissertation described above are concerned with how the concept of the freelancer as a subject position is achieved through the networked configuration of freelance work, and this networked concept of the subject is key to my study. The question of the subject, in this framework, unfolds as an inquiry into how ideas about actions are discursive accomplishments. I explore how networked configurations of freelance writing are accomplishments wedded to the technologies and social circumstances of late modernity in the United States. As I explain below, the freelancers I interviewed engaged in distributed, splintered, intersubjective, and emotive efforts to gain opportunities for compensation, for self-

expression, for professional development, for comradery, for understanding, and for authorial rights. Their efforts served to renew a precarious gendered and racialized figure of the freelancing subject in the 2010s, despite the appearance of the "empowered" autonomous subject continuing to emerge as an outcome of workers' processes of engagement in the commercial market economy, of attempts to reconcile ambiguities and tensions that emerged across experiences.

### A threshold that is not crossed

Liminality as a transitional state merits further consideration, as it is a grounding term of my analysis of the *liminal work* of online freelance writing. The concept of liminality was introduced by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep ([1909] 2019) in the early 20th century to describe rituals that usher people into new stages of life. *Limen,* as mentioned earlier, comes from the Latin word "threshold," which evokes a spatial metaphor. Anthropologist Edith Turner notes that van Gennep was documenting rites of passage for birth, puberty, marriage, and death that are often physically carried out in or are using passageways and doorways. The metaphor of crossing from one space to another is rooted in the documentation of specific physical acts (E. Turner, 2005, para. 1). Van Gennep defined liminality as a tri-part state: first, separation and detachment; second, bodily transformation that includes passing through cultural and spiritual realms; and third, reassembly.

Turner, an anthropologist of religion, and her husband, anthropologist Victor Turner, were instrumental in advancing the concept in the 20th century. Victor Turner published an often cited article on the concept of liminality as the state of being "betwixt and between," based on the circumcision rites of passage for boys in Zambia (V. Turner, 1967). Turner specifically emphasized how the state of liminality contrasts with the status system to confer meaning and elicit change. He emphasized the experience of "*communitas*" among the initiates in a liminal stage—for they are suspended from usual conditions. Liminality is an ambiguous, unstable place of coming-of-age, where one foot is in one space, another foot in another (V. Turner, 1967, 1969). Liminality in rituals is an intense and often spiritual experience. Those who pass through are aware of and reflexively recognize their own transient state, often shepherded by a master of ceremonies and initiates who have previously experienced the ritual (V. Turner, 1969, p. 366). The experience has been likened to religious life, to queerness, to the womb, and with porous and unsettling boundaries evoking change (E. Turner, 2005). Anthropological theories about rituals investigate the close connection between space, community, and psychic effects.

Liminality exemplifies a concept that has "traveled" from explaining not only particular human rituals, but also other life experiences, social groups, and epochs (Bal, 2002). For instance, political theorists have used the concept to explain how social groups (e.g. cohorts, minority groups, etc.) and "civilizations" transition (Thomassen, 2014, p. 89). Agnes Horvath, Bjorn Thomassen, and Harold Wydra's volume on liminality (2015) advances the concept to explore large-scale social

situations of upheaval and breakdown in modernity. Horvath describes modernity as a liminal condition in which the "technological reconstruction of irrational fragments [is] the very principle of rationality" (Horvath et al., 2015, p. 2). While Arpad Szakolczai has applied Turner's work to momentous times of political change, analyzing state communism in 20th-century Central Europe as a particular form of "permanent liminality . . . as if a film is stuck at a particular frame" (2000, p. 220 cited in Horvath et al, 2015, p. 93). Thomassen considers modernity as a persistent liminal transitioning, identifying how risky gambling and extreme sports generate important liminal experiences, thus deepening and torqueing the concept of "risk society" advanced by Ulrich Beck (1992) that views contemporary modern life as having "problematically incorporated liminality to its core" (Thomassen, 2014, p. 216). In a liminal society, as in a risk society, humans are unmoored from traditions, from a coherent understanding of how to live.

Also building upon the thesis of modernity as a "risk society," and then drawing on sociologist Anthony Giddens' work on the ontological crises of late modernity, is literary critic Susan Merrill Squier's (2004) thesis of modern subject-hood as liminal, a theory for contemporary human life in relation to changes in biomedicine. The negotiation of what constitutes the boundaries of life, such as the fetus in relationship to the gestating mother, the line between life and death, or who can live and who cannot in situations of access and consent to biomedical artificial life supports, are pronounced ambiguities that characterize modern life.

> I view human beings living in the era of these biomedical interventions as liminal ourselves, as we move between the old

> notion that the form and trajectory of any human life have certain inherent biological limits, and the new notion that both the form and the trajectory of our lives can be reshaped at will—whether our own or another's whether for good or ill. (2004, p. 9).

For Squier, risk and crisis permeate social life. Liminality is an apt concept to make sense of a persistent state of destabilization for it also offers a resolution: a new subject position will emerge after the liminal stage is completed. Squier resists making forecasts, but rather looks to storytelling as a diagnostic and guide. "The stories we tell about our lives—whether fiction or fact—are crucial maps to this shifting ground" (p. 9). A focus on stories, and the futures they open up (or make difficult to envision), is a way of thinking that I also take up in this dissertation.

In addition to theorizing risk society and biomedicine, liminality has been used to mark movement between binaries, as in the work of critical theorist Brian Massumi, in his discussion of "molarization." This is a condition in which, he explains, subjects are in a position of forced movement between an x and y (yes or no) binary, within the phenomenological experience of being in a state of transition, actively toggling between an either/or. This liminal condition of "molarization" becomes a space of "invention . . . a space of transformational encounter, a dynamic inbetween" (Massumi, 1992, p. 106).

My work in this dissertation supports the theories of risk society and modernity as the social conditions that produce the figure of neoliberal subjectivity, as I described above, with a new layer of detail. I advance the concept of "liminal work" in order to attend to *how* risky social conditions are maintained and reproduced through the daily practices of interaction. To return again to Lauren Berlant's work on sentiment, the

compulsion to find ways to live and author personal narrative despite uncertain conditions are acts of liminal work, a form of storytelling, driven by a shared hope to embrace promises, form communities, and an effort to manage suspicions. Berlant's book *Cruel Optimism* looks at the promise of dreams that are attached to objects of desire—these become "affective attachments to what we call 'the good life'" (p. 97), which take on an "aesthetic," and serve as a "cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us" (p. 97). This "cluster of promises" can materialize in objects or desire. Yet for Berlant these attachments can be cruel. Falling in love with an idea, this "cruel optimism," is an attachment that never actually manifests as a possession. It wears out its subjects. And yet these attachments to ideas persist because, Berlant explains, they're sites where subjects find conditions of possibility, but paradoxically, cannot quite grasp them. The liminal work of online freelance writing serves as a vector for these feelings.

When I analyze freelancing in the study that follows, I argue it does *work* to maintain conditions of ambiguity in ways that are in harmony with Berlant's diagnosis of the 2010s, an argument that may well continue to be prescient in the 2020s, at the beginning of which I am writing this introduction. The uncanny, ghastly presence of an idealized neoliberal, postfeminist "empowered" subject and the fragmented, contradictory, and multiple freelance subject positions occupied simultaneously evoke hopefulness and anxiety. However, let me emphasize that I am not suggesting freelancing is always or only liminality. Nor are all instances or operations of freelance writing work examples of liminal labor. Rather I use "liminal" as an adjective with work,

*liminal work*, to name its particular effects. My study traces how freelance writing work online has discursively emerged and is practiced within a commercial ecosystem during a particular historical moment. I describe how subject positions can move into and out of processes that contribute to the recreation and maintenance of unequal conditions and shared sentiments, in a sense of generative alliances—akin to Turner's concept of *communitas* that is experienced among initiates—but also of dependency and incompleteness.

**What is freelance writing?**

In the United States, freelance writing work is considered a tax bracket and a semi-professional act. There is not a unified profession identified as freelance work that crosscuts sectors. However, freelance writing has gained traction as an occupational category, with websites, trainings, and books devoted to variations of remotely accomplished work (Allen, 2005; Bly, 2008; Gandia, 2012; Goodman, 2007; Grade, 2020; Petit, 2015). Freelance writers, specifically writers working online, are a part of the larger sector of "cultural workers" who have formed a growing contingent workforce (Hesmondhalgh, 2007). As an occupational category, freelance writing has been typified by indistinctness in terms of what the experience of its practice is like and how it takes place. Freelance writing in the United States, the primary location of this study, falls under multiple occupational categories, such as author (code 27-3043), reporter (code 27-3020), and technical writer (code 27-3042). Freelance writers are

independent contractors and lack job security and benefits, as do other part-time, temporary, and informal economy workers (Barker & Christensen, 1998; Dwyer, 2012). Nested within these circumstances are other cultural workers as well, including artists, musicians, fashion designers, graphic designers, and curators. Some organizations have sought to address the legal rights and dignity of the growing number of freelancers in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. A case in point is the Freelance Union, a non-profit advocacy group, not officially a union, founded in 1995 to serve "the freelance class" (Horowitz, 2019). In 2014, during my research period, the estimated number of freelancers in the U.S. was approximately 53 million (Horowitz, 2014; Horowitz & Rosati, 2014). Numbers increased to 57 million by 2019 (Horowitz, 2019); the Career Outlook article for the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2018 on self-employed workers reports "25 percent of jobs in [cultural industry] occupations are projected to be for self-employed workers in 2026, the highest concentration of any group" (Torpey & Hogan, 2016). While this project focuses on freelance writers in the critical online growth period of the 2010s, its findings have bearing on the situation going forward into the 2020s.

**A networked information age**

Crosscutting social theories on precarious labor is an effort to understand how subject positions and logics of late capitalism intersect with the inner workings and

organization of commercial information communication technologies (ICTs). Since the 1970s, various approaches, theories, and terminologies deployed by social and cultural theorists in North American and European contexts have sought to explain the rise of precarious experience of work in late capitalism, particularly given the ways that such work intersects with computers and information communication technologies and services. This is evident within such core concepts as risk society (Beck, 1992), which I described previously, as well as networked society (Castells 2000), the “post-industrial” age (Bell, 1976), information economy (Benkler, 2006), post-Fordism (Harvey, 2011), digital cybertarianism (Huws, 2015a), immaterial labor (Fortunati, 2011), platform society (van Dijck et al., 2018), and surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019), to name a small selection. These frameworks are relevant in my analysis of the ways that precarious work intersects with computers and information communication technologies and services. The global outsourcing of informatics possible through the standards provided by global transatlantic connections and deregulation foreshadowed the rise of the so-called “gig economy” or “platform economy” in the period after the 2008 recession in the United States. The discourses and processes that have accompanied the strengthening of the commercial platform economy have fundamentally shaped and impacted freelance writers. Understanding configurations of freelance writing online necessitates building on and deepening these theories, which I do by giving attention to the liminal material-discursive enactments of labor for online freelance writing.

Sociological research and cultural theories of contingent labor in late capitalism largely draw on the political-economic theories of Karl Marx to explain how capitalism, as a social practice, works through expansion, leading to reinvention and reproduction of practices. “The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere,” Marx diagnosed in *The Communist Manifesto* ([1888] 2008, p. 11). Theories of precarious and contingent work are grappling with how these forms of work are in fact forms of capitalist expansion into new markets. Marx predicated his theories of change on the concept of human progress, inverting Hegelian dialectics. Later scholarship has eschewed this notion of linear progress, focusing on the role of contingency in reproducing power (Ong, 2006), and the significance of information communication technologies in the mediation of work and forms of commodification. For instance, Manuel Castell’s (2000) work on informational capitalism echoes Daniel Bell’s (1976) forecast of “post-industrial” society organized through the economics of information. Castell posits that information capitalism, and the workers within it, rely on the logics of information communication technologies, wherein communication itself becomes traded and commodified. The many names for and theories about contemporary work are a signal of the fragmentation in experiences that have taken place over decades of deregulation and globalization, leading to the contemporary paradigm of digital and virtual work that operates through postcolonial, gendered, and racial axes and depends on ICT infrastructures.

Sociologist Ursula Huws, whose research on outsourcing and women working in call centers began in the 1970s, documented the inadequacies of economic conceptual tools to explain how gender, race, place, standards, and practices were ushering in a divided global working class, a sector that she has dubbed the cyberteriat (2015a, 2015b). Harry Braverman (1998) proposed that the processes of developing technologies foresaw the coming of a working class governed by computational technologies that extended the divisions of labor introduced during the era of Taylorism. We see the expansion of this trend toward fragmentation in the work of Huws, who notes that the unique, gendered divisions in tasks and subjectivities involved in performing online labor has made it more difficult for workers to see themselves in each other, and/or to unionize.

Feminist research on information technologies in global value chains has emphasized and carefully documented how capital is created by and through the bodies of women, often brown women (Gregg & Andrijasevic, 2019). With the deregulations in the United States in the 1970s, corporations have sought out new processes of work using information technologies in order to manage the creation of value (Flecker, 2015; Thompson, 1998). Transnational outsourcing of data entry work to be completed by women marks the intersection of the racialized gendered subject position with global models of profit and efficiency, facilitated by deregulations around investment and growth in telecommunication infrastructure (Freeman, 2014). Women have had an integral role in the hardware, including indigenous women in the U.S. doing the painstaking work of assembly (Nakamura, 2014). Following scholars such as

Huws, Gregg, and Andrijasevic, my dissertation continues in this line of analysis of ways that 21st-century capitalism resembles earlier forms of the social and economic order by attending to freelance writing work as an iteration of late capitalism, but one specific to the contours of a risky information society. I give special attention to how capitalist and neoliberal discourses and practices create conditions for an autonomous subject position to be reproduced, despite the fact that its practices are varied and non-universal. In other words, I explore how even uncomfortable enacting of a universal, autonomous subject does liminal work in recreating marginality, the precarious isolation at the margin of the economy and the market, as an achievement of her own communicative, commodified efforts.

**Mediated super publics**

Communication scholars' research on the affective dimensions of online identity formation and cross-platform storytelling includes danah boyd's (2014) "networked publics" work on teens using social media, tending to the ways that teens extend existing social networks when using social media platforms, which could lead to "context collapses" (Marwick & boyd, 2011).[1] Zizi Papacharissi (2015) has documented the affective dimensions of alignments in networked publics, foregrounding how storytelling, and meaning, is articulated through emotions, platform

[1] danah boyd styles her name in all lowercase letters, like bell hooks.

mechanisms, commercial tendencies, and affordances. While Theresa Senft and Nancy Baym (2015) have challenged the gendered and racialized pathologization of online social acts, such as taking and sharing selfies, explaining these as social "gestures" in a networked super public.

Freelance writers working online, like many users, are operating in a complicated commercial media ecosystem wherein significant affective labors, cultural affinities, and rhetorical strategies coalesce for users to develop professional and social connections on social media platforms. These efforts present an additional layer of labor for freelance writers, who are not only subjects of "user commodification," insofar as their data is commodified and sold, but are also expected to incorporate the logics of clicks and visibility into their work. That said, this effort is distinct from "influencers," or "micro-celebrities" who rely on highly visual and labor-intensive engagement and content creation for audiences, and use advertising and sponsorships to generate income (see Abidin, 2018).

I attend to situations where people were explicitly working for pay as writers online, inquiring about their social and work practices, experiences, and circumstances—the conditions that led them to engage in networked publics and networked self-constitution as part of their social contract as online freelance workers. This orientation led me to understand that freelancers, as users of social media and search engines, are subjects of "commodification" in ways that are different from the subjects other theorists of social networks have studied, insofar as their work is already explicitly commodified from the start. This status is reinforced by the fact that

their online writing work is developed and traced in the attention economy, a market in which actions like clicks, likes, and re-shares become currency in cultural capital that bears an explicit, direct, and immediate connection to one's income and professional survival. Thus, freelancers are engaged in multiple, nonexclusive forms of value generation in markets that are directly and explicitly economic. An example of this phenomenon is the fact that clicks and "likes" have been called a kind of "immaterial" labor, insofar as the click serves as a commodifiable action, a kind of public editorializing that is both freelance and "free," and which generates value, because these "likes," attained without any investment other than the freelancer's own labor, can be generalized, packaged, and sold by the contracting publishing outfit as quantitative evidence (ratings data) to analytics companies and advertisers.

Quantification of viewership is thus commodification of a networked super public; particularly during the 2010s, before the rise of paywalls and subscriptions, attention was aggregated and quantified. Women's magazines and daytime television shows have built their business models by selling advertisers specific audiences using algorithms designed to amass and analyze such networked public data (Duffy, 2013). Target marketing, established as a field in the cable era of the 1980s (Turow, 1998), finds its expression in this digital process of facilitating the incidental labor of reviews by a vast networked super public, amassing these responses, and subjecting them to data analysis. As the internet was opened for commercial activity in the 1990s, specialized, targeted sales opportunities emerged with the development of new technologies to tailor content to audiences, and these practices of audience

segmentation are not mutually exclusive. Sponsored Google search results coexist with the enduring draw of the “mass” audience, as the high price of Super Bowl advertisements has attested (Hesmondhalgh, 2007). Data tracking and audience building is a multifaceted feature of the cultural industries long in operation.

What is specific about freelancers in relation to this practice is that they participate in social media platforms to generate a sense of occupational identity, find work, connect with editors and other writers, and track the reception of their writing work, as I will explain further. Some freelancers participate as administrators or managers of special interest groups related to their professional goals. Such activities can be partially explained by what Tizziana Terranova (2000, 2004) calls “free labor,” a formulation that challenged dominant, idealistic visions of the internet as a nonhierarchical, democratic participatory culture. As I described earlier, Terranova’s argument emerged from critical conversation with the Italian autonomous school of Marxist thought (Fortunati, 2011; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Hardt & Negri, 2000), an intellectual framework that refocused attention to the ways that multiple dimensions of social life are absorbed into capitalist practices. “Free labor,” Terranova explains, “is the moment where this knowledgeable consumption of culture is translated into productive activities that are pleasurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited” (2000, p. 37). Freelancers could be described as doing this “free labor” on the internet in part because it might advance their professional identities and help them build network connections with editors and readers. Performing such “free labor” online subjects freelancers to exploitation and

commodification as an online audience “likes” posts and increases traffic on search engines. In addition, paid, and sometimes for-hire, pieces are valued based on their performance in an algorithmically governed attention economy (Davenport and Beck, 2002), a market that demands continual attention, availability, and participation in order to retain personal value and status as an information worker (Odell, 2019). How this demand works and makes sense to freelancers is a question I address in this dissertation.

The persistent activity of clicking and posting does liminal work in perpetuating a vision of platforms as common public spaces, while also recasting the subject positions of freelancers as workers dependent on platforms. Though online social media companies may be broadly conceived of as independent, position codified in 1996 through the Communication Decency Act, section 230, which provides companies with legal immunity from content posted within them while also giving platforms with the authority to govern the content (Cohen and Library of Congress, 1996). Freelancers roles working with and through platforms are predicated on various dependencies in the networked commercial publics, which I describe in Chapter 1 and Chapter 4. The precarity of this work has been foreshadowed by the rise of insecure, flexible working conditions of cultural workers in neoliberal capitalism. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) explain that for at least two decades, unpaid internships and working “for free” have been hallmarks of entry-level work in cultural industries including journalism, advertising, the arts, music, and publishing. Freelance work today is performed with general professional awareness that success in the profession

involves freelancers using marketplaces where their profiles are, or will be, cross-referenced among a broad variety of platforms in an even broader media context. As media organizations became increasingly aware of this during the 2010s, they actively engaged in their own "platformization," in part by adopting practices associated with platform culture into their organizational and media norms, making it even more necessary for freelancers to themselves strategize how to self-present and brand in social spaces online in order to land jobs. Rosalind Gill summed up this situation presciently when she wrote that "mythologized and highly-valued features of a project-based new media economy—informality and flexibility—are the very mechanisms through which inequality is reproduced" (2002, p. 26). In other words, those without the resources or capacity to engage, take risks, or self-exploit in social networks might be unable to participate.

This dissertation begins with the paradoxes and contradictory imperatives that freelance writers have faced working in a commercial networked information economy, mining the neoliberal zeitgeist of North America in the 2010s to see how freelancers aspired to, or implicitly recreated, the status of a hegemonic subject in order to gain rights and recognition, jobs and income. But to act on these aspirations came with dangers. As the concept of liminal work helps me to explain, freelancing became an experience of a promise that could not be made good. It was the desire organized around that promise of autonomy and flexibility that captured the subjects I interviewed, within the context of networked configurations of gendered subjectivity. This dissertation looks closely at the conditions of aspirational subjects who committed

to the utility of a networked commercial internet economy in the years after the 2008 recession. As I finalize this now, in 2020, we are seeing the unprecedented unfolding of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is my hope that the critiques and lenses I use to carefully describe the maintenance of a threshold of labor conditions may also be illuminating in this terribly uncertain context of the 2020s.

### Freelancing, feminism, and onto-epistemological configurations of gender

Since the 2008 recession, women have constituted the majority of part-time and freelance workers in online writing and communication. In the general U.S. labor market, 65% of the part-time labor force are women, while women make up only 43% of full-time employees (Women's Bureau, Department of Labor, 2016). A 2012 Freelance Industry Report estimated that 71% of freelancers in the United States are women between the ages of 30 and 50 (Gandia, 2012). Surveys of niche markets in freelancing report similar trends, while these asymmetries also typify other forms of work in the tech industry. Gregg & Andrijasevic's (2019) special *Feminist Review* issue on "digital labor" and gender observes that feminized contingent or gig work "is the flipside of the mythical white, male 'brogrammer' or software developer enjoying the comfort and benefits of large multinational tech firms" (3). In U.S. media industries, gendered divisions of labor persist both in the newsroom and between freelancers and staff (Cohen, 2016; Deuze, 2007; Hayasaki et al., 2016; Network of Women in Media,

2002). While research on journalism reveals that employment in media organizations remains male-dominated, the reverse is true for assistants, freelance writers, and editors, whose ranks are mainly comprised of women (Anderson, 2013; Horowitz, 2014; Mendes et al., 2009). Similarly, Mark Deuze notes that approximately one third of staff journalists are women, while since the mid-1990s, most freelancers have been white middle-class women (Deuze 2007, p. 133). Cuts to media institutions have seen men remain in, and dominate, senior staff positions. Women are often in positions that exclude them from decision-making processes and have limited access to media ownership.

Women's magazines have been among the few spaces in media and cultural industry in which women—predominantly white women—hold leadership positions in larger numbers. Though, the majority of contributors to women's magazine are freelancers (Duffy, 2013; McRobbie, 2004; Peiss, 2011). These trends form a working culture for writers in general that is characterized by gendered social, racial, and economic asymmetries as norms. These statistics have inspired feminist research on the contours of gender and the reproduction of inequality in the workplace, and in part ground my own feminist inquiry into the ways in which power dynamics and authorities are negotiated and coagulated in online freelance writing work.

*Self-presentation*

In a networked public and attention economy, freelancers are challenged to

shape their self-presentation on social media. Self-expression using commercial technologies, such as filters, can enable hyper sexualization coupled with neoliberal discourses of "empowerment feminism" (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2017; Gill, 2008; Harris, 2004). In addition to facing pressures to look the right way, women are often likely to experience gender-based attention, degradation, or harassment in their online experiences—both paid and unpaid. Research on women and girls representing themselves in these "postfeminist" mediated contexts have shown that the online media ecosystem pressures women, particularly young women, to present themselves in "sexy" ways or through identification with formations of femininity (Ringrose, 2013, p. 101). As mentioned, research on selfies, and their pathologization by others who view selfies as narcissistic rather than gestural, demonstrates that visual and textual self-representations in a networked public are subject to policing and surveillance, particularly for women and people of color (Senft and Baym, 2015, p. 1592). Harassment such as doxxing, which is the public revealing of a person's personal information or pornographic images of them, have been directed at women who identify as feminists online (Gaus, 2014).

For Black women, online harassment has also involved coordinated attacks by unnamed or cloned accounts and bots that have used "digital blackface" to simulate an account of a black woman modeled after those who publicly identify as feminists. Bot accounts have gained mainstream media coverage for the outrageous "social justice" posts, such as posting criticisms of white masculinity, which delegitimize communities of black women writers and activists who were using social media as

alternative public spheres and were misrepresented by the fraudulent accounts (Freelon et al., 2017; Hampton, 2019). Online threats are frequently violent and sexualized, and threaten to escalate to physical violence (Citron, 2014). The abuse can be further amplified via a networked, affective public where information can be poached, moved, copied, and shared by the commercial logics of an attention economy. Mainstream media outlets may not have the time to fact check or reach out to the communities they are allegedly representing, and misinformation can spread because of time-oriented and convenient journalistic practices, as was the case with the coverage of an organized effort by fake Twitter accounts posing as black women feminists (Hampton, 2019). Critical research on race, gender, and self-presentation online shows that freelancers looking for and doing online work are vulnerable to not only commodification, but harassment and de-legitimation as well due to the ease of distribution through digital media, a form in which it is relatively easy to engage in disingenuous use. Freelancers working online are thus situated within a minefield of discursive frames in which displays of self are neither innocent nor within their control, but are rendered meaningful through the commercial attention economy of circulation.

*"Flexibility"*

Sociological research on the role of race, gender, motherhood, and ableness/ability in hiring decisions empirically demonstrates that specific subject positions have very real liabilities. Identifying as non-white, non-male, non-able

bodied, or a mother introduces discriminatory consequences including lower callbacks to applicants, lower wages, and lack of promotion (Ameri et al., 2015; Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Correll et al., 2007). Some women manage these contradictory pressures at the level of the body, through attitude, for example by “leaning in” (Sandberg, 2013), to bodily practices such as wearing makeup (Dellinger & Williams, 1997), or by the time spent acquiring and wearing feminine clothing (Trethewey, 1999). Sociologists such as Joan Acker (Acker, 1991) and Arlie Hochschild (A. Hochschild, 1994; A. R. Hochschild & Machung, 2003) have explained that these efforts are never fully successful due to the white masculine heterosexual conception of the “ideal” or “abstracted” worker, a subject position that women can never fully occupy.

Among the reasons that freelancers report choosing their professional trajectory, “flexibility” is at the top of the list. However, my informants’ perspectives, which I describe in Chapter 1, refer to circumstances wherein “need” as accurate of a formulation as “choice”—though my informants sought to ameliorate disagreeable or difficult circumstances through their “workstyles,” including toxic or hostile workplaces, care work responsibilities, asymmetrical marriage arrangements, geography, mental health, and disabilities, not all were able to manage in the long term the risks of freelancing, so “choice” is also contingent on dependencies. Women freelance writers working online do occupy a flexible position, but they are also statistically burdened with the majority of care work responsibilities (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 2015a, 2015b). The choice to freelance, I learned, usually

stemmed from the opportunity the workstyle offered to proactively manage life circumstances. The networked and remote functionality of online work facilitates these accommodations, but at a cost.

When analyzed from an intersectional perspective, to borrow the framework advanced by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 1991), "flexibility" is revealed to be a contextually-specific need that leaves out the experiences of many women. Working from home or remote work can afford certain kinds of flexibility, but non-white women, single mothers, and poor women—constrained by geography, education, experience, and accident of birth, are less likely to be able to claim they "need" flexibility. Let's consider how the discourse of "work-life balance" and the articulated need for "flexibility" for *some* women is the consequence of a specific discourse on "women and work" and those who can occupy those subject positions, which I describe throughout this dissertation as neoliberal empowerment feminism, building on the important work of feminist cultural studies scholars (Adamson, 2017; Banet-Weiser, 2018; Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2017; Gill, 2008; Gill & Scharff, 2011; Gregg, 2008; Harris, 2004; Harzewski, 2011; Taylor, 2015). Moreover, the intersubjective processes through which women who can work at home as online freelance writers craft their professional development and relationships with their peers and editors, as I describe in Chapters 3 and 4, accomplishes liminal work that advances a particular, exclusionary vision of an empowered feminine subject. Unfortunately, this discourse can also lead to ignorance about the experiences of

those unable or unwilling to work from home or to participate in the online commercial writing ecosystem, despite their other similarities.

*Reparative histories and feminist epistemologies*

As a feminist project, aspects of this study could be considered reparative histories, in that the dissertation is situated in a broader discourse about the role and value of women in paid work, specifically women writers, and also librarians, and women in computing. I present stories about their efforts. I've attempted to build it on the shoulders of and following in the footsteps of feminist scholarship that has sought to do reparative work and advance feminist and anti-racist epistemological frameworks. The dearth of women in technology professions and the lack of visibility of women in these fields has been addressed in reparative research by scholars who have emphasized how marginalization of the expertise of women in the history of computing has taken place, and have offered useful correctives to masculinist histories. For instance ,feminist researchers have documented women's inventions (Rothschild, 1982; Stanley, 1995) and the leadership of women in science and technology, such as Barbara McClintock (Keller, 1983) and Rosalind Franklin (Maddox, 2003; Sayre, 2000). The work activities chronicled the well-documented rise of the masculine associations with the field, but are inflected with other practices, for example with the "housekeeping" labor of naval mathematician Mina Rees in early

computing (Losh, 2018a). Jennifer Light (1999) reveals how women themselves were considered “computers,” a workplace title that was then transferred to the computing machines that took over their work.

Recuperating this gendered history of women in computing does more than “add women and stir” to affect change; it helps contemporary critics to make sense of the ongoing problematic of the gendering of automated assistants: technologies designed and commercially sold as feminine support figures. A vision of machinery as a feminine form of support is sensible only in light of the longer history of interchangeability between women and machines, which I will discuss at greater length in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 when describing the humans working “behind” the machines to make them work (Irani, 2015); such a vision is also predicated on the erasure of women as designers of computational systems (Doyle et al., 2017). In addition to this recovery work, feminist studies in science and computing have challenged the primacy of normative practices as objective and impartial, demonstrating that biases are built into experimentation methods, which then limit the universality of these models that don’t account for differences in race, ability, gender, and culture (Adam, 1998; Harding, 2004; Narayan & Harding, 2000).

We find a parallel effort in feminist works about women and the authority of their writing (Cixous, 1976; Jardins, 2003; Russ, 2018; Showalter, 1987, 1997; Spender, 1992), which serve both as reparation and epistemological framework. These epistemological approaches have taken different tacks in the vast and rich body of work by theorists in the tradition of literature and literary criticism. As this

dissertation emerges indirectly from these various traditions, I am promiscuously borrowing from literary theory, affect theory, Black literary criticism, and psychoanalysis, and it is my hope to contribute in meaningful ways to debates with scholars who have labored in theorizing voice, desire, intersubjectivity, gender, difference, and psychic attunements (Ahmed, 2004; Berlant, 2010; Cixous, 1976; Clough et al., 2007; Irigaray, 1996; Jackson, 2016; Showalter, 1997; Spillers et al., 2007; Spivak, 1988; Woolf, 1929).

**At the interface**

Feminist technoscience studies also inform my theoretical approach, specifically Lucy Suchman's (2007; 1987) body of work on innovation, AI, and human-machine interactions. Suchman's ethnographies depict how non-human and human intersubjective agencies operate at the interface of humans and computing machines. Her empirically supported proposals about the ways in which agency is produced at the site, the interface of interaction, is a cornerstone thesis informing my analysis throughout this dissertation. I focus on identifying the buoying effects of networked online labor, including first-person confessional writing and platform-publisher sites. This work is important for research on cultural industries because it takes up the question of affect in relation to the intersubjective, technological mediation of ideas to conceptualize how power dynamics are meted out and administered.

While Suchman's workers were primarily situated in an office, mine work largely from home, writing and communicating using keyboards tethered to networked screens. Freelance writers are essentially spending their time with a screen and are positioned through screens. For this reason, film studies and visual culture studies offers much of value to my work in interpreting field sites and the field of the gaze, the engagement with screens as women work "from home." The presence of the screen is the critical, and yet also banal, site of interpersonal engagement for my subjects, and engagement with it required careful observation and theorization. Lisa Cartwright's model of human subjectivity, situated within film and media studies, is a source in the formulation of the inter-constitutive nature of freelance writers' liminal experience of subjectivity that I engage in the following chapters. Feelings, actions, and agencies are produced across bodies and events (Cartwright, 2008, p. 3). I take Cartwright's engagement, which expands feminist psychoanalytic theory and objects relations theory, as an invitation to explore the intersubjective as the distributed locus of subjectivity and way of looking at meaning-making processes in what is also a complicated workplace with multiple engagement sites.

Donna Haraway's body of work, on the penetration of cybernetic thinking into the daily lives of the millions of internet and smart device users today, offers a vocabulary of continued purchase for interpreting how the mediation of data-as-life is coordinated through the optimistic, if not systemically mandated, integration of human behavior with and by computational devices embedded in social, economic, and political structures, and the playful and specific ways these behaviors emerge. As

Haraway writes, “the body may be read as a map of power” (Haraway, 1989, p. 10); and body is heuristic I turn to throughout this dissertation. Bodies and the languages we have to articulate embodied experiences are conjoined proverbial maps through which material-discursive meanings and relations are trafficked—rich and lively sites through which to explore the workings of power.

In the chapters that follow, I unpack how freelance writing as a set of material-discursive processes does liminal work. Intersubjective practices, the ways that inter-textual and inter-bodily relations occur, are interpreted as accomplishments in themselves as well as a means to accomplishment, what Fairclough calls a transformation of drive “associated with new capitalism” (2003, p. 65). According to Michel Foucault’s earlier expression of a similar formulation, “Discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power.” Discourse is “also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance, and a starting point” (1990, p. 100). In analyzing the discourses of freelancing online, I show there is a Mobius strip-like quality to the reported experiences and effects, and to explain this I use the interpretative toolkit of literary theory, studies of affect, visual culture, and feminist science and technology studies to explain how liminal work happens. In other words, my work has many theoretical parents, gently yoked as a constellation of lodestars helping me understand how freelancing emerges as a discourse with multiplicities of silences and contradictions that “come into play” in the twining of “power and knowledge” (Foucault, 1990, p. 102). My project thus deepens theories of labor in a digital age. It does so by focusing on the intersubjective processes of mediated-re-mediated engagement. I

focus my analysis on situations that touch—and are wound in to—writerly online work that is explicitly paid.

The impact of gendered roles and repertoires affects the culture of the work and the norms of storytelling. Mark Dueze (2007) remarks that to be successful in a newsroom, reporters are expected to adjust their own work styles to the "occupational ideology" of the organization, and managers may measure workplace performance not on external rubrics, but on evaluation by peers. Consider Michael Schudson's account of a black woman reporter not reporting on rapes and deaths of black women, because those events happened all the time; she did cover the rape and death of a white woman, because that was unusual and therefore newsworthy (Schudson, 1978). Gendered occupational norms not only reinforce a gendered and racist perspective on news, but also complicate the reporter's own work process within an organizational system, bringing the negotiation of reporter identity in relation to story selection and job security into uneasy relief. Of course, newsrooms vary in size, culture, and focus. But during the period I cover in this dissertation, most reporters were still typically assigned to beats, which in many cases were, even tacitly, segregated by gender, with women covering beats related to health, fitness, and lifestyle, while men covered "hard" news and sports, and non-white minorities were called upon to represent stories about people of their own ethnicity or race (Deuze, 2007, p. 167). In the mid-20th century, women journalists at *The New York Times* worked on a different floor than the men and were responsible for covering the "4fs": fashion, family, food, and furnishings. While it may be the case that at least in women's magazines in the 2010s, more

women than men had leadership positions, simple numbers are an incomplete measure of the way power is wielded. Women's employment in beauty and fashion magazines operated as "a state of being, not a will to action," because magazines are based on the economic exploitation of femininity, with women contributors brought on to appeal to women as a purchasing audience.[2]

An argument that must be considered is that freelancing has brought more women into the field of journalism. Women reporters and journalists of color have struggled to expand and re-center media coverage of daily life, for example normalizing non-racist, non-sexist experiences of social life by reporting on them, and featuring protagonists who are not from dominant or normative cultural sectors or groups. This kind of expansion and re-centering of reporting often is achieved through the strategy of working outside mainstream commercial media, for example by starting, running, and working for alternative media programs and projects (Cheng, 2007, p. 262). But the ways in which freelance women writers online have transgressed the industry's corporate boundaries have constituted them, in effect, as practitioners of liminal work, with writerly labor presented from independent media platforms, or from positions of marginality inside large news media corporations.

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[2] On this point, Brooke Duffy, in her book *Remake, Remodel: Women's Magazines in the Digital Age*, cites Kathy Peiss's 1998 work (2013, p. 11). Angela McRobbie has argued a similar point in her analysis of post-feminism and women's magazines, see McRobbie (2009).

**Methodology and research sites: Following situations**

The project has unfolded with brainstorming in notepads, informal conversations, margin notes, reading, conference presentations, lectures, and work. While my research began years ago, I began to write up the dissertation in September 2018. In the past eighteen months, I have gravitated to feminist mythology, literary theory, psychoanalysis, and theology, a personal inquiry that nevertheless seeped into readings of my field notes and questions about epistemology and ontology. Thus, this interdisciplinary project contributes to communication studies, science and technology studies, and feminist media and literary studies, using multiple explanatory vocabularies, including interpretative readings, literary theory, and affect theory. The outcome is both a modest empirical study of the experiences of online freelance writing and an ambitious effort toward a theoretical explanation of freelance work practices that take place through screens in a way that accounts for psychic and cultural processes. I intervene in and borrow from more than one disciplinary trajectory, so this study is wide-ranging, but I train my eye closely on moments of interaction and the centrality of the imagination, following in the footsteps of feminist scholars who recognize that "matter and meaning are always already entangled" (Suchman, 2007, p. 130) and "fantasy and action are always interconstitutive" (Cartwright, 2008, p. 235).

I take up the concept of "liminal" as an interdisciplinary analytic tool. I also provide histories of words throughout my analysis, given that a word's history is a

“twist in the belly” that helps me see what I am explaining in a new light (Haraway, 2016, p. 120). The rhetorical choice to highlight particular concepts does affect the object of my analysis, and my analytical tools. Mieke Bal describes concepts as travelers that are changed by their journey, as engaging in “[a] meeting in which the object participates, so that, together, object and methods can become a new, not firmly delineated, field” (2002, p. 4). My uptake of “liminal” to explain networked configurations of freelance writing online is a usage transformed from its original context that ultimately transforms the concept itself as a result, which is a unique contribution of this study.

My methodology draws on a model of intersubjectivity developed in studies of women in the workplace. I describe how human agency is facilitated, in the freelance work contexts I studied, through affective relationships and technologies. This project embraces an interpretative ethnographic sensibility. I interviewed, followed, and stayed in touch with 21 freelance writers, in addition, I used ethnographic methods for a workplace study of a Seattle-based online freelance writing work marketplace. Through this, I followed work situations, tracing the ways that ideas, as things, materialized over time in their places of work, and my own trajectory as a participant-observer. I draw on Suchman’s explanatory attunement to the “situation” as a site of change to inform my own ethnographic interactions. I interacted with my informants through the very devices, software, platforms, and techniques I am analyzing, drawing on my senses to map out situations (Pink, 2009). I analyze situations, then, with duel lenses. First, I recognize my own encounters as situations, as sites of mediation and

de-and reterritorialization with my informants and my interpretative apparatuses (Kember & Zylinska, 2012). In portions of this work, I use my bodily responses, affects, and feelings as heuristics to analyze the workings of power (Cerwonka, 2007). Second, in analyzing the experiences of freelancer participants, I focus on how their experiences within a networked ecosystem are gestural: performative actions, reactions, and interactions. Thus, rather than viewing “situations” as specific to a shared time/place, which I take up in Chapters 3 and 4.

This effort has been guided by an ethnographic “sensibility” to challenge the order of things, while understanding it from within. I approached my work by considering myself a kind of technology, following Kim Fortun’s (2009) reckoning with the ethnographic method. As a technology, “ethnography . . . can be designed to draw out what is, the state of things,” and to reckon with the openness that comes from allowing for questions that were not asked at the beginning, or designed and theorized in advance, which Jacque Derrida calls a “lace of obligation” (cited in Fortun, 2009, p. 448). The outcomes of this study were not predetermined. Nor were the futures and hopes that animate and justify the practices I explore. I gathered materials from 2011 to early 2016, working from an ethnographic position that situated me, as a participant-observer, in three overlapping research “sites.”

First, I followed and interviewed freelance writers doing popular writing online for a general audience from 2011–2016 (IRB #150039). Some writers worked with explicitly feminist or “women-centered” online publishers and/or online magazines; others worked for more generalist sites. We had interviews in-person, over the phone,

and I also communicated by text and instant message. I recorded the interviews for the purposes of transcription. Using snow-ball sample, interviewees were asked to recommend others in their network, and seven participated in multiple interviews over four years. I initiated conversation on social media forums for freelancers or at meet-ups and convenings, as I described in the vignette at the beginning of the introduction. I met interviewees out of these varied online and offline interactions, I also have stayed passively intough with my interviewees as we have remained connected using social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn, and/or I receive their professional email newsletters with announcements. I participated as a reader and observer of women's feminist media online during this period, focusing on the online women's magazine xoJane, and also becoming a part of online support groups and off-line meet-ups.

Let me pause to explain what may appear to be inconsistent naming conventions throughout this dissertation. At times, I refer to my informants or freelancers using their first and last names. Following typical reference conventions, I use the last name for future references. This naming convention applies to freelance writers who've published work using their full name, or who asked to have their full name used. For all others, I used first name pseudonyms.

Second, I researched the start-up culture of what was then being called crowd-sourcing or crowd work (IRB #150848S). This was an effort to research the designs and decisions at work by a company seeking to marshal the power of the "crowd" to do particular kinds of piece work. Companies strive to serve particular worker

characteristics, such as workers seeking flexibility in their paid work practices to accommodate disabilities or care work (Zyskowski et al., 2015). To this end, I interviewed employees and freelancers in 2016 at a platform marketplace specifically dedicated to writing work, and based in Seattle, WA, which I describe in Chapter 1. The naming convention in this study is also loosely anonymized, per the choice of my informants to be named and have their company named, which I discuss in Chapter 1.

Third, I gathered and analyzed more than 20 articles, documents, legal papers, court cases, and books on freelancing, information access, and copyright, which informed each chapter and specifically, the historical work in Chapter 2.

The ethnographic methods I employed included "lurking" on work platforms as a participant-observer, participating in forums, and trialing the technique of "trace ethnography," a method that extends Susan Leigh Star's concept of "infrastructural inversion" to make sense of how distributed, digital events unfold by using logs and date stamps (Star, 1999). I accessed these materials by making an archive of my own screenshots, searches, and double-checking now defunct or taken-down websites using the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine. This is a method to analyze and interpret "traces," including "data traces," to begin to account for how distributed systems and organizations operated, and how freelancers were operating within them. In Chapter 4, which discusses metaphors of frustration and loss of work, I propose that companion, interstitial social spaces online have an agential role for writers, helping them not only to communicate, but to make meaning and form community in relation to their professional status and selves, as meaning is shaped by the timing and technical

processes of when and how participants join asynchronic conversations, sometimes halfway through an evolving conversational thread. Due to the dispersed organization of the open web, events and situations simultaneously unfold but experiences can be individuated due to the personalization of each user's computer settings, login times, and preferences. It may well be near impossible for any researcher to know how to make sense of these interactions without losing sight of something. Thus, rather than presuming I can take a bird's-eye view in an era of networked communication and globalization, I follow George Marcus's (1995) directive of "following the metaphor" and "following the practices" as a guide to my "partial" and "situated" perspectives (Haraway, 2003).

My dissertation does not follow a strict linear trajectory. I do not report on events in a historically sequential order, telling the *fabula* first. I begin the first chapter at a time with experiences at the second research site: the offices of a writing work platform. I describe how experiences with the CEO of this platform informed the way I theorize liminal work, and bring this into conversation with Marx's theory of fixed labor and with freelancers' reflections about their work circumstances. Chapter 2, a historical chapter, began with the question of how situations of possession of the rights to writing came to be enacted in a networked information economy which also is governed by copyright over algorithmic processes and domains. I trace a discussion of the struggles for authority over freedom of access among database vendors, information service providers, and freelance writers negotiating copyright claims to understand the present. Liminal work is what happens when freelancers confirm authorial authority

just as they lose it, moving between vocabularies and subject positions as a result. In Chapters 3 and 4, I analyze selected experiences of writers from 2011–2016, focusing on narratives of redemption and feminist narratives in Chapter 3; and then moving to narratives and reports of disappointment and shame in Chapter 4. The cultural power of *fabula* narrates a progressive concept of time, when one thing happens after another. I do not provide coverage of every event in such a timeline. Rather, my efforts provide a conceptual architecture for understanding online freelance writing as doing liminal work within a neoliberal capitalist cultural order in the United States in this particular historical moment.

I also want to differentiate the narrative order from the *sujet,* the ordering of events as they emerged in my encounters and in the encounters of my informants. Sometimes we were only aware of the debate or criticism first, and this affected how we perceived beginnings, and how writers perceived their relationships with each other, as well as how platforms organized their work processes, often copying or borrowing practices from elsewhere. Sequencing in a disruptive, disjointed way and with signals of mimesis was more of a norm than not. For instance, I note and describe the significance of freelancers responding to critiques of events in building community rather than responding directly to events themselves. This backwards response process is a direct outcome of the decentralized organization of mediated social life and it impacted how freelancers perceived themselves and the work they were doing. The experience of being disjointed, I argue, is significant to the experience of freelancing as liminal work that results in neither here nor there, both/and, in-between

and aiming to move forward but not quite getting all there. In this way, my argument follows the spirit of work by cultural historian of technology Carolyn Marvin (1990), in chronicling the process of change as something that's not due to the intrinsic qualities of a technology—in this case crowd work platforms for writers—but to the transfer of habits onto particular technologies and improvisation as part of the process of negotiation. It exposes "the drama in which existing groups perpetually negotiate power, authority, representation and knowledge with whatever resources are available" (Marvin, 1990, p. 5).

My presence and the relationships I developed through participant-observation, interviewing,≠ and attention to this topic are both elucidating and a "contamination" of the material-discursive cultural practices I have sought to understand and explain. I take to heart Kathleen Stewart's work on affect and discourse: "Discourse does not reflect . . . a situation. It is a situation (Stewart, 1991, p. 397). As I was embedded and interpolated through discourses, I recognize my interpretative work on these situations can also include "hazardous" (Hayden, 2009) "fictions" (Visweswaran, 1994). Thus, I adopt the first-person perspective as a way to acknowledge my role as a participant-observer, name my assumptions and curiosities, and articulate my feelings in viewing the hazards and fictions of situations as parables and conduits to power.

I am attuned to the ways that a decentralized organization and archiving practices enables me, as a researcher, to put together the order of events. Over the period of years of my research and the dissertation-writing period, companies changed names, were bought and sold, and disappeared. Other websites rebranded, and

content was moved, morphed, and deleted. The Wayback Machine has been a vital archiving service for this research project because, though I do not presume it can ever provide a "real" meaning or authentic situation, it could, as a publicly accessible archive, enable me to revisit and name otherwise seemingly ephemeral, or disappeared, platforms and publications, and histories of labor and storytelling that have otherwise been erased or become inaccessible. It helped with research sites that had important roles in shaping the experiences and intersubjective processes of freelancing during my research period that have now since closed and deleted their content.

### Toward a typology of platformization for freelance writing

Amongst the ambiguous occupational strata and commercial activities that online freelance writers straddle, they work at the crossroads of digital practices and labor configurations. This research on gendered freelancing, however, is situated in a broader story of capitalism, information technologies, and labor, and contributes to theories of labor that attend to gender, as I have described through the discussion of the risky work of freelancing as a part of risk society (Beck, 1992).

I motion to these labor histories because they prefigure the development of concepts of flexible labor, reproductive labor, and occupational identity that are implicated by liminal work and help me to explain why particular kinds of labor manifest in freelancing online. The concept of "platform" has gained purchase, over

time replacing a hodge-podge of names for the intersection of social, economic, technological, and political arrangements that have risen and fallen in the past decade, including “peer-to-peer sharing,” “virtual economy,” Web 2.0,” “digital information economy,” “networked society,” “gig economy,” “sharing economy,” “new information society,” and crowd work, which I also use in this dissertation as it was a widely adopted term during my research period to describe companies that sought to connect or use freelance workers (“the crowd”) with hirers (Gray & Suri, 2015; Zyskowski et al., 2015). Tarleton Gillespie (2010) describes how platforms in the commercial media ecosystem act as assemblages and figurative mediators. But as mediators, their role is not neutral. The organization and experience the platforms facilitate can reconfigure social relationships. Platforms have nevertheless marshaled the neutrality of the term to advance the idea that they are neutral technology companies, rather than members of the sectors they are affecting with technology—such as media companies or hospitality. In this next section, I will provide a typology of ways that freelance writers' work intersects with four situations of “platformization” in publishing.

### Integrated work platforms

Start-up platforms operate as complete workplaces for paid online work. Not all are specifically for writing. For instance, Amazon's Mechanical Turk is an example of a platform for cognitive piecework, some of which may entail writing or content work. Demand Media Studios is an example from my research of a platform devoted

specifically to writing and filmmaking. I describe this platform in greater depth in Chapter 4. The freelance work experience — from application to payment — takes place entirely through the platform. For freelancers, this entails creating a login (which can have an application process) and profile, browsing and claiming piecework opportunities, submitting, reviewing, and receiving payment. There are multiple ways that work platforms operate. First, integrated platforms can be vertically integrated, and the platform manager can facilitate the upload of jobs (e.g. articles to be written) for freelancers to "claim" for a set fee. There is no bidding or proposal process that requires interaction between the client commissioning the article and the freelancer. Demand Media Studios and Content Runner, the site of my workplace study, operated this way. There are specific style guides and editorial procedures in place to ensure the work was uniformly completed. Again, this style of work resembles click work platforms, such as Amazon's Mechanical Turk, and transport companies, such as the so-called ride-sharing company Uber, which scaffolds a uniform experience for workers, who receive notifications about how to do their jobs well. There is reputation system in place to provide feedback from hiring users to freelancers, as with Uber, where drivers may receive reminders about how to earn more money (Dijck et al., 2018, p. 91), such companies may send reminders to freelancers to log-in and pick up more work. Payment is delivered directly to freelancers from the platform, not from a third-party client buying the work.

Integrated work platforms may also make use of reputation systems to provide user-generated feedback on the quality of work. Demand Media Studios and Content

Runner writers are graded internally on writing performance (e.g. research skills and grammar). Timeliness also is assessed: missing a deadline or returning an article without completing it can lead to a lower reputation assessment. van Dijck, et al. call reputation systems “norming apparatuses,” because the design of reputation assessments provides information that nudges both the worker and the client to perform the assessment in particular ways, leading to the emergence of a standard (Dijck et al., 2018, p. 91). In Chapter 4 I describe how writers cope with these platforms and how that contribute to enactment of liminal work.

### “Peer-to-peer” work platforms

Peer-to-peer online work platforms presume to facilitate the “sharing” of jobs between clients and freelancers, or peer-to-peer exchanges. These platforms may manage payment, though not through direct pay, as is the case with the integrated work platforms, for instance by holding funds in escrow and then releasing them on behalf of the client when the job is completed. The platforms also provide a place for auctioning or bidding to happen between freelancers. On these platforms, clients become users of the site and manage their job proposals, which can include a wide variety of requests. Freelancers create profiles about themselves, take skills tests, and share examples of their work and make bids. Some platforms have conditions monitoring how freelancers can join. The requester or client selects a freelancer, monitors their work, and then rates the completed job, leading to freelancers building

reputations on specific sites, based on their performance according to the clients. Examples of platforms which operate this way were Upwork (formerly Elance/oDesk) and Content Runner, which had both integrated services and peer-to-peer features.

### Platform-publishers

Legacy news media and lifestyle magazines have begun to incorporate features and values of platforms into their freelance submission and publication process. I call these incorporations “hybrids,” through each story of hybridization is different; the publishing industry is not uniformly “platformized” (Plantin et al., 2016). For instance, a publication may operate through direct pitch to a publication’s editor or accept submissions through an online form or user account, but incorporate other values and practices associated with platforms, such as using content management systems to create and maintain distance between the designers or publishers and the freelance workers, as Lilly Irani (2015) argues is accomplished by Mechanical Turk, in order to maintain social and economic hierarchies.

Many of my informants worked for xoJane, an online startup magazine led by the magazine editor Jane Pratt, which was later acquired by Time, Inc. and eventually closed. xoJane, online only, relied on email pitches and commercial social media communication to manage freelance writers, which I discuss in detail in Chapter 3 and 4. Writers used a content management system to upload their work, but this was not used for the purposes of pitching or payroll. The magazine conglomerate Hearst

launched a project called The Mix for about a year. Freelancers applied by submitting clips; those accepted were added to an email list and received regular emails that included a list of titles writers could write an article for (e.g., “How my serious illness changed my sex life”). The freelancer wrote the article on spec and if the editor accepted it, the freelancer earned $100 and some additional income per click. Articles were published across the online versions of Hearst’s large family of women’s magazines, including *Seventeen*, *Marie Claire*, and *Cosmo*. Though The Mix closed after one year, it exemplifies ways that publishers were taking up practices associated with platforms—in this case related to scale and speed—and seeking ways to implement them within existing organizational practices. Publisher-platforms function as platforms in the more conventional meaning of the word, as an elevated stage for the public sharing of ideas, but the communicative process of getting and doing paid work does not explicitly take place through them.

### Discursive exchanges about freelancing on social media platforms

As I described in the above section on mediated super publics, freelance writing work can include social media activity about or for work, wherein large social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter becomes sited of exchange, including pitching and building relationships with editors. This is not considered to be “work,” but it can be necessary for gaining the social capital needed to understand how to get and do paid work; writers also used social media groups and networks to access to possible

informants for articles. Social media, search engine algorithms and open-access databases impact the circulation of news and hierarchization of search results; these affect online freelance opportunities and the stories they write as well.

With commercial values shaping the inner workings of online companies, and the erosion of traditional news media organizations from having a strong presence online, there's been efforts to "game" the distribution commons, leading to types of content to be produced for low or no cost. After the closure of this study, there was a realization that there was hyper-partisan content being produced and channeled through social media networks. During the period of my study, this was primarily resulted in the rise of "content farms" as I describe in this dissertation, which seek to manufacture content to meet presumed search criteria, with freelancers hired as content managers. Gaming search engines has been called "search engine optimization "(SEO). In addition, publishers utilize the logics of personalization and affective value to gain circulation in social media and thus profit from the engagement within the network (with the aim of bringing readers from social media to the publishing homepages). This technique has been called "click bait" because it utilizes behavioral techniques of eliciting emotions in order to increase circulation. "Click bait" is related to, but distinct from, the circulation of misinformation and disinformation campaigns that took place through the outsourcing of writing work in the second half of 2016 onward (Dijck et al., 2018) and is not given great attention in this dissertation as the presidential election and alarm bells about "untruths" and "fake news" happened after the ethnographic study closed in September 2016.

As I will describe, clicking sometimes led to freelancers feeling exuberant about the recognition they gained from wide readership, sometimes leading to increased money and even book deals, but they also reported experiences of hate messages. During the period of my research, some publishers incorporated readership metrics into pay scales. Some freelancers also worked to establish themselves as micro-celebrities and "influencers," laboring to create and maintain an intimate connection with followers through mixed media content creation and audience interaction with followers on social media (Abidin, 2014, 2018; Alperstein, 2019), though this was not the norm among my small sample of informants. I lay out these details to motion to the fact that online freelance writing work is not happening in isolation. Rather, the logics of platforms, attention, micro-celebrity, and economy shape freelance work practices.

As mentioned earlier, this dissertation does not analyze the labors and practices of independent bloggers, sponsored influencers, or micro-celebrities. Not because they are not writers or "entrepreneurial"—there is much labor involved in mixed media content creation, and money earned—but because during the period when I was conducting my research, I had to limit the scope of the project. I have focused on following freelancers who were working as writers for various publications for piecework pay and encountered work platforms specifically designed to facilitate the getting and doing of this work. Some of these writers may take up labors or practices of micro-celebrities, however, I don't discuss that at length in this work. Rather, I aim to highlight online work practices that are less visible but are widely practiced, following, in part, what Meghan Morris calls studying the "banal" (1988), and

as Rita Felski does, inverting questions of the applicability of theory to ask why theories of digital labor in modernity don't sufficiently account for the specific experiences of work that women accomplish. How might women's varied experiences with freelance writing inform theories of digital labor? (1995, p. 11). The typology I have laid out, of the types of platforms and forms of engagement, forms a crux of my ethnographic project temporally; however, I also materially-discursively and onto-epistemologically trace and explain the struggle for authority that has taken place between the logic and jurisdiction of databases and information access services and the writers who contribute information and material ideas to these platforms, so my project begins with those struggles. This is the first element of my dissertation's focus on specific situations of engagement. I explain how debates about the way to provide services to expand access to information became a site of struggle and shaped the commercial marketplace for writing today. Then, I pivot to discuss how, as participants in a marketplace for writerly work, freelance writers negotiate personal identification and feelings of redemption. My analysis provides a theory of how to understand how freelance writing is accomplished in these crossings: as doing liminal work in the networked configuration of gendered labor, technologies, and subjectivities.

## Chapter summaries

### Chapter 1: Toward a theory of liminal work

Why does liminality help me to explain material-discursive configurations of freelancing in a networked information economy? This chapter addresses myths of entrepreneurialism and their effects on freelance workers, as well as theories about labor, the worker, and technology to develop the concept of liminal work. I dovetail ethnographic impressions, my own embodied experiences as a researcher, and an explorative rethinking of the meaning of Marx's concept of "fixed labor" as a way to explain the central concept of the dissertation: liminal work. Through exposition of metaphor, myth, and the discursive figuration of the entrepreneur, I discuss how liminal work helps to account for the specific ways that the subject position of freelancers is figured in relation to their own relationships to the platforms they use, and in relation to the experiences of the figure of the entrepreneur. This chapter uses and departs from an analysis of ethnographic materials from a Seattle-based writing work platform, including interviews, observations, reflections, and interviews. I argue that social circumstances, human-machine dependencies, and material-discursive mythologies of innovation become technologies of liminal work, which position workers—both freelancers and entrepreneurs—in a state of uncertainty.

## Chapter 2: A gendered prehistory of freelance work platforms

This chapter explores freelancing as liminal work through a history of debates about “freedom” and “public access” in the 1990s, revealing how these concepts were conceptual vehicles through which authorial rights were negotiated, and detailing decisions about technologies and commercial access that foregrounded freelancers’ claims to copyright and conditions for content writing work online. I lay out the debates about public access to information that unfolded around the U.S. Supreme Court New York Times Co. v. Tasini, 533 U.S. 483 (2001) decision process on the class action lawsuit. Taking up the courthouse as a site of negotiation of authority, freelancers sought to confirm their right to property copyrights for their writing. On one hand, they succeeded in doing so, the court sided with freelancers’ authorial rights. However the decision also led to publishers, publisher-platforms, websites, and online database vendors to move to pressure writers to default to work for hire, and to exchange authorial rights and digital redistribution for payment. I look at the ways that the gendered, de-professionalized experience of the freelance writer was prefigured through debates about public access and commercialization, and sidelining of the jurisdiction of library staff, which shaped the development of the commercial open web in the United States. Competing claims to authorial rights and debates about freedom of access emerge because of freelancers claim to copyright and thus position

freelancers as betwixt and between frameworks and languages through which to claim agency.

### Chapter 3: Exaggerated through you

In this chapter, I move forward to the 2010s to tend to the situation of first-person confessional writing and the second person "you" that emerges in online working environments established as magazines and publishers go through "platformization" in a networked information and attention economy, focusing on women's magazine publisher-platform xoJane. I examine how the evocation of a gendered second-person, apostrophe, guides conceptualizations of what participation in freelance writing can accomplish emotionally, and how it is productive of an exaggerated neoliberal feminist subjectivity—a tenuous position that freelancers respond to as a future they hope for, and which is incorporated into their present actions.

### Chapter 4: Being ghosted and droughts

In this chapter, I compare the reported experiences and vocabularies that freelance writers used in two separate companion social spaces to describe the process of using two different writing work platform types. Writers reported experiences of frustration, let-down, shame, broken promises, unwanted attention, and

economic precarity using metaphors that evoke spiritual presences and/and natural processes. Each metaphor facilitates the reproduction of asymmetries in working life. I explain that these metaphors are notably analogous to the organization of each work platform process. I discuss the significance of the fact that these metaphors emerge in companion social spaces to the online platforms where freelancers get and/or publish their work—in this case, online forums and social media sites—which become both informal and commercial places for freelancers to socialize, build community, and network.

**Conclusion**

I summarize the overarching argument of the dissertation that online freelance writing does liminal work in the 2010s commercial online economy in the United States. Having first developed the concept through a theoretical chapter, I then explored the discursive construction of tension between the authorial agency of freelancers and coders in Chapter 2. In Chapters 3 and 4, I argued that freelancers' interpersonal, intersubjective ways of making meaning in a networked affective public position them to themselves, as they are pressed to expression through commercial spaces and professional practices, their work both personally meaningful and tethered to commodified audiences. The concept of liminality gives me a vocabulary to advance the ways that, for instance, Lauren Berlant describes "cruel optimism" as an experience of a national sentiment, never reached, to explain labor in a networked

information economy. I contemplate implications for future studies and describe opportunities for future inquiries.

Portions of a book chapter, "'Being a Better #Freelancer': Gendered and Racialised Aesthetic Labour on Online Freelance Marketplaces," published in 2017 in *Aesthetic Labour*, edited by Elias A., Gill R., Scharff C. by Palgrave Macmillan, London, in the Dynamic of Virtual Work series, are included in this introduction. Monika Sengul-Jones is the sole author of all material in this dissertation.

## Chapter 1: Toward a theory of liminal work

In this chapter I develop the concept of liminal work by exploring the ambiguities of the experience of labor that happens in a setting where screened communication is labor in relation to “fixed labor” (technology). I explain this by weaving together my ethnographic notes with close readings of a reference in Karl Marx’s work to “fixed labor” and evoking the “onto-epistemological and non-representational” register of myth to explore the social, material, and psychic work happening at the intersection of freelancing and technological development and innovation.

In early 2016, I began an on-site workplace study of an online marketplace for writers in a Seattle suburb. The aim of this portion of my project was to bring the sensibility of an ethnographer to gain perspective on the discursive practices of running a freelance marketplace company. I sought to document the ways that particular values and cultural norms contribute to the design and functioning of the platform, and to theorize how formations of labor were taking place through such a platform.

To recruit a local startup marketplace for my study, I attended events during Seattle Startup Week in fall of 2015, which aimed to “highlight the amazing startup culture of the Puget Sound,” a city with a growing number of tech companies and an increasing number of transplants living in the greater metropolitan area. I attended panels, browsed the program, hung out at the coffee breaks, sat in on seminars on topics such as how to pitch angel investors, and got a free pass to The Riveter, a

"modern union" of working women founded in Seattle. I learned that two marketplaces for freelancers writers had been recently founded in Seattle. Writer.ly was my first choice of a workplace because the company was launched by two Seattle women writers in 2013, who'd won venture capital funding for an "elance for writers" (Soper, 2013). I'd had the coincidence of meeting writer.ly co-founder, Kelsye Nelson, at a neighborhood writing meet-up, as I described in the introductory vignette, so I had initially reached out to her with an invitation to be a part of my research project. She did not respond to my emails, and after a couple of attempts to reach out, including pinging her on social media, I approached Content Runner, the second Seattle-based start-up marketplace for writing work in the area. The CEO responded to my cold-email introduction, and after a phone call and sharing of the IRB paperwork, I had a research site.

This chapter documents a portion of my study at Content Runner, where I conducted three half-day on-site observations over two months, had multiple semi-structured interviews with the CEO in person and by phone, and conducted phone interviews with two freelancers who worked through Content Runner. I also joined and worked on the marketplace as a freelancer myself, taking on work as a sponsored content writer for articles that touted the (dubious scientific) value of vitamin supplements for various health maladies (each piece paid $12) and also writing content for a brick company's blog and social media account.

My primary focus in this chapter is to offer interpretative analysis of ethnographic encounters with Content Runner alongside notes from my interviews with

freelancers about their life circumstances, as a way to explain how digital marketplace platforms can become vectors of liminal work. My effort is not to assess the extent to which the marketplace introduces a sets of labor relations that are fair, nor to evaluate who is right and wrong in the outcomes. But, following Lucy Suchman (2007, p. 224), I pause to give attention to "situations" in the work of "studying up" and to use the interpretative framework of discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013) to understand how interests and values are included in the development of start-up companies that broker writing work, and the relationship these values have for the reproduction of the freelance workforce and the subject positions that emerge through their labors.

Lilly Irani's feminist studies of digital infrastructure names how the scale, pace, and distancing of crowd work software are a form of cultural "work" of innovation (Irani, 2015a; Irani & Sengul-Jones, 2015). Irani calls the shift to adopt atomized, individualized practices "entrepreneurial citizenship" (Irani, 2019). I deepen Irani's work through an exploration of my ethnographic experiences and with a critical reading of concepts of labor in the 21st century, which has been called "surveillance capitalism" and a "platform economy," by probing Marx's concept of "fixed labor"—what technologies are made of—as doing *liminal work.* Drawing on interviews I conducted with freelancers and the interpretative heuristic of my own embodied responses during the research period, I turn to the connections between practices and "mythic time" (Barthes & Lavers, 2006; Jackson, 2016; Spillers, 1987) to unpack the ways that "innovation" and its technologies can be theorized as a site for identification and imaginative action.

Prior to making the first cold call to invite the company to participate in my research project, I had spent some time reviewing the online homepage of Content Runner. It was a bright royal blue overlaid with a crisp white sans serif font. A line of rectangular photos featuring faces of freelancers in candid shots peeped up from the lower half of the screen: an invitation to scroll downward to a visual directory of writers. I was drawn to looking at these photos. While most of the photos were headshots, the backgrounds were not uniform; some images were pixelated and cropped. Under each image was a star rating with a few lines from a longer description. The page invited me to consume them. The line of pictures resembled a MySpace "Top 8," who's who directory, or a yearbook page.

Their bright visual availability stood in contrast to the suburban ordinariness of the company's office in a strip mall about 10 miles from downtown Seattle. When I arrived on a March weekday in 2016. Smith, the CEO and a co-founder of Content Runner, warmly met me at the front door and escorted me past reception and a mailroom. He showed me two dark offices with large desktop computers—the co-founder and lead developer was working from home, and the office manager had stepped out for lunch and never reappeared. At a remote work marketplace, perhaps the distance of staff wasn't surprising, but it did add a layer of challenge to my efforts to conduct a "workplace" ethnography.

When we'd corresponded by email and phone, I'd asked for permission to "hang out" a few days a week for a few weeks while Smith's team worked on designing and maintaining the freelance writer marketplace. My IRB research description,

"Designs and Decisions about Freelance Marketplace Design," sought to understand how they went about their jobs, and specifically, how they translated business strategies into the user experience for clients and freelancers. When I introduced the project, Smith was pleased to hear that I wanted to learn more about his company. But he said they were only all in the office together one or two days a week, so I'd have to be okay with coming less frequently. "No problem," I agreed, and we scheduled the first date.

In the next two subsections, I'll elaborate on what I learned from this ethnographic encounter. First, a theoretical discussion of invisible labor of humans working behind the scenes to realize a vision of autonomous machines, in relation to Marx's definition of a fixed labor relation. Then I offer a consideration of the discursive accomplishment of innovation values through interfaces as a practice of psychic accomplishment, which I discuss through a reading of "The Elves and the Shoemaker" story, and folklorist and cultural critic Louis Hyde (1980) as a way to discuss the logics of freelancing in the register of myth.

**The humans behind the marketplace**

During my first week hanging out at Content Runner, I asked if Smith or a programmer would give me a behind-the-scenes "tour" of the marketplace. Smith said he was happy to do so and invited me into an empty conference room. He used a desktop computer, and I sat next to him with my laptop on the conference table. He

asked what I wanted from a tour. I said that I wanted him to show me his perspective on how the marketplace works, and to explain their choices "of colors, of size, of front-end features." He agreed and suggested we use my laptop. I felt surprised by this request, which I assume to have stemmed from a sense of attachment to my laptop, not just as my possession, but as an extension of myself, as a site where I'd experienced embodied intimacy, mobile-emotive co-presence, and that intimacy was extended into attachment to a mobile device (Cumiskey & Hjorth, 2017). But at the same time, we were in a conference room and I had a computer, so I swallowed this discomfort and replied "sure."

We sat side by side and he opened Safari and went to the Content Runner homepage, and then logged into the content management system at the top using "admin." First he demonstrated how he could toggle to view all jobs: claimed and unclaimed jobs, jobs pending review, and completed jobs. He then showed me an overview of the company's transactions over time. The company had started more than seven years ago but, he noted, initially they focused on developing software for business-to-business payment transactions. The marketplace was a side project that had become more viable as freelancers signed up to work. I noticed as he was explaining the company history that one client name showed up often, possibly on 80% of the sales. I asked if he would share more information about this frequent client.

"That," he said, "that's us." I waited, possibly gave a few head nods, and then he went on. "We started out needing to build up and we needed to hire writers," he said. Designing a functional marketplace had initially not been the goal, and proved to

be a challenge as the primary focus, but since the marketplace was one of a few of his company's services, he was able to do a few different things with it:

> We hired writers for other projects, projects we had or for other companies. I have three other companies that I hire writers for, and we bill it through the [marketplace] company. In fact, I was writing the blog for a while, but now I hire one of the best writers. I've also hired her and a couple other writers to manage some of the clients. They often need extra touch, more help from the platform than what is actually there, so we have her do that work. She also now published an eBook on ghostwriting content work.

His explanation illustrates three ways that this internet marketplace for freelancers to do copywriting work functioned through the invisible work of freelancers and internal business ventures run by the same company. The marketplace needed to build interest to solicit clients to hire writers, and while doing so, Smith created work to retain freelancers on the site by hiring them for other companies to generate and sustain interest. This internal work was not transparent for the freelancers, who may have presumed they were meeting third-party clients, or who may have been in a different relationship if they had been hired directly by the company, rather than for a piecework job to create the image of a functional marketplace. This work included hiring a writer to ghostwrite Smith's own blog contributions. A second form of invisible work was providing for behind-the-scenes client management, a kind of "white glove" service by a human, in this case a freelancer selected by Smith. She shepherded clients through the process of uploading jobs to the platform and working with freelancers. Third, the freelancer who published an eBook on ghostwriting provided scaffolding and training to other writers through summaries and tutorials on her experiences. Thus, beyond designing and maintaining a meeting place to facilitate

human-to-human connections, Content Runner used additional layers of invisible work and business management activities to facilitate a vision of the marketplace as a self-sustaining platform that was absent of human involvement.

This was not an unusual finding in the 21st-century tech workplace, nor within the history of information technology as a global industry. Research on the sociology of work and critical studies of artificial intelligence have demonstrated that hopeful visions of automating human labor, particularly cognitive labor and "soft skills" such as empathy and interpersonal work, result in new work formations that are often invisible and which herald the male sovereign subject as the norm (Adam, 1998; Atanasoski & Vora, 2015; Gray & Suri, 2019; Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Huws, 1999a, 2015b). What has been distinct with digital automation in the age of the internet is when humans take on work that machines cannot *quite* do. Thus, the humans are invisible because they are doing work that the pervasive vision of intelligent machines presumes should be happening, or that they will be able to do soon (Chen & Gray, 2019; Gray & Suri, 2015, 2019; Naughton, 2019; Newton, 2019; Roberts, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). I describe in the next chapter the aim among database vendors to "crack the librarian barrier" and de-center librarians/library staff as the primary users of database searches in order to more widely commercialize and automate database search services, another vision of computing predicated on erasing the humans behind the scenes, but that relied on humans to achieve the vision. As has been the case with other examples of humans working "behind the scenes" to make AI "work" (see also Roberts, 2017), cultural changes that are fundamental to human communicative practices and cultures make

machine learning labor-intensive and difficult, if not impossible, to standardize over time, as learning is always ongoing. Thus the realization of the vision of automation relies on humans to participate invisibly, justified as stopgaps for machines who are not quite developed enough (Newton, 2019). "The figure of the surrogate human . . . performs degraded work that is always already meant to be invisible," Atanasoski and Vora explain in their work on surrogacy, a formulation that can be extended to this context as well (2015, p. 7). I've described, freelancers are among workers positioned as in limbo, *liminal*, in a process which does not recognized them as fully human, but a stop-gap. Unlike the liminality of coming-of-age rites, which I described in the introduction, the outcome of the liminal switchbacks I'm describing here is uncertainty, thus the efforts do liminal work because they are unresolved through the framework in which they also make sense.

**Debates on commodification and labor**

In my ethnographic encounter, I was witnessing how a vision of a technology that was not supposed to really involve people was being produced through the subordination and erasure of people to a cultural vision of what machines, automation, and platforms could be. In the case of Content Runner, one of the humans doing the behind-the-scenes work was Smith himself. His software company was hiring freelancers as if the software company was third-party vendors. Notably, these features were not incidental to the function of the site, but were essential to keeping it

going.

Another way of explaining what is happening is through Marx's discussion of technologies as "fixed labor." Marx characterized machines in capitalist production as "mechanical monsters whose body fills whole factories" with "demon power" and strips work down to meaninglessness (2011, pp. 416-7). Machines are considered valuable stand-ins for humans, and humans work as prosthetics to machines. While Marshall McLuhan has convincingly argued that technologies extend human senses, with his prime example being the electric light (McLuhan, 1964), Marx's discussion of technologies is focused on explaining them in context of the capitalist social order. The image of mechanical monsters towering over and subordinating workers, who have lost any sense of control or meaning, illustrates how the workers are sucked into supporting a world order that is run by machines with a class of capitalist overlords.

The labor that is appropriated into these machines is defined through Marx's theory of value. Workers' subject positions are defined as *their capacity to* labor (also known as their labor power), which is "the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in a human being" (2011, p. 186). The *capacity to* labor is what makes a worker human; humans have "vital energy" (2011, p. 192). Vital energy is what *defines* a worker; the appropriation of their actual labor (enabled by their labor power) is what makes the process of generating either surplus or absolute value exploitative (1978, p. 80). By working in a capitalist system, and in this case, having work appropriated into a machine (fixed capital) to generate further surplus value, a worker's self is taken from him.

Marx argues that labor power is the capacity *to do* productive labor. Vital energy requires replenishment through *reproductive* labor, subsistence. Reproductive labor is essential for renewing a worker's vital energy (2011, p. 192). More specifically, reproductive labor consists of affective, ecological (domestic), biological practices through which vital energy is created and replenished (birthing, emotional development, caring, feeding, educating). Marx and Engels recognized that reproductive labor, positioned within the heteronormative white family, as Black literary critics have pointed out, has been central to keeping abstract workers with *the capacity to labor* (Engels, 1884; Spillers et al., 2007). Workers' pay should reflect their ability to replenish themselves, but the labor of doing the replenishing is secondary, in that it is not translated directly into value.

Marx further develops his theorizing of the complex relationship between workers and the machines that fix vital labor in *Grundrisse*, with a quote from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's (1808) dramatic version of the Germanic legend of Faust. Marx writes, "Thus the appropriation of labour by capital confronts the worker in a coarsely sensuous form; capital absorbs labour into itself—'*as though its body were by love possessed*'" (3) ([sic] (Marx & Nicolaus, 1993, p. 704; Marx, 1993, p. 704). In the English translation of Goethe's work that I subsequently read for more details, there's a reprint of this line, in the original German: "*Als hätt es Lieb im Leibe*" (Goethe, 2013). This quote is seemingly used to illustrate how fixed capital—in relation to vital energy—comes to be.

I'm going to offer an interpretation of this reference, to what would have been popular culture for Marx, as a way to explain how "humans," working as stand-ins for machines, as I have described in the preceding sections in detailing the ethnographic encounters, are doing liminal work. This is an effort to deepen my theorization of writerly work as it is done in a tri-fold of material-discursive constraints: within the context of "innovation" that is also the outcome of, and reproduces, power dynamics and gendered asymmetries in social life. In this interpretation, I write informed by feminist and postcolonial and Black literary criticisms of the purchase of concepts of "labor" and the "human." Theorizations of "human" ("man" [sic]), Kalindi Vora and Neda Atanasoski explain with reference to the work of Sylvia Wynter's theorization of humanness, are epistemological accomplishments rooted in, and which serve as technologies of, racist-scientific apparatuses of biology and economics (Atanasoski & Vora, 2015, p. 10). Feminist theory of economic relations has emphasized that labor power is possible, and is realized, through historical formations of domination. These formations have included patriarchal kinship structures of marriage, housework, inheritance, capital, and gendered distribution of household labor (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003; Fortunati, 2011; A. R. Hochschild & Machung, 2003; Weeks, 2011), as well as racialized technologies of labor, including chattel slavery, indentured servitude, and colonialism (Vora, 2012, p. 690). Maria Mies (1986) has argued that colonial transitions to possession crosscut capitalistic patriarchy (rule of the Father, domination of women); colonialism (domination of the Other, enslavement); and domination of nature (extraction of natural resources). In addition, the gendered and

racialized subject conceived as labor power relies on a host of technology supports, including scientific methods like calibration and numbering practices, which result in commodification of the worker (Lampland, 2016). The historical structure of the Protestant heteropatriarchal household with its wives, children, and servants obscured how value-producing labor is predicated upon specific social structures to create labor power in the capitalist market.

Commodification and fixed labor have been integral concepts for addressing technology and human vitality and thus for explaining inequalities. I will contribute to this discussion by emphasizing ambiguity to explore liminality. I will argue that freelance work online with technology, which, broadly writ, is a form of fixed labor, can be understood as an ambiguous intersubjective dependency. To borrow from Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska's work on the vitality of remediation, this helps to conceptualize online labor as situations where humans are becoming-*with*, and being in a position of responding *to* (Kember & Zylinska, 2012), which I explicate as a borrowing and deepening the work of Lisa Cartwright's (2008) modeling of the intersubjective subject and spectatorship; Kaja Silverman's (2006) work on memory and subjectivity; and Mary Ann Doane (1987) on feminine identification, to address the mediated and interdependent affective and sentimental features at the core of the accomplishment of online freelance writing in a networked commercial ecosystem.

**“As if she had love in her body”: On ambiguous conditions**

In the English translation of Marx’s *Grundrisse*, the original German line from the classic German legend *Faust*, “*Als hätt es Lieb im Leibe*,” is cited in a footnote. Further inquiry into the source reveals the line is the chorus line of a song sung during a scene in *Faust* that takes place in an old bar in Leipzig just before Faust and Mephistopheles (the Devil) arrive. The song tells the story of a rat who has been eating up the butter and lard in the kitchen (Goethe, 2013). The cook, upon finding the rat, laces poison into her food. Consequently, the rat’s stomach balloons out, which the song refrain narrates as “*Als hätt* ***sie*** *Lieb im Leibe.*” Depending on the stanza, the song refers to the rat as both *sie (she)* and *es (it),* suggesting through the former word that the rat is female, and with the latter that the rat is a thing/it. The line can be literally translated to “as if she had love in her body” *and also* “as if she had love in her womb.” The lyrics suggest that as the rat writhes on the floor, the bloating of the poison resembles the promise of pregnancy. “*As if* she had love in her body” (italics mine, my translations). In Marx’s work, this German sentence was translated by Martin Nicolaus in 1973 to “as though its body were by love possessed.” This translation, with *es* as “it,” flips the literal translation of the line from the German, suggesting that rather than love being inside, a body is trapped, possessed, by love. In the literal translation, love—perhaps a metaphor for new life?—is entrapped in a womb. Yet the honesty of either translation—be it possession (a body possessed by love) or pregnancy (love possessed in a body) is a ruse. The rat *is* poisoned and in her writhing, dies. The

rowdy bar crowd roars with laughter at the irony of the bloated rat who looked pregnant but was, in fact, faced with her own painful death.

Interpreting this line in the context of the storyline of *Faust* adds another layer of meaning. The story told about the rat could be read as serving to metaphorically foreshadow the life trajectory of a central character, Margarete (Gretchen). Courted by the artificially youthful Faust (who achieved his youthful looks thanks to the Devil, who had wagered a bet with God about his ability to seduce a human into making immoral choices), Margarete loses her virginity and becomes pregnant with Faust's child. The pregnancy is illegitimate, and her brother, angry at the loss of his sister's honor, fights with Faust until his death. Margarete is distraught at the death of her brother, who cursed her in his last words. She is haunted by this potent combination of "poisons" that her pregnancy signifies. When she delivers, she kills her infant. For this she's imprisoned for infanticide and goes insane. When Faust comes to the prison to try and convince her to be with him, she refuses, tormented. Afterwards, he is led by the Devil to Hell and she is executed, leaving her soul to the judgment of God.

Similar to the rowdy bar crowd who snicker as they sing of the ironic fate of the rat, the audience reading and/or watching *Faust* bears witness to Margarete's downward spiral after consorting with the Devil. Even while she appears happy, her seduction by Faust leads to her social and psychological death, which the audience observes while Margarete remains oblivious. One could venture that her pregnancy signifies her social and physical poisoning—a poison that manifests inside her as an illegitimate child who will eventually be killed. She is harangued and cursed by her

loved ones for having sexual relations out of wedlock and then physically condemned and executed for killing the infant, seeded by the man who had sold his soul to the Devil. As witnesses to her fated demise, the audience sees that while it seemed as if her pregnancy was the physical manifestation of love—“As if she had love in her body”—it actually portended her death. She was possessed by it, and taken.

The story is significantly ambiguous in terms of the metaphoric meaning for fixed labor in Marx. According to the translation by Nicolaus (1973), the worker is compared to having “its body . . . by love possessed.” This translation falls in line with the meaning that Marx seems to initially suggest is the meaning of fixed capital, which is how the worker’s labor—vital energy—is appropriated, leaving him in possession of something in part himself, but also out of his control (love), through consorting with capital. Here, the machinery is love and the worker is the body and the body is possessed by love—which was once itself and is now changed beyond recognition. *Es* makes sense as a stand-in.

A second translation, the one I did literally from the German, offers another lens to interpret this quote as a metaphor for fixed labor. If the worker’s appropriated labor is defined by “as if she had love in her body,” then the gendered worker is confronted not with the appropriation of vital energy, but with the *tragedy* of having fixed labor appear to appropriate her vital energy, when in fact her bodily labors of reproduction are only a mirage, a farce, as a stand-in for labor power. Her bodily labors remain but are secondary to the conceptualization of her vital energy. The “coarsely sensuous form,” as Marx describes, that her own labor confronts her with in wearing the

mechanical mask of fixed capital, is coarse with contradiction then, and with ambiguity—unfortunately, it's only "*as if*" the love in her body were part of her labor.

It is difficult to know what meaning or interpretation Marx intended to convey with the inclusion of this reference to Goethe's *Faust* in his work. I would like to consider the ambiguity of translations as suggestive of multiple readings and this, too, helps me explain why liminality, and liminal work, are useful concepts to explain what's happening when humans are invisibly laboring "behind the scenes" of a platform such as Content Runner. Though the historical context is different, I argue that the work that's being done by freelancers does liminal work of maintaining thresholds of similar ambiguity. When confronted with a situation where their labor is taken from them, and working alongside it, it's difficult to find an explanatory framework that will explain this tenuous relationship workers thus have with a marketplace animated by humans acting as if they are machines, in limbo. Marx described the transition from handicraft manufacturing to industrial production as an inversion of workers *controlling* their tools to workers *being controlled by* their tools. Recent scholarship on internet activities as "surveillance capitalism" and "digital labor" advances this Marxist tradition of explaining the relationship of labor to the internet as a kind of "fixing" of human interaction into the commodification, prediction, and control of human behavior (Zuboff 2019; Naughton, 2019; Mosco, Vincent 2014; Scholz 2013). Critiques of the economic governing of social life through the marshaling of user-provided data reveal the dangerous effects of using quantification analytics in a commercial system. Both tracking and archiving can become a lens to see the world, and also to govern through it.

The close reading of the ambiguous figuration of the rat, poisoned—and her relation to Margarete, tricked and pregnant—presents a lens through which to recognize how humans relate to themselves as frozen in figurations of fixed labor—not only as control, but to conceptualize online labor in a situation where humans are becoming-*with*, and being in a position of responding *to* (Kember & Zylinska, 2012). I'm suggesting that liminal work is response-*to*, and in this circumstance does maintenance work. The ambiguity introduced in the reference to the legend of *Faust*, and the characters of that story, helps explain how the laboring self is constructed in an ambiguous, dependent, and contextually specific relation *to*, rather than independently of, technologies. Response *to* and becoming *with*, as Kember and Zylinka put it, and as is illuminated in the story of tricked Margarete, is constant and thus central to subjectivity. Freelance writers are emerging with the technologies they use via a process by which they are themselves fixed labors with gendered dependencies.

**The "good" fortune of dependencies**

Who were some of the humans behind the scenes at Content Runner and companies like it, hired as copy editors or ghostwriters? Over the course of the research period, the nearly two dozen freelancers I interviewed and many more whom I got to know indirectly through my own mediated participant-observation—many of whom did more than one kind of writerly work, from copywriting to longform essay

writing—came and went from their posts. The riskiness of freelancing is borne, or not, by freelancers often depending on their personal connections and circumstances. As I described in the introduction, sociologists researching modernity have advanced ideas about how the risks of neoliberal capitalism are shouldered by cultural workers (Beck, 1992; Neff, 2007, 2012). Understanding the risks that freelancers are taking, however, can be confusing, as communicative practices conferring meaning are increasingly commodified (Castells & Castells, 2000; Wark, 1997), and are also structuring the communities to which freelancers belong and the ways that they make sense of themselves and their work, as I will explain in Chapters 3 and 4.

The atomized process of work and the domestic circumstances required to complete it deepen Stephanie Taylor's (2015) argument that the discourse, and practice, of working from home forms a "discursive drift." Indeed, not only does the affirmation rhetoric and imagery about "work-life balance" encourage remote work, those who are able to do remote work may perpetuate gendered inequalities in familial structures and possibly the uneven shouldering of feminine responsibilities for care work. I make sense of this by explaining that the imaginative vision of innovation, enacted through the workings of technologies, is doing *liminal work*.

Writers working on U.S. platforms and writing in English told me they are not always from or currently living in the United States, though the work made sense for them. "I'm very fortunate," said Parvati, a freelance writer in a medium metropolitan city in the U.S., who had worked on multiple marketplaces as a ghostwriter and also pitched stories from India. "My husband has a good job in the tech industry," explained

Veda. Yasmin, from Saudi Arabia, who lived in a large metropolitan U.S. city, said "I am lucky to have a supportive family," crediting them for helping her get on her feet as a writer.

"I worked in the corporate world for a decade," said Diane, who was recently divorced, childless, and lived in a mid-sized U.S. city. "I saved my money and I bought rental properties that generate income," she said. Frida, whom I introduced in the introduction, lived in Florida but had begun freelancing while in Prague, and slowly built a full-time career with the support of her husband, who worked in hospitality services, because remote work helped her be able to manage a chronic health condition and was, she said, exactly what she wanted to do: "I feel very thankful that we're okay financially and we're okay, not great, but okay, and I can live this dream. I know there will be a point that it won't be forever, I'll have to cut down for paid work, but for right now I'm trying to take advantage of the time that I'm giving myself, it's awesome." Like Frida, Ann and Jennifer explained that they had been working in full-time employment for the health insurance, but they were able to move into freelancing because their partners or spouses had jobs with health insurance.

In their recent book on "ghost workers," Mary Gray and Siddharth Suri (2019) argue that the use of freelance and contract services to keep information services working is a good reason to advocate for state-provided financial support and health benefits for self-employed or underemployed humans. My work shows that freelancers tend to take up this kind of work while in marriages or domestic partnerships that allow

them to manage the precarity of freelancing; on the flip side, this kind of dependency makes it difficult to gain the independence promised by the work.

In a popular how-to-be-a-freelance-writer guide published in 2008, referenced by one of my informants, author Robert Bly (2008) both suggests that freelancers need a financial cushion and assures his readers that freelancing is possible for average Joes. He reports that he relied on his own savings to launch his career, with no trust fund and a homemaker wife. His book is animated by examples that presume the freelancer can and should occupy a male subject position, which includes not being responsible for caregiving activities and having someone, a wife-figure, to take care of unpaid household sustenance work. One example of advice for a person working full-time who wishes to transition to freelance writing mentions someone who would write for two hours after working in his study, finishing “when dinner is ready” (Bly, 2008, p. 37). Such advice relies on the heteronormative assumption that *someone else* is serving dinner. This of course could be a male partner, but married heterosexual men are more likely to have full-time jobs than their female partners and less likely to do domestic work.

Orshi owned multiple rental properties, had no children, and was in her sixties when she took up freelance writing. She pitched articles to women’s magazines online, aiming for eye-catching virility so she might gain enough attention in the social media ecosystem to get a book agent and publish a memoir about her relationship with her mother. Orshi credited her financial security and supportive partner for her ability to

take risks. Three years after we spoke, she had published her book and was touring at bookstores.

Meanwhile two young mothers I interviewed, Ana and Blair, explained that they tried to freelance for a time, but did not continue. The work was emotionally difficult and financially unpredictable. “I don’t know how people do this,” said Blair. “I guess I don’t have the money to do this full-time. I think I value my mental health too much. I’d rather work in a café and walk dogs on the side.”

On the other hand, Stephanie Land, a single mother who lived in a homeless shelter as she ran from an abusive relationship, eventually found success in the freelance writing field. After a decade working as a housecleaner, she went back to school to finish her degree in creative writing, and later pitched and published with Vox a first-person essay about her experiences as a cleaner. The essay, which she had first written as a school paper, gained the attention of an agent who helped her land a book deal. Stephanie’s dream, she explains, was to be a writer, but that was impossible for years. She hung on to the dream, and with her degree and a second baby, reports she can support her family freelancing from home in a cozy one-bedroom apartment in Missoula, Montana. Land mulls on whether or not to deepen her education with an MFA degree, noting, though, that she is able to be successful in her freelance work because her writerly community is “not at the bar talking about Raymond Carver over double whiskeys under clouds of cigarette smoke (though sometimes I wish it could be). That community is online, looking up blocked milk ducts, and pumping milk out of engorged breasts like I am, feeling more alone than they've

felt in a long time" (Land, 2014). The difficulties of writing are not only about the precarity of the business or writing in relation to the status of being "prosthetics" to the crowdsourcing machines, but, as I described in my analysis above, they're also about the bodily, financial, and emotional interdependencies that the workers have. "As if she had love in her body" becomes a liability to one's ability to submit her "coarse sensuousness"; to fully participate, is she supposed to kill her infant, as Margarete does? This is not a literal question, but I pose it to acknowledge the tension that women writers face in participating in the paid labor force, which includes laboring with machines and with gendered bodies, in a work environment that rewards the productivity of giving up other aspects of social life and care work to fully focus on the work. "Killing" dependents is a lean-in strategy, while being dependent allows women to "choose" freelancing.

Three freelancers I interviewed did this sort of work between larger projects or full-time positions, returning to full-time work for the consistency and higher pay. Lizzie received a grant to develop an investigative piece on the biotech industry in Appalachia. But the fellowship had limits, so she also worked as a real estate blogger and copywriter online. After two years, she found a full-time job through a creative temp agency, which had become attractive for the health benefits and predictability, giving her the leeway to save money to move out of a group housing complex. Similarly, Jennifer worked as an adjunct educator, posted her profile on crowd work websites, and pitched stories while she looked for full-time work. She planned to scale back on freelancing efforts when she got a full-time job.

Others were able to gain financial independence. For Carla, the choice to freelance was due to the difficulties she faced doing office work as the mother of three, two with disabilities. Carla needed paid work that did not require going into an office regularly. She was supported by a former and new husband to transition to freelance work. She was pleased that the internet afforded her the opportunity to build a portfolio remotely and solicit work. “I don’t think I could have had a job prior to the internet,” she said. “I consider myself very lucky.” She used more than one marketplace and crowd work platform to build her skillset and credentials and to find clients.

Meanwhile, Bella, a self-described shy introvert, explained to me she started freelancing when she was unemployed and going through a divorce. She had worked in an office doing administrative work but found freelancing allowed her to be choosier about her hours and tasks, and gave her the opportunity to be near her two school-age children. She appreciated that she did not have to self-promote or interact with other people on a daily basis, though she did, at one point, accept an office job for the benefits. When she remarried, her new husband extended health benefits to her through his employment, so she transitioned to freelance work again. “I wouldn’t be able to do it without my husband . . .  he carries the benefits, that has been what has allowed me to do this. I wasn’t able to before; I needed the insurance. He has been a big support in that.” Bella also published eBooks, earning passive monthly income through royalties. She says this is a career that makes her happy, and she would not want to go back to office work, though she laments that her teenagers do not always

understand that her working from home is a job. “I think they could give me space and not try and talk to me. I am actually working, I’m not just playing on the computer.”

These subjects’ stories could be evidence, as I mentioned earlier, of a “discursive drift,” (Taylor, 2015) wherein freelance work is a way for women to balance a bad math problem, mapping the “housewife trap” Betty Friedan (2001) identified onto the ideologies of *choosing* to do crowd work. I do also wish to mention that there are freelance writers who are able to earn a steady income and gain financial independence with no additional financial support. However, I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that women who have received financial or in-kind support from family, or who are managing asymmetrical life circumstances, are in some way unworthy of their work, their failures, or successes. That is a view of human dignity as tethered to financial independence that I wish to challenge. My essential aim is to use these stories to illustrate that viewing labor in the context of “choice” or “dependencies” is a frustrating catch. I suggest these difficult or fortunate “personal” conditions shouldered by freelancers are outcomes of the work. Following Felski’s line of thinking, how might women’s varied experiences doing online freelance writing inform theories of digital labor? (Felski, 1995, p. 11) We can see that in becoming-*with* the working conditions and attendant processes of a commercial networked job market, the work itself is a technology reproducing inequalities alongside the platforms through which freelancers labor, and it does liminal work—the maintenance of a threshold.

**Surprise: Not a part of that world**

My behind-the-scenes tour with Smith lasted about an hour. I was looking over his shoulder as he navigated his platform on my laptop. I asked questions and Smith stopped navigating to use his hands to speak. During the tour the "admin" account received three notifications from new freelancers who had submitted applications to the company. Smith didn't explain what he was doing initially. But I watched as he clicked to view the applications and saved the documents into my Downloads folder, reviewing them while I sort of watched—I was uncertain if I should look away—and approving them to get started. He explained after a moment that he was immediately reviewing these applications because he cared about the writers. "By getting back to them right away, I want them to feel taken care of," he said. "It is like [we're] creating our own little world, where these agencies and writers can coexist. That might be a silly analogy, because it's so small, but the ones that are using it, it is important to them. And it's our own world. I always think about what's most fair to the writers, what makes sense . . . . It is a never-ending process." At the end of our tour, he turned the laptop back to me. I closed the lid. I had been taking notes on a notepad and continued to direct my attention to our interview. When the clock struck the top of the hour, I realized I needed to return home to relieve a babysitter. So I initiated a goodbye and thank you.

When I left, I sat in my car in the parking lot and opened my laptop to shut it down, when I noticed something I had intuitively already realized: Smith had not

logged out as “admin” from the backend of Content Runner. The page with the personal details of those freelancers was still open. Unease spread in me. I was in a position of having access to information I did not have permission to look at, and ostensibly I could continue to poke around, copy things, download files. The names, emails, addresses, and tax forms of the three freelancers who had applied to work with Content Runner were saved to my drive. As the thought crossed my mind of what I could potentially do, I immediately thought that Smith might be remembering that he’d failed to log out—and at that very moment could be angry at himself, or me, for that matter, and might accuse me of looking or stealing information without permission, of breaking ethical research boundaries. A wave of panic prickled over me and I flicked my fingers to CLTR-Q to quit the browser. I went to files and erased my browser history and the Downloads folder, then shut down the computer. After a moment, I restarted and opened a new document to draft an email to Smith apologizing for the situation. “I hadn’t realized this was saved on my computer,” I wrote, “but rest assured, it’s all deleted! Thanks for having me.” I reread the message and immediately despised myself for apologizing and for worrying right away about his potential anger rather than simply deleting the information. Yet, I didn’t feel like I had great choices regarding how to respond in that moment and felt unsure what to do next. I decided to wait and think more about what had happened. I saved the email in my notes file, wrote down that I was surprised by the situation, and then turned on pop music loud enough to silence my racing thoughts and drove home.

I want to explore the discomfort I felt using my body as a heuristic tool to help

me get at what was happening in terms of the discursive, imaginative accomplishment of “innovation” and “leadership” on the part of Smith and his company. I consider my body’s responses a heuristic guide following Cerwonka (2007), who used her body as a discursive site through which to assess various ideological commitments and categorical positionalities as a researcher. Following feminist scholarship on “strong objectivity,” I seek not to shift critique into relativism, but to consider how my standpoint and my bodily reactions enable me to feel the pulse of conditions and reproductions of power (Harding, 1991). I then consider my feelings of panic and worry about anger, my stomachache, and the sense of surprise and discomfort I felt as sites to explore for insight into power, given ways in which “erasures, repressions, and disciplines” are embodied discourses (Cerwonka, 2007, p. 35). In this way, I’m recognizing subjective embodiment, which every researcher grapples with, as a field of inquiry through which to discuss cultural ruptures and power dynamics.

**Reading techniques of innovation**

In their critical analysis on innovation, Lucy Suchman and Libby Bishop (2000) explain how “frames” operate in the cultural imaginary of professional business practices. A dominant frame of innovating positions the individual actor (the corporation, the individual) as operating in a field of action wherein they are responding to “survive” in the capitalist economy. Narratives about innovation depict how a protagonist, the innovator, creates a new way of organizing labor practices to

generate profits. While the technologies and organizations may be new, however, Suchman and Bishop note that the resulting organization generally reproduces existing hierarchies between capitalist and labor, preserving existing institutional orders.

I felt surprise and discomfort when Smith discussed the creation of a "little world" and talked about the invisible layers of labor that created it, as I described above. I also felt surprised that he allowed breaches of privacy in a supposed effort to exercise fairness, and I want to argue that this surprise registers a collision of his subjective "frame" on innovation with my own position, which aligns more closely with the freelancers. Fairness, to Smith, seemed to mean at that moment the practice of managing an environment where freelancers have quick and easy access to the platform to ensure they are always available, facilitating the "on-demand" feature of the contemporary information economy. Fairness did not necessarily mean data protection or privacy from a researcher. Over the past decade, as the logics and values of the "platform society" have been adopted by organizations across occupational sectors, commercial values clash with public values and the common good (van Dijck et al., 2018). Indeed, upon reviewing Content Runner's Terms of Use and Privacy Policy contract, accepted through clicking boxes when one creates an account, I see that writers exchange their data and online activities for access and work under a contract that gives the copyright to the buyers (*Privacy Policy*, 2016; *Terms of Use*, 2016).

Smith had already explained to me that in order to understand what writers want and to better serve the marketplace, his team analyzed chat conversations that

took place on his platform between hiring clients (which were sometimes his company) and writers to better understand how they negotiated their needs and what kind of interventions his marketplace could facilitate. This “leads to better service,” he said. In another conversation, I asked him for more information about how he had decided to support a client with a freelance client manager. He explained he had done so because he had observed conflicts arising due to miscommunication between a client and freelancers.

At the time, that made sense, more or less, and I didn’t think too much about how he might have “observed” that tension, but upon later reflection realized he may have read their chat exchanges. Of course he would analyze what was happening on his platform to ensure the freelancers and the clients could have a great experience and come back to work through his platform again—that was a value add of Content Runner as marketplace: convenience and ease. But the logic from his point of view also made me feel uncomfortable. For whom was that great? And who gets to decide? Who gets all the information to make decisions? How much transparency was there? I felt uneasy about the invisible forms of control taking place.

Smith described his approach to leadership as “designing destiny,” for himself and the users of the marketplace. To achieve this, he read; followed tech leaders on Twitter; followed his competitors; reviewed data from users; and used data to make decisions about the design and function of the site, implementing strategies that would make the business a successful venture. This required having a steady stream of freelancers ready for the clients who would join the platform. I was not entirely

surprised by how little Smith mentioned the craft of writing; on the marketplace, craft was slightly auxiliary to the function of the platform that was conceived of as a facilitator of connections, like other marketplaces (Irani & Sengul-Jones, 2015; van Dijck et al., 2018). Nor was I surprised by the various ways that writers were earning income (e.g. the freelancer who published the eBook on ghostwriting). I was uneasy about the lack of transparency for writers about these invisible forms of control, and, considering Smith's efforts to "design destiny," I also was focused on the strategies that writers take up to create a viable world. For fiction writers—particularly those working in the genres of speculative fiction and fantasy—world-building refers to the techniques used to guide a reader to suspend their belief in reality and have an "immersive" encounter with fictional worlds. Techniques include a great deal of imaginative pre-work: writing back stories, researching histories, and figuring out character development—all preliminary work that does not go into the final draft of the story. When the story is delivered, successful writers are applauded for "showing not telling," and for balancing believability and surprise to build trust so readers can be safely delivered into and out of the story. When it is successful, readers are swept in.

Consider freelance writer Rebecca Chace (Chance, 2018) explaining her desire for a fictionalized place in Budapest, Hungary. Chace read works by Magda Szabo, a Hungarian writer, and traveled to Hungary. During her visit she hired a taxi driver to take her to a street she had read about in Szabo's book *Katalin Utca*. When the taxi arrived at Katalin *Utca* (Street), Chace was overwhelmed with a breathless feeling of searching, of looking to locate the sites depicted in the book, desiring to physically

experience the immersion she felt from the story. Registering the impatience of her taxi driver, who was unable to access this world she wished to be in, Chace realized that her longing was going to remain unfulfilled. She was faced with trying to explain—translating literally and figuratively—her desire to experience Szabo's Katalin Street, but found herself at a loss for words. What to say to someone who wasn't involved in Szabo's novel? Her longing to locate a physical space that mapped onto the world she experienced in the book was what brought her to Hungary, and travel became an extension of the satisfaction of being in a world built by another. "Isn't that why we read novels?" Chace said. "To inhabit places as real as our own and *hand over responsibility* for what happens there to the author. I was just as consumed by a longing for Katalin Street as the characters in the novel."

Figurative framings work at the imagination as discursive world-building. Like the impatient taxi driver in Chace's story, I was surprised rather than what might be identified as the effects of interpellation during Smith's behind-the-scenes tour (Althusser, 1971), which revealed the discourses that were not normalized inside my head. Part of this had to do with my discursive and positional identification with freelancers and the contours of my ethnography. The workplace ethnography, what anthropologists have called "studying up" (Suchman, 2007, p. 129), required an "ethnographic sensibility" to gain an understanding of a phenomena across sites. The phenomena I was studying included the workplace where the design was happening and how the role of human and non-human agents, specifically commercial, technological configurations, facilitates freelancing through emotional processes. My

discomfort indexed a misalignment with the innovation process, notably through my reflection on the impression I seemed to have made on Smith.

When Smith reviewed the description of my research project, he read that it involved research on the culture of crowd work and marketplace design. However, he asked if my research was also a job shadow. “Are you interested in starting your own start-up, or in making a name for yourself as a reporter or writer about start-ups?” he asked. I said, “Well, at this time, my work is a cultural mapping of how people do things and my aim is to write a dissertation, perhaps eventually a book.” He understood, he said, but asked me to keep him in the loop if I published anything sooner. His suggestion that I might be interested in getting involved in his line of work led me to wonder further about his having openly reviewed freelancers on my computer. Private companies are generally concerned with protecting trade secrets and proprietary information, in addition to maintaining professional ethics.

Perhaps he was forgetful. But what made him feel forgetful around me? Did he think I didn’t understand, or wouldn’t know how to manipulate or change, the content management system they had used to develop their website? Or perhaps he thought I did understand, and he trusted, based on our interactions, that my presence as a guest in the office was affirming to him, and that I would do no harm. My aim, of course, was to be a respectful researcher.

Perhaps he simply did not see me as threatening. It’s possible my ingrained gendered, White feminine bodily behaviors, including note-taking and polite affirmations (e.g. “Wow, that looks like a lot of work”; “So interesting, go on”) cast me

in the role of therapist, which reaffirmed his position as boss. At the end of our time, he told me he really enjoyed having me and felt he "learned something by our conversations." I was surprised by that comment, since the research was one-sided, in that I wasn't doing action-research or seeking collaboration. I had asked questions—I wasn't there to instruct and shared little information about myself or my subject-matter expertise. But the act of asking questions and listening is not innocent and became an opportunity for him to be heard, to reflect, and learn about himself through being observed. The conversation he was referring to was himself speaking to an attentive audience of one. My surprise guides me to the rupture between his "frame" and perspective on innovation and mine.

This rupture signals how the figure of the innovator is accomplished. I felt effaced in my identification with freelancers and also in the sense of apology and shame I felt when my computer was used. Lilly Irani's work on "entrepreneurial citizenship," with an ethnography of Indian design professionals, explains how the "myth" of the entrepreneur is significant to the reproduction of cultures of innovation. Irani advances Bennett Berger's concept of "ideological work" to explore how the "myth" of the innovator is taken up by software designers through their interactions via an interface of coding and screens. The "lines of code," coding events, and the hopefulness of the programmers facilitate asymmetrical hierarchies of labor, because the myth of the entrepreneur as fair and changing the world for the better allows the programmers to believe they are in a place of choice and equality. Berger discusses myth as ideological currency. "Austerity is no barrier; in myth, entrepreneurs are fueled

by nothing more than perseverance, empathy, and resourcefulness in the face of adversity or injustice” (Irani, 2019, p. 2).

Myths are often juxtaposed as *opposed to* the real, the factual, signaling a positivist view of meaning. Berger discusses how myths have historically been a slippery way to co-opt stories for legitimation of power:

> Although I am less interested in the history of ideas than the sociology of ideas the business of myth has always been about legitimation, an attempt to create moral capital out of available ideological resources (meager or abundant) to justify action, to dignify motive, to transform interests into justice, privilege into right, fake into virtue, power into authority (Berger, 1979, p. 124).

This line of thinking about myths suggests that the ways human stories morph over time and place is hinged to ideologies: the cultural wrappers that help people make sense of how economic structures affect daily life. Roland Barthes in his book *Mythologies* ([1957] 2006) adopts a similar position in his explanation of modern myths as propagating—broadcasting—practices of society that support ideologies of the ruling class and its media (cited in Bradley, 2010, p. 98). A subtle transformation of bourgeoise cultural ideological values to mythologies happens through what Barthes calls “second-order signifiers,” wherein the signs do not appear to be myths to their consumers, but are naturalized (Barthes & Lavers, 2006). This quality of myths is powerful because of their role in society as stories of spirituality, as ways of thinking and being as cyclical. “In the pre-modern world a myth was an event that happened once, but which also happened all the time,” writes religion scholar Karen Armstrong (2006, p. 7).

Myths, as semiotic vehicles of ideology, offer yet another route, a cultural

wrapper, through which to make sense of the world. This way of thinking mythically has productively been taken up in Black literary criticism, such as in the work of Hortense Spillers (1987), who describes "mythic time," borrowing from Barthes, to confront the ways that dominance emerges not in a progressivist manner. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's interpretation of myth, which is in conversation with Spillers, stresses the possibilities of intervening in narratives and myths of domination, using the "register of myth" (Jackson, 2016, p. 7). In her work, Jackson challenges the epistemic primacy of the liberal world-historical order and, centrally, the novel as the primary fixture and symbol of "Culture" since the Industrial age. She argues for taking up and taking seriously mythology as "a non-representationalist mode of reason or onto-epistemology," a powerful way to unsettle "hegemonic modes of racist reality and their constituent myths" (Jackson, 2016, p. 8). Thus, as a part of my effort to "study up," (Suchman, 2007, p. 129) I'm turning to using the mythic as a heuristic by reading a folktale as a way of attempting to explain my ethnographic story, the conditions of innovation, and the liminal work that happens in reproducing the freelancer as an entrepreneurial subject in relation to the innovator.

My upset stomach hadn't completely subsided by the time I arrived at my home after the tour. But due to the work of parenting young children, I found myself thinking through the experience while reading out loud a Disney version of a folktale. My partner and I had received gifts from friends and family after the birth of our second child, including a Disney treasury of folktales retold with Mickey Mouse as the protagonist of every story. The large print and bright illustrations featuring these

caricatured animals interested my older toddler, who dragged the book over for me to read. So there I was reading the story of "The Elves and the Shoemaker," featuring Mickey and Minnie Mouse, and it cast in new light the meaning of my affiliation with freelancers and my discomfort with Smith's tour of his marketplace on my laptop.

Allow me to retell the Disney version of the tale to explain the connections I made with it (Disney Book Group, 2013, pp. 159-171). In this version of the story, a shoemaker, Mickey Mouse, falls on hard times and isn't able to make shoes. One night, Mickey lays out his last piece of leather on the work bench and goes to sleep believing he will not be able to make a living any longer. In the morning, however, he wakes to a surprise. There on the bench are beautiful shoes made from the leather! They sell for a high price and Mickey is able to buy more leather to make more shoes. For the next week, every night, he lays out the leather on the workbench. Every morning the leather has been transformed into new shoes. After seeing his success, and beginning to believe in himself again, Mickey—prompted by his wife, Minnie—decides to stay up late to see where the magical pairs of shoes are coming from. He discovers that nearly naked elves have been laboring to make the beautiful shoes! Minnie decides to sew new clothes for the elves as a gift, and Mickey offers them to the elves, interrupting their tasks. The elves are just delighted and they dance happily clothed. Then they go on to help Mickey and Minnie by continuing to make shoes for them, inviting their friends to join, and they all live happily ever after.

The Brothers Grimm version of this story has a different ending (Grimm, 1884), which, upon further inquiry, I found related to the cultural critic Lewis Hyde's

interpretation of a story as a parable for the psychic process of higher thinking (Hyde, 1980). The Brothers Grimm version recounts the experience of a shoemaker and his wife who fall on hard times, despite their efforts. After laying his last piece of leather on the workbench and going to sleep, the shoemaker wakes to find beautiful shoes in his workshop—what a gift! They sell quickly and the shoemaker uses the money from the sale to buy beautiful leather to make another pair. He falls asleep and wakes to find, again, an extraordinary pair of shoes. After this happens for a week, the shoemaker and his wife stay up late to find out where these beautiful shoes are coming from. They discover that naked elves have been making them and decide they must show their gratitude by sewing clothes for the elves. Upon receiving their new clothes, the elves are delighted and run away—never to return. But by this time, the shoemaker has realized that, as a shoemaker, he is capable of carrying on this work, and he goes on to successfully make many more wonderful pairs of shoes.

Through the act of clothing the elves, the shoemaker recognizes them as real, as clothing is a symbol of social legitimation—the process of becoming a part of culture, of being named and recognizable. In addition, the clothes signify incorporation (corporality as body). But, through the shoemaker's recognition, the elves disappear as incorporation: they are a part of the shoemaker now; he has named and embodied his creative skill to make shoes. (I'm not sure about his wife's role in this story, except to be relegated to providing support.) It is not incidental that the elves' clothing and disappearance coincides with the moment he finds that he has the ability to make such shoes.

Liminality, as a state of transition, according to Hyde, can be moved through with a gift—the gift of naming, of recognition, incorporation—which allows for a safe passage from the ambiguity of being in-between states. The *gain* of creativity is possible with giving the *gift of release*, submission to the process (i.e., a novice becomes an expert). Hyde's work, also taking up liminality from van Gennep, argues that "threshold gifts," to honor life passages, such as the passing of flowers or food over coffins, or gifts at marriage, after birthing, and at graduations, are important for moving out of liminality. He identifies how these "gifts" can be figurative, offering a new conceptualization of creativity, for instance, as a "genius," in that it is not conceived within a person, but rather achieved by *crossing a threshold* through giving. "The Ancients," Hyde remarks, namely describing the classical civilizations of Ancient Greece and Rome, identified creative faculties as emerging when a person recognizes their tutelary spirit, a *genii*, through respect of their external powers and gift-giving (Hyde, 1983, p. 53). Genius then becomes *incorporated* (integrated into the body of) the person through recognition, with a gift, of respect and submission.

In the Disney version of the fable, however, the elves are never set free, but ambiguously remain, and invite their friends to help. The ending suggests not only that the elves are stuck in bondage (a genie chained to his kettle), but that more elves join, increasing production. The Shoemaker is trapped, stuck to them, stuck in the threshold, remaining mythic in liminality. The Disney version of the story creates value through the absorption of labor, the bondage of the elves, and the loss of the metaphor, because the liminality is ongoing, never moved through—now, it is liminal

work, the maintenance of the threshold. This is the literal—not figurative—bondage of others that the genius of innovation requires. In this retelling, what can be read as a parable for the mysteries of the psyche (how creativity and higher thinking take place) is also a *manual* or instructional guide for achieving genius through dependence on reproductive, racialized, and feminized labor: the bondage of subservient, but allegedly happy, elf-workers who are clothed (named)—but not released. As discussed earlier, the "frame" of the innovator positions capitalist innovation to design new ways to create value. This recycling of the story of the shoemaker—adapted as it is to forever after imprison the elves—attempts in a mythic way to give meaning to the daily practices of entrepreneurs. Writer Jeffery Tucker (2015), for instance, similarly provides a version of this story as a parable for capitalism.

Reading this Disney tale after my experience with Content Runner gave me an *aha* moment. I could make sense of the story I'd heard from Smith, who described his work as an entrepreneur as a generous, creative act of world-building for others, the writers who needed him. This folktale helped me to describe why "liminal work" as a concept makes sense for understanding networked configurations of "digital labor" and their attendant subjectivities and effects. Identifying these processes as doing liminality, creating circumstances of repeated ambiguity that are not moved through, helps us/me see the need to carefully recognize the intersubjective process of creativity, which, as I will describe in Chapter 3 and 4, involve what Turner calls *communitas,* a sense of community among those who occupy the subject position, and to find ways to enact release, to transition through liminality. This is difficult because of

the impalement of a need for recognition and submission/release by the technologically mediated ("fixed labor") and hardened commodity exchange of the networked information economy.

The design and management of a marketplace, through invisible forms of work, creates a story of innovation that reinforces the way that an innovator is operating a field of action wherein they must respond to "survive" in the capitalist economy. To respond is to create change and do activities in a different way, but it nonetheless reproduces structures of power and creates new formations of labor and profit. My effort here has been to investigate the way the story of innovating is told; the work of a platform then becomes a kind of "transmedia" storytelling. Jenkins (2007) describes the expansiveness of transmedia storytelling as not located within a specific plot or character, but through the "different pleasures" of being in a world "which always expands beyond our grasp" (para. 4). Jenkins is explaining how fictional worlds are co-created by multiple fans using a variety of media. I take this up as a way of thinking about discourse, and activities of innovation, as a world "that's always beyond our grasp." In this world writers and innovators labor, in tension, to create up against their dependencies, decisions, values, norms, and the interfaces that are designed and used to separate out the labor of those humans who are standing in for machines from the innovators and designers who are able to maintain distance from this sort of servitude. My definition of liminal work, unpacked here through a reading of legend and folk tale, uses Jackson's call to take mythology seriously to explain how the imaginative process of creating and inhabiting an entrepreneurial subjectivity

reproduces forms of domination. Liminal work is what is accomplished by humans responding *to* fixed technologies, becoming-*with* (Kember & Zylinska, 2012)—sometimes "behind the scenes," as prosthetics to machines—but as humans always becoming-*with*, through the complex ways that meaning is attributed to systems and changes over time.

## Concluding remarks

This chapter addresses the intersections of discourses, designs, and practices of innovation in crowd work, effects on freelance workers, and theories about labor, with stories and ethnographic readings of technologies of work to develop the concept of liminal work. I take up Jackson's (2016) discussion of "mythic time" as an onto-epistemological nonrepresentational framework to deepen conceptualizations of labor and work as unifying. By rereading stories of my own ethnographic impressions about the invisible layers of work built into the structure of the crowd work writing platform, presenting an interpretative rethinking of a reference in Marx, and considering my informants' descriptions of the personal circumstances that enabled them to freelance, I argue that liminal work captures the specific ways that the subject position of freelancers is figured in relation to their own relationships to the platforms they use. This exists in unhappy limbo between social dependencies, discourses about the smartness of AI, and the "world-building" intentions of the figure of the innovator and owner. Liminal work gives me a vocabulary to arrest situations that yoke subordination

and imagination, empowerment and performance. In the next chapter, I will discuss how the effort among freelance writers to guarantee representation of themselves as legal authors in relation to commercial database vendors through copyright claims resulted in a “win” for writers, who were conferred copyright, but ultimately were left subordinated to the dominance of commercial profit models as bulwarks of the public’s freedom to access. Legal efforts seeking to affirm ownership through copyright worked against freelance writers working online. Moreover, the effort centered the figure of the legal, liberal autonomous subject as the conduit to control, but for ever diminishing returns.

## Chapter 2: A gendered prehistory of freelance work platforms

On Sunday, September 23, 1990, *The New York Times* published an article titled “Remembering Jane,” by memoirist Mary Kay Blakely, in the *Her* column of the national edition of the paper. The essay, published on page 26, with a jump to 78, reflects on a video recording of a young woman in the parking lot of an abortion clinic in Fort Wayne, Indiana. In the video, the woman wears a large box over her head as protection from the terrorizing tactics of the anti-abortion group Operation Rescue; members of the group confront her with taunts as she crosses the parking lot to the clinic for care.

Above the three columns of text, an illustration by contemporary artist Sandra Filippucci features a female figure with her upper body covered by a large box, surrounded by signs and images that evoke anti-abortion protesters. Because the eyes and face in the illustration are hidden, the shadowy figure is available as a stand-in for a woman who has been, may be, or might become pregnant at a time she does not wish to be. Above her boxed head the words “killer,” “murderer,” and “death” loom from faces embodying these messages as the presumptive speakers: their mouths obscenely open, as if to spew anger. Advertisements for classical music and jewelry appear to the left of the column and illustration. To the right is a full-page advertisement for Chanel perfume.

I accessed *The New York Times* digital archives containing this article in the fall of 2018 on my laptop computer screen in my living room using a personal subscription

to *The New York Times*. I could also access the article using a third-party database, via the subscription available from UC San Diego, but that does not include a visual scan of the print edition containing the illustration and advertisement. With my personal subscription to *The New York Times* archive, I lingered to look at the Sunday broadsheet from decades ago, gazing at the columns of words and noting the visual asymmetry of the perfume bottle on page two, as large as the woman's boxed-over body on the other side of the sheet. Laura Mulvey (1975) might say this juxtaposition creates a visual parallel between consuming perfume and consuming images of women, because both are symbolically serving as passive objects subjected to the "male" subject position's "gaze": a visual act that reproduces patriarchal relations in society. On one side, the masked woman's body is presented as a critique. Blakely's article assesses how the contemporary social order—including the courts and law enforcement—has failed women seeking a "safe, legal abortion," allowing them to be degraded, dehumanized. The angry crowd of Operation Rescue activists verbally assaulted a woman who was acting within her constitutional rights while "passive and mounted" law enforcement officers looked on. This is the "modern, psychological equivalent of a stoning," Blakely writes. Her column aims to raise awareness about a paradox. In the United States, women have the constitutional right to access abortion on the grounds of privacy. But it's also socially and legally permissible for her to be threatened and verbally assaulted as she seeks to exercise her right to privacy. Meanwhile, politicians make statements blaming women for getting pregnant in the first place. "The attitude that women alone should be punished for sex is still very

much with us," Blakely writes. "As Virginia Kendall of Louisville, Kentucky, told a poll taker for *USA Today*: 'A woman's right begins with herself—her right not to get pregnant. If she does, don't expect the public to help her. She danced; let her pay the piper.'"

This article, and my encounter with it, serves as an example of the argument I want to make about freelance writing in the post-2008 recession era as rooted in a longer history of feminist struggles. Though not mentioned in her article, Blakely's piece itself was part of another gendered struggle: the effort to maintain authorial authority and receive compensation for digital reprints from additional redistribution with online services. Blakely published this essay in *The New York Times* in a special section created specifically for freelance articles relevant to women's experiences and struggles in the wake of the 1970s "women's liberation movement." Her article on the threats to women seeking abortion was reprinted later, without her authorization and with no additional compensation. As a consequence, she was one of five defendants in the largest class-action lawsuit for freelancers who sought to uphold authorial rights for their works—New York Times Co. v. Tasini, 533 U.S. 483 (2001)—which was filed in 1992, renamed, and decided in 2011.[3]

The message of the article's content, and the contest around the labor that went into it, is relevant to the constraints that freelance women writers in the post-recession era face. I recover and contextualize the struggles that women freelance writers

[3] Defendants (Authors) were Jonathan Tasini, Mary Kay Blakely, Barbara Garson, Margot Mifflin, Sonia Jaffe Robbins, and David S. Whitford.

encounter both in crafting their narratives and in the processes and labors that shape their working conditions, which is a necessary prehistory to the ways that online freelancing does liminal work in the period of my research. In what follows, I do a critical reading of the case and its reception. In the lawsuit, freelancers succeeded in confirming their right to property copyrights for their writing. But this gain came with a loss, in that authorial rights became pitted against the public's freedom to access information. Freelancers' authorial rights came to be understood as impinging on "free" public access, a negotiation that unfolded through interpretations of the gendered jurisdiction of library staff, who were marginalized as well, and the value of commercial database vendors and their predecessors—internet search companies and tech industries—which were valorized as purveyors of informational freedom. This chapter centers the marginalized work of information service providers, namely librarians, as relevant to the story of freelance work today, and contributes to my overall argument of freelance writing online as liminal work by demonstrating how freelancers are positioned as betwixt and between subject positions through which to claim agency and authority.

## From e-lancer to freelancer

In 1998, Beerud Sheth, an MIT-trained computer scientist, Wall Street trader, and immigrant from Mumbai, India, started a company called Elance (Mitra & Sheth,

2015).[4] The purpose of Elance was to make human services “more liquid” in the global economy, Sheth said. As an Indian, he knew millions of talented people in India, but sourcing services globally was uncommon. Technology, he decided, had the potential to change that. “I remember our early versions of the presentation,” said Sheth in a 2015 interview with Sramana Mitra, also an MIT computer scientist and entrepreneur. “We’d say that services [are] 60% of the world GDP.” Elance sought to distribute freelance work opportunities electronically, and it was one of the late-1990s companies that survived the dot-com bust. In 2013, Elance acquired its marketplace competitor oDesk, rebranding as Upwork in 2015 and going through a public IPO in October 2018.

When it began twenty years ago, however, Elance was a “technology” start-up company, in that it was the dominion of computer scientists and business people, not human resources companies. Sheth credits an influential article about the future of work, “The Dawn of the New E-lance Economy,” (Malone & Laubacher, 1998) published in *Harvard Business Review*, as inspiration for the company’s name and focus on a services marketplace, which he sought to build using the tools of computer science (Mitra & Sheth, 2015). The article was written by MIT economics professors Thomas Malone (who in 2004 published *The Future of Work*) and Robert Laubacher and describes a not-too-distant future with a new economic order where markets are flexible—the e-lance economy—the antithesis of midcentury corporations. Sheth

[4] Sheth co-founded Elance with Srinivas Anumolu and Sanjay Noronha, also Indian immigrants.

reached out to Malone about his venture, and Malone would end up serving on the board of Elance.

The e-lance economy is presented as a new concept by Sheth, but, as Ursula Huws points out in her work on outsourcing, information communication technologies and communication practices have been at the center of the global trend of neoliberal deregulations and commodification of labor since the midcentury (Huws, 1999a, 2014). Industrialized countries have developed supranational relationships and offshore manufacturing. Vertically-integrated corporations have been slowly reorganizing, a process typified by the shifting boundaries between paid and unpaid work and the commodification of services (Huws, 1999, p. 34). The “liquid” economy of the late 1990s was not a brand-new idea, but rather a result of both an intensification of connections across information communication technologies (namely the World Wide Web) and changes in the organization and regulation of labor markets. The concept of an “e-lancer” captures how this “new” way of doing work unfolded but was in tension with the experiences of freelance writers working during the period. The story Sheth tells about the inspiration behind Elance captures a moment when changes in expectations and practices that cultural industry workers had with employers were undergoing complicated shifts. As I will discuss, these expectations and practices would evolve through negotiations about technologies that the public used to access information.

The model for Malone and Laubacher’s “e-lance” worker is not a freelance writer who starts to work with electronic formations of writing as the “e-lance”

conjunction might suggest (Salamon, 2016). Malone and Laubacher used the Finnish free software writer Linus Torvald, when he was 22, as the model for an e-lancer. When Torvald was a computer science student in Finland, he developed the Linux operating system (OS) kernel with support from thousands of programmers (sometimes called hackers), some of whom were a part of the GNU movement.[5] No one had directly assigned him the task; Linux is a derivative of his name, Linus. Malone and Laubacher celebrate the ingenuity of this seemingly self-motivated process of collaborative, distributed work by suggesting that a new culture of work could and should be developed, casting Torvald in the lead position. But was Torvald a model for businesspeople managing database companies; entrepreneurs like Sheth; or for e-lancers, the "new" freelancers?

In 1998, active freelancer writers where focused on the ways their writing and work processes were being adapted to online environments. Writers actively sought to represent themselves in policy decisions around the adoption of electronic distribution processes, and they were notably represented by the National Writers Union. In the early 1990s, six writers, including Blakeley, whose work on abortion rights I described above, were named in a legal conflict with prominent news media publishers and commercial electronic database companies, some of which were, and would be in the future, friendly to free software and the rise of the "sharing" and "gig" economy for low-paid workers and freelancers. With New York Times Co. v. Tasini case, freelance

[5] GNU is a recursive acronym for "GNU is not UNIX." Unix is a proprietary system; Linux might be considered an independently fashioned copy of it. (Stallman, 1985, p. 163).

writers were seeking legal confirmation that they were the copyright owners of their work and, drawing on that definition of copyright as their property, they sought to be compensated for the recirculation of their writing when it was redistributed to electronic databases after print publication. Led by the NWA's president at the time, Jonathan Tasini, who was also a plaintiff, the suit filed complaints against *The New York Times*, Mead Data Central Corporation (which had previously developed and owned LexisNexis), University Microfilms, *Newsday*, and *Time*, Inc. The defendants were accused of selling archives to vendors—either outright or by subscription—without any payment to freelancers, who by contract were only granted first American rights of circulation. Among the articles that were presented as unauthorized for redistribution was the piece by Blakely (Freeman, 2001, p. 51).

Authorship, Michel Foucault has convincingly argued, does not reside in a person; it is a function of discourse (Foucault, 2015). Let's contrast the figure of Linus Torvald with the figure of Mary Kay Blakely, who can continue to stand-in for the struggles of active freelancers seeking to confirm ownership of their writing in an emerging online economy. While they are not the only examples, nor is this the only pivotal moment in the interlocking histories of news media writing work and the workings and culture of digital online database distribution vendors and companies, I have chosen this particular debate as a lens to examine how struggles for authority among freelance writers intersected with, and were in opposition to, debates about commercial databases providing access to knowledge in the United States at this time.

I argue that these polarities were made on the basis of conflicting definitions of freedom of access and freedom to create.

Torvald in particular is an interesting, ambiguous model for the “e-lancer.” On one hand, he voluntarily developed the Linux kernel operating system, and was not directly hired to do so nor paid directly for these efforts. Such a move could situate him as an ideal subject of postindustrial capitalism, doing work not unlike the “free labor” of forum moderators or fan communities that Tizziana Terranova (2004) describes in her work on free labor and the content of digital culture. Indeed, in her book *Network Culture*, Terranova evaluates Claude Shannon’s 1948 paper, “A Mathematical Theory of Communication.” Decentering the dominant theory that information is simply the “content” of communication work, she re-centers the work of generating, managing, and organizing content as the example of immaterial labor.

Torvald released the kernel, as is typical with the F/OSS software movement, under a copy-left license—he used a GNU public license wherein he granted others the right to use, modify, and share the code, even commercially, provided they release their products under the same license and share source code (not machine code). In order to claim the right to give a GNU license to his work, Torvald is claiming authorship, appealing to the same legal form of ownership as freelance writers.

Yet, as writers seeking to be paid directly for their work and more concretely control the redistribution, they are seemingly the reverse of the ideal e-lancer. These layers of contradictory figuration become meaningful as cultural and socio-technical

struggles unfold around the jurisdiction of software code writing, narrative writing, hosting, and sharing.

Thus this chapter unfolds a layer of this struggle through an analysis of over a dozen responses to The New York Times v. Tasini; the subsequent class action lawsuit The Reed Elsevier Inc. v. Irvin Munchnik, seeking damages for writers; and an *Amici Curiae* written by members of Net Coalition and the Computer & Communication Industry Association, among information professionals and news media. The analysis that follows captures how the ambiguity of freelance writing and authorial ownership emerged. The gendered, de-professionalized experience of the freelance writer that I describe was prefigured in these debates about public access and commercialization, including the sidelining of the jurisdiction of library staff, which shaped the development of the commercial open web in the United States. Competing claims to authorial rights and debates about freedom of access position freelancers as "betwixt and between" frameworks and languages through which to claim agency. This lays the foundation for freelance work to do liminal work, as the effort to gain authority toggles between empowerment feminism and marginality.

**On archeology as method**

As I described in the introduction, my project uses an interpretative ethnographic sensibility. This chapter uses archeological methods, developed through the practice of discursively tracing, dusting, ruminating, and connecting a shadow to

an object: database technology in relation to the figure of the freelancer. It came about after I'd completed my ethnographic work and felt pulled to look beyond the sites and instances of tensions and reports of screened freelance platform work, following Lucy Suchman's framework that "takes interface not as an a priori or self-evident boundary between bodies and machines but as a relation enacted in particular settings that shift over time" (2007, p. 265). Less visible struggles for authority and labors take place behind the scenes of freelancing work through a screen. I look to how competing claims to the value of copyright and freelancers' authorial rights came to oppose values of freedom of access, positioning freelancers as betwixt and between legal and discursive frameworks through which to claim agency. Freelancers today inherit these tensions and ambiguities in the subject positions they can occupy, as they are asked to give up authorship legally, or earn it through virility and likes, both of which ennoble the neoliberal subject that gives little space for differences.

Media archeology is a framing device wherein I can unfold interconnected, non-obvious embodied practices that have animated processes of computing in relation to the experiences of creative workers from the 1960s through the early 2000s. As a method, media archeology focuses on theorizing "media cultures as sedimented and layered, a fold of time and materiality" (Parikka, 2012). In following mediation through folds, Michel Foucault's archaeologies of knowledge is a touchstone orientation: my process herein involves digging around and following threads to understand how an object's shadow—in this case a search database—becomes a reasonable solution to providing public access to information (Parikka, 2012, p. 3). As a whole, the chapter

surfaces discussions, processes, and images evoking the politics of access. In the first part of the chapter, I look to the midcentury United States, when alliances between military and commercial enterprises led vendors to seek legitimation for their activities and products. This worked in fits and starts, as database vendors brought to life a new way of accessing knowledge, often through bringing love-seat-sized machines into the spaces of research and corporate libraries. I read the language, a prominent popular culture feature film reference, and recover seemingly invisible work of often unnamed women librarians who worked as Searchers, operators of databases. I explain how vendors justified the barely visible legibility of a “user” as a stand-in for the public. The marginalization of librarian’s labor is part of the gendered, taken-for-granted history of library work, within the larger history of information professionals.

In the second part of the chapter, I return to the figure of the free software writer evoked in the introduction to this chapter in order to draw connections between discourses of “freedom” that enabled certain commercial decisions about authorship and authority to take place. We see two distinct, complementary notions of freedom come into conversation: freedom *from intervention*—which materializes in decisions made by news media about both print and web development, as well as freedom *from* intervention more generally—and *freedom to* speech, manifested in free software culture.

Again, in traversing this history, I do not take for granted the persistence of a stable subject; rather, I use this opportunity to mine how subject positions are the outcome of many layers of relationships and discourses at work, situating freelancers

betwixt and between languages through which to claim agency. Materials I analyze in this chapter include secondary references about Supreme Court cases, information and reference librarian trade publications, publications in computing, oral histories conducted and hosted by the Digital Riptide project at the Shorenstein Center at the Harvard Kennedy School, and the 1957 film *Desk Set*.

**Database vendors and freelance writing**

Public and university libraries historically purchased, collected, stored, and shared newspapers and other documents; corporations and governmental agencies run their own in-house libraries and archives (in news media, this archive is called "the morgue"). The long postwar period in the United States was a time of business development and expansion for information processing vendors. Many of their first clients were libraries. Library professionals have called the midcentury through late 1970 "online before the internet." During this time, news media companies began to build relationships with database and library vendors, which predated, and subsequently framed, their relationships with internet vendors. In a 2013 interview, Caroline Little, now president and CEO of the Newspaper Association of America, described her work as a lawyer with *US News and World Report*, owned by Mort Zukerman, in the mid-1990s when digital content contracts were first coming to her desk. Little recalls that when the organization received the first AOL contract, "we

actually thought it was another library database contract. We didn't pay much attention to it" (Sagen & Huey, 2013).

From the 1970s-80s, commercial vendors used military technology and funding to build, organize, and procure the rights to circulate databases for paying subscribers. One of these companies was Mead Data Central, developer of LexisNexis, and one among a number of companies that in the early 1970s and later would be involved in legal suits against freelancers. To build up a suite of databases services, Mead Data Central established business relationships with organizations to procure their content, including medical classification data; bibliographic data; legal data; and abstracts of full-length texts, which Mead Data Central would organize into database libraries and sell access to via subscriptions.[6] As a database vendor, Mead Data Central provided a subscription-based "computer-assisted" research service to information seekers.

In 1993, freelancers argued the sale violated their rights as independent contractors, which granted only first North American serial rights (FNASR) to publications.[7] The Copyright Act of 1976 on for hire differentiates three categories of ownership rights. The first concerns employees, whose employers maintain copyright of their creative works. The second is for-hire workers, considered independent contractors who contractually give their rights to their contracting party. The third

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[6] See *International Directory of Company Histories*; see also McGill, G. M., "Mead Data Central's Vision of the Future," LEXIS 20th Anniversary, Dayton, Ohio: Mead Data Central, Inc., (1993, pp. 9-11).
[7] In the 1980s, the standard contract for freelancers working with periodicals included the licensing of "first North American serial rights" (FNASR), offering the publisher one-time publication rights for use of an article in the North American market. The author retained all other rights, including reprints and foreign uses. Maureen O'Rourke cites a document published by the American Society of Journalists and Authors on "Historical perspectives" (2003, p. 606).

category applies to independent contractors, who, unlike employees and for hire workers, automatically retain copyright to their own work, unless specified by a written contract (Copyright Office, 2012). When *The New York Times* sold its archives from 1980 on to the Mead Data Central, which in turn resold access via subscriptions to users, the freelancers were not compensated. The legal suit was on behalf of an estimated 27,000 freelancers, who contributed approximately 100,000 articles to the national legacy newspaper between 1980 and 1995 (Kirkpatrick, 2001).

New York Times Co. v. Tasini spent nearly two decades in litigation. It was first heard by Judge Sonia Sotomayor in 1997, who ruled on the side of the publishers. Their defense was they were acting in accordance with the Copyright Act of 1976, which allows for a "revision" privilege of collective works. The inclusion of individual works in electronic databases, the publishers claimed, was permissible because they appeared and were reproduced as a part of a collective whole, the newspaper. The freelancers appealed the decision and in 2001, the case was heard before the Supreme Court, which reversed the earlier ruling. Judge Ruth Bader Ginsberg wrote the 7-4 Supreme Court syllabus conferring that freelancers had their contracts violated because an electronic database is not just a *copy* of collective works. Users experience the works *differently* in a database.

Ginsberg laid out how users access articles using databases. Access is not the same as a reprint available in the archive (a saved physical copy of a whole newspaper), but rather databases are distinct. "Users search the universe of their contents, thousands or millions of files containing individual articles from thousands of

collective works (i.e. editions)" (The New York Times vs. Tasini. 533 U.S. 483, 2001, p. 485). The searching experience is unique from the reading experience of using a microfilm machine to view a copy of a newspaper. This analysis of the medium-specific differences between databases and print newspapers led to the court ruling that the sale was a new publication. Indeed, this decision was consistent with the 1980 addition to the Copyright Act of 1976, which was updated to include software writing as a form of creative expression protected by law. Software fell under the category of "literary works," the expression of an idea, thus landing software side by side with music and fiction. Freelancers won their right to compensation.

Based on this ruling, three subsequent class action lawsuits merged into one*:* In *Re: Literary Works in Electronic Databases Copyright Litigation,* which after an appeal was renamed *The Reed Elsevier, Inc. v. Muchnick* and sometimes called by the shorthand *Freelancers*, the plaintiffs sought monetary damages for hundreds of thousands of freelancers who had their works published in databases without their permission and for no compensation. After numerous appeals, including claiming that the court did not have the jurisdiction to award monies for works that were not officially registered with the U.S. Copyright (which led to a rename for the case as *Reed Elsevier, Inc. v. Muchnick*), the court ruled in support of the authorial jurisdiction of freelance writers to be compensated for these contractual breeches. In 2017, checks were in the mail: eleven years after the Tasini case was resolved and more than two decades after the case was first filed (Albanese, 3018). Irvin Muchnik, a writer and representative of the National Writers Union, issued a statement after the decision

supporting freelance writers to continue to resist subordination by publishers, news media organizations, and databases. Intermediaries cannot sell work without permission, he said; all involved deserve compensation. "Revenues from new digital media must be distributed in accordance with the law, and must be based on full negotiations involving all the stakeholders" ("'Freelance' Copyright Class Action Settlement Approved—13 Years After Supreme Court's 'Tasini' Ruling, Nine Years After Muchnick Slate Objected to Terms," 2014, para. 9). The courts were affirming that the purpose of U.S. copyright law is to reward authors with economic incentives to ensure the creation of new works.

**Economic crisis in news media**

But this verdict was not a victory, as this next section explores, though it is no way a comprehensive analysis of intellectual property in the digital age.[8] Rather, I use this case to attend to the responses—examples of discursive negotiations about the conditions, technologies, and labors of speech for the benefit of the public that happened during a twenty-year-long period and had material-discursive impacts. Politics of speaking, and listening, are never only about who is speaking; nor is authorship a direct conduit to understanding the thoughts of a person, or even a reasonable way to capture the creative process. Disability studies and cultural-

[8] See Boyle, 2010; Vaidhyanathan, 2003 for two comprehensive reviews.

historical communication scholars have developed theories of mind that show us how knowledges are intersubjective, distributed accomplishments. This closer look at the technologies and processes of making claims to copyright during this period, via an examination of this particular case, is an opening to a site of struggle through which shared understandings of expressions of power come to be epistemologically legitimate.

Publishers learned that freelancers were seeking compensation for digital reprints through the lawsuit filing in 1993 and subsequently changed their standard contracts to benefit the publishers (Naini, 2002, p. 25). By the time the class action lawsuit was resolved nearly two decades later, standard contracts for the majority of freelance writers were classified as work for hire, a licensing that grants copyright/ownership rights to the publisher as “all-rights agreements” to use their works in existing and future publications. These standard contracts offered compensation that was similar to, or sometimes less than, the compensation writers received when they licensed only first North American serial rights in the 1980s (O’Rourke, 2003, pp. 606-607).

The Supreme Court verdicts came on the eve of what has come to be described as a deep economic crisis for U.S. print news media (McChesney & Pickard, 2011). Circulation and subscription rates for news media print publications had been in decline since the 1980s, though profits were high through the 1990s (Pickard, 2017). A decade later, with the 2008 recession in the United States, readers, and subscribers, of news media organizations would alter their habits again, making the situation worse

for freelancers. But struggles between news workers and publishers far predated the 2000s; there were periodic news worker union strikes throughout the second half of the midcentury in the U.S. Since the 1980s, there have been struggles between writers and publishers over the conditions of work and speech (Ardito, 2004). By the mid 2000s, news media workers were among the many “cultural workers” considered to be part of the contingent workforce: an occupational strata that lacks job security and benefits, and which includes part-time, temp, and informal economy workers (Fallick, 1999; Gill & Pratt, 2008). The increase in cultural industry workers taking on freelance work as independent contractors was what led lawyer Sara Horowitz to found The Freelance Union, a nonprofit advocacy organization, which dubbed the creative work strata as “the freelance class” in 2003.[9] As described in my introduction, this naming foreshadows the increase of precarious work brokered using digital platforms in what would be called the “gig economy” in the post-2008 recession period in the United States.

The 2016 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics report on employment captures the dramatic drop in employment in the newspaper publishing industry. In June 1990, there were about 458,000 people employed in newspaper publishing; by March 2016, that figure had fallen to about 183,000, a decline of almost 60 percent (Bureau of

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[9] Horowitz collaborated with researchers to compile a report on the state of freelancing in New York City, which captures the nature of a thousand freelancers’ work in 2005. The top five occupational categories were as follows: 1) writers, editors, journalists, and copywriters; 2) graphic designers; 3) web designers, software developers, programmers, and information technicians; 4) artists and illustrators; and 5) professionals working in advertising, marketing, and market research. (Anteby et al., n.d.) p.3 Anteby et al., “2005 Report: The Rise of the Freelance Class: A New Constituency of Workers Building a Social Safety Net,” 37; See also Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries*; and Gill and Pratt, “Precarity and Cultural Work, In the Social Factory? Immaterial Labour, Precariousness and Cultural Work.”

Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 2016). Though in the early 1990s changes were only nascent, journalism work was a “profession with a future.” Journalist Thomas Frank (2010: 113) left academia for journalism in the 1990s, a move he said was a “practical, responsible career move.” Freelance writers were a small subset of media professionals in the 1980s, though high-profile names such as Tom Wolfe and Nora Ephron—symbols of the New Literary writing of long form journalism (sometimes called “New Journalism”)—are said to have credited the 1962–63 typography strike in New York with their “freedom” to write narratives (Sherman, 2012). However, in comparison, freelancing in non-journalistic fields of writing in the 1980s was widespread enough to merit the publication of advice columns on freelance copywriting in trade magazines (Slatkin, 1988). Indeed, whatever the case the tax-bracket designation was for senior correspondents and experts, this role was rarely for the majority of the staff. Being named as the writer of a particular newspaper piece was not really about giving the writer credit for it; rather, bylines were issued so editors, and readers, could hold writers accountable to norms around objectivity and rigor (Reich, 2010). In the 2010s, the situation flipped, with media organizations employing the majority of contributors in a freelance capacity and freelancers seeking name recognition in order to further portfolio careers, though freelancers are still often constricted by genre and may be evaluated based on their names.

As employment in news media has dropped from the 1990s onward, employment in the wide category of “internet publishing and broadcasting” has grown 660%, from about 30,000 in 1990 to about 198,000 in 2016 (Bureau of Labor

Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 2016). Economic changes do not operate in a vacuum. Though it has been used as a substitute term for "globalization," and is often rhetorically presented as inescapable, the "information age" has not been an omnipresent commercial force acting *on* media companies, forcing them into making choices like adopting paywalls, hiring freelancers and firing employees, or closing altogether. Popular culture on cyberspace in the 1990s tended to frame the internet as ushering in either a dystopia or a utopia, in particular because the internet, like globalization, seemed to be challenging the authority of nation states. "The internet seemed uncontainable, writes Stephanie Schulte in *Cached* (2013, p. 92).[10] Print news media publications joined magazines in reorganizing and rebranding to accommodate the changing tides that unbundling brought forth with an uncritical belief in the "benevolent divinity of technology" (Frank, 2011, p. 117).

As I have described in the introduction to this study, industry leaders, commentators, and scholars have marked the relationship of the neoliberal "information age" to the culture and practice of journalism and online writing, to news media's changing relationship to technology, questioning how the nature of journalism's structure and funding might best serve democracy. News media industry changes have primarily been justified as necessary to stay in business and maintain

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[10] See also the 2006 literature review of 1990s internet scholarship by (Goldman & Wu, 2006; Schulte, 2013, p. 92) "What values would drive the internet," Robert McChesney asks, claiming this was *the* question of the 1990s. "I will not keep you in suspense," he writes in his 2013 book *Digital Disconnect*, which encourages readers to fight back against the monopolies that are taking democracy away from the people: "Advertising won, and the hyper-commercialization of our culture proceeds swiftly." Commercial forces are powerful, but in this recognition also comes the conceptualization of the internet as a force of good or evil, a singular thing that must be either validated or contained, loved or hated.

profits as the conditions and technologies for speech change (Cohen, 2012, p. 14). This has introduced situations where companies feel pressure to develop strategies to produce more content and to monetize it, often through working with fewer staff in order to lower costs. Strategies include more commercially-oriented media such as paywalled content, audience participation, niche publishing, and outsourcing of content (Bakker, 2012).

These strategies have led to the start and stop of a number of different commercial entities and gray market industries that indirectly contribute to media production, including Upwork (formally Elance and oDesk), Demand Media Studios*,* Journatic, and AOL's Patch. I explore further in Chapter 3 how writers make sense of contributing to low-paid publications. In some cases, automated writing and aggregation tools replace staff altogether, such as in sports reporting (McChesney, 2013). Some companies, as I will describe in Chapter 4, bridge the logic of "big data" analytics in organizing and publishing "evergreen" articles online written by low-paid (or unpaid) freelance contributors. The articles are often optimized for search results and emotional clicks: algorithmic automation and aggregation, as well as "click-bait" blogging that features entertaining stories with a visual component that are understood as likely to get reader attention (and reposts). There's also the "no-pay" journalism model that *Huffington Post* and other publications have instituted (Ross, 2013).

The widespread adoption of personal computers and development of networks of broadband Internet connection happened *in tandem* with the crisis in news media and mass communication, shepherding in the slow rise of a "gig" economy. This could

misleadingly lead to a causal, determinist framing of the internet, or the "information age," as some sort of unitary force—obfuscating the particular struggles and logics at work. Though the rise of job precariousness for writers is related to the experience of other types of work in neoliberal late capitalism, specific economic and cultural discourses and policies about freedom intersected to legitimate the epistemic value of databases as more valuable to the public than copyright protections for authors.

**Angry freelancers, nervous librarians, and public access to information**

For two decades, the Tasini case received regular media coverage in information trade magazines and in some general interest national newspapers. Two claims emerged in this coverage: on one hand, the "information seeker," standing in for "the public," has the right to access information. On the other, the freelancer has claims to authorship, but this claim can potentially infringe on public access. Coverage in information trade magazines, written for librarians, jokingly characterize authors as "greedy" or "upset," as if they are sabotaging the public good by limiting the public's right to access databases (Chen, 2002). Reports highlighted publishers' worry that the resultant loss of information would be tragic for historians and researchers. Freelancers' anger was portrayed as dangerous to the public, writers presented as a force to be reckoned with (jokes include references to their threatening "lances"), jeopardizing the public's right to access "the mother lode of history." This situation would supposedly result in everyone losing out: "the public will lose because the

historical record will be incomplete and the freelancers will lose because they will no longer be included" (Barringer & Blumenthal, 2001; Reid, 2005). Casting freelancers as antagonists preventing public access to information is surprising. It's also a mischaracterization of the relationship among database vendors in the United States, publishers, writers, and the people they served. Labor struggles take place through debates about which technologies of speech will best serve the public.

### Tasini: A logistical nightmare

Though the Supreme Court verified that freelance writers deserve compensation for electronic redistribution, acknowledging in a backhanded way the 1980 addendum to the category of literary works including software as a form of unique expression, responses from librarians bring to our attention the considerable logistical work and negotiating skills necessary to reorganize work practices. This is a "nightmare!" writes Nancy Garmen, in one of a number of responses from library professionals about the court's decision (Garman, 2000). *Information Today*, a trade magazine for information professionals, included more than fifty articles and columns referencing Tasini over a decade. Textual analysis of these articles provides a barometer for the nervous frustration about access experienced among information services professionals. Library staff reported facing difficult database vendors who were resistant to complying with new rules about not circulating full-text articles or paying freelancers in order to continue to include their works in composites. There

were pleas for help about how to work with reticent vendors. Columns used hyperbolic humor to express anguish at the changes coming to their professional practice, wherein access would be more limited and make it harder for them to serve their patrons.

I'll use Barbara Quint's columns as an example of this tension. Quint, editor-in-chief of a magazine for professional searchers, wrote regular columns and oversaw periodical contributions, and she helpfully instructed other librarians on savvy strategies for managing vendors who might not be forthright about how much their databases would change (or need to change) based on Tasini. She addressed colleagues matter-of-factly about what vendors were doing and how this could make their jobs harder. Vendors were treating librarians "like a collection of suckers who can be sold—and told—anything" (2002). She offered her own insight into particular vendors and how to best negotiate with them: Factiva was tightlipped on removals smaller than 600 items, while LexisNexis pushed the labor of confirming copyright onto information professionals, absolving themselves of their own licensing of materials from other database vendors, such as ProQuest. "Grrrrr," complained Quint.

Library professionals could take proactive strategies for their libraries and communities in response to the effects of Tasini, such as sharing information with their clients about possible absences or gaps in databases, and making requests to freelancers to give their permission to be included in libraries when necessary. Quint counseled against dismissing freelancers as the enemy: "they're 'lancers' but not 'armed." Librarians should re-negotiate their ongoing antagonism toward database

vendors. In a word of caution to readers who might be working for database vendors, Quint posed the question, “Libraries as clients or libraries as competitors? Your choice, vendors. Reporting decisions made today may influence your competitive future” (Quint, 2002).

Her point redirects attention to an important relationship. Since networked databases launched as a commercial service in the early 1970s, librarians at governmental agencies, special collections, corporations, and universities had been the largest user group. But this history is missing in common histories of computer services users. The idea that a “user” as “end user” can singularly stand in for the general “public or “crowd” is not a pre-given strata of society but a rhetorical accomplishment linked to negotiation of epistemic value. I will now turn to review the ongoing tensions between database vendors and librarians, who were often women, involved in this shift.

In the postwar period through the late 70s and early 1980s, database vendors developed online networks “before the internet” which distributed remote access to catalogues and materials, some of which were co-developed with news media organizations and publisher as partners. Primary users of bibliographic databases were libraries—indeed, some of these databases were developed by librarians or library co-operatives. Interest in full-text databases coincided with the interest of vendors to get around the librarians, who were the primary “users” of these systems. Corporate librarians worked with and were sometimes hired by vendors, but they too were then enlisted to better reach the end user. We can see conversations about what

formats and technologies might best serve the public as a part of the ongoing struggle in the jurisdiction of library workers and the aims of commercial vendors.

### **"Crack the librarian barrier"**

The establishment and growth of database computing, "online before the internet" (Susanne Bjorner & Ardito, 2004), took place in the postwar period in the United States. The commercial database industry came out of refashioning military expertise into laborsaving technologies useful for making a profit in private industry. Lockheed's DIALOG and SDC's Search Service (Orbit 3) were both early "online before the internet" commercial database ventures. The companies had been developing digital retrieval services that were labor- and equipment-intensive, and the goal of the new initiatives was to produce a profitable business model that would transform the labor-intensive and isolated process of retrieving archived information. Using computation, various sub-categories of information seekers (end users) might directly connect with the information they sought. This led to the conception of the computer, and the software on it, as replacing the librarian.[11] The goal of reaching the end user by eliminating the librarian is captured in an interview with Dick Giering, who worked on developing LexisNexis, owned by Mead Data Central—a subsidiary of a

[11] See Bjorner and Ardito, "Online before the internet, Mead Data Central and the genesis of Nexis: Interview with Richard (Dick) Giering and his early military and Data Corporation experience in developing full-text retrieval technology"; "Company Histories: Mead Data Central, Inc."

paper manufacturer—which would later be sold to Reed-Excelsior. Giering explains his goals for developing full-text databases: "We were driven toward the end-user. Not toward a librarian . . . . We did not want anyone interposed between the person needing the information and the person having the information. That was our goal" (Bjorner & Ardito, 2004). His sentiment is echoed in a separate interview conducted by Trudi Hahn with Jerome (Jerry) Rubin, vice president of Mead Data Central, who explained that the objective of the LexisNexis business plan was to "crack the librarian barrier" (Bourne & Hahn, 2003, p. 302). Rubin, a former Navy serviceman and Harvard-educated lawyer, held leadership positions at Mead Data Central at the same time Giering was building a database catalogue of all of the Ohio State Laws using Air Force technology initially developed to track intelligence reports.[12] When the Mead Data Central began developing and packaging database access to legal materials and newspapers as a market product, they were concerned with getting as much information as possible into a format that would be easily readable by machines. Bourne and Hahn note that Mead used off-shoring facilities to repackage volumes of royalty-free machine-readable text. Mead also benefited commercially from making their databases proprietary. Labor costs are cast in these fields as an obstacle not just to earning profit, but to connecting information to its seeker. In characterizing this vision, I do not wish to suggest that it was realized without friction or failure; rather I point to contradictions in the aims of vendors and their idealized and actual users. This

[12] Dick Giering recounts calling operators in towns to check what type of phone lines were available. If it was an electronic phone connection, then he would use a credit card to call the main computer in Ohio and set up a connection; the other two types of phone lines would not work so those towns did not gain access to the early internet. (Bjorner & Ardito, 2004)

is relevant to my research because Lexis (later LexisNexis) and the vendors in the Tasini case were established during this period.

A second example of use contradictions as labor struggles is nascent in the Information Bank project, a networked, computerized information retrieval access system developed by *The New York Times* in the mid-1960s, and acquired by Mead Data Central in 1983. The project was developed in the aftermath of the crippling strike in 1962–63 by the major typography union in New York City, when, for 114 days, all of the newspapers were unable to publish. Union workers were largely understood to have "won" the strike, as they negotiated for pay increases and also conceded to allow publishers to introduce computerized typography. Four papers folded during or after the strike. To avoid future labor strikes, *The New York Times* hired management consultants and decided to develop a project proposed by a *New York Times* indexer, John Rothman, who was frustrated with the decaying "morgue" of 20 million clippings housed in multiple places across the Times building (Bourne & Hahn, 2003, p. 323). The solution was an automated index and abstract retrieval database accessible remotely by dedicated terminals, requiring the labor of indexers and abstract writers. The Information Bank would not only preserve indexes from decaying in the morgue, but would mitigate the possibility of future labor strikes by people who "took their job seriously," reported Robert November, Director of Library Services and Information Division of the *New York Times*, in an oral history (Nisenholtz, 2013).

The Information Bank project launched in 1967 and would last two decades before the database was sold to Mead Data Central in 1983 ("Times Co. Data Bases

Licensed to Mead," 1983). It was a multi-million-dollar electronic research database that allowed users to access indexes and article abstracts of *The New York Times* and sixty additional newspapers on microfilm, via dedicated remote terminals. The service was used in-house at The New York Times until 1972, after which it went to market; the first client was the CIA. Other information-seeking federal agencies were early subscribers. Subscriptions had a monthly cost that varied between $500 and $2,000 and then searchers were charged by the minute. This was typical for online information services of the period—DIALOG, run by Lockheed and the predecessor to ProQuest database, charged $5 per minute for searching. The Information Bank also gained support from the lead librarian Kent Allen of the Hillman Library at the University of Pittsburgh; they received a five-year NSF grant to run the Information Bank on campus. According to dissertation research by information studies graduate student Dineh Moghdam (1974) on the learning experiences of its first years, only 47% of new users were able to complete a search using the computer-assisted training guide, and only 8% of new users could successfully complete a search using a paper manual. Despite this, the marketing of the Information Bank suggested the service would meet the research needs of a typical end user. According to a review of the service, it was available from 1970, though materials from 1968 onward could be accessible.

Reports from the field of users suggest that the initiative sought to serve end users accessing research materials at libraries, which paid a subscription fee ($1,800 for a monthly subscription in 1973, not including a per-search fee). Sally Bachedler

wrote an in-depth report about the user experience and goals of the system with the launch of the project at the Hillman Library at the University of Pittsburgh, when the Information Bank was housed there in a trial underwritten by the *New York Times* and the National Science Foundation:

> The Information Bank has been developed with the end user specifically in mind; every effort has been made to bridge the gap between the world of automated information systems and the student, business executive, government official or other information seeker. The kind of information the system offers, covering a wide variety of current events, topics that address a large and diverse audience, demands that the Information Bank be an easy to operate tool, readily available to the end user (Bourne & Hahn, 2003, p. 326).

Bachedler's report provides a painstaking review of the many ways that librarians engaged with weighty, expensive hardwired computers, carefully using Boolean logic to access copy mediated by placement in an ontology,: a different system from the indexes and abstracts previously used to navigate and maneuver through large sets of information, which in the case of the *Times*, were decaying. The process of seeing the past was a bodily one—from decaying text to the remote work of the search librarians. As Bachedler emphasizes in her review, she was "walking around to the other side of the desk" to capture the user experience. Her report demonstrates that though publishers intended to create a product that the end user could accomplish without a professional searcher, the goal was difficult to implement.

A 1976 survey of ten libraries subscribing to the Information Bank service revealed that only two provided patrons with instructions and direct access to the search terminal. At nine out of ten subscribing libraries, librarians, supported by clerks and paraprofessional library personnel, managed the Information Bank terminals to

assist patron research requests. One library hired an information technology specialist to manage the equipment. Time was needed to develop the skills to operate the system. One librarian complained the onboarding process was "a lesson in frustration to expect competency in two hours (as the salesmen [sic] imply)" (Garoogian, 1976, p. 60).

The vision of providing automated access to individual researchers was attractive to many stakeholders, for they could generate more cash-flow through subscriptions. But the vast majority of early users were trained librarians at the subscribing libraries, particularly since they made decisions about how to house the cumbersome computers and care for them, and they could train and facilitate access for others thanks to their preexisting search skills. "Time is money," Bachedler reminds her readers. Most of the end users did not have the time to learn the skills necessary to operate the complicated system. She attributes the control librarians had over the database access systems to their logical creativity: searching methods require knowledge of controlled vocabulary, facility with Boolean logic, the ability to learn new dropdowns and ontologies, and the capacity for creative troubleshooting. One common complaint about the Information Bank was that it was both too simple and too complicated, and mistakes were embedded in the searching database (Garoogian, 1976, p. 67).

In information science histories I reviewed, photographs of professional searchers were generally unnamed. This lack of credit is suggestive of the way that librarians were, and remain, an invisible presence in database development and the

history of the user. Though early online systems were expensive and difficult to operate, requiring effort, training, and skill to get results for patrons, the centrality of librarians in this operation is underrepresented.[13]

Librarians also managed the physical presence of the large terminals and facilitated the finances, ensuring that subscriptions were paid for to facilitate ease of access. Subscriptions were expensive for the libraries and access necessitated infrastructure—dedicated electric telephone lines and electricity outlets—in addition to space and labor. A state library and two public libraries subscribing to the Information Bank lost access because of faulty telephone lines (Garoogian, 1976, p. 67). However, once users, librarian searchers, were on the terminal accessing the subscription, indexes (descriptors) and abstracts were available remotely on microfilm for them to review; full text of articles were available by request on microfilm.

In this way, access to databases that commodified and sold information was unevenly developed. Vendors prioritized places that had access to electric telephone lines, primarily on the east coast with centers in Ohio and New York, and later in Palo Alto, California (Bjorner & Ardito, 2004). Development of the computing field was possible thanks to funding from a number of sources, including the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare; UNIVAC; NSF; and the Council on Library Resources. (Bourne & Hahn, 2003, p. 408). Interest in accessing information remotely was also necessary. Government agencies were among the largest subscribers: librarians at the CIA were the first customers of the Information Bank and librarians at the

[13] This history is chronicled in interviews with early internet pioneers (Bourne & Hahn, 2003)

University of Pittsburg were the primary users of the Information Bank's NSF-funded trial. Businesses were also a major market. But whether at government agencies, universities, or special collections and corporations, librarians were the primary users.[14]

In histories written about information science, historians have sought to identify reasons why these early search initiatives failed, what the experience was like, and what led to success. This documentation of failures interests me for naming epistemic shifts in the relationship between the vision and the work in and out of the library to eliminate the librarian searcher. This helps us to see that the knowledge-seeking capacities of an imagined end user is persistent across these stories, which were being imagined for the benefit of a commercial system.

## ***Desk Set*** **prophesy: Personnel**

Librarians were involved in both sides of the database and computing industry, as the searchers and as trainers hired to promote and train others. Trudi Hahn describes librarian Anne Hubbard Caputo as a typical trainer. She was hired at Lockheed for her "looks," public speaking experience, and library science background (Bourne & Hahn, 2003, p. 369). Similar criteria, including "prettiness," was used in the hiring of Sally Bachedler for the Information Bank (Hahn, 1996). Caputo reported that

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[14] "Despite the developers' efforts at designing user-friendly enhancements, BASIS in the 1970s was used, like virtually all the other online systems of the period, primarily by librarians." (Hahn, 1996, p. 42)

she was asked questions about her personal relationships and desire for a family. Once hired, women such as Caputo and Bachedler did what might be called the maintenance and repair care work for the computing database systems, hauling the heavy equipment on cross-country trips, holding the large machines out from their bodies during travel (according to Hahn, so they wouldn't snag their nylons), and working closely with staff to discover where the new database computer stations would be housed. They gave live demonstrations and helped enlist the necessary interest and managerial buy-in to outfit libraries with search database equipment. They also facilitated gathering and reporting feedback to improve the search experience.

The importance of this ongoing work by women librarians, mathematicians, and trainers for the institutionalization of computing databases decenters the primacy of the single male innovator. More generally in computing, women were crucially involved in the development of mechanical and processing activities (later called software), as Jennifer Light carefully describes in her history of IBM's ENIAC, and in the incorporation of commercial information retrieval systems into everyday life (Light, 1999). Feminist retellings of the histories of computing that re-center women's experiences and the care work they do is a contribution that Elizabeth Losh advocates for in her research undermining the primacy of Vannevar Bush as the architect of digital culture. Losh retells the story of computing from the perspective of the care work performed by women mathematicians such as Mina Rees (2018). The research I include here, in this chapter on the work of librarians as the first searchers and trainers

in database implementation, could and should be considered a small part of this retelling effort.

J.D. Licklider, the director of the U.S. Department of Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA), begins his famous article, dedicated to Vannevar Bush, on man-computer processing by evoking the intimate "coupling" between men and computing machines. In 1965, he wrote the white paper summarizing the future of libraries as relying on a task force of experts who present as male, despite the fact that library work is, and was then, a female-dominated profession (Licklider, 1960, 1971). Licklider imagines the future of libraries as a system of access and retrieval designed around independent subject users, whose use of computers will put them "in the executive's or commander's position." The user operating in this position of power is clearly positioned as male:

> He will still read and think and, hopefully, have insights and make discoveries, but he will not have to do all the searching himself nor all the transforming, nor all the testing for matching or compatibility that is involved in creative use of knowledge. He will say what operations he wants performed upon what parts of the body of knowledge, he will see whether the result makes sense, and then he will decide what to have done next (Licklider, 1971, p. 30).

In 248 pages, Licklider only once mentions librarians or library staff, acknowledging that, incidentally, these are the people who right now are actually the users—but ultimately, to continue this arrangement isn't the intention or goal (Licklider, 1971, p. 37). Like the developers at LexisNexis and Information Bank whom I described in the above sections, Licklider imagines a world of public access to information where the computer is the privileged assistant, effectively erasing the librarian. Computers are

perpetually "available, can handle documents and facts, converses with user when he is formulating his questions, adjusts level of sophistication to meet the users' needs, displays desired degree of initiative, and provides flexibility, legibility and convenience when presenting inquiry results" (Licklider, 1971, pp. 36-37). The requirements of the computer processing system would be familiar to librarians, who did the work Licklider hoped computers would do.

In responding to Tasini in the 1990s, librarians explained their relationship of competition with vendors. Hahn, the author of original research on the history of information work in the United States, describes the dynamics of the moment—with apparent sincerity—as effectively captured in the 1957 film *Desk Set*, which she says can be seen as a "forecast, guide and retrospective" for the experiences of the times. In my reading, *Desk Set* is indeed a useful artifact to turn to at this point in the chapter because Hahn considered it an acceptable framing device to tell her story; she nests the film uncritically into the history of computing in libraries, using language peppered with military and neocolonial metaphors. In providing a critical review of *Desk Set*, I want to draw out what, if we are following Hahn's train of thinking, about this film can help us understand the relationship between the early online database companies' commodification of information, gendered work, and epistemic shifts in the value of information? Hahn uses the film as a framing device in researching an original article for the *Information Processing & Management* journal and considers the film a point of reference on the history of the "pioneers" computing in libraries in the book she co-authored in 2004, which includes interviews and original research. Hahn describes the

film as “remarkably prophetic for what actually happened in the 1960s and 70s as online information systems invaded laboratories and libraries around the world” (1996, p. 34). She explains that the film portrays people’s attitudes—from their anxieties to their excitement—during the midcentury adoption of computing systems into organizations,.

*Desk Set* is a romantic comedy feature-length film adapted from a screenplay written by Henry and Phoebe Ephron (the parents of Nora Ephron), and adapted from a play by William Marchant, regarding the introduction of an “electronic brain” into a corporate workplace in New York City, which has been staffed by four in-house librarians, as was typical of the period.[15] Katherine Hepburn stars as lead librarian Bunny Watson and Spencer Tracey plays Dr. Richard Sumner, the “father” of the electronic brain EMERAC (Electro Magnetic Research and Authorizing Calculator), nicknamed Emmy in the film. EMERAC is a fictional version of IBM’s ENIAC (Electronic Numerical Integrator and Calculator), which had launched commercially about ten years prior; networked databases would go to market about a decade later.

Viewing this film provides a startling, funny, full-color cinematic characterization of librarians that ostensibly represent the middle people Jerry Rubin of Mead Data Corporation hoped to “crack.” Four white, college-educated adult women (referred to as “girls” throughout) are portrayed at work, responding to a constant flow of research questions that come by phone or note during the workday at a large news corporation.

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[15] Ephron was one of the freelance writers said to have later benefited from the 1963 strike of news workers in New York (Garfield, 2013)

Smiling and working together in the in-house library, they evoke an air of educated professionalism and helpful grace in smoothing over abrupt callers with authoritative and comforting answers. Conflicts in the plot soon arise. Watson is in a romantic relationship with her boss, who seems to be taking advantage of her devotion by enlisting her to edit his financial reports while not following through with dates he plans. Meanwhile, the white male corporate managers who oversee the corporation are keen to introduce a new technology, the computer, to make the business more efficient. Watson and her staff of librarians are purposefully left out of any strategy conversations regarding the purpose of the EMERAC in relation to their work, but they are expected to pleasantly accommodate the intrusion and disruptions into their space by Dr. Sumner and Emmy.

Patriarchal familial metaphors reveal how the librarians are threatened by the rise of Emmy. The computer is introduced to the office by her "father," the inventor Richard Sumner. She also has an operator, her "mother," as "the girls" sarcastically call the IBM trainer, Miss Warner. Hahn attests that work relationships in corporations often operated according to a parental framework. Most database and computer trainers were women, as I have recounted, and early searchers, or primary users, were women librarians. They may well have felt threatened, as the librarians in the film do, that computers were going to replace them.

This perceived threat of impending elimination is palpable in the film—as viewers, we are asked to make a judgment about who should win in this struggle for the affection of the male figure (represented by the corporation/Dr. Sumner): the

machine or the women? The resolution to this question is carried out in two ways. First, by trivializing the work of the librarians as beneath men, while at the same time suggesting that men are sweetly incapable of certain tasks, reinforcing the idea that women are better at multitasking. The librarians are asked more than three times in phone calls to recount the names of Santa's reindeer. During a holiday party scene, Dr. Sumner is in the library before Emmy is fully functioning. He takes a call but cannot answer this question correctly, confusing the reindeer with the seven dwarves. Despite such humor about the ineptitude of men, the librarians are frustrated by the male-dominated standardization and trivialization of their work; the "girls" rightfully worry throughout the film that they are going to be replaced by a machine.

The second way the question of the machine vs women is resolved is through a romantic love triangle between the vivacious Watson, capable Emmy, and the inventor Dr. Sumner, the "father" of the female computer who will do this work. Bunny, it is clear, is intellectually superior to her boss at the station, yet we must watch her grovel for his affection. She submits to his requests to edit his financial reports, work that paves the way for him to get a promotion. Meanwhile, he strings her on romantically. The viewer is left feeling sorry for Bunny, assuming that she will always make herself available whenever he beckons. Emmy is installed and running thanks to Miss Warner, the competition between Emmy and the librarians unfold, and then the struggle resolves when Bunny Watson receives a marriage proposal from her boss. Instead of receiving what she is due—a promotion, perhaps—she accepts a marriage proposal from Richard Sumner. His proposal becomes the culturally acceptable resolution to the

power struggle between woman and machine. Emmy the computer can replace the human women librarians and they (or at least one of them) gets a consolation prize, a marriage proposal. As Carol Colatrella points out, what's remarkable about this film is that the struggle is cast as being between a female machine and the women competing for male attention. The German title of the film, *The Other Woman,* helps us see this very well (Colatrella, 2001).

Why and how did database designers want to "crack the librarian barrier?" What purpose could this serve, what struggles did this desire do to structure future relations with information providers and the epistemic primacy of search processes? As the decades wore on, most database vendors closed because their programs were too expansive to run, as Hahn writes, persisting in her use of metaphors evoking neocolonial expansion:

> The developers of the many prototype systems faced a huge hurdle in converting to a profitable (or at least self-sustaining) operation. Most of the pioneers did not make the passage. For the survivors, the transition often was harrowing. The systems that were successful were led by individuals who believed in their value and who promoted them with vigor and determination, but without a great deal of support from their own organizations (Hahn, 1996, p. 45)

Database vendors were under pressure to make their resource-intensive and government-funded visions of easy, widespread information access a commercial success. But the struggles that took place during this process are mostly invisible. In using this film as a historical framing, the story becomes one of women competing to win male attention, and the question is solved through appeals to appropriate, gendered reasons to leave the workplace and not be seen as directly in competition

with a male worker. Though Watson has an extraordinary memory, a caring and bright feminine demeanor, and vast intellectual prowess, she is an "exotic bird," says Sumner. And she is eventually captured and put away—married off. Her situation was typical of the time; a decade earlier most women in computing at IBM were moved from job to job, or lost their jobs when they married, which was legally permissible (Colatrella, 2001, p. 7). Women were often stymied birds, trapped into marriage.

Let's take this critical reading of *Desk Set* as Hahn suggests we should, a frame for the history of online databases and the role of librarians. The desire among commercial developers to earn profit was resolved by finding ways to marginalize and displace the labor of the human searchers, usually women librarians, by appealing to a masculinist, heterosexual vision of appropriate ways to live. The drama that unfolds as a competition between feminized machines (Emmy) and women workers (librarians), both owned / or to be owned by their singular male authors, helps us see this persistent gendered resolution that animates the relationship between librarians and database vendors, wherein we have searchers and searching algorithms, but the human searchers can be marginalized. Librarians struggled to retain their jobs and authority while their professional status was under threat for the benefit of a profit-seeking database company. The failures of these early initiatives shows that the primacy of full-text search was not an inevitable outcome or always the most reasonable, profitable, accurate or helpful pathway to serving the public. Rather, the early search projects that sought to develop and connect publics to information repositories across the United States were accomplished by mapping onto existing

electronic and telephone infrastructure, and by attempts to devalue the profession of librarianship as unnecessary and trivial in order to gain access to a larger market of subscribers, imagined to be men who did not want to be subordinated to female librarians as their guides.

This analysis is thus relevant to the marginalized work of freelance writers today because it is through the effort to provide easier information access for the "public" (the end user) that freelance writers' authorial rights eroded, even as they were confirmed. The possibility that labor demands might halt the flow of information was indeed powerful in depreciating writers and worked to create a shared understanding of a new "free" public, free by proximity to the available information, now a commodity bought and sold by commercial vendors. Absent from this conversation were discussions about the legal reasoning for copyright, which is to economically protect writers, giving them an incentive them to create. Instead, publishers and vendors gained authority with gendered narratives about acceptable ways to best serve the public imagined as the user within a framework of commercial logic. By this logic, individual writers seeking compensation were endangering the public record due to their own emotional concerns. The rhetoric of these narratives recalled a midcentury vision of computing, which sought to remove the librarian so the computer could directly serve the end user. The librarian's professional mandate is to serve the public, concealing any antagonisms they might have with database vendors.

**Two kinds of freedom for public access**

Let me return now to responses to the Tasini lawsuit and connect them to the figure of the free software writer as the e-lancer. As I have described, information professionals in trade magazines and in newspapers depicted freelance writers as hindering the availability of information for the public to access, though, as pointed out, less than 1% of the databases were altered in response to the court decision and it was up to the database vendors to negotiate, which many resisted. As the related class action lawsuit, Reed Elsevier Inc. v. Irvin Munchnik, unfolded, publishers again pursued appeals, questioning the court's fitness to make subject-matter decisions about the monetary value of freelancers' work in order to allot compensation. They pushed the burden of proof of copyright onto freelancers, by suggesting that according to the Copyright Act of 1976, for infringement lawsuit payouts, copyright must have been registered with the copyright office in order to receive post-due compensation for breaches. More than 90% of freelance writers had not registered their copyrights when their work was sold. Copyright registration cost $30 and required filing and mailing the form; it was not practical for a freelancer to pay what could be a good portion of their earnings to officially register a copyright to an article, particularly if they did not expect to pursue litigation. Despite these hurtles that freelancers faced to earning a living by selling their work, claims to copyright cast them as selfish, as careless or disorganized, and as ultimately weighing down the public right to access information in databases by seeking monetary damages.

What, then, was accomplished? An alliance between database vendors and the growing internet industry. A coalition of internet industry players supported the requirement of copyright registration in the *Amici Curiae* brief prepared for the class action appeal. The brief was signed by a cross section of free software organizations with for-profit internet platforms. Coming together as the Computer & Communication Industry Association and NetCoalition were Wikimedia, Google, Yahoo!, and Bloomberg; this would not be the first or last time that nonprofit, for-profit, free culture, and commercial vendors all came together. What aligned these organizations for this brief was a shared interest in prohibiting claims to content authorship; the brief articulates the organizations' concern that "every blog post, electronic mail, voicemail, instant message, text message, and 'tweet' may constitute works of authorship fixed in a tangible medium, potentially entitled to decades of federal copyright protection from the moment of fixation" (Band, 2009, p. 3). The brief supported upholding the requirement of copyright registration for payout since technology industries, without the freedom to freely copy, share, and own content, would otherwise be "imperiled by the federal copyright system."[16]

This repeats the logic in which freelancers are cast as villains, while technology companies position themselves as conduits to public access, creating copyright-able materials themselves, in the form of proprietary algorithms. As mentioned, in 1980, the Copyright Act of 1976 was updated to include software writing as a form of creative

[16] Band, "Brief No. 08-103 for Amici Curiae Computer & Communication Industry Association and NetCoalition in Support of the Judgment below in the Reed Elsevier Inc. v. Irvin Munchnik; the United States Court of Appeals for The Second Circuit." p. 3

expression protected by law under the category of “literary works.” Notably, this created an equal plane between writing and software. With piracy and copying of digital works common in the late 1990s and early 2000s, media industry copyright holders advocated for the 1998 Digital Millennium Copyright Act, which made piracy illegal. The ramifications of this alliance strengthened the association between commercial database publishers and free software writers, while pitting libraries, and librarians, against freelancers because their claims to authorship impeded the library’s ability to serve their publics.

### Journalism as “freedom from” intervention

I will now provide a brief overview of journalism work and concepts of freedom of access in the United States. Though journalistic practice has never been static or stable, and has emerged through a constellation of social forces, the shared cultural vision of the purpose and function of journalism in a democracy has been to inform the public by providing oversight services to, and within, a liberal democratic state.[17] Textbooks about the field and mission statements for professional associations reinforce this principle, supporting their statements with the First Amendment of the

[17] In his history of newspapers in the United States, Michael Schudson discusses the development of an ethic of “objectivity” as central to the ideal of modern journalism, emerging with the “penny presses” in the late 19th century (Schudson, 1978).

U.S. constitution.[18] With Jürgen Habermas's theoretical formulation of the "public sphere" as a lodestar, *service to the public* has been the cornerstone of news media workers' efforts, and is marshaled as a justification for the development and institutionalization of news media organizations.

*Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press*" begins the First Amendment.[19] While the U.S. constitution guarantees freedom of the press, funding the work of journalists to serve the public's access to democracy has been realized in historically specific ways. For instance, the U.S. Postal Service Act of 1792 provided governmental subsidies for newspapers (McChesney, 2016). Later, journalistic institutions achieved financial independence from government subsidies by courting advertising dollars and subscription models, with the "penny presses" an early example of this effort in the United States. Over time, journalistic "independence" has come to mean *freedom from* government funding, oversight, or intervention. Journalistic jurisdiction and authority are achieved by balancing the commercial interests of advertisers through the institutionalization of strict routines, with spatial arrangements for news media workers and for news reports, including labels not just for sponsored content but also for opinion writing. Victor Pickard argues this negative concept of *freedom from* has been a cornerstone value for media

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[18] "Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy" as described in the code of ethics for the Society of Professional Journalists ("SPJ Code of Ethics," 2014; Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2009).

[19] "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances," from the (*First Amendment - U.S. Constitution*, n.d.).

organizations and by definition has libertarian roots, following market fundamentalist logic (Pickard, 2017, p. 51). *Freedom from* conceptually limits the possibility of governmental funding for journalism as a public good, to the chagrin of journalism studies scholars who argue that European countries have successfully launched independent journalism organizations supported by government funding (McChesney & Pickard, 2011). In addition, *freedom from* curtails the variety of responses to economic pressures that news organization serving the public can take, potentially leading to the "end of journalism" (Deuze, 2007, p. 141). Scholars of journalism and politics have argued that the ideal of journalism can be achieved through many different means, such as "citizen journalists;" government subsidies; and non-journalistic organizations or actors working in tandem with legacy media, for example the relationship between WikiLeaks, bloggers, and four large national newspapers in Andrew Chadwick's (2013) analysis of hybrid media logics and journalism. Nevertheless, it's important to pay attention to the way that traditional journalism's formulation of serving the public has been advantageous to the *owners* of news media publications, who can justify commercial choices, such as layoffs, mergers, outsourcing, aggregation, and paywalls, rather than seek governmental support, as they attempt to avoid other forms of intervention (Pickard, 2017, p. 51).

*Freedom from* governmental intervention was not explicitly marshaled in the discussions around publishers seeking to ensure the public had access to the "mother lode" of history. Rather, publishers distanced themselves from the needs and struggles of writers hired to furnish their content. Their self-preservation efforts were aligned with

a longer-term market-oriented approach to news media as a commercial venture that has struggled to prioritize its commercial needs with the need to serve democracy. Moreover, publishers experimented with ways to generate value (and income) by serving the public with research databases, exemplified by the expensive Information Bank endeavor, which gave way to the partnership with LexisNexis. This strategy recalls the earlier period, when white women librarians were said to be standing in the way of commercial success, and the romanticized Hollywood solution to this was marriage.

### Free culture and authorship: "Free to"

The *Amici Curiae* by the Computer & Communication Industry Association and NetCoalition establishes ideological alignments between news media publishers, database organizations, and free culture software writers.[20] Alignments between the nonprofit and for-profit internet initiatives materialize as distinct but complementary appeals to "freedom" as a form of ownership. The free and open source software movement (F/OSS) has been a decentralized community of computer software developers who are roughly align around shared notions of sharing. Gabriella Coleman's (2013) ethnographic work on the North American hacking community

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[20] Membership in 2018 reinforces the initiative to "promote open markets, open systems, open networks and full, fair and open competition in the computer, telecommunications and internet industries," and yokes Amazon, Uber, and Facebook to RedHat and Modzilla (*Computer & Communications Industry Association: Tech Advocacy since 1972*, https://www.ccianet.org/about/members/).

captures the shift in discourse about sharing that began to adopt freedom, as in freedom of speech. In the 1980s-1990s, the hacking community was purchasing, using, and modifying compilers (which translate human code into machine-readable code, for instance) and other software, which led to a collective impulse to share with others doing the same thing. To justify this, hackers claimed that software should be "free like beer"—in the sense that beer is a thing that can be given away. In Coleman's interviews of hackers who began as students or young adults, they use the language of money and consumerism to explain their wonder at technology and its capacities (Coleman, 2013, p. 35). Getting free beer was cool; so was copying and using software without having to buy it. However, with the adoption of F/OSS into businesses, the movement began to use a new statement that referenced speech instead: "free as in speech, *not* as in beer" (italics mine), which distanced the movement from piracy and not accepting compensation for one's work, but required transparency in the code as a form of speech. GNU and Creative Commons licenses are the result of this movement. Free/open software license agreements are reversals of copyright law ("copyleft"), through which software writers can protect work to ensure that others can continue to modify and adapt it. The mandate is that it can only be used on the condition that modifiers agree to share any derivatives of their work under the same license agreement.[21] In this way the meaning of "free" isn't *gratis*, to give work or software away for free (though since the source code should always be freely

[21] Gabriella Coleman (2013), in her book *Coding Freedom*, writes that the thousands of developers who have labored to make software *libre* constitute a kind of "social performance that contrasts with, as well as effectively erodes some of the foundational assumptions about the continual expansion of IP law," p. 186. See also Stallman (2002, p. 172).

available, there is “some free beer”); but rather free takes on the “to” preposition—free as in freedom *to* speak, free speech.[22] Software writers are “speaking” by being able to modify or adapt/remix software, and codifying their right to continue to share and remix their software by launching the GNU license agreements and, later, Creative Commons. To varying degrees, Creative Commons and GNU licenses prohibit commercial entities from taking free software work and profiting off of it without releasing the source code for others to use freely. Richard Stallman, acknowledged as a leader in the free software movement and trained as a lawyer, compares sharing software with sharing and modifying recipes. The freedom to share and modify is central to the definition of free software, and the right to change and redistribute the program become inalienable rights.

The relationship between concepts of freedom *to* in the free software movement and responses to licensing as limiting user access are exemplified in a response to another case. NuSphere and MySQL was filed and settled rather than going to court at the same time that Tasini was being argued (Progress Software, Corp. et al v. MySQL AB, et al. 195 F. Supp. 2d 328 (D. Mass.), 2002). In this case, copyright-seeking writers and free software writers align in their claims to authorship. The shared premise is initial ownership. In order to give something away, you have to own it. The writer of a blog about the case, Mike Holderness, warns his readers to not make the mistake that legal groups do, which is assume there’s one single group of rights

[22] Free software could be sold for a profit, but the source code should always be free, so there was “some” free beer; free software writers also found their skills in demand, earning money for developing free software by “land[ing] gainful employment and stock options in technology firms and start-up companies, such as Oracle, Apple, and Adobe” (Coleman, 2013, p. 33).

grabbers. Rather, both free software advocates and authors are seeking to prevent corporations from profiting off of their work without recognition of their dignity as authors.

A final reading of the evocation of the 22-year-old Finnish free software writer Linus Torvald in the influential 1998 *Harvard Business Review* (HBR) article affirms alignment between authors and software writers. Similar to *Desk Set*, this article provides a portrait of and an explanatory framework for a not-too-distant future, in which the marginalization of gendered positions is crucial. What is notable is the slippage in Malone and Laubacher's article in relation to *who* the e-lancers are and *what* they do. In the beginning of the piece, "freelancers" are the nodes in a loose network of independent workers; they are e-lancers who make up a fundamental unit of the new economy:

> Tasks aren't assigned and controlled through a stable chain of management but rather are carried out autonomously by independent contractors. These electronically connected freelancers—e-lancers—join together into fluid and temporary networks to produce and sell goods and services. When the job is done—after a day, a month, a year—the network dissolves, and its members become independent agents again, circulating through the economy, seeking the next assignment (1998, para. 5).

This vision of a network of workers evokes equality, and a radical transition to a networked information economy, as described by Yochai Benkler, an MIT legal scholar. These visions paint a portrait of a system without an author, thanks to the collaborative and non-linear structure of the database, and the internet.

Malone and Laubacher counsel their readers that this essay, as a warning of what's to come, can serve those *in the know* ahead of time. With this knowledge,

readers can shape exactly how the future will look. Thus, a second, fainter figure in the e-lance economy is conjured: the independent business people, the innovators, who will usher in this new business model.

Torvald is a model for both. How can this be? The figure that underlies both positions is that of the autonomous liberal subject. Torvald is the independent freelancer and he is the independent creative user who makes things happen, a magician. Malone and Laubacher celebrate his creativity in developing and releasing the Linux “kernel” via a process that could not have been done at a traditional hierarchical institution, thus evoking the “wisdom of the crowd” cyberphilosophy. At the same time, Torvald is a representative of the new/neoliberal subject, one who leads the decentralized organization, giving his work away for others to share.

**Concluding remarks**

In the past decade, while writers (among many cultural workers) have sought to be recognized for their specific cognitive labors by appealing to the legal codification of authoring with copyright, these sets of practices have also figured the author in a way that marginalizes their efforts to be recognized, positioning them within the framework of what I am calling liminal work—or the reinstating of a threshold between one framework and another. In analyzing the unfolding of the Tasini court case through the lens of industry publications, interviews, and popular culture references, I have followed how the legitimacy of claims to “author” have been

challenged, and how debates and struggles over the appropriate way to serve the public information have structured the commercial database market. The user as a proxy for "public" emerges with the commercial expansion of computers and software, such as online research databases, which were formerly terminals connected by telephone lines that remotely connected people with previously inaccessible information.

Pointing out that writerly work has been subordinated to the authority of the computational database is not to claim that writers are not influential: many nonfiction writers have been and continue to be widely read and cited.[23] Rather, in this chapter, I intend to deepen a claim that others have made, namely that the computer database, as it gained ground as a dominant cultural form, constituted a form of subjectivity, the user. But the user, in an "online before the internet" environment, has also been a homogenization of a fraught relationship between librarians and database vendors. When we bring the ontological theories of the internet into historical and cultural context, following feminist work in the history of computing, the shift to prioritize the logic of a database emerges through the particular, embodied relationships that stand in tension with each other.

In uncovering two interrelated inquiries into the emergence of a mediated workplace governed by database logic, at stake is the politics of public access to information. I have looked closely at, and challenged, the interest of database vendors

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[23] Nevertheless, writers face pressure to become brands to achieve commercial success, similar to the challenges of magazines to adapt to the commercial marketplace. See also (Banet-Weiser, 2012).

to erase the intermediary users—librarians—in order to reach an end user. This was not technologically inevitable. Rather, the emergence of the "end user" was part of a commercial design to gain more subscribers and discourage labor strikes. Though this desire might make sense to us now, since the end user is understood to be a reasonable and attractive formulation of a subject, in the 1970s, not all humans had access to computers, nor was the user system in full force yet.

Technologies have impacts, but as I have described in Chapter 1, they are also structured labors, and labor is creative action (Warner, 1992, p. 9). Differing concepts of freedom guided the various labor struggles—which played out in the courts, popular culture, and language—that unfolded between writers, publishers, database vendors, and libraries. Ultimately, the definition of database technology as best serving the user has justified the marginalization of content creation to the development of databases that sort and organize content, and the automated sets of instructions that read them.

The chapter began with the intention to give a historical overview of how our cultural moment has come to pit writers against software developers, databases, and publishers as commercially motivated, selfishly asking for money for the republication of their work. Considering that authorial rights are a claim to liberal subjectivity, I wondered, when and how did the idea that "information wants to be free" come to be in tension with freelancers asking for their authorial rights to be respected? This query brought me to read closely and widely to understand what was at stake and for who, and how these struggles were unfolding. This curiosity brought me to New York Times Co. v. Tasini, 533 U.S. 483 (2001). This lawsuit unfolded over nearly two decades,

during which writers were both being acknowledged for having authorial rights and being dismantled by the very rights they were looking to exercise, in part because of Justice Ginsberg's assertion that databases can be considered unique expressions. It surprised me to read responses to the Tasini case from women librarians, reluctantly reproaching writers for choosing to limit the public access to information by asking for compensation. Here is a red flag. What social forces would bring librarians to blame freelance writers, even reluctantly, for suppressing access to knowledge? Answering this question brought me to questioning the way that contradictions reveal the logics of power; further research shows that databases were not necessarily providing great access to the "public," but were rather creating a specific concept of "the public" as "the user," in part for commercial purposes. The struggle between labor and publishers relied on gendered tropes. Librarians, many of whom were women, were seen as an obstacle, as they were workers who could strike. Thus gendered hierarchies become a normalized way of handling the threat they posed. In this scenario, the librarian is pitted against the computer, and against the men who underestimate librarians' work. I discuss this by evaluating the film *Desk Set,* specifically referenced in the history that information professionals give of their field. Further working backwards, I show that newspapers themselves incorporated technologies such as computers through partnership with vendors, or in-house efforts, because technology promised ways to increase profits when production stalled with labor strikes, which I showcase with the example of the news media strike of 1962-63. Thus, debates over the conditions of

speech as conduits to public access were also ideological and were attempting to respond to labor struggles.

The concept of databases introduced a great deal of excitement, and fear, as the organization for and conduit to knowledge, which, in the commercial system, created producing users who are themselves products. Media theorist Wendy Chun explains this shift as an odd extension of commodity fetishism: “We now wish to be as free as our commodities: by freeing the markets, we free ourselves” (Chun, 2006, p. 10). But this organization is itself a form of commercial power/knowledge, to draw on Foucault. Publishers and vendors grappled with developing ways to maintain profitability, while workers struggled to maintain control over the circumstances of their work. But in shifting the conversation to appeal to the way that information networks provide greater public access to knowledge, software gained the authority to more directly control labor processes, while suggesting that greater freedom was coming to users.

The question of who can own an expression of an idea is a slippery one. A freelance reporter interviews others, who may be restating ideas they heard from their family or friends; a freelance photographer may profit off of the expression of a person they photographed. But it is not for these reasons alone that online writers are increasingly paid less and less, or not at all (and not at all may be preferred). Rather, it is because of the mandate to make content sharable, and the ease with which that can be accomplished. To reach the end user, the librarian has to be marginalized. To reach the user, the writer has to be marginalized.

I began this chapter by recounting *The New York Times* article “Remembering Jane,” by freelancer Mary Kay Blakely, published in the *Her* column of the national edition of the paper. The next two chapters take place in a new time frame, the post-recession era in the United States, and draw on ethnographic work with a set of writers sharing first-person stories. What binds Chapter 3 to Chapter 2 is the continuing focus on how questions about power and language are related to the historical gendering of bodies and labor—and it is within this framework that I will develop my argument about subjectivity and configurations of freelance writing.

## Chapter 3: Exaggerated through "you"

In this chapter, I turn my attention to a reading of the reported work experiences of freelance writers contributing content to platforms on the open web. As I described in the introduction, over a period of five years I have used ethnographic and interpretative methods to gather materials related to the accomplishment of doing writing work online. My ethnographic process has involved observing, interviewing, conversing with, and following the work of 21 women and/or non-gender conforming freelance writers and their communities as well as participating myself. The next chapter advances the project of theorizing online freelance writing as doing "liminal work," with analysis of the sensibilities and writerly styles of freelancers in the 2010s who were contributing first-person confessional writing to online platforms.

I focus on the genre of first-person confessional writing online because it has been a popular contemporary genre, with the majority of contributions produced by freelancers (Ferriss & Young, 2006; Hayasaki et al., 2016; Petersen, 2017; Smith & Watson, 2017; Stadtmiller, 2015). It remains an enticing and recommended form of writing for novice freelance writers to consider taking up as a way to gain entry to the commercial writerly industry, and publisher-platforms have actively solicited new writers (Petersen, 2017; Tolentino, 2017). Moreover, a majority of my informants mentioned, reported, or otherwise acknowledged this "boom" of first-person writing online as influential in their online writing experiences, whether they participated with reluctance or enjoyment, or pushed back on the conventions of the genre. Thus, I look

at the experience and style of writing specific to the genre to draw connections between the labors of writing and the affective and emotional process by which writers engage with their readers, and readers feel engaged to participate as writers.

Confessional first-person writing online is an important site of inquiry for this project because it is a site where freelance writers grappled with feminist topics. In my analysis I seek to treat with respect the reported stories and reliving of often difficult personal experiences. The outcome is a combination of affective experiences, writerly styles, and economic sensibilities, which emerge at the interface of freelancers interacting with socio-technical mediating devices: in this case, words, syntax, website design, platform benefits and restrictions, and commercial logic. These outcomes are significant for the liminal work they do: affirming a discourse of empowerment feminism, and an attendant subject position of an entrepreneurial feminist, which is a tenuous achievement that freelancers respond *to*, but all never quite obtain.

I will focus the discussion in this chapter to considering how a freelance gendered subjectivity is elicited within a second-person "you" as a mediating device, which I identify within first-person confessional discourse (articles and self-reporting about writing first-person articles, as well as self-help materials shared about freelance writing), and across and between sites where commercial first-person writing was fostered and proliferated. I use the expressive diagnostic languages of literary, affect, and psychoanalytic theories to explain how interplay of design and discourse figures the subject position of an online freelance writer. I foreground exploring and explaining what happens when, and how this first-person style is accomplished successfully.

Chapter 4 takes on reports of shame, pushback, and embarrassment.

**"The first-person industrial complex"**

After the recession in the United States in 2008, the English-language open web publisher-platforms were attentive to readership demographics, many devoting content to the interests of specific reader groups. Increasingly, these venues used readership-tracking tools, click records, and reader comments to facilitate precision tracking of reader tastes, needs, and sentiments, sometimes even sharing tools and/or data with readers. At the same time, editors sought to base article assignments on this data, requesting articles that might resonate with and fulfill the assessed needs of readers and provide appeal to commercial sponsors advertising products geared toward market-researched needs as well. Here I will neither analyze reader tracking and assignment techniques nor assess their (in)accuracy. Rather, I focus on understanding the psychic and emotional styles of commissioned and cold-submitted first-person essays on topics related to "a woman's insides—her exploits, her eating habits, her feelings, her sex life" (Petersen, 2017). I ask about why and how writers participated—particularly given that these websites were undergoing platformization. How did these changing conditions make sense to them? Platformization, as I explained earlier in this dissertation, marks how existing institutions, businesses, or organizations adopt the duel economic and technical logics of established market

players, which might include introducing new selection mechanisms and reorganizing value regimes.

Within a decade of feminism-focused blogging and media production, I interpret the reported experiences and writings by a subset of writers who contributed to this genre "boom" as a way to identify what it means that it made sense to them to participate. I critically read their process of participating and descriptions of doing so, arguing that this is an instance of the interlocking of affect, community-building, and neoliberal subjectivity. Freelancing accomplishes liminal work of labor in the 21st-century U.S. economy through this interlock.

First-person confessional writing is not new to a digital knowledge economy or the internet age, but some critics claim there has been a proliferation of memoir and first-person confessional genre writing in the early 21st century (Smith & Watson, 2017). The autobiographical, confessional, and first-person position has sometimes been relegated to shelves labeled "chick lit" or sidelined as "marginal" in masculine histories of the literary canon, making it even more important to study from a feminist perspective (Ferriss & Young, 2006). First-person writing has been prominent in women's magazines in the United States since the turn of the century (Mandziuk, 2001). In news media, first-person reigns on opinion articles, topical blogs, travel writing, and consumer/lifestyle writing.

On the open web, the first-person form and vantage has been the customary style of expression on personal blogs, internet forums, and social media sites

(Rettberg, 2014), gaining prominence on publisher-platforms.[24] General interest publisher-platforms such as Huffington Post, Demand Media Studios, The Guardian, Slate, and Salon have specific sections devoted to first-person stories, following a news media / newspaper model. Smaller publisher-platforms with boutique audiences and niches that were functioning in the 2010s, such as xoJane, The Hairpin, The Awl, Jezebel, and online women's magazines, used the first person as the default fixture. Writers I interviewed named xoJane as influential or notable in their publication histories and experiences as writers.[25] Their references guided my focus for this chapter, which focuses on, primarily, xoJane and a selection of other digitally-native publisher-platforms.

Before I go on, allow me to describe xoJane (2011–2016) and similar online publisher-platforms from the 2010s. xoJane was an online website magazine founded by editor and publisher Jane Pratt, co-launched and published with Say Media, a technology company that developed the content management system of xoJane using venture capital. Pratt was formerly the editor and publisher of *Sassy Magazine* and *Jane*. The platform launched with a small editorial staff that wrote content, solicited contributions from freelancers, and monitored reader comments. Most content was written in the first person, including the popular column "It Happened To Me" (IHTM), which was the web incarnation of the same column printed in *Jane* and *Sassy* since

[24] Hybrid business models that are both platforms and publishers were dubbed "platishers" in one trade publication. See (Glick, 2014) I use the awkward phrase "publisher-platform" in this dissertation chapter.
[25]

1996, both overseen by Pratt. In an interview, Pratt credited reader enjoyment of and her personal pleasure in the unique, strange, and interesting personal stories—portraying issues that matter to women not expert advice—as her reason for launching a section for “real” stories from readers (Brodesser-Akner, 2011; Capitol Staff, 2014). The first IHTM, published in 1996, was a personal story about a woman who had an abortion(Cochrane, 2013). In 2014, after losing money, xoJane was acquired by Time Inc. for approximately 20 million (Trachtenberg, 2015). The site stopped publishing new material in 2016 and redirected to another Time Inc. property, HelloGiggles, in early 2017. As of 2019, archives are only accessible using the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine. Freelance contributions were accepted via email to editors, submissions made through the Skyward content management system, and comments managed through Disques.

In addition to xoJane, my interviewees also referenced or reported working for other online publisher-platforms, such as Jezebel, HuffPost, Forbes, and The Mix. Jezebel (begun in 2007) is an online magazine first launched as a part of the Gawker Media Network, run by Nick Denton, a digitally native publication. Editor-in-chief Anna Holmes claimed that 70% of Gawker readers, then the flagship blog of the network, identified as female and these readers deserved content that was relevant to them. Named in tribute to the biblical character Jezebel, the publication has been credited as the first commercially successful explicitly feminist blog in the internet attention economy (*Journalist Q&A*, Anna Holmes*,* Jezebel, 2007). Jezebel was launched using the Gawker content management system and in 2016 was acquired by Univision

Communications. Freelance contributions were accepted by email pitch. Larger than Jezebel, Huffington Post (now HuffPost), was created in 2005 by Arianna Huffington and was launched as a news and opinion website and blog, which for nearly a decade provided space for paid and unpaid unmonitored contributions in first person.

Finally, a popular, and controversial, publisher-platform for my informants was Hearst's The Mix (2015–2016). The legacy information conglomerate owns magazines, newspapers, broadcasting networks, and internet properties (*Hearst Magazines*, 2020). For about two years, the magazine brand division of the company advanced a digital publishing service for freelancers, called a "community," which connected freelancers to article titles that would be published on the digital versions of Hearst publications, including ELLE.com, Cosmopolitan.com, Esquire, TownandCountryMag.com, Seventeen.com, and MarieClaire.com. Freelance writers could apply to become a "member" of The Mix by submitting clips and a resume; editors then emailed members a daily digest of available titles to write articles for on spec. Sample titles: "How I Found The Right Therapist," "Stories Of Emotionally Unequal Marriages," "I Was A Pregnant Teacher," and "What It's Like To Have Cystic Acne." Any member could then submit a 600-word article within two days to be considered for publication under the title. The editor would choose one first-person essay for publication. Published authors were paid $100 (later, $50), plus .0025 per click bonuses after 20,000 clicks. Many writers submitted articles that were not accepted, and members encouraged each other to publish these pieces elsewhere.

In 2015, Slate staff writer Laura Bennett gave a pejorative name to the genre, calling it the "the first-person industrial complex" (Bennett, 2015). The term references "the military-industrial complex," first used by Dwight Eisenhower, in his final speech from the White House in 1961, to describe the alliance between the military and corporate business in advancing capitalism through state-sanctioned violence. By calling the genre the "first-person industrial complex," Bennett suggests a relationship between large-scale economic gain in internet industries and subjective first-person storytelling. To make this argument, she retells the experience of a first-time writer, then 27-year-old Natasha Chenier, publishing an essay with Jezebel (Chenier, 2015). Bennet describes how Chenier, a regular reader and hopeful future writer, decided to pitch Jezebel a startling personal story about grappling with her feelings about an incestuous relationship with her father. Jezebel, which has a bold, explicitly feminist style, had published similar exposés. Bennett describes the way Chenier's story was transformed into a first-person essay with the help of Jia Tolentino (now a *New Yorker* staff writer), as bordering on abusive, since it set Chenier up to have her experience evaluated, or criticized, by large audiences.

When I read Chenier's Jezebel piece, it took me on a rollercoaster of attraction and horror, as I accompanied her in navigating pleasure in what she would later identify as acts of grooming by her father; recoiling with her as she vomited in disgust and terror from her father seducing her; and breathing deeply with her subsequent, relentless distress from the experience. A follow-up edited interview with Tolentino was published the day after the essay (Chenier & Tolentino, 2015). Bennett describes

Chenier’s piece as one among hundreds of first-person essays that needed more consideration, that were pressure-cooked by the drama of rapid online publishing, and ends her critique with the recommendation that editors should take on more of a responsibility to better serve their writers.

Bennett’s diagnosis and correlation between economic drivers and the style of writing taken up by a non-staff of freelancers is convincing. But her criticism led me to believe she was presuming that the articles were being published to fulfill a predetermined economic need for first-person writing, so the call to action was to do better. As I have gotten to know both the genre and the details about publisher-platforms that have created spaces for first-person writing, what stands out to me is that although confessional writing is not a new form, writers on online publisher-platform publications are lucidly choosing to navigate changing publication processes and norms.

What I was left wanting, however, was a more thorough understanding of the imaginative, affective ways that moved freelancers, as non-staff writers, to participate in contributing risky stories about themselves wherein they will be subject to scrutiny, and possibly harassment. This question forms the core of this chapter. Writers I spoke with, and met in online forums, generally were aware they were contributing to publications whose practices have devalued the work of the writer, and they justified writing for low pay or no pay, as well as understood the risks in terms of online harassment, in ways that make sense to them. Writers also reported the difficulties of pitching and of unpredictable payment processes and often supported each other in

finding solutions. Some, of course, choose not to participate, are compelled to turn elsewhere, or get burned out. I address some of these situations in the next chapter. But in this discussion, what strikes me is that amidst changes and indeterminacies, freelance writers found ways to master shifting norms, and new writers emerged to contribute their stories. So what was behind the desire to participate in this arena, and how does that intermesh with economic ways of thinking?

These are the particular questions I take up in this chapter by doing a close reading of the first-person narrative genre to address why and how this writing is meaningful, and what connections these forms of expression have to economic and commercial values animating everyday life. One identifying theme is the reliance on and elevation of a second person, *the you*. This "you" plays a significant role in the freelance writer subject position. Though it is created and maintained through intersubjective processes, it is *through* this "you" that the freelancer engages and is figured in response to, as a gendered neoliberal subject.

**The apostrophic "you"**

> "To apostrophize is to will a state of affairs, to attempt to call it into being by asking inanimate objects to bend themselves to your desire." — Jonathan Culler, 1981, p. 139

> "Write for us! Don't fake anything. We can't wait to hear from you so please send us your ideas now!" — "Write For Us! xoJane.com Pitching Guidelines," 2015

First-person essays often appear in publications that have identified as woman-centered. Essays and articles often present multiple perspectives, ideas, and experiences on topics relevant to women—such as wearing makeup, shopping, abortion, parenting, marriage, and sexuality—though the positions often contradict each other, which I discuss in the next chapter. In the pitch guidelines for xoJane, writers are told, “it helps to always be brutally honest and radically transparent. Don’t fake anything. At xoJane, women themselves are the experts—our advice comes from having lived through an experience” (“Write For Us! xoJane.com Pitching Guidelines” 2015). In this chapter, I focus on how a candid first-person style came to be developed and established within, and across, certain online publisher-platforms.

The aesthetic significance of women’s autobiographical texts and/or visual works has been overlooked or denigrated, though feminist literary critics contest this positioning, showcasing how the genre provides powerful commentaries on contemporary political, social, and emotional issues. I argue the explicit use of the second person—both by editors and writers—serves as a socio-technical rhetorical act that assembles writers into a community and a future together. The second-person voice becomes an invitation encouraging a freelancer to explicitly perform, with writing, her own recognition of her place in a commercial system, which, I will argue, provides her with motivation to transform herself into the “postfeminist” liberal subject aligned with “empowerment feminism” (Banet-Weiser, 2018). The second person, as apostrophe, is thus central to the liminal work of freelance writing.

| **Addressee** | **Speakers** | **Function** | **Example:** |
|---|---|---|---|
| You: plural general readership / writer community (horizontal) | Omniscient editor and/or named editor writing on *behalf of platform* | Creating general readership | "Stories that matter to you."<br>"Write for us! We want your stories." |
| You: individual general readership; the singular user within the intimate public (horizontal) | Publisher-platform design for the community of users, social media posts on behalf of publisher platform | Enabling writer as user to technically use a machine and interface to participate | Buttons, forms, prefills, comment boxes |
| You: me (vertical) | Staff writers and freelance writers | Speaker is ambiguously relaying her experiences about herself from an external second position; ambiguity allows this to be used in conjunction with other forms | "You give him a call."<br>"You work on it." |
| You: plural specific, our community (vertical) | Staff writers and freelance writers | Writer is establishing that she has membership in the community | "You've heard this before." |

**Figure 1**: Forms and functions of "you"

The "you," as depicted in Figure 1, emerges through four forms of narrative and socio-technical functioning. First, the general "you" addresses an imagined audience of readers who form the intimate public. When an editor writes "you won't believe this news" or "you are invited to write for us!," the form addresses an intimate plural audience. This form of "general you" is found in travel writing and advertising, and it speaks to the imagined member of this target audience—a woman who isn't afraid of being selfish. The second type of "you" is expressed with technical functions, implied with the dropdown features and individualized processes of creating "users" for the

site. This “you” is at the base of the form asking for your email address or user name to login. These two forms constitute a horizontal address. The third type of “you” is an “apostrophe.” This is a vertical form of address that returns the question of “you” back to the speaker, as in, is it you? This second-person address is an external reference to oneself. The forth form is similar to the first and third, in that it is both self-referential and also returns the question back to the speaker, apostrophe, but is in the plural form, as in you plural (us). I’ll describe how these overlapping forms of address work in this and the following chapter.

In rhetoric and literary theory, the vertical address of “you” can be explained as an instance of apostrophic address. Apostrophe is unannounced speech directed to a third object. The invocation of “you” can be an interruption—speech directed away from the intended audience to another, third, object. Jonathan Culler discusses how rhetoricians see passionate address as apostrophic. He looks to William Blake’s *Poetical Sketches* for examples of the address, connecting the moment of interruption to the passion of the speaker. “Oh Rose, thou art sick” and “O Spring” are instances of speech directed to an object and to a construct of time (Culler, 1981, pp. 138-139). This form of speech metonymically “signifies . . . the passion that caused it.” Passion, according to Culler, is a function of the poet’s belief in “a universe as a world of sentient forces” (Culler, 1981, p. 139). Thus, apostrophe is less about the content of the work; rather, it is a form that motions back to the psyche of the speaker and the assumptions of the listener. In this way the occurrence of the apostrophic form heightens the perceived need for human connection. Literary critic Lauren Lovett

(2014) emphasizes that apostrophe, in fiction, can be understood as a desire for human connection. In her readings, the use of second-person apostrophe signals the difficulties a narrator faces to connect with others, by evoking a you through what are presumed to be general characteristics of human connection.

Lauren Berlant, whom I introduced in the introduction to this dissertation, has addressed apostrophe in her work as an evocative reorientation (2010, p. 95). The reader is oriented to look back to the origin of a passion and see that origin as a *desire for* the present in the speaker who is making the address:

> Apostrophe therefore appears to be reaching out to you, a direct movement from place x to y, but it is actually a turning back, an animating of a receiver on behalf of the desire to make something happen now that realizes something in the speaker, makes the speaker more or differently possible, because she has admitted, in a sense, the importance of speech for, as, and to, two: but only under the condition, and illusion, that the is really (in) one (2010, p. 95).

The turning back shows, in her contrast, "a *desire for*." Apostrophe is powerful for the locus it provides.

In what follows, I trace out this third form of second-person apostrophe in two ways. First, as present in the configuration of the publisher-platforms as convenient and available spaces where readers are invited to be participants, exemplified in the centrality of commenting on articles and the explicit call to readers to be freelance contributors, as well as in the pitching guidelines, and modeled in the redemption promised by editors who also contribute. Second, I explore how second-person apostrophe animates essay writing techniques. The second-person enables writers to motion to their own expertise and membership in a writerly community, and at the

same time it allows them to re-live, from the outside, and re-signify intense, traumatic experiences. Thus, the process becomes cathartic and worthy of imitation. These functions enable freelance writing to do liminal work, wherein the writer is affectively toggled between states, looking forward and backward, to others for themselves, and to the future for the present.

**You get into their head/I get into my head through you/Get into your own head anew: Apostrophe as intuiting**

One of my informants, Maeve, explained that pitch acceptance was, to her, a sign of mastery in stepping into another's head. "You have to read a lot of it. Get into their head. You see what they want. If they want red shoes and if you send maroon shoes, you'll get a big no, if they even communicate with you at all." Another writer, Missy Wilkinson, reflects on her successes with pitching in a similar way, in a how-to she published on her personal blog about the best way to pitch xoJane: "I had pretty much internalized the site's voice from reading it so often. I did prime the pump by reading a few published xoJane essays right before I started writing" (Wilkinson, 2015, para. 4).

As I explained, the publisher-platforms I was following either claimed to be feminist or appropriate places to express femininity. Forms of expression also necessitate the emotional labor of learning and internalizing a technical and stylistic repertoire, a specific skillset that participants using social media platforms are called

upon to learn, wherein understanding the technical/cultural inner workings of the platform is necessary for being a “legitimate” participant (Cowen, 2014; Ford & Geiger, 2012). Within this learning curve, writers frequently address other writers using an informal “you.” “You” is an ambiguous pronoun, as the writer uses it to both signal their own membership in a writerly community and to evoke the imagined curious reader or listener. With “you” a writer may be speaking about their own experiences from an exterior position or creating a subject position they may imagine themselves as needing to perform. In other words, the imaginative, ambiguous psychic processes at work with the use of the second person brings to life multiple subject positions: the “you” brings the writer to life in an exaggerated fashion. For instance, Wilkerson goes on to explain that her pitch was about her time with a religious community. Writing about it helped her to “cut the pain,” and can help you, too, she suggests. “Find the kernel of secret pain lodged inside you and tell everyone how it got there” (para. 8).

Allow me to further clarify this argument through my own reading of freelance writer Melissa Blake’s decade-long relationship blog series, “Letters To My Future Husband” (Blake, 2009-17). In this series, via hundreds of letters she publishes on her blog, she conjures both herself and a future husband as experts. “Dear Mr. Melissa Blake,” she begins each letter (sometimes addressing him as “Sweetpea” instead), setting them alongside first-person articles and reporting she’s published. Her writing is playful: she teases, she’s witty, she’s wordy. She acknowledges that the framing of time in writing to a future husband can be confusing (“I’m writing about the past to a future!”). This format gives her space to write about her difficulties, such as her

enduring grief about her father's suicide, which surfaces repeatedly in these letters over the years ("I wish people would ask me how I am"). She recalls memories of vacations, vents anxieties about her disability, expresses frustration when her wheelchair breaks. She provides a fascinating level of detail about her daily life: what she eats for breakfast, the drinks she prefers. Blake writes about the concerns her future husband might have ("I know you might want children, and my disability I'm told is like 100% inheritable"). The modal verbs look to a future that is extraordinary, with accompanying visuals that affirm this vision: aspirational stock photos of other people, and the occasional photo of herself out and about in her wheelchair, at a casino, in parks, at restaurants. She presents to her future husband— and to us, her readers— an entire series on her/their dream home, a midcentury modern rambler with a porch and a cute kitchen: maybe they can drink root beer from the bottle sitting at the tiled bar together. She confesses her secrets: for one, she gambles sometimes. Over nearly a decade, Blake writes 183 humorous and poignant love letters to her future husband. The brilliance and tenderness of this is, of course, for her readers, predicated on our understanding that she is writing a suggestive fiction about someone who is make-believe, who does not exist. I know this (she knows this), but this fiction is never acknowledged in the letters themselves. Rather, she spins a suggestive future in the theater of her words, which serve to bring her interiority to life in a very special, exaggerated way, because she is imagining herself by creating a fictive possible relationship and having real conversations with an imaginary subject. Through it she

creates, reckons with, and disrupts her desires and conceptualizations of a heterotypical, heterosexual marriage.

In the latest (possibly the last?) entry, dated September 14, 2017, Blake very nearly breaks the fourth wall in her decade-long literary speculative nonfiction when she reflects on the pain a Twitter comment brought her: the tweeter had suggested her letters "reek of loneliness." In response, she writes a letter to her future husband about the feelings that surface with this comment, bringing herself to life again by speaking to a desired life partner, naming her desire for a counterpart, and evoking the notion that having a "soulmate" is self-fulfillment. Then she scolds her imagined addressee for taking up too much space:

> I mean, are these letters really all about you? Are they just about you? No offense, but you're not the center of the universe; and I mean that with all the love in my heart, mind you. Because before there will ever be a Mr. Melissa Blake . . . there will just be me. Melissa Blake. And that's something I'm OK with. Granted, I wasn't always comfortable with that, but I'm getting there. In the end, maybe that's half the battle right there.

As she acknowledges, what's important about her letters to an imaginary him is that they are a creative way to create her inner self, through exteriorization. I've described her series in this way to demonstrate the powerful work of apostrophe*,* the you, in bringing to life Blake the writer. In creating a husband out of her own head, she can also get out of it in an exaggerated fashion. The blog series explicitly names socio-technical influences, such as comments, drawing attention to the power of the hyperlinked community on the open web. The social and technical processes at work can be seen by looking away from the "you" who is the object of attention and instead

to the accomplishment of the subject, the freelancer, who directs attention away from herself in apostrophic referentiality.

I am drawn to, and want to highlight, this power that the apostrophic invocation can have, because a seemingly simple use of pronoun is pronounced in the discourses that surround the act of doing freelance writing online, particularly in terms of making space for novices. Apostrophic second-person is a lynchpin upon which the individualized experiences of writers hinge together with the experience of commenting and participating in the collective feminism of individual expression. "You" click, and come to life as a participant, because "you" are brought to life through speculative, collective nonfiction. Writers exteriorize and create both themselves and feminisms through such intersubjective interplay.

Allow me to emphasize what I mean by unpacking two more examples. A few years ago, Demand Media Studios writer Rebecca Sato created a video about how to be a freelance writer. In it, she addresses a "you," the spectator, who is presumably curious about freelancing. The short film, which is available on YouTube, chronicles her experience of freelancing and is animated by her sitting at a desk, turned away from her computer to look directly into the camera, reporting her experiences and suggesting what you would need to do to do what she does. The video both creates you and leads you to see her as someone who is also creating herself. For example, after describing in broad terms the various opportunities for writers on the open web, she interjects: "So, you have to ask yourself, are you good?" She pauses and repeats herself: "Are you good?" The simplicity of the address and the repeating pauses create

space for the spectator to feel invited to join her in this self-assessment, and we may turn the question back to her: is she good? What is she modeling? Such an evocation can be persuasive in getting novice writers to return to watching her because it asks them to question their value, to look outward for self-confirmation.

Notably, the second-person address is a familiar rhetorical style in self-help and in consumer magazines, which often blend self-improvement with consumerism, using the "you" subject. What snags in Rebecca Sato's how-to video produced for Demand Media is the way the apostrophic address bends back into Sato. The film viewer is presumed to be interested in freelancing, so the subject position created for the viewer is one of questioning. But Sato takes long pauses between speaking, her position low in the frame, making her appear as if she is looking up at the filmmaker. The pace and framing invite the viewer to occupy the position of the filmmaker: we look down and question this protagonist, who is asking, "are you good?" Is she also asking herself if she is good? Is she maybe not good? She's making a how-to video for a content company that has been pejoratively called a "content farm," a characterization that I will discuss at greater length in Chapter 4 (Roth, 2009).

Sato's film gained 1,000 views in five years. Clicks and viewership are popular tools among tech companies to quantify and sell audiences; this process involves the commensuration of different qualities, such as sentiment or curiosity, into a common metric, in this case clicks (Dijck et al., 2018, p. 67). The visual presence of viewership metrics on Sato's short film may lead some viewers to pass judgement about the authority or value of the clip, despite the fact that metrics, as techniques of

datafication, are not all that useful as critical lenses (Juhasz, 2010). Nevertheless, the pathetic can become empathetic. By emphasizing the “you,” and looking up to the camera away from her computer screen, she is directing attention back to herself, in an exaggerated way, as the locus of attention—the spectator sees she is the site of the project, evoking the stance of “empowerment feminism” that the feminine subject is a site available to remake. You see yourself as the site of a project, too.

This bending backwards was also articulated in the description interviewee Bella provided me about her work as freelance writer. “Every time you visit a business website, consider that someone had to write . . . everything that you see.” Bella establishes her expertise by situating the reader as a novice who may not even realize that content is written by humans, as I described in Chapter 1, often humans who are not employed by the company. As Bella explains the tasks of the work, she continues to use the word “you,” but to narrate circumstances that are increasingly specific, that is, circumstances that only she knows. “A content marketing ghostwriter is a person who writes copy for the internet without getting the credit for it. When you agree to write for a client, you are selling your work and can no longer claim it as your own.” If apostrophe marks the desire for connection by isolated protagonists—and the ways that the editors and publishers imagine themselves as singular, isolated protagonists—it is also a telling rhetorical technique for creating affinity among a geographically dispersed group of women freelancers.

Apostrophe generates a sense of intimacy between writers and their reader participants, “intimate publics.” Carol Harrington (2018) writes that publishers such as

xoJane exemplify the concept of intimate publics in her examination of the feminist ethos that emerges in a networked public. The concept comes from Berlant's (2008, 2011) work on the relationship between community and consumerism. An intimate public is a "culture of circulation" among a market, a block of consumers, who share interests and desires, and feel they can express what is common among them, due to their shared sense of intimacy and ongoing attachments to this intimacy.

Harrington's work evaluates commenters on xoJane articles about sexual violence. Do commenters seem to understand rape differently through engagement with each other in this space? Harrington's concerns are both about the conditions of knowledge production and the knowledge produced. She contrasts comments sections to feminist consciousness-raising groups from the 1970s and concludes that yes, attitudes about rape do change, from hegemonic rape scripts of victim-blaming to more radical, non-linear forms of understanding. Commenters generate empathy. Harrington draws attention to the centrality of reputation-building among frequent users and the functionality of the tracking software Disquis. The option to assess reputation offers participants an opportunity to evaluate the authority of other users in the community, to collectively converse, and, importantly, to manage intruders. The software that notifies them about new users helps the community identify commenters who harass or threaten participants or otherwise disrupt the conversational flow. Building on Harrington's analysis of the agential role of the software to support users in vetting new users, the two articulations of the you "hails" users of the site into an intimate public (Althusser, 1971) who continue to, arguably, include all who can access

the site. In addition, the intimate public is accomplished through a rhetorical style that advances neoliberal postfeminist economic ideologies.

### **"All I got was this lousy article": Self-referential irreverence in a networked intimate public**

xoJane launched in 2011 with a headline article, "My Rapist Friended Me On Facebook (And All I Got Was This Lousy Article)," by staff editor Emily McCombs (McCombs, 2011). The article is about confronting "the architect of my adolescent rape" in the age of social media, accompanied by language inviting readers to participate. I consider this as an example of a touchstone piece, indicative of the work of the publisher-platform in bringing to life the readers—you plural—as an intimate public. McCombs' piece accompanied the launch of this popular publisher-platform; was written by one of the editors who would go on to work with hundreds of freelance writers, including two of my informants; and was referenced in future pieces on xoJane and elsewhere as an exemplar of first-person writing on rape.

In the essay McCombs recounts her experience of having her rapist "friend" her on Facebook. Her writing style is playful and takes up a familiar vernacular as she grapples with the uncanny strangeness of mediated intimacy. She is sharing her feelings with a presumably intimate readership. "As one benefit of that long-ago trauma, I sometimes have difficult accessing and identifying emotions, so I'd describe my feelings upon seeing his friend request in my inbox as sort of 'hurt-y?' With a side

of ‘can’t breathe.’” McCombs includes screenshots of social media apps to recount digital encounters, capturing the normalcy of what boyd and Marwick called the “context collapse” of social media (2011). McCombs admits she wanted to throw her computer away after seeing various parts of her life collide in the same space, on her Facebook page. Her strong feelings cast her relationship with her device in new ways, which could lead to displaced longing or revulsion of the device (Cumiskey and Hjorth, 2017).[26]

The article is laden with self-defacing, ironic language about the genre—“all I got was this lousy article” is a kind of inside joke, a motion to the language of kitschy tourist T-shirts brought home by relatives who’d traveled to sunnier destinations. The article is *not* lousy, it is a powerful reckoning and retelling of her own memory of rape; and it has reach, published on a platform designed for mass sharing and with the financial backing of a media conglomerate. But by prefacing her own work as lousy, McComb is backhandedly countering presumptions of the low value of first-person women’s writing compared to other forms of reporting or redemption, and inviting her readers to take up the question. Is this writing she’s doing lousy? Is she lousy? The playful subtext is self-referential in a simultaneous adoption and disruption of the coy style that feminist linguist Robin Lakoff (1973) calls “women’s language.” McComb’s style effectively contains both the problem, the trivialization of assault and of femininity inherent in lousy women’s magazine writing, and a thoughtful investigation of the

[26] “The vividness and poignancy of user-created digital content makes it likely that such content—often mobile-mediated—related to loss will be experienced as emotionally intense and psychologically close—the definition of mobile-emotive co-presence (Cumiskey and Hjorth, 2017, p. 6)”

experience of re-encountering people who have hurt you, who remotely enter into your private spaces. And it contains two solutions.

The first solution is presented in the article's subhead: "The hour-long phone conversation with the man who raped me that was more helpful than 1,000 hours of therapy." The article documents how initiating contact with and confronting the shameless rapist who had the gall to "friend" her provides resolution for McComb. In a detailed play-by-play retelling, she reports on how this experience allowed her to gain a newfound sense of self-validation and outsider perspective about her rape. She includes visual proof of this confrontation, sharing with readers social media visual culture now mundane to most: screenshots of the Facebook interaction with the familiar gray timestamps, light-blue hyperlinks, square photo avatars, and fine-print Helvetica. "I have something I need to ask you," she had written in Facebook Messenger, documenting for her readers a screenshot image of this digital encounter. He responds by requesting a phone call. She agrees, acknowledging to her readers in parentheses that he must know what is about to come: "(My guess is there are some admissions you don't want in writing.)" Though she is compelled to engage in the phone call "to know the truth," she confesses she feels distress about what might unfold, but also finds ways to comfort herself: "like everyone I've reconnected with on Facebook, he'd gotten fat." She notes the "banality of his listed interests like 'Bob Marley' and 'Scrubs.' He was a monster in my memory, but on Facebook, he was just a man. I called him."

This first solution, as I have described it, can be understood as a way that the economic processes of a neoliberal platform economy come to govern taste—in this case, the attractiveness of communicating her experience. Pierre Bourdieu (1984; 2001), a 20th-century scholar of social practices, furthered the Marxist theoretical accounting of the capitalist economic order and social life in a way that made sense of people's sensual and aesthetic tastes in relation to the logic of capitalism. Bourdieu developed a theory for understanding how it is that some people like certain things (e.g music, books, activities) in relation to the means of production and explains how economic processes govern these elements of taste. His work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* argues that taste is not naturally pleasing or pleasurable, but the associations to particular tastes are connected to class positioning. Moreover, such associations are acquired through cultural capital. He categorizes these forms into three types: embodied cultural capital (e.g. accent, posture); objectified (e.g. objects, such as a work of art or favorite film); and institutionalized (e.g. educational degrees) (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 98).

Bourdieu's contribution to Marxist theoretical literature on cultural practices provides a conceptual vocabulary for explaining why it is that tastes of an individual or group position them to benefit or lose from capitalist relations. The relationship of taste to class is complicated when theorizing the tastes and styles of women freelancers in their " work styles" (Gill, 2009; Gregg, 2011). Berlant's work, as motioned to earlier, helps me explain this with more attention to sentiment. Berlant connects psychic interpolative processes as intimately twined to the workings of the political economy, a

national sentiment. Of course, it could sound both mean and theoretically shallow to suggest that McCombs' reported story of freeing herself from the terror of sexual assault by confronting her rapist, and the invitation to follow her script, is attractive because it's wedded to a commercial, neoliberal framework. My intention in making associations between these is not to be reductive or nihilistic (it's the economy!), though I will continue to come back to this impulse and what it means again for freelancing to do liminal work. I want to name the fine nodes of connection between the contradictory logics of a neoliberal economy, work styles for freelance writers, and the affective configurations of an online writerly life. Writing in this particular genre motions to the social positioning of the writer, and her gendered labor welds certain feelings, which do liminal work in both reproducing the subject position of "empowerment" feminism and the accomplishment of risky online labor.

Giving her readers the edited transcript of her phone call, McCombs reinserts herself into a position of power through confessing her own exposure and eliciting a confession from her former rapist. Her style is characterized by the inclusion of trivial vernacular language such as ending sentences in question marks and including statements of self-doubt. As a reader, I cannot know what her tone of voice was, or aimed to be, during the initial call. Nor can I know exactly what tone she hopes to convey to her readers in the account of the call, since the article is a textual form of discourse, but we could read it as feminine vernacular: a breathy, accessible tone, with claims prefaced by interjections wherein she motions to her reader, informally. For example, she writes: "I just want to know if all this really happened." Inclusions of

feelings of indeterminacy suggest to the reader that she, as a narrator, is reliably reporting her paranoia and extreme discomfort in her recollection process of this episode in her past: "[S]ometimes it feels like I'm going crazy." The reported conversation unfolds as if we, as readers, are participants (reader participants), right there with her, piecing together memories to form a unified story of what happened.

"Me: It was a warehouse. That's real?

D: Yes . . . You are not delusional. I was there. It happened. . . . Somebody brought you over and told me you were going to give me head. I thought you were hitting on me. I had no idea there was anything non-consensual going on. After you left, they all gave me shit about it. Said I was hogging all the head.

Me: I remember handcuffs, do you remember that?

D: I don't remember handcuffs. I remember a collar and a leash.

Me: [crying] Oh my god.

D: For any part that I played in this, I am so fucking sorry."

This is the first apology. There is a second, when he realizes that his understanding of nonconsensual sex means rape. She was bleeding and unresponsive, he remembers. And then, she reports, he apologizes again.

As McCombs delivers her reliving of this trauma that she has reinserted herself into once again, she becomes her former self, re-alivened in the retelling, alive to us as our writer. The reported experience is exaggerated, and the article gains a redemptive quality through the retelling. In the end, McCombs secures her authority over her rapist as she accepts his confession and his apology—but not his friend

request!—and rejects his offer to "help with anything." Instead, she gives him instructions: to be a better guide to his children, to teach his daughters to respect themselves and to teach his son to understand that "no means no." Thus, there is a *second solution*, as I mentioned above, to healing from traumas. This solution is to write about the experience, as she has just accomplished, and which she has also modeled as an editor who will be the primary point of contact for freelancers contributing to the publisher-platform.

First-person writing in this moment thus becomes a genre that ironically reverses the limits of autobiographical or "women's" writing work as being relegated to the margins. Instead of seeking to marshal a genre that has epistemic authority, McComb's commercially-situated reenactment seems to take on often denigrated features of femininity—such as a tendency to dwell in details, report conversations, self-disparage, and self-question—as a way to reclaim authority. Irreverence as a gestural style is not limited to xoJane, but has been identified in feminist readings of women's media production in the digital age in a variety of contexts.[27] I see McComb's piece as an example of how self-awareness and catharsis for past injustices are gained with the publication, circulation, and promotion of the first-person genre within a commercial platform. xoJane states the publication's mission is to be a place "where women go when they are being selfish, and where their selfishness is applauded." McCombs models what this feminism can look like through her rehashing of her rape

[27] For example, in Senft and Baym's (2105) reading of selfies, "What Does the Selfie Say? Investigating a Global Phenomenon."

and redemption in a first-person article, using the visual artifacts of social media, and welding the rhetorical power of irony to reclaim women's self-writing as a legitimate space for healing from gendered violence. In doing so, she reclaims "selfishness" as self-confirmation.

With the launch of xoJane and publication of her article, McCombs is creating participant-readers, an intimate public, for an online publisher-platform on the commercial internet. These participant-readers are also consumers, consuming her experience and creating themselves as consumers with their clicks. McCombs' "lousy" article becomes a stand-in for her ethos as an editor soliciting writers, modeling the form, tone, and delivery that her participant-readers and consumers could assume that she expects them to deliver. Redemption is available with re-telling, and it's not lousy but palpable—provided you are there to receive, you who can breathe in and out with the writer as she relives her experience on a commercial digital publication platform. Procuring a confession and broadcasting a mediated apology to an intimate public of participant-readers and consumers produces a kind of digital pathway to using commercial digital media as a channel to self-fulfillment.

**Apostrophe and the "intimate publics"**

The launch of the xoJane platform, according to Pratt, was trial by error (Brodesser-Akner, 2011). The editorial team did not have a clear process for creating pay structures, monitoring reader comments, or developing beats. The half-dozen staff

writers, most with previous experience in women's magazine publishing, published their own articles in a similar format, writing to a community of readers, the intimate public: women presumed to be familiar with hegemonic tropes of femininity and standards in women's magazine publishing.

The xoJane publisher-platform flipped these scripts, slightly, subversively, which I would argue served to motion to readers' ironic awareness of their own position in a commercial, patriarchal, scopic regime. For instance, by overtly claiming that their for-profit commercial platform is a place to be "selfish" and not feel bad about it, xoJane paves the way for narcissistic autobiographical writing to be taken up as empowerment. However, such a position, reviewed through the work of Mary Ann Doane's theory on women's spectatorship of films directed explicitly at the female subject, suggests there is an ironic alignment with a male gaze (Doane, 1987). This positions the spectator subject as a split subject, creating contradictory desires for the intimate public. The discomfort of such a splintering is evident in the genre mastery performed by xoJane beauty editor Cat Marcell, in an interview with *Vice*, both acknowledges her own expertise in "typical" beauty writing and her hegemonic white femininity, demonstrating her mastery with the adoption, ironically, of risqué language (and elicit drugs) which suggest heteronormative transgression and exaggerated femininity nevertheless complicit with masculine constructions of desired femininity:

> Beauty is so square. Obviously, I could just write it straight and I could write that in my sleep. 'The Lip Gloss Round Up!' It's stupid. I just hated it. It's so boring. 'Master the Disheveled Pony Tail!' You don't even really write them, you just get the quotes from the hair stylist and then you plug in a product. But when you write 'Lipstick That Won't Come Off on a Dick,' you get a response" (Way, 2012,

para. 5).

The extent to which this intimate public is situated in a commercial media ecosystem is evident as a beauty editor acknowledges to another publication that she is actively seeking to invite readers to turn their digital eye-rolls ("clicks") into responses. Readers are assumed to be intelligent, to be curious about how a genre is bent, and to enjoy genre flipping.

xoJane launched at a time when the knowledge economy of cognitive and cultural work was burgeoning (Hsu, 2014). As one of more than a dozen publisher-platform sites, xoJane provided a semi-professional space for writers to both build community and earn a reputation as writers, and for the platform to demonstrate to funders and future buyers that it had reach and impact. In 2015 Time Inc. purchased xoJane from Say Media and valued the transaction in the range of $20 million dollars (Trachtenberg, 2015).

The publisher-platform encourages using the second-person in singular and plural, with the presence of commenting and the online submission process creating a space for an intimate community to bloom. "Write for xoJane! We're always looking for new writers at xoJane. We're especially interested in personal stories told from a raw, honest perspective. Our audience craves stories about personal experience." Similar to other sites, submission processes at xoJane included sending pitch emails to an editor. The small full-time staff of editors were tasked with responding to these pitches and editing and promoting pieces, as well as sharing their own experiences on the platform and gaining publicity in other publications to build readership. Mandy

Stadtmiller, an editor at xoJane for two years, later wrote about her work finding people to share their stories, calling herself a "trafficker" of stories, in a tone that seems to slip between impudence and integrity (motioning to the blending of the two). She writes "I, too, believed in these stories as agents of liberation, and I went to work as if I were at the forefront of a revolution" (Stadtmiller, 2015). Is she serious? Maybe yes, or maybe she's just winking at her readers: revolution ;)?

Publisher-platforms such as xoJane that advanced confessional writing published articles using a combination of blog format (the truncated word stands for a web log of diary entries—posts—organized in reverse chronology by time), sections (e.g. IHTM), and site-specific categories ("tags"). Article bylines hyperlink to author contributions. On xoJane and Jezebel, readers can comment on posts, and editors participate in the commenting. Over time rules and guidelines on comments have evolved, and readers become writers themselves. Comments are displayed on the main page in a sidebar. Staff writers contribute articles and share posts on social media, explicitly inviting readers to transform into freelance writers for the site, with overtures such as, "This is your place to talk about the funny, sad, outrageous things that are happening in your life—whenever you're ready." Jane and staff editors also publish commentary on their own work, and the ways in which articles are commented on, inviting readers to become writers.

McCombs' essay, typifying irreverence and modeling a kind of feminist agency achieved through digital publishing in the first-person, is partnered with this second-person plural—her attentive readers—who, as witnesses to her first-person

confession, can act by submitting their own stories. At the end of the article, the "intimate public" are invited to comment and submit. "Do you have a story to share? Send submissions to editor@xojane.com." The second-person plural hailed by the platform is necessary for the success of the first-person confession to have witnesses, to gain redemption. These two forms of redemption for past injustice both rely on the imagined and presumed second person singular (the you in her article/her or me) and plural (the you as the intimate public). As an interpreter of this culture, I am guided back by McCombs' evocation to see digital redemption as premised on an exaggerated, curated self that is dependent on a second person—the you—participating.

**You are not one but two: Seeing yourself molt**

> "When we allow something in the world to signify what we lack, we light it up, confer upon it a kind of more-than-reality." Kaja Silverman (2006, p. 36)

Tia, a reader of xoJane, is an example of a freelancer whose experience writing online was hailed by, and then mimicked, McCombs' transformation. As a regular reader of xoJane, Tia decided she wanted to share her uncertainty about her seduction by her high school teacher and their multiple sexual encounters. Tia reported that she struggled daily with feelings of humiliation and hoped publishing an essay would be a way to grapple with the experience (Anonymous, 2015). Her pitch

was accepted and she begins by clueing in her readers about the ordinariness of her account: “It’s a story you’ve probably heard before: a teenage girl falls for her married teacher,” she writes, creating herself as an average teenager in these caveats. “Maybe you’ve also heard the story of how he falls for her, too.”

Tia’s narration unfolds in the simple past, vividly recounting her interactions at 17 with her attractive, charismatic, married teacher. Like other pieces in this genre, the tone is matter-of-fact and provides many details. She was at the art gallery when her teacher, Greg, offered her a sip of beer. She went on to babysit his kids. In the summer after graduation, they exchanged calls and, eventually, had sex. The arc of her story is conveyed through her commitment to past present-ness, which emphasizes her sense of her own naivety. The writing platform is a space to relive her experiences, recollecting a past with sentences firmly in the present. She graduates from high school and moves away, “devastated to leave him despite knowing we could never have a future together. Even without his saying it, I *knew* he’d never leave his wife. He never *made* any promises and I never *expected* anything. Still, those first few months away from him *were* terrible.” (Italics mine). The past tense of her story gradually transitions to the present perfect, and then finally to present tense. “It *has been* 20 years since Greg and I had our affair. *I’ve been* an adult for a long time now,” Tia writes. “*I’ve had* other relationships, I’m married, *I have* kids of my own. I don’t look back and hate him. In fact, I still harbor feelings for him despite not having seen him in many years.” But she has a question: should she feel differently? “Asking that feels scary,” she writes. Her completed past actions are finally given grammatical closure.

This tense use opens up space for us, the reader participants in her story, to wonder if she worries that she might become undone. This worry about the present state of the writer gives the genre narrative power as a site of reconstitution of self. “I’m just now starting to realize that he acted in a way that might have been detrimental to me,” Tia confesses. The essay concludes with this subtle signal that she is leaving her experience of the past as her present, finding redemption in seeing herself as different from her younger self.

Kaja Silverman writes that a perfect memory would mean to be forever within the same cultural order. This makes the process of re-telling and re-membering individual events of the past a dynamic process of re-signification, giving affinities from the past new meaning: “A kind of memory which is more on the side of forgetting than memorialization” (K. Silverman, 2006, p. 35). In telling a story to the “you,” the reader participant, there is an active process of recreation, which I also noted in Emily McCombs’ essay and in my example of Blake’s series on her future husband. Tia exemplifies how her contribution is an act of participating in her own forgetting, retelling and rebirthing her past experience in the new cultural and socio-technical moment, through her retelling to an intimate public. She documents how this went for her in the next essay she publishes, a few months later, titled “xoJane Commenters Sent Me To Therapy”—a title that could suggest a story of cyber-harassment, which is the experience of some women who expose their personal stories—but in Tia’s case, she affirms the power of writing and sharing that writing as a vehicle for her transformation. In this next essay, she narrates how publishing the original essay

about her affair with her teacher led to (as she'd expected) comments and conversations online. She gained validation that her essay was read through the comments, which helped to crack the continuous connection she had established between her past and present sense of self. She then began to recast herself by attaching to a new object, giving it, as the pull quote I have chosen above explains poignantly, a "more than reality" (K. Silverman, 2006, p. 36): "Nearly all were clear in their assertion that I had been the victim of a lecherous and manipulative teacher. As I read comment after comment, it was hard for me to keep making excuses for Greg. A few internet strangers might be wrong, but when 300 of them all say the same thing, maybe they're onto something."

Commenters condemned her teacher and absolved her of guilt, and these comments helped her find the strength to go to therapy and allowed her to continue to find ways to see her younger self from an exterior. "I cried. I felt sorry for that girl—for myself." She recalled a peculiar experience that had happened years before with "a pet red-clawed crab named Sandy" as a metaphor for her current feelings. One morning Tia looked in the aquarium and was stunned "to find a second crab sitting at the bottom of the tank. I stared at them in confusion." As Tia recalled her crab, she also recalled her disbelief in herself. She could not explain the presence of the second crab. She realized, through telling this anecdote, that she was seeing herself anew in the process of telling her story online. Tia wrote that therapy helped her deepen the distancing process initiated by the comments. "I was recalling times I had comforted my children when they were scared or uncertain, I suddenly saw an image of my body

splitting in two down the middle, and another version of myself stepping out and walking away, like a molting crab." Her pet crab had molted "and had left behind a perfect but empty replica of himself." And now so had she. "That vision was odd and unexpected, but I was filled with optimism at the thought of shedding my old self and emerging free of the burden that had held me back for so long."

To return to Doane's psychoanalytic reading of women spectators in the 1940s films, which I mentioned in the last section, the split subject in this case is the ironic alignments of the reader-participant-consumer to both the ideas within the essays and the empowerment feminism of the freelance writer. Feminist ethnographic work in the 1980s about women reading popular fiction raised attention to the ways reading commercial fiction, such as romance novels, allow a reader to attach and identify with the protagonist. The act of reading and identifying with the protagonist's world enables the reader comes to see her own world, and herself, in a new light. Janice Radway explains: "The activities of reading and world-building, then, carry meaning for the reader on a purely formal level in the sense that they repeat and reinforce or alter and criticize the nature of the world as the reader knows it" (cited in Mandziuk, 2001, p. 180). The reader finds personal comfort and stability in the process of recognizing how a protagonist navigates uncomfortable circumstances. Within an intimate public, via the participant-reader and consumers' involvement in the platform-publisher arena, a not dissimilar psychic dynamic takes place, though it is different from the experiences of women reading and identifying with the worlds carried out in novels. In intimate publics such as xoJane's online community, people can comment and receive a

comment back, and thereby are “hailed” very specifically to participate in the collective platform. Thus they are participants in this world-building along with the protagonist, whose stories hailed them to re-signify their own stories and produce feminism as an act of consciousness-raising online. Crucially, the radical capacity to critically reflect is predicated on the collective experience with an intimate public. In Tia’s story, a freelance writer is created in the moment she is responding to the call to move beyond the position of a reader-participant and consumer to contributor; she is called to write for this intimate public and make herself anew through the external exaggeration, the re-worlding, of her memories.

Tia recognized that sharing her first-person story gifted her the capacity to critically reflect with her participant readers. Thanks to the care-full comments from hundreds of others, she felt cared for and validated. She also followed up with her readers to continue to keep them up-to-date on herself and her growth from the experience. Through writing, she not only split her psyche into two—gently holding the previous self that she had been and forgiving that younger self for the pain she caused by blaming herself for others’ transgressions and breaches of power—she also created in this narration the figure of the freelancer writing in/for a networked, intimate public as a subject position where such an act is possible. The older, wiser Tia reports emerging to simultaneously hold these two versions of herself through the process of writing online for this attentive, intimate, caring public. Her reported story models a kind of self-consciousness redemption that also signals participation in a feminist community “where selfishness is applauded,” as she confronts past injustices through

the retelling of her past in the first person writing to the second person—herself, externalized, and the plural community of reader participant consumers, the intimate public.

Yet, the collective "you" who is invited in to read and participate may not see the first-person subject as exaggerated. The freelance writer must then further recreate conditions of opportunity by peddling a postfeminist redemption: join! The ethos of postfeminism, according to Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (2011), emerges in discourses that emphasize female empowerment and individualism, which, as I have described, entail individual women actively shaping their own lives. The example of McCombs' piece, and the form and style of this model, produces a version of feminism typified by irreverence and redemption, possible with the socio-technics of the immediacy of emailing and commenting available on publisher-platform, wherein the individualism and explicit commercial intentions of selfishness bend back to question one's worth, and in doing so, establish the worthiness of the pursuit.

**The obvious and not so obvious work of the sensibleness of first-person writing**

> "I get it, it's the internet, I have to bare and share my deepest secrets. It's how I build visibility." Tasha

Scribbling down the point that there is an economic sensibility to first-person writing online became an unwanted truism in my notes. I motioned to this earlier in the chapter when I alluded to the reflex response, "it's the economy!" I want to return to

what's happening when "the economy" becomes a tautological explanation for publishing first-person essays on commercial, self-identified feminist publisher platforms for a ~$100 payment. I jotted down more than a few times that, *obviously*, a good reason why women write first-person confessionals is to get exposure and earn a name for themselves, to have a livelihood as a writer, to "make it" as a freelancer in the attention economy.

Writers, particularly those who have been successful enough to keep doing it, are savvy media-makers. They acknowledge that their lives are not stream-of-conscious "raw" for the sake of being raw; their writing is business-savvy-authentic raw, crafted raw, purposeful raw. As Crystal Abidin argues in her work on influencers and microcelebrities, who know "tacitly" how to bend their hip or tilt their head for the camera, and then write captions or overlay script that demonstrates authenticity with irony, tenderness, and oversharing (Abidin, 2018; Alperstein, 2019). Writers are aware of this pull; they talk about it with each other and they help each other strategize how to be successful. Just as critics of the genre have pointed to the obvious relationship between writerly devaluation and emotional exposure, writers are quick to recognize this too, and find ways to advocate for themselves and justify why they are writing. "At the end of the day, it's a way to promote my book," said Maeve, who told me that two of her confessional articles went viral. Tasha laughed when I asked her about why she wrote in the first person online, identifying it as an easy way to accomplish writing because reporting is not required. She gets it that the internet asks for her secrets, as exemplified in the pull quote above. Four freelance writers I interviewed sought out

first-person writing opportunities in the hope that their articles would go viral because they wanted to build digital visibility to promote their books or businesses.

In analyzing my own responses to the intersections of subjectivity with ideology, I recognize my impulse to identify the economic sensibility of producing otherwise crassly emotional writing as a “real” justification. But why do I write “crass,” why do I suggest I’m searching for a “real”? What work is this gnawing idea that there might be a “real reason” behind certain activities doing? As I explained in the previous section, self-contempt can subvert genre expectations about epistemic legitimacy in the digital, intersubjective re-telling process. But when I use the word “crass” to qualify the rational economic sensibility of some otherwise astonishing writing, I am retreating to a patronizing vantage, a vantage of a privileged subject that gazes from a patriarchal scopic regime, where “woman” as a social category represents objects to be consumed (Mulvey, 1975). I, too, slip into participating in this system through my feelings of comfort in finding a “real,” “rational reason” as explanation. As I have explored, commercial online publisher-platforms centered on inviting and creating female-focused, “selfish” writing does not preclude first-person confessional writing taking on a political aesthetic. To be sure, it does, it’s just a particular kind. In a review of autobiographical works, Kaja Silverman explores narcissism as a form of radical self-love. But of course she also reminds us that the self and subjectivity are distinct. Silverman describes the self or the ego in an interview by quoting Jean Laplanche, as “an object mascaraing as a subject.” A self is a foundationally fictive object that makes sense through our misrecognition of ourselves in it, but, she writes, “classically the

subject clings to it anyway" (2006, p. 36). Silverman's formulation of this distinction helps me to explain the ways that freelance writing can do liminal work in maintaining the figure of the neoliberal self, while that work is achieved through intersubjective acts.

It's worth probing the specific intersections between business sensibility and freelancing, and the reasons why first-person writing online can be understood as a sensible trajectory in pursuing a freelance career. In this final section of the chapter, I will describe the discursive intersections between the intersubjective writing style and the ethos of neoliberalism that shapes freelance writing work. What is happening at the level of the imagination when a business perspective on writing emotional pieces gains a practical sensibility? How do personal narratives traverse a distance from the emotional rollercoasters of confession and redemption? The articles themselves, through their two apostrophic invitations to the participant-reader and consumer, the intimate public, serve as discursive instructional maps; thus the business sense is a *close partner* to the intersubjective experience of catharsis through exposure. As I mentioned, a few writers who contributed first-person confessionals did so explicitly to develop their personal message or brand and sell their already published books, gain clients for consulting services they offered, or to shore up grounds for their book proposals. They reported acquiring speaking engagements and forging deeper connections with others working in their areas of interest through the exposure they gained writing first-person essays. This strategic use of publishing personal essays aligns the practice with the postfeminist subject. The power of therapeutic psychic

processes obfuscates ways that elitist gender and class divisions are also reproduced with this figuration of the online freelance writer, and in this iteration of feminism, as carried through the entrepreneurial, postfeminist subject position. I'll consider this through a discussion of two complementary examples of writers on the reported business of first-person writing.

Emily McGee (2016) contributed a first-person essay to xoJane about her life as a woman, wife, and mother, living in Africa. She analyzes her frustration-turned-pleasure in being the "trailing spouse" in her heterosexual marriage, leaving her teaching job in the United States to follow her husband's career by moving to Kenya, and then Mozambique, for his job. Initially, she had envied the prestige associated with his title and expressed a piercing pain in the struggles she had with her sense of identity related to her career. She then describes the transformation she experienced when she quit a stressful remote job she had kept to maintain her career and started freelancing, which she calls "driving the bus" of her own life. As the "driver of her own bus," she can re-center her definition of satisfaction to accommodate her role as a mother and foreigner. She describes taking pleasure in her position of "vast privilege" as one of the 1% in Mozambique. The essay concludes with her freeing herself from the confines of an idea of identity that had trapped her in constant dissatisfaction with her sense of accomplishment. Like the other writers whose work I analyzed in prior sections, McGee goes on to explicitly and implicitly credit online freelance writing as her solution to achieving a sense of liberation and control.

McGee follows her own first-person essay with a guest article posted on a freelance entrepreneurial website, Horkey Handbook (McGee and Gast, 2016), shifting from the genre of confession about her daily life and feelings on a personal journey—animated by photos of her with her husband and toddler on a safari picnic—to a business genre article. Beginning with an "executive summary"; unfolding with a series of headings, subheadings, and bullet points; and using marketing terms like "target audience," this article is McGee's own analysis of why her first-person article does, and doesn't, make "business sense." A benefit of having an article receive internet traffic, she writes, is that the writer can "build authority" with this target audience, as well as promote her other products, gaining new newsletter subscribers or potential book buyers. She was comfortable taking on the personal style of women's magazine writing found on sites such as xoJane, she explains, because of the wide reach she hoped to achieve. She provides practical advice about strategically working with xoJane editors, who might not let writers know when their post publishes, which can be a disadvantage to generating clicks. She suggests contributors should lower their expectations and not expect editors to give them a heads up about their publications. McGee acts as a remote consultant seeking to foster an entrepreneurial ethic in other women hoping to become freelancers, and through her own work, she acts to herald online freelance writing as a postfeminist solution to a gendered identity crisis.

With these details, what I had described as the "obvious" reason now materializes as a site where complicated postcolonial, racial, and heteronormative ways of living are mixed with the language and feelings of gendered liberal

empowerment and self-actualization. McGee's initial story follows a familiar heteronormative narrative of female frustration turned pleasure by coming to identify with her own peculiar sense of gendered subordination, which she then overturns by accepting the contours of the "patriarchal bargain," a situation in which a woman chooses to accept gender roles in order to maximize her individual power, which was amplified by her presence as a white woman married to an expat (Kandiyoti, 1988). The gratification she relays invites her readers to restage themselves along with her gendered subjectivity, as she turns to explicitly recognize the power she has as a married white woman and mother in the postcolonial African geopolitical landscape. Expatriate life is her opportunity to re-see herself as empowered ("driving my own bus")—as she distances herself from recognition of any gendered violence, constraints, and economies at work in the lives of the local people she is currently dwelling among. She assumes this authority by turning to explain to other women that they too can be empowered as women, in the process reproducing assumptions of privilege. This message about the value of strategically publishing her writing resonates with a neoliberal, postfeminist business ethic. In her analysis of her own xoJane post, McGee describes the reason for sharing her story to earn money, to get a few more clicks and more subscribers. This rationalization legitimates imagining one's life as a journey to find meaningful work as a wife, mother, and white foreigner in Africa. Her narratives are seeped in liberal feminisms, a way of thinking she depends on and then advances with the rationalization of her brand-building in her follow-up article. Her empowerment as a white businesswoman in Africa, serving women

freelancers seeking to help themselves, becomes logical through a worldview where white women make choices in situations of dependency. Thus, the analytical category of postfeminism helps to explain how the mundane work of women's freelance writing grafts onto the economic sensibilities of modernity and postcolonial financial superiority. This figuration of freelancing and feminism forms a raced, gendered, privileged, dependent, and independent liberal subject.

Juxtapose McGee's situation in Mozambique with the reported experiences of a non-American expat living in the United States, Veda, who moved to south east of the United States, and then Seattle, following her husband's acceptance of a job in the Seattle tech industry. Once she obtained a green card and work permit, Veda began intentionally building a professional identity as a freelance journalist and an expert in both ethnic and gender diversity in the corporate workplace. We met in 2014 at a talk through a mutual connection and she took the stage at an open-mic to describe her difficult experience as a married foreign woman of color in the United States without a green card. In her words, she was wearing "golden handcuffs," while waiting for a visa to legitimately work. After she obtained a U.S. green card, Veda worked in a series of full and part-time jobs in journalism and digital marketing before deciding to launch a career as a freelance journalist, consultant, and expert on gender equality in corporate work. She had a contact from her master's program at a recognized bi-weekly American business magazine and spent four years of blogging for their online website about women in leadership for the magazine, she then went on to publish an eBook, which was later released in paperback, about the advantages of gender and ethnic

diversity for business. Veda sought out speaking and writing opportunities to deepen her thinking and her connections, and to promote her book and her corporate consulting work, and used social media regularly to build connections and champion anti-racist regionally and globally.

During an in-person interview at a coffee shop, I asked Veda about how she connected the critical lenses she has of the inner workings of society to her own freelance work, what was her take on the opportunities and drawbacks of freelancing for gender equity? She explained to me that she considers herself privileged to have health benefits and financial stability from her husband's job so she could be in an otherwise precarious field as a freelance professional. She emphasized the freedom of freelancing to craft her career. The job she wanted did not exist in a corporation, she said, and she reported feeling moved to create her own work and expand conversations through public speaking and writing. She went on to say that expectations about future parenting were also a factor in pursuing freelance work. "I met a woman who told me that after her baby was born she went back to working 60–70 hours a week. That was just shocking to me," Veda said, expressing the hope that in doing her own work differently, she might contribute toward making life better for executive women working in corporations.

A year and a half later, Veda had a baby. She vocalized the difficulties of early motherhood on a panel about the pay gap when she was eight weeks postpartum. She later shared her perspectives with her Facebook community, and wrote a first-person piece for a popular magazine about her personal struggles with early motherhood.

Notable about her writing is her move to acknowledge conditions beyond her own feelings. Veda contextualized her experiences with “the reality [that], in this country, 12% of mothers have paid maternity leave.” Rather than foreground on her own difficulties as the most important story, she redirected attention to the difficult circumstances the majority of working women face. “My post got 100+ likes and many comments from friends around the world. This is clearly a pain point felt by many women globally—and one we all have a part to play in trying to solve. I was hesitant to share my story; I wanted to pretend like nothing had changed in my life. But I realized that by trying to underplay the difficulty of being a working mom, I would just be perpetuating status quo,” she explained. What is special about Veda’s writing and analysis, particularly in this example, is she concretely grounds connections between singular, first-person experiences and the experiences of a broader population of women. In fact, much of the writing I have discussed so far does not explicitly make such connections between the personal and the broader story, sometimes due to the stylistic constraints of the publications or publisher-platforms; and to the chagrin of some writers, two mentioned their frustration with parochial perspective. Contrast Veda’s work to zoom out with first-person stories which appear by themselves as solitary testimonies, reorienting attention to the writer to solve her own problem, which is a post-feminist position. At times the comments which circulate with an url of an article, or under the article—as was the case for Veda as well—can become evidence of some kind of broader story or circumstance, but not always.

However, there are thematic connections in the ways that McGee and Veda have made sense of the entrepreneurial business of freelancing, both foreground how the job becomes a legitimate way to balance (in this case, expatriate) mother-work; even if the writing they do is able to zoom out, the choice to freelance nevertheless highlights the individuality of the freelancer as a conduit to social change. When it is most sensible, freelancing reproduces an aspirational subject position, achievable through a general reach outward to an audience—to you (herself, and you, the intimate public)—even when the work accomplished criticizes aspects of social life that are reproducing social inequalities, including Veda's advocacy for gender and ethnic diversity and inclusion in the corporate workplace, and McGee's effort to support women balancing motherhood with paid work. Veda's work is explicitly centered on researching and advocating for corporate norms to change. She argues that diversity is better for the bottom line. McGee seeks to serve and support women who want to be entrepreneurs, arguing that entrepreneurialism can bring self-fulfillment. In ways, both narratives figure the freelance subject position, and the feminisms that attend it, balancing demands and marshaling the flexibility and convenience of digital mediation as a vehicle to affect change.

Balance is a key theme in postfeminist self-help literature for surviving and thriving in the corporate world. Work-life balance proposes a solution to difficulties that a person, particularly a woman and a mother, faces when navigating constricting choices. But this supposed remedy is often problematically cast as a balancing act;

Rosalind Gill, for instance, calls the repurposing of life advice “saccharine bromides,” referencing how inadequate self-help advice can be to affecting structural change.

The first-person article Veda wrote on the time-management and psychological struggles she experienced in early motherhood follows this redemptive model through the style of writing that I described when interpreting xoJane editor McCombs’ “lousy” article. Veda relives and re-signifies her difficult day, using screenshots from her Facebook page to gain perspective on the strain that mothering and work put on her. She petitions for the need for collective action for early motherhood community support, using her freelance work as a platform to shift or change conversations, and reaching out to extend the individual testimony into a claim for universal change.

As I read these two examples, I’ve considered what else is happening when the economic sensibility of freelancing is the obvious reason for pursuit, allowing me to pinpoint concrete instances of when and how freelancing becomes a pleasing economic solution to larger social problems, including (but not limited to) recovery from trauma and violence, gendered asymmetries in heterosexual marriages, discomfort about racial and economic disparities, and anxieties about caregiving and mothering responsibilities. Freelancing configures a style and form of expressing feminism that is animated through the position of an aspirational subject who is able to take on, and participate in, an intimate, precarious community of writers seeking a venue for expression, though generally unable to sustain themselves financially through the pursuit of this line of work alone. Thus, Bourdieuian theory of style and Berlant’s theory of cultural reproduction as the desirable life come together in the figuration of the

freelancer that emerges from this analysis of why and how she solves her own problems (sort of), through the purpose and style of her work.

**Concluding remarks**

In this chapter I have identified how apostrophic invitation works for the first-person freelance writing economy. Forms of “you” enable hailing (Althusser, 1971) of both the freelancer and her intimate public to participate in an online platform-publisher. The predictable, sensible obviousness of this move helps subjects feel, in an exaggerated fashion, that they can be saviors of their own lives—through the writing, and as writers. As a result, an aspirational gendered white liberal feminist subject emerges as a figurehead for the abstract freelancer, which, I argue, allows freelancing to continue to do liminal work. Making the personal—the oversharing of a personal story—a commercial success in spreading and raising awareness is a feminist act that can affect change. Exaggeration and the use of the general and apostrophic “you” create in the writer a dual role of rewriting memory and gaining redemption.

The logic of needing to appease the economy guides freelancers to justify their motives in smoothing over problems or difficulties in the trajectory, reproducing the work as worthy and allowing narratives about freelancing to themselves become places to resolve and reproduce hegemonic social arrangements and gendered strategies for managing the asymmetries and traumas of social life. These include

gendered asymmetries in married life and parenting/motherhood as well as sexual violence and incest, through the ascendency of a persuasive neoliberal figuration of freelance writing. This repertoire of commercial strategies, including personal branding, self-promotion, and first-person narrative writing may bring a larger platform and more opportunity to be in conversation with likeminded others, forming a smaller feminist “public sphere.” The xoJane writing community was among multiple small feminist spaces that developed in the post-recession period. At the same time, as I have described, the commercial features of the platform and ownership model can curtail more transgressive possibilities of independence for women writers, particularly for writers who do not have a partner to guarantee their financial stability. In the next chapter, I take up the question of contradictions, disappointment, embarrassment, and shame, as these constructs and emotions relate to the figuration of the freelance writer.

## Chapter 4: "Being ghosted" and "droughts": Analogous metaphors in companion freelancing spaces

This chapter describes the experiences of freelance writers working for two types of publishers: pitch publications such as xoJane and the internal jobs board system found at Demand Media Studios. The freelancers communicate about their experiences of getting and doing work using analogous metaphors in companion online social spaces. In analyzing these communications, I'll discuss internal forums and Facebook groups, which I argue take on agential roles in shaping the meaning of working experiences for writers. As behind-the-scenes anchors to community and profit-driven entities, freelancers discover and express disappointments, frustrations, and feelings of shame in these spaces. I identify and interpret how specific work processes are recast in metaphoric language, which has implications for the ways that work is understood, experienced, negotiated, or resisted by freelancers. With the aim of understanding implicit ways that software interlocks with expressions about freelancing for these platforms, this chapter crystalizes the role of cultural expressions about work that emerge in tandem with the specific operations of two forms of getting and doing online freelance work.

I will be discussing two processes for getting work as a freelancer: pitching to publications and working in an internal jobs board system. For the analysis of pitching, I will primarily focus on writers who worked with xoJane (2011-2016), though they also commented on other pitch publications, and I look to an online Facebook group as an

interstitial social space. The internal job platform is Demand Media Studios (2006-2015), and the interstitial spaces are freelancer groups on Facebook and the internally hosted online forum space for Demand Media Studios writers. I'll draw on reports from writers about how they connected with other writers, editors, and readers, such as through private messages or Twitter, analyzing the ways that disappointment, frustration, or shame in the context of their working experiences was discussed and acted upon—or not—through communication in companion spaces.

There are many social platforms and forms of socializing that may have agential roles in shaping the work of freelancers in addition to the ones I describe here. It is not within the scope of this chapter to attend to discourse that emerges on all corollary and interstitial platforms or online spaces, which could include Twitter, Reddit, and LinkedIn, as well as in-person meet-ups and events. Rather, the purpose of this chapter is to provide a close reading of select reports from freelancers about their getting and doing work processes, as such work processes were undergoing change, in order to explain the ways that they made sense of what they do.

I was present on multiple Facebook groups for freelancers from 2011-2016. These groups were my introduction to some of my informants, while others were recruited through a "snowball" sampling, where one writer would introduce me to another. I had many writers who declined or never responded to my invitations. One group significant to my recruitment and observation efforts, as already described, was a secret, private group for "womxn and non-binary writers" doing freelance writing work. This group was launched in 2012 and grew to over 15,000 members by 2015.

This was a very active group with multiple subgroups. Members asked for advice, provided moral support, shared tips/workarounds and technical advice, debriefed after jobs, self-promoted, and discussed trends. Volunteers stepped up to work as administrators of the group, navigating disputes and setting community rules about participation. Given the private status of the group and the privacy of its members, I do not describe many personal details, share screenshots, or discuss group governance in any detail. As a member of this group, and a few subgroups associated with it, I explicitly mentioned in my posts to other members that I was researching freelancing and gender for a dissertation. I made three requests to the group for feedback and interviews, providing my IRB number and institutional details, as well as a note inviting them to reach out for more details. I sought to participate in this group in a respectful way as a jumping-off point for conversations with writers about their experiences.

I worked as a freelance writer with Demand Media Studios for a few months, which I'll describe at length in this chapter. I viewed the Demand Media Studios internal forum and followed/participated in a Facebook group for writers that discussed the platform. As well, I was a part of the online community of xoJane as a reader—though I did not personally pitch xoJane, many of my informants did, as I have described in my previous chapter. My informants wrote for many different publications. In focusing on two, I hope to provide a rich site of analysis to consider the work of language in an intersubjective, mediated digital social space, as it shapes the identity and feelings that freelancers have about their work.

The pitching, editing, and publishing processes were distinct for xoJane and Demand Media Studios, and these differences significantly impacted how the freelancers developed a sense of professional values and identity. As I described in the previous chapter, xoJane solicited personal pitches via the website to be submitted by email, building on the "intimate community" of readers-writers who regularly came to the site. Writers could send pitches to an editorial address, though pitches were also developed through less formal means, such as in comments. At a general level, pitching is a typical protocol for magazines and internet publications. After acceptance, writers submitted their articles to xoJane using a content management system, Skyward, but continued to correspond with their editors using email. For payment, xoJane had each writer sign a contract and submit an invoice by email, and writers were paid after their story was published. Future publications by writers required additional pitches.

At Demand Media Studios freelance writers, copy editors, and filmmakers applied to become a part of the DMS community and gain technical access to an internal jobs board. The application process involved submitting a resume and three writing samples, and once a writer was accepted as a "freelancer" they worked on a trial period. The internal job board included a personalized dashboard where writers could see their articles in progress accepted or rejected. They could browse categories of available articles and "claim" any article by clicking on it, after which the article would appear on their dashboard. In 2011, when I worked on the site, writers could claim up to ten articles. The writer then had to submit within a specific amount of time

(~25 hours) after “claiming” the article. Different user rights were determined by site administrators; some writers could “see” more titles than others. The site partnered with PayPal to facilitate bimonthly payments.

The xoJane pitching process and the Demand Media Studios internal job board were both fairly standard variations on trends in online freelance platform design. The company where I conducted in-person interviews functioned similarly to Demand Media Studios, and Textbroker and Contently used this model for writers as well. Online portals for “claiming” tiered types of piecework were also found in other skill fields, most notably in “click” work or crowd work sites such as Amazon’s Mechanical Turk and Crowdflower. Meanwhile, magazines and online news media publications solicited and assigned stories using a more ad-hoc process, a combination of emails and pitching that emerged through personal connections. I will not be discussing the auction-style freelancer sites such as Elance or oDesk (now UpWork), which advertised writing work but were not exclusively for writers or for publishing writing, though those platforms also use a pitch process. What I found notable and which forms the core of this chapter is a discussion of the shared vocabularies writers used to describe what was happening in their working environments. I focus on ways freelancers expressed frustration or disappointment when they faced difficulties or communication breakdowns in their working environments and how they made connections between specific metaphors and their negotiating of a sense of professional identity.

The word “metaphor” comes from the Greek word “to carry.” Figures of speech carry meaning-making stories that help people to make sense of their circumstances. A metaphor presents a parallel story; one thing is another. In service of the dissertation’s argument that freelancing is an intersubjective experience that creates powerful normative assumptions about appropriate figurations of freelancing through liminal work, I look at how repeating metaphors emerge in secondary spaces to form an interconnected fabric of cultural meaning that animates the computational processes of online freelance writing. I use the word analogous to describe these metaphors, as they complement the software processes they emerge from. Analog means to bear resemblance, and the metaphors themselves bear resemblance to the processes. Thus, when writers reported experiences of frustration, let-down, shame, broken promises, unwanted attention, and economic precarity using metaphors that evoke spiritual presences and/and natural processes, these metaphors suggested or helped them make sense of what they were experiencing using a narrative of faulty phenomena beyond human control. I also contend that the asynchronic narration of events in online social spaces has an impact on the metaphors.

**Pitch publication: xoJane**

In this section, I give a general overview of xoJane’s pitching, editing, and publishing processes and then provide details on how they were experienced by freelancers in their day-to-day working operations. xoJane asked writers to write a

“pitch” via a “submissions” email address to secure an article assignment.[28] The editors of the site were available on xoJane and social media to answer questions. In fact, editors often solicited writers using social media channels as well as through appeals on the site (Stadtmiller, 2015). My interviewees reported that they often pitched more than one publication. Rejected submissions could be re-written to meet the editorial needs of another publication.

The process of pitching is speculative; it’s also common in the U.S. publishing industry. There are tutorials, how-tos, online classes, seminars, and workshops devoted to helping writers perfect the art of the pitch. While formulas and techniques vary, the end outcome is securing a contract, so the pitch is a sales technique. The writer must convince an editor that her idea is worthy, that it will advance the mission of the publication, fit their style, and reach their audience—and that she’s the best writer to get the job done. A pitch can follow a formula. However, there are many formulas. Writers I followed and interviewed were constantly sharing tips and tricks on pitching in forums and blog posts—how to tailor a pitch to a publication, how to pitch faster, how to pitch efficiently, how to secure a relationship with an editor to not have to pitch at all. The act of working as a freelancer on xoJane, and similar pitch-based online women’s magazine publications, required the writer to demonstrate feelings of emotional connection and professional expertise in a pitch in order to get hired.

[28] I want to point out that pitching to editors is not a new practice for writers. Since the 1960s or so, querying about article ideas has been common. However, in the early 2000s onward, the freelancization and platformization of writing work ushered in a distinct set of digital ways to negotiate relationships around this accepted custom.

The variability in process and lack of transparency made pitching a barrier for some writers, who found it time-consuming and difficult to master. Consider Blair's explanation of the emotional work she put into the pitching process:

> Right now I pitch nothing unless it is taking up my whole heart and I can't not share. And that is disappointing. A lot of pitches don't get a response and it's not a great feeling. It's a ton of work. It's not not work and it doesn't morally work. And if you put your heart into it, and it feels important, then it makes you feel like you don't matter.

In mentioning the morality of pitching, Blair cast me in a position of witness, as her interviewer, as someone to acknowledge her otherwise unseen efforts. Despite the difficulty of pitching, however, some writers got to know the editors and became a part of smaller lists of writers who were notified when an editor was interested in a particular story. Many editors and writers followed each other on social media sites. At xoJane, writers with accepted pitches submitted their stories to a content management system, Skyward, and editors would edit and shepherd the story through to publication, often without letting the writer know its status. The element of uncertainty and surprise was frustrating to writers. Blair told a story that more than one writer reported experiencing, of only discovering that her article had been published when a friend emailed her the link. Blair's piece was featured on the front page of Yahoo News, xoJane having partnered with Yahoo for syndication. "I was excited and I was confused why my editor didn't notify me," she said. Titles were frequently changed without the writers' permission, which was also done in the world of print journalism, but writers nevertheless complained to me that this was a particular pain point in the

freelancing process. Pitching was difficult. The lack of follow-up and changes without notification were especially frustrating.

**Being ghosted**

The metaphor of being "ghosted" was taken up regularly in online forums and to describe breakdowns, frustrations, and disappointments in the editorial process. When a pitch was never answered, that was frustrating, but it was not considered ghosting. Ghosting occurred when there was presence first. The word "ghost" is a remark on the lack of a former presence, and it is a term used in social encounters that are not limited to the freelance writing community. The other social space where "being ghosted" is frequently adopted is in descriptions of dating culture. Freelancers described ghosting as an editor accepting a pitch or a submission, but failing to provide follow-up in some expected way. Examples included not publishing the submission, not letting the writer know the piece was published, not providing support or money if the submission went viral, and not paying pre-negotiated kill fees.

In 2015, Diane, a former business strategy consultant turned writer described to me a "terrible" experience with xoJane. She had published with them twice and those experiences had been smooth. When she submitted a third pitch, it was accepted by one of the regular editors, and she submitted the article shortly after. At this point, editors at xoJane made changes, gave the piece a new headline, and then published it

without notifying Diane.[29] When she realized her piece was live, the article had already gone viral, she said, generating comments and "nasty" negative feedback. She reported that she received negative attention from other writers who used social media to challenge her integrity as a writer. As the article gained clicks and comments, Diane explained to me in a phone call that she began receiving a barrage of messages about being the wrong kind of feminist, being "anti-feminist."

"What kind of support did you get from the editor?" I asked.

"Support." She repeated the word I'd used in my question. "Uhhhh, it's just, you know, [editor's name from xoJane] was completely, just completely . . ." She trailed off and was quiet for a minute, then started again as I waited. "Was she supportive? Well, I wouldn't say she was unsupportive. Well, I guess I would say she was unthere. Not there."

I repeated what Diane said back to her: "As an editor, she wasn't unsupportive, she was unthere, not there." "Yeah," said Diane. Diane was describing her experience through a passive, as negation.

She went on to explain that she had wanted to defend certain ideas, essentially about the merits of dating someone different from herself, against the accusations that she was "anti-feminist," which she reported to me as coming from others in the feminist community.[30] Diane hoped to publish a follow-up article. But her emails to the

[29] I heard more than one report by writers that editors at xoJane and other publications would use new titles without notifying the writers.
[30] Trending articles and hashtags can be instrumental in creating, or dividing, communities, as Eunsong Kim (2015) describes in her essay "The Politics of Trending" and as Safiya Noble (2018) describes in her work on the amplification of racism and sexist content through commercial algorithms.

editor went unanswered and she was unable to respond quickly enough to those who were criticizing her on social media. Diane decided to publish a rebuttal on another lesser-known website and circulated the link in an attempt to reach those who she said had attacked her, but she felt let down that her editor ghosted her after soliciting and publishing the piece in the first place. The work of managing her comments from readers was significant, and Diane was dismayed that her editor had failed to support the reception of her work beyond the domain of the publication, while at the same time Diane felt the ironic pressure—as many of my informants did—of needing to perform digital self-promotion knowing that she was paid per click.

In this conversation, Diane switched back and forth between the second and first person, as if she was vacillating between seeing herself from the outside and speaking for herself. She was frustrated about being ghosted, while also berating herself for not being positive about the experience. “You get whipped into this state of desperation by, I think, the level of rejection that you get by the community and you have to inure yourself to it.” Then she interrupted herself to apologize. “Sorry for talking so much. I’m kind of going insane. I am more bitter than I realized.” She said she did not know how to handle the lack of support at times, and felt let down by the writing community, which she described as those who commented on her posts or sent her messages. In our interview, the ghosting metaphor seemed to give her a way to identify a lack, just as the second person helped her externalize her previous self from the persona she had as an expert on her own past.

Another freelancer, Deborah, was angry that a story idea she had pitched to one publication was stolen by an editor who had ghosted her. She used the vocabulary of possession and lack of presence to materialize feelings of disappointment. Deborah had received a positive note of interest, but then no further follow-up with respect to commissioning a story. In following the publication, she discovered that a staff writer had written a story very similar to the angle of her pitch. Deborah took screenshots of the emails between her and the editor and shared them in a private Facebook group to let it be known that her idea had been unfairly stolen by an editor who'd ghosted her, aiming to warn other writers away. The post marks her palpable frustration with the fact that she had nurtured a relationship with the editor at the publication only to feel that was severed and her idea was taken without attribution. The online social media group served as a source of communication and community. Like Diane, Deborah used the vocabulary of being ghosted, presenting herself to others as a wounded writer, one who was acted upon by a negative force. The act of sharing the screenshots to a community helped her to recoup control over the loss by naming the ghost that stole her idea.

A recent college graduate who started freelancing during her senior year of university, Tasha also described her experiences with pitching publications using the vocabulary of lack and ghosting. She'd written for xoJane, but it was an editorial encounter after pitching *Harper's Bazaar* that left her feeling ghosted. "I broke into a dream pub! That was really exciting," she said about her initial relationship with the

magazine. But the editing process led to an increasing number of rewrites that Tasha found problematic.

> It was a very personal pitch. I originally pitched exploring body positivity and nudity from the perspective of a woman of color, comparing how white women were compared historically, how that shapes how we view beauty today. The editor that I worked with wanted it to be more personal. That was out of my comfort zone. I felt like there was disconnect between the story that I was to tell, and the one she wanted me to write. She wanted to place emphasis on me and pop culture and celebrities. It wasn't my voice.

As the editorial process unfolded by email, Tasha was asked to do more revising than she'd anticipated. Eventually, she said, the edits started to create a narrative of black femininity as a matter of individual concern rather than the sociological angle Tasha had intended to write. "She wanted it to be about me," Tasha said about the editor, and this made her uncomfortable, as well as requiring a good deal of work. Tasha felt increasingly disconnected from the story, not to mention frustrated by the labor involved—which she said she had initially rationalized because "it was a dream pub!" and the byline could help her establish her credibility.

When she finally submitted her piece and asked about the publication date, the editor was "unresponsive," she said. A few weeks later, "a friend sent me the link," Tasha said, finding out about the publication from her personal social network rather than her editor. The piece had a clickbait title she had not approved. "I felt embarrassed and disappointed," she said, that her byline was attached to a story that was ultimately not in her voice or presenting the argument she had hoped to make. Like Diane and Deborah, Tasha had also then gone and asked for feedback from others—on the private social media group for womxn writers.

In each of the situations I've relayed, the writers use a shared vocabulary of being ghosted to describe their relationship with pitch publications. This same vocabulary is used to describe being let down by an intimate partner. The cultural logic of *dating* seemingly grafts onto freelancing, wherein the freelancer, like someone who is creating a relationship with an intimate partner, initially begins to see herself as desired, wanted, and loved, but the good feelings are broken when that relationship ends abruptly.

Significantly, the publisher's process for soliciting contributions in part facilities the creation of a sense of intimacy in the editorial process, becoming what McKenzie Ward calls a kind of "telesthesia"—knowing at a distance—that is woven "out" of devices such as the telegraph, telephone, and television (Wark, 1997, p. 27). Eunsong Kim (2015) points out that trending topics in a commercial internet system should be considered outcomes of the contours of a networked ecosystem. Journalists covering trending topics such as popular hashtags or viral articles reinforces the values of the algorithm, and trending topics might guide journalism, rewriting the confrontations that racialized/gendered users may be having with white audiences (Freelon et al., 2017). Freelance writers I spoke with have realized the fraught ways in which their work practices are predicated upon logics of trending topics, likes, and virility in an attention economy, which by some publications are treated as effective and neutral measures of audience engagement. Though they felt uneasy about the situation, relationships with editors grounded their interactions. For instance, Tasha said she continued to work with the *Harper's Bazaar* editor because they had a relationship, and Deborah was

angry that the editor she had corresponded with let her down. When the mutual exchange of a relationship such as this breaks down, the vocabulary of "being ghosted" as a metaphor for an experience of disappointment is suggestive of the linkage between notions of a professional self and the people at the publication. Language names a disappeared figure responsible for subsequent feelings of abandonment. Rejection is difficult, and a sense of shame can emerge, which leads some writers to respond by publishing or speaking out in other media outlets, performing a metaphorical exorcism. The culture of a pitch-based women's online magazine such as xoJane presents iterations of feminism and gendered low-paid work, including high expectations, high turnover, and unfulfilled hopefulness around financial security. To emphasize Blair's sentiment: "You put your heart into it, and it feels important, then it makes you feel like you don't matter."

Self-care and self-help advice for freelancers nurture skills, confidence, and independence, but these narratives also normalize uncertainty and rejection as par for the course in the publication process. While it may be useful in the short term for freelancers to handle the shame of rejection by following such manuals, ultimately, the organization of the online workplace and the governance of labor produces feelings of lack and disappointment; the feelings do not begin with the inadequacies of the freelancers, but they become articulated in conversations about work. What is significant is that social media groups and connections to other writers become secondary spaces for communication for writers to find advice and support, to share stories, and to grapple with letdowns.

**Feeling bad: Shame and companion work spaces**

Feeling of badness and inadequacy among freelancers who worked for pitch publications emerged from experiences with the site that went beyond encounters with their editors. In this section, I'll recount different experiences of shame in relation to the pitch and publication process. Freelancers expressed their own feelings of and about shame to me in interviews, as well as describing the shaming of other writers and explaining how to relieve shame. Here, I draw connections between mediated, computational processes; daily life; and the negotiation of professional identities for writers.

Tasha explained that she felt ashamed about publishing on a popular publisher-platform because it had also published articles she found offensive. "Like that time the white woman was writing about how she imagined a black woman feels in her yoga class," Tasha recounted, calling the article shallow and insulting. Tasha also expressed disappointment about another woman writer who had "shamelessly" gone on a national morning broadcast television show to talk about her article and the outcry it had generated. Tasha reported she first heard about the article from posts by writers of color writers on social media. She then saw posts in a group about the morning news show, discussing that a writer was being interviewed because of the controversy. Finally, she went back to read the article, and regretted that she had given it a click. In the previous chapter, I described how xoJane promoted "selfishness" as an

embodiment of the platform's feminist approach, publishing a wide variety of articles that might be said to celebrate "selfishness." The piece Tasha took issue with, for instance, is a mean-spirited essay about how a writer learns of the death of her mentally ill acquaintance and feels relief, the irreverence of her feelings offering readers an opportunity to revel in the badness of feeling relief thanks to internalized misogyny and hatred of disability. Discovering the article had gone viral and the freelancer was going to be featured on a popular national morning show, thus normalizing the revulsion of disability and the attractive irreverence of meanness, understandably made Tasha frustrated. That writer was shameless, Tasha summarized, when I asked if she could describe her feelings about it—just shameless.

Tasha was one among a half dozen writers I interviewed who relayed a sense of shame, and regret, that their writing—their first-person stories—had been published in general interest women's online magazines or publisher-platforms that also hosted pieces they disagreed with, didn't like, or found harmful. Animosity tended to be specifically directed at the other writers, I noticed, suggesting that the individual was cast as an independent agent in the freelancing ecosystem. Such a view downplays the role of editorial policies, codes of ethics, ad-word placements that are distant from the publications, and the commercial intentions of the publisher-platforms in the internet marketplace, which nevertheless benefited from "hate-reads." Crucially, however, what became clear to me was that the shame emerged thanks to the companion, interstitial online spaces where writers socialized. When writers claimed to experience feelings of shame, or direct feelings of judgment about who should feel

shame, this was explained in reference to the asynchronic events where they learned about other pieces. Reading comments about them, or not reading comments at all, were activities that played an important role in the way that writers described their accomplishments.

Research on shame tends to begin with etymology, perhaps because, as Donna Haraway writes, to be reminded of a word's history is a "twist in the belly" (2016, p. 120). I will attempt here to twist and reterritorialize shame's history to elucidate the work of affect in these circumstances. Shame is derived from the Gothic word "sham," which means to cover one's face (Probyn, 2010). The distinction between the two words is precisely the awareness of oneself in relation to others. When you turn your face away, you seek cover, which is because you have been uncovered as bad. When you feel shame, you feel you were exposed to another, and thus, as Sara Ahmet writes, shame requires a witness (Ahmed, 2004, p. 103). Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank (A. Frank, 2004; Sedgwick & Frank, 1995), in their work on the oeuvre of psychologist Silvan Tomkins, explain that shame is one of nine affects. Shame is the feeling one has when an interest is interrupted or a connection severed, with the subject's accompanying realization that another person sees them as bad. To be seen as bad means they are bad; the badness falls into them. When an infant begins to actively seek connection with the mother figure and the connection is not met, the infant's experience of positive affect (interest or enjoyment) is incomplete, reduced, and the child experiences shame (A. Frank, 2004, p. 522). I use this theory for the figurative description of the psychic feeling of badness as a severing; I want to

be explicit that I am not suggesting or advocating that literally women *should* be in charge of this connection, or that shame is the fault of a mother. Rather, I explain shame as the loss of connection, which is noticed and felt.

Tasha told me that she wished every woman who wanted to write could have the opportunity to do so and be heard, to experience the powerful effects of being heard. “This first time I saw myself on the page, it was really powerful. I wish we could honor that everyone has a story to tell and can tell it. We need more safe places to tell stories.” But Tasha tempered her wish with an acknowledgement of the internet ecosystem that facilitates the shaming of writers who may “say the wrong thing.” She noted, “if you are wrong, you will be crucified.” The writer who published the article about feeling relief at her acquaintance’s death was first removed from her private, secret group, and then the outcry led to her piece being taken offline by xoJane, which issued an apology. The power of the companion space of social media to reclaim professional identity was notable.

In our casual conversation, I was struck by the word “crucified,” which of course evokes the story of Jesus who died nailed to a cross, his suffering meant to atone for humanity’s sins. Jesus’s sacrificial act of surrender, in Christian theological traditions, eventually makes space for humans to reconnect with divinity (a godhead) through the subsequent resurrection. As I read the meaning that Tasha was perhaps intending to convey, to be “crucified” (nailed down, publicly held accountable, shamed by others online) entailed no expectation that the process might lead to resurrection and divine connection. It was more like being left in the gallows, if not a mob lynching. In tending

to the scriptural connotations of language for the helpfulness of their localized mythologies, I'll note that the meaning of shame also has biblical associations. In Genesis, exposure to external knowledge is what brings shame to Eve and Adam, who turn away from god and cover themselves. Shame in this reading involves self-awareness of the loss of connection to what is divine, to wholeness. "In shame I expose myself that I am a failure through the gaze of an ideal other" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 106). As an emotion without a referent, shame, as I summarized, thus requires a witness, one who is not you. Tasha's shame and embarrassment at being associated with the writer who published an article cruelly expressing relief at the death of a human with disabilities emerged through communication with other writers, a move that had powerful consequences.

Diane, who was frustrated by being ghosted by her editor when she was accused of being anti-feminist, stated bluntly in our interview how difficult it was for her to be a freelancer because of the occupation's immersive qualities, motioning to the economies of time and attention involved in social media in the networked digital age, where attention has been a limited resource in the "free" model of content creation and circulation (Abidin, 2018; boyd, 2017; Linchfield, 2018; Papacharissi, 2015). Yet not using social media pulled her away from her online community of working professionals. The system felt inherently problematic. "If I was writing to make other people happy I might as well just kill myself now. That's the interesting part—the community that savaged me was the writing community. They love to eat you alive. If this is your community, you need to find new friends." Some of the harshest comments

Diane received, she said, were from writers who had contributed to the same online publisher.

Yasmin remarked in an interview that she felt bad when her professional network of friends and acquaintances did not like, re-post, or re-tweet her writing work or accomplishments. She would read and share stories amid her feeling of frustration, and these stories would receive many comments and re-posts. Yasmin expressed disbelief about her friends' silence. Diane's and Yasmin's reports signal the authoritative role of secondary social media sites in freelance experiences, and the ways that community is facilitate through their mechanisms and logics. On one hand, the social media sites serve their purpose very well—they are commercial social networks facilitating connections, and as commercial entities that can adopt automated processes, such as creating data out of user activity and using this information to select which information is featured as a "trending topic" or a "popular story," in ways that are not only prioritizing commercial interests but are obscure. When a writer feels her friendships are measured through re-shares, this collapses the commercial logic of sharing as a symbol of the practice of support and care.

I want to turn to the ideas that emerge in the account of another freelancer, Frida, who I met in an online forum and then connected with on a Facebook group. After commenting on each other's posts, we arranged a private phone call that lasted for nearly three hours. I'll recount a portion of our interview in detail because it is helpful for conceptualizing the ways that socialization in companion spaces forms in relation to the culture of freelancing. Frida's report on pitch work and the practice of

capitalizing on one's personal experiences also relates to the discussion of shame. In our interview, Frida told me she had wanted more visibility online, which she believed would help her sell her self-published books. She used personal connections and old friendships to get textbook editing jobs, maintained profiles on freelance crowdsourcing platforms, regularly pitched reviews and first-person essays to niche arts and culture publications, and self-published three fiction books. She had just accepted a new position, the outcome of a pitch, to be a freelance columnist with HuffPost. Though it was unpaid, Frida was thrilled about the new gig and she talked about how great the exposure would be for her other work. When I asked her what she had planned for her column, she said she would focus on trauma. Then, as if to explain this focus, she told me about a comment another writer had made about her previous writing on trauma. "I write openly about my PTSD. This other woman I know from online, I've known her for about a decade, wrote me and she told me, 'Frida, you are so lucky that you have this trauma that you can talk about so openly.'"

Recalling this conversation, Frida paused and took a breath. I made a note: *writer reports other writer's interest/ desire/ jealousy for their trauma. Trauma as a competition*? *Connect to themes in fiction writing?* Before I could finish the note, Frida went on to say that she responded to the woman by explaining that she actually had *other* traumas she did not want to write about online, to protect the people involved. She was not surprised, however, that this other writer was envious of the traumatic experience she'd described. She knew she had gained *something* through writing about it, she said. Frida's acknowledgement of the *something* gained motions to ways

that writing online for digital publications is intersubjective, wherein writers experience a "co-presence" with others, as Cumiskey and Hjorth (2017) describe in their work on grief and the "mobile-emotive" reconstructions of feelings through mobile communication, which are powerful despite the absence of voice or physical presence. Yet the *presence of others* is significant to this work, the professional identities of writers, and the imaginary of the networked freelance experience.

As I have discussed, desire does work beyond a commercial pandering of emotions. To my point, Frida was not telling this story to report that she was capitalizing on her trauma. Rather, she seemed to recognize that another's expression of envy was important, an explicit acknowledgement of her success in curating and re-expressing her feelings about trauma and its impact on her. She knew she had gained *something*, and went on to explain this "something" as a kind of re-subjectification:

> People tell me that there's a rawness and vulnerability that I have in my writing. I feel that the more we talk about these hard things then *we wouldn't have to feel shame.* That's ultimately what is important. To know it is not your fault. The more women that come out with their stories, the more you are giving permission to share other stories and find the support that you need, and *not find shame*. That drives my intentions.

As I pointed out in the previous chapter, the second person is significant to the accomplishment of a freelancing subject position. Frida spoke in the second person about herself: To know it is not your fault . . .  to find the support you need." In speaking about herself to me, she was also externalizing herself from her experience by using the second person, and in doing so providing space for this imaginary third subject (other writers, a would-be writer, the woman who made the comment about

trauma) to gain a similar "something"—in this case, the experience of relief from shame. She does not use words such as "pride" or "confidence" or "relief" to describe ideal outcomes, but rather uses the negative—to *not* feel shame—and other writers also commonly employed this syntax when they expressed themselves to me and to each other. The implication is that a successful writing experience can alleviate private, personal suffering from unwanted exposure (others see me as bad, I must be bad, and thus must turn away) *with* exposure. Frida's analysis of her conversation with this woman and what she then recognized in herself exemplifies that she was experiencing the exposure of writing as a cathartic process, one of being beloved.

I've motioned to the cultural narratives associated with the language expressed by writers about shame—stories of crucifixion and double negatives—because I argue they function as "tacit knowledge" for my work, that is as a kind of understanding of something that is difficult to put into words (Fleck, 1981). This dissertation follows a methodology of attending to "the situations" in which online freelance writing work is experienced by writers. The ideal self-as-witness is manifest in these linguistic processes that emerge in companion social spaces about and through the asynchronic experience of freelancing and communicating with other freelancers online. I am not suggesting that an "ideal self" is a floating universal out there waiting for humans to find, internalize, and then measure themselves against. Rather, such an ideal forms from the outside going in, through the internalization of the social norms and values of a given community, specifically, through a person's particular encounters with others in that community, which I've shown are distributed and at times disjoined.

Sara Ahmed argues the ideal self (or the Ideal Ego) is solidified through a feeling *of love*, the understanding that the self *belongs* to the others in a community. Thus, subject matter that introduces feelings of shame among writers—that is, stories that are morally distasteful or reprehensible—are an important part of the experience, which is also created through the way the community describes the meaning of the work. As I have shown, this community forms a sense of professional identity in the companion spaces of freelance platforms, and so feelings of shame are contingent upon the values and rituals of the community, which in this case include communication with each other in companion spaces.

When I reread Tasha's observation that writers are quick to criticize the perceived misdeeds of others, I noted that she used the word "crucifixion" in conjunction with her own interest in aligning and finding connection with other writers. Indeed, this was also the same type of work the writer of the negative article about her mentally ill friend's death was engaging in—she, too, was aligning herself with a community of people. Frida's astute observation that another writer was envious of her trauma is evidence of the need for connection that writers feel as they form their senses of self through encounters with each other.

Out of these vignettes emerges a tendency—that the asynchronic activities in companion social media groups form a social space where writers come to imagine themselves as part of a community of writers: I see myself in you. Love can come with recognition of membership in that group. And shame can come from lack of recognition. As such companion sites become a part of the rituals of membership, they

are also fractured sites of community because of their asynchronic temporal pace, and their commercial interests, which poses a problem for writers. When Tasha recounted discovering the story's publication, she emphasized the centrality of social networks in nurturing attachments to the publication in the first place. Tasha considered withdrawing from the online forum as a social space because she was disturbed by the others within it who stood up for the writer who published the problematic piece about another woman's death. Listening to her, I recognized that the potential withdrawal of her participation became a moral choice. But she hesitated because she had found the group to be a significant source of connection, and a means to amplifying her work, which had monetary benefits. Her hesitation attests to the importance of companion social media spaces for the professional development and identity of freelance writers working online. This authority poses a problem in terms of workplace behavior. If the social spaces are not governed by the publishers or the social media platforms but become places where editors and writers encounter each other, where writers connect, then these spaces are central to their professional development. What responsibility do the platforms or publishers have to ensure they are safe and free of external influences? Both the platform that publishes an article and the volunteer-run community groups should bear responsibility, but only one is recognized as a legitimate space of work. I pose these questions not to then provide an answer to them, per se, but to underscore what I have learned from my interviewees, which is that private sphere companies form a significant mode of connection for collaboration,

idea generation, and professional identity, but are not considered to be part of the formal workplace nor of the domestic sphere.

In her study of creative workers in the European Union, Rosalind Gill (Gill, 2009) has shown that contract workers in the creative industries often take on a great deal of unpaid work as a means to network and reskill in order to gain footing in their fields and procure paid work. In this portion of the chapter, I have argued that the companion informal social sites and practices through which freelance writers get and do work, and their feelings about the work, are significant for their professional identities. As well, these are practices that are taking place in asynchronic ways, across a variety of platforms, and are often mediated by volunteer-run community groups that have the power to validate and encourage the viral amplification of freelancers' articles, thus helping them feel redeemed and welcomed. But they also have the power to make freelancers feel excluded and ashamed.

**Anonymous how-tos: Work for hire with Demand Media Studios**

In this section, I'll describe the function of a companion internal communication forum as it pertains to freelance experiences for writers working with Demand Media Studios, a freelance platform launched by Demand Media. Demand Media Studios is distinct in operations and governance from the pitch-based freelance work I have been discussing up to this point in the chapter, but the role of companion social spaces is

significant for the accomplishment of the work and the identity of freelancers, which is why I have chosen to include this case study in the chapter.

Launched in 2006 and attracting $355 million from investors, DMS was a content company that connected over 10,000 freelance writers with content writing jobs, forming one of the largest sources of online web content (Kushner, 2011, p. 1). DMS predated mobile-app gig economy companies such as Uber and Task Rabbit, and was launched at the same time as Amazon Mechanical Turk. There are resemblances to these interfaces in terms of the way that workers join a closed platform to claim tasks, which they are then graded on, as for hire workers. The CEO and co-founder of the company, Richard Rosenblatt, was a runner-up of the world's top CEOs, according to Forbes, behind Apple's Steve Jobs (Kushner, 2011, p. 2). Rosenblatt explained in an interview that he sought to provide access to evergreen and practical knowledge with Demand Media, such as "how to make a homemade Mother's day card" (Kushner, 2011, p. 2).

Much of my understanding of Demand Media has to do with my personal experience on the platform. In 2011, I applied to work with DMS as a writer, was accepted, and worked more or less 40 hours a week for approximately three months. As I described earlier in this chapter, the application process required uploading a resume and writing sample; completing a form with basic personal details, including directions to facilitate payment to a U.S. bank account; and then completing two graded assignments. The assessment process did not use any external markers of "reputation" or the number of "clicks" articles received, but rather relied on the

evaluations of copy editors as well as topical-specific markers of expertise. During this time and shortly afterwards, I began talking online with writers who had also worked on the platform, some of whom are a part of this study.

Rosenblatt explained that the purpose of Demand Media's prolific number of articles that hinged on specific sets of keywords was to provide content not being published elsewhere, ensuring that the "nonobvious" needs of searchers were being met (Kushner, 2011, p. 1). Titles were created by pairing two keywords that might, at some point, be searched by someone using an internet search engine. Demand Media then sold advertising space on their articles to advertisers who might be interested in targeting that small subset of readers, for example, who would search "Mother's day" and "card," or "frog feet" and "cook."[31] Search engine optimized content was predicated upon content surfacing in search engines, such as Google, which were understood to be hierarchizing content by keyword. Emphasizing the absurdity of the formula, Amy Green (2010), who writes for *Quill*, explained, "Demand Media uses a mathematical algorithm drawing from web data rather than editors to anticipate questions, generating titles such as "How to Curl Hair With a Curling Iron.'" Overall, the type of writing was explicitly absent of any political or personal connections; writing for Demand Media did not, in my interviews, foreground political issues or point-of-view

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[31] For instance, I wrote an article for a title "How to cook frog feet," which has since been removed and was not, unfortunately, archived by Internet Archive. In the article, I used my position of authority as the writer of this title to point out to searchers who combined these terms in their queries that frog feet are not edible. It was a bad search combo: "For epicureans uninitiated to cooking webbed-footed amphibious creatures, it is the frog's legs—not the frog's feet—that are edible. According to Ernest A Liner (2005), author of *The Culinary Herpetologist*, frog's feet have no nutritional value, only bones. Moreover, some frogs excrete unpleasant liquids into the foot skin making it extremely unappetizing, not to mention the occasional presence of squishy suction disks. While it is uncommon and undesirable to make frog's feet, making frog's legs is a culinary tradition globally," I wrote.

articles, nor was it a platform to share personal experiences or stories. The DMS style guide mandated the third person, active verbs, and at least three references, to create content that would ostensibly be meaningful to readers and thus be featured highly in search results. I was careful to fact check my entries and use reliable sources accessed via library databases and Google Books for research on a wide range of topics: blood, RNA replication, fashion history, sewing, crafts, the legal lexicon, and algorithms.[32] However, there was no guarantee that all freelance writers or copy editors had done a thorough job on topics, or had access to subscription research services. Some titles begged extraordinary specialty knowledge, such as on medical, chemical, mechanical, or software topics, raising the possibility that misinformation could circulate due to the prioritization of inexpensive content flooding search engines over expert fact checking.

Once created, Demand Media Studio's content was published on sites that the company owned. In the late 2000s to early 2010s, Demand Media's premier websites were ehow.com and Livestrong.com.[33] Demand Media Studios advertised using their freelancer platform to provide original content for entities such as *National Geographic,*

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[32] All things considered, I had more authority than perhaps experts in these fields would approve of for a novice with a penchant for research having authority not rewarded by payment, but conferred by distribution and de-professionalization. Many freelance writers did a sloppy job writing how-tos, and I did at times too, which could be read as "polluting" the search results through the effects of commercialism, including pieces by low-paid novices tasked with writing such content. The resulting consequences are that users encounter information that is misleading or misconstruing expert and/or critical knowledge about the topics at hand. Moreover, the delivery of this kind of easy answer to any throbbing question ("How to make a Mother's day card") robs searchers of the chance to think of answer themselves, arguably reducing critical thinking, though facilitating critical thinking is not the purpose of a search engine.

[33] Livestrong lost popularity and story opportunities were reduced with the Lance Armstrong doping scandal.

*San Francisco Chronicle,* and Major League Baseball.[34] While the workplace model resembled other crowd work platforms, it was distinct in that the company promised to facilitate the professional development of writers and pay them regularly. Unlike with writing for personal websites, writers did not need to "live a memoir-worthy life," as Diane said in an interview. Solid research skills and adeptness at following directions could get the job done.

Once a freelancer logged on, the contribution process was facilitated through a main homepage that provided a "feed" of titles. Logged-in writers could set goals and see their earnings in a bar graph on a sidebar. The "feed" of work was organized by title, and once a title was claimed, the writer was tasked with creating content (an article or a film) that would fulfill its meaning, following a Demand Media style guide. Freelancers had no contact with any person at Demand Media during this process; rather, writers were expected to simply read the style guide and follow directions. Note that this process was distinct from pitch-based freelancing, wherein writers developed one-on-one relationships with editors and publications. Freelancers for Demand were not able to contact their editors or other writers on the Demand platform, though writers did connect, share tips, and provide mentorship in offsite online groups and forums, including a Facebook group devoted to freelance writers working at Demand Media Studios, as well as in comments on the blog "Demand Studios Sucks," published by a writer who had earned a living with DMS for some years. The editorial

[34] During the six months that I had access to my freelancer account (I wrote regularly for three months), these additional outlets were either not visible to me as a freelancer based on my credentials and assessment ratings, or such external contracts were not as plentiful as the work of updating the company-owned domains.

system allowed copy editors to rate articles, and then an aggregate of those ratings were used to hierarchize freelancers and broker access to claiming articles. The anonymous freelance copy editors graded articles according to grammar and research on a scale of one through five, with five being the highest mark a writer could receive.

**Drought on the farm**

For the few months that I wrote for DMS, it felt like a game compared to pitch writing jobs; I appreciated the platform because it was a straightforward way to earn money. I earned $15 dollars for every article. Claiming them was as simple as clicking on a button. I had 48 hours to write, and I could claim up to ten at a time. One of my informants who also worked for Demand, Bonnie, agreed that the ease was a draw. “It’s a quick filler. If I am low on meeting my monthly budget goals, I like that I can claim a few articles with little hassle.” I set a goal to write an article in one hour, so as to earn $15 an hour. This required much focus. I needed to earn high “ratings” in grammar and research on my articles from the anonymous copy editors (CEs), who reviewed articles and had the power to accept, request a rewrite, or reject.[35] I read reports that, in the first three years of the platform, writers could claim four or five titles on the same topic and thus could use one research inquiry for multiple articles, making the writing process faster (Roth, 9 C.E.).

[35] From what I read on DMS forums, CEs were paid $2.50 per article review.

In March 2011, Google introduced the "Panda" algorithm change (Levy, 2011). The algorithm deprioritized webpages from "content farms," that is, companies that seemed to be producing content to "game" the algorithm. Demand Media Studios, as well as other content companies such as AOL Patch and About.com, were among the websites impacted (Levy, 2011). At the same time, there was an increase in traffic to social media web platforms specifically oriented to sociality. In response, Demand Media reduced the number of articles it was publishing; less work was available to the 10,000 work for hire content creators. Available titles were often esoteric, such as "How to teach algorithmic skills for preschoolers" or "How to make a flexi prim." Sometimes it took me more than two hours to research and write articles. "How to Make Your Own Instant Coffee" required research on industrial food manufacturing; "How to Neutralize Inequalities in Ratings" was a statistical how-to. I also dove into the legal lexicon to write "How to Write a Nomenclature Enclosure." Though I aimed to submit strong articles, my ratings from the CE roulette went down from a 4.3/5 average to 3.9/5. When I recall this period, it was characterized by a general feeling of isolation, anxiety, and low confidence. The computer work wore me down. Unlike Bonnie, I wasn't using Demand for fill-in employment, but rather I made it my primary work for a season. As a result, I often took longer than I should researching a topic, enjoying the research process, but I felt I had to figure out how to work in a machine-like way in order to efficiently earn money.

Writers shared tips and tricks in an internal forum space, as well as less formally in social media groups. The latter was where I learned about Demand Media

Studios as a remote work platform in the first place. Online social spaces for discussing the experience of freelancing became a source of both comfort and news. Writers I interviewed reported similar feelings, and in fact, it was in a Facebook group where I "met" my first three interviewees. A Facebook group and the internal DMS forum for news about the company became companion communication channels that facilitated an ad hoc community of freelancers. As Zizi Papacharissi has noted in her work on "structures of feeling" (Williams & Orrom, 1954) and online networked publics, social networks "facilitate networked circulations of affective flows produced, distributed, and further remixed through mediated communication channels" (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 15). I connected with other writers looking for work and observed with interest how the conversation about Demand came to be called a "drought" by writers on internal and external forums ("Demand Media Forum . . ."), which meant that only one or two titles were showing up in my feed for me to claim.

In July of 2011, I learned about Demand Media's "First Look" program on their Facebook page, where freelancers were discussing the fact that DMS writers with high grades would be able to see the titles released first. Only writers with scores over 4 were invited. As I mentioned, my assessments had dropped my average to just below 4, and I admit, I felt a little crushed I wasn't going to be part of the program. As expected, I did not receive a First Look email invitation and was disappointed. I wasn't the only one who felt bad. As I scrolled through the comments on Demand Media's Facebook page and in the online forums, *hundreds* of writers were upset. This was a notable moment because it crystalized for me the importance of the companion

communication pages in creating a sense of community for DMS writers and documenting their response to the governance structure of this workplace.

Rather than come together to organize or request changes in working conditions, writers took to the internal forums and social media page, filling them with questions posed to each other. Many writers requested more information about the "drought." "When will this clear up?" one asked, as if speaking about an unexpected rain squall. The management responded to questions every once and a while. Reading these pleas felt like watching a horror film, helplessly wanting to warn an on-screen character of impending doom. *The company was built on sand; the writing was on the wall*, I wrote in my journal at the time, pessimistically wondering, *why do these writers seem to believe that the boom isn't over? The business model is parasitically based on a search engine, and who wants to read our how-tos anyway?* What perplexed me was that some of these writers seemed to have expected security and now felt baffled. Why couldn't they see what a terrible idea it was in the first place, I wondered. Perhaps their comments surprised me because they failed to adopt the postfeminist "go-getter" subjectivity, to present themselves as people who could inventively find their own solutions to problems. Instead, I was seeing a subject position of neediness and bewilderment: the "ghost freelancer," who can follow directions; work in the background; commit themselves to a platform; not ask questions about the process; and hope they will be rewarded, piecemeal, for these characteristics. As I described in Chapter 1, in 2019, Mary Gray and Siddhartha Suri (2019) advanced the term "ghost worker" in their book of the same name, to describe

how crowd-sourcing platforms hire freelancers for a variety of tasks, not just content writing, to labor behind the scenes and make machines work. This commitment to the platform by invisible workers can be seen as an extension of the midcentury model of business that expected workers to pledge allegiance to their parent corporation, which used a vocabulary of paternity and protection as justification for these practices. One commenter wrote, “Demand business model has always been based on crap and now everyone is going to lose their crappy virtual jobs on the content farm in the clouds.” Another quipped, “Mommy and Daddy love you very much, Parker, but sometimes people have to get a divorce.”

Whether naïve or realistic, an implied trust in the business to continue to provide work for freelancers was evoked with the word “drought” as a metaphor to explain the lack of work in their “feeds.” To reflect further on what was accomplished culturally with this linguistic choice, calling the lack of stories a drought had economic and political implications. The ways in which commercial software companies re-configured writing work to meet the perceived needs of commercial search engines were naturalized as inevitable. The metaphor of drought fits nicely into the storyline made real with the language of a feed, where writers see a long list of jobs to claim to earn money, and with a “cloud,” the natural metaphor prevalent in the digital technology industry more generally to describe networked remote data storage space, as data is ephemerally gathered in the sky, above reach. Together, these metaphors have the effect of facilitating a vital, but also otherworldly and supra-natural sensibility associated with digital technology companies and their inner workings.

What's important for this chapter is that these metaphors, which emerged in the companion online spaces and were also reported in interviews about freelance work, were instrumental in facilitating a sensibility of confusion around who to ask and what to do next, and a desire for the security of the predictable. The suggestion that a drought is to blame for the lack of work normalizes a complicated interrelationship between the algorithmic prioritization of search engines and the process by which piecework is available for writers. The notion of a drought suggests circumstances are beyond human control. For centuries, humans have not understood themselves to control the weather; rather we aim to understand and adapt to weather patterns, writing almanacs using celestial bodies to help us understand and possibly predict the weather. Droughts are difficult, unwelcome ecological events, and often there's little one single person can do about it beyond saving beforehand, conserving, or moving on to somewhere with more water. Droughts negatively affect farms, so it is fitting to have a "drought" come to a "content farm," as Demand Media is deprecatingly described for manufacturing search engine-optimized writing (Hiar, 2010; C. Silverman, 2010). In a PBS episode of the program *MediaShift*, freelance writers for Demand Media Studios are described as "toiling on the farms" (Hiar, 2010). Droughts are to be endured, just as farmers would endure a swarm of pests, tornados, or hurricanes; droughts are an act of God ("Act of God," 2019). The content farms and weather metaphors perform affirming psychological links between the sensibilities of

freelancers as victims, toiling invisibility on digital farms, and the visible functioning of the web platforms as authoritative, neutral, and righteous.[36]

After a few hundred comments were posted in the internal forum, DMS staff member Jordan Decker posted an update about strategy changes. Demand Media's web products were diversifying, and new forms of content were coming, along with new quality assurance programs for existing titles. Because this post was in the forum and allowed comments, it could be understood as the site management authorizing the experience of using the forum as a valid place to build community. Indeed, this forum was only available to writers who had gained access as site users by completing the application process and had participated in the highly mediated, if not physically shared, workspace, monitored through various forms of temporal and spatial disciplining practices. This space was instrumental in shaping the meaning that freelancers developed about their work during this time because it was the place for an exchange of comments about the lack they were experiencing. Indeed, by early October 2011, there were no more titles to claim. Three years later, though I could see my username, I was unable to access my profile page. Demand Media Studios rebranded as Studio D, and at that point I was unable to login at all and lost access to all of the articles I'd written and to my payment history. My workplace had disappeared. Another former DMS freelancer wrote, “The site is like the last barbed

[36] The connections between precarious work and language and attitudes about climate change are an interesting site for further exploration.

wire strands marking off the borders of a defunct farm, lingering for a gust of wind to lift and deposit it further down the road" (Paulas, 2016).

This language of the "defunct farm," with its lingering "barbed wire strands," easily makes sense in the web lexicon, bringing to life the web terminology of "wire frame," a phrase used to describe a basic web site template with no content. There's the rightful loneliness of an abandoned place, a ghost town, as if a web platform was actually a shared derelict space where thousands of writers had worked together for years, giving materiality to the seemingly ephemeral because it is distributed and not shared physically. All my writing was taken offline, though I had saved my own copies. On forum spaces writers exchanged tips on recovering their writing from sites that had collapsed. But given the lack of a physical site to visit, and with the erasure of digital memorabilia, this language is successful in re-embodying Demand Media Studios as a former place of significance for writers who had, in some ways, trusted it. However, this trust *in* was precariously placed. Just as the word "ghosted" was adopted by freelancers who engaged in pitch work, stories of drought and abandonment were used to describe the predicament of freelance writers for a crowd work site that employed a predictable, top-down management style. Amid this environment, mythologies of human endurance became a strategy for managing a feeling of bewilderment or loss.

**Concluding remarks**

In this chapter, I argued that the interstitial companion spaces for writers to communicate were important ancillary channels significant to their sense of professional identity, worth, and membership in a community of freelancers. I've highlighted metaphors and interdependencies of the publishing-platforms with social media forums. As these double-edged spaces were not always safe or positive, writers also experienced letdown or disappointment as they sought to promote their work or gain recognition from publishers that would validate their authority and provide monetary compensation.

I've explained how writers vocalized and adopted strategies to reconcile the hurt of these experiences using shared metaphors. Disappointment or rejection around pitch work in freelancing was explained by using the vocabulary of ghosts, while disappointment or rejection in an online platform was widely referred to using the metaphor of a drought, an extreme weather event. On one hand, metaphors of the natural and supernatural suggest freelancers are experiencing circumstances that are beyond human control. Though circumstances could be different, the linguistic formulations are discursive strategies that enable the people who use them, in a way, to manage.

Throughout this dissertation I use the concept of liminal work to describe the material-discursive effects of online freelance writing work. In this case, the writing work I have studied is the traversing that takes place between the pitching spaces and

the semi-professional alternative spaces for communication that I've described in this chapter. What kind of liminal work is accomplished? I turn to Victor Turner's concept of *communitas* that is experienced among initiates in a ritual. Turner explains initiates feel bonded through their shared experience, but also feel dependent and incomplete (V. Turner, 1969, p. 364). Liminality, a period of time, a space to cross, is endured because it symbolically represents the shedding of the old and adoption of the new. However the creation of indeterminacy also creates a "vital force," he writes, that's not the outcome of biological or inherited drives, but developments through the experience of being in and releasing society (V. Turner, 1969, p. 373), following my reading of disappointment and shame in this chapter. The configuration of the processes freelance writers engage in commercial companion spaces in their efforts to pitch freelance articles to online publications or to use vertically-integrated job boards to get and do work, is a dialectic of participation that results in intimacies, alliances, and shame.

## Conclusion

> "This is Jane," the volunteers who staffed The Service responded. "How can I help?" Almost immediately, they were asked for more help than they had to provide. Their callers needed a doctor, an abortion, money to pay for it, someone to care for their children. The Janes responded by diversifying. Contracting several doctors to lower fees, they gradually filled other needs themselves: Driver Jane provided transportation, Counselor Jane held the patient's hands throughout the procedure, and Big Jane raised money, arranged backup care at local emergency rooms and managed the operation. Eventually, they learned to use the technology themselves. Over the next three years, the Janes served more than 11,000 women." (Blakely, 1990).

In Chapter 2, I began by re-narrating an article that was written by one of the five freelance writers who led the lawsuit against *The New York Times*, and others, in the 1990s-2000s, to retain authorship rights with digital re-distribution to third-party database vendors. "Remembering Jane" was published in 1990. While I looked at a variety of the articles published by that set of writers, this one stood out to me because, as I described at length, the author, Mary Kay Blakely, was using her pulpit as a freelance writer to write about a subject of considerable, ongoing debate and importance for feminists concerned with the integrity and dignity and bodily autonomy of women, then and now. Despite having been legally conferred the right to privacy, and thus the right to terminate pregnancy, with Roe v. Wade, Blakely notes that women seeking abortions at U.S. clinics faced physical and emotional harassment. The article, I explained, was doubly significant for this dissertation because it signals two struggles, first, the social and emotional conditions that women who write may

wish to report on through writing, and the challenges, anxieties, and opportunities that written narrative holds as a conduit to gendered knowing. Second, the article authored by Blakely indexes the labor struggle that writers have faced, particularly around the right to own their own works, with the advancement of commercial configurations of networked information technologies. One outcome of the Tasini case, as I describe in Chapter 2, is that writers often are asked to give up electronic redistribution rights with payment, a result that was justified through debates about freedom to access information. I return to Blakely's piece now, at the end of my dissertation, because the story she told next surprised me, and offers a timely vignette about care and generosity that can inform the conclusion of my dissertation.

Jane, we learn from Blakely, is a name for an anonymous collective of helpers, a group of women who helped other women get abortions before the treatment was legalized. As described in the epigraph at the beginning of this concluding chapter, these women, Janes, took up a sophisticated, organized, and care-fully coordinated series of actions, secretly, to care for other women in need. The story reminded me of the text Frida sent me, "Viva la Fempire." When I asked her about it, she said that she'd recently heard about a women's network, The Fempire, and the vision hit home. She was, in her own words, a woman of color and an intersectional feminist. "I want to promote my friends, to help other women by writing articles about them, helping them do their thing," she said. That was one of the reasons she was keen to interview with me, she said, to lift up another woman. Women helping women, prioritizing care, an

anonymous network of Janes: these acts seem to be the core material of a feminist movement.

Social movements, and their tactics, goals, and rhetorical choices, are shaped by the communicative technologies available to and taken up by organizers and participants. In this dissertation, I set out to document the working practices of freelance writers online in the aftermath of the 2008 recession in the United States, which included efforts by women writers and feminist writing, as well as feminized writing portals and platforms. I was curious about how authority was being reconfigured thanks to the inner workings and becoming-*with* that freelancers perform with online platforms and practices, and how such interfaces and reconfigurations impacted their emotions, writing, work practices, and professional communities. My work has sought to make sense of the changing and often unevenly experienced working conditions that freelance writers have navigated when publishing online through attention to cultural and material-discursive practices, feelings, and vocabularies.

**Crossing the threshold: Directions and implications**

There is a future to which this dissertation points and on which it must speculate, not because I advocate or desire it, but because it is a real eventuality that must be intervened in and reimagined as we shape it. The concept of future here is

discernible through the neologism I have advanced in this dissertation: liminal, and, specifically *liminal work*. As a motion to physical thresholds—from one room to another, one space to another—the borderland of liminality is a transitional space, as I've explained, which relies heavily on spatial imagery and from-one-to-another movement. I have sought to be careful in my update of this concept. I have not wanted to advocate for a progressivist understanding of liminality and freelancing, that they are one and the same. Nor do I propose a noun usage, as in "freelancing is liminal." Rather, across the four chapters of this dissertation, I have shown the intersubjective relations in human-machine interactions and material-discursive configurations of online freelance writing work in a commercial online networked environment as doing liminal work, that is, engendering formations and instances of instability and ambiguity, as well as alignment and intimacy.

People move in and out of freelance writing work. Companies open and close. Partnerships solidify and fizzle. Discussion are heated and over. The category and activity of freelance work has been under debate and defined by circumstances, discussions, and discourse that are not under the control of one person. An understanding of discourse and intersubjectivity are key to my analysis and usage of liminal work. In part I advanced this concept because, I asked not why are theories of digital labor in modernity able to account for the specifics and variations of online freelance writing, but instead how might women's varied experiences doing online freelance writing inform theories of digital labor? This orientation brought me to keep

close to situations and stories, and at times use them as theories, to advance an understanding of what is happening.

*Liminal work* maintains interstices and margins as circumstances to pass through. Critical race scholarship on technology has shown that the internet has been a site of gender, ethnic, and racialized figurations through powerful visual and digital signifying practices (Nakamura, 2008). Historical formations of domination and control are built into systems, categories, and hierarchies of difference (Atanasoski & Vora, 2015; Noble, 2018). A line of thinking through this project has involved attending to the ways that the labor practice and experience I identified in the fieldwork was continually unbalanced by the specter of a neoliberal subject, specifically aligned with empowerment feminism, though, as I describe in Chapter 4, visibility and empowerment are one iteration of this subject position. Liberal figuration, as an idea, materializes in the discourses of entrepreneurialism, in the discourses of independence and redemption in freelance practices, and in the specific processes through which freelancers work. This subject interpolates women freelancers as writers, and that draws them to write, participate, and connect. However not only is the position never quite available to occupy, but it serves to reinforce the irrationality and ambiguity of liminality as a productive force in the world of the freelancer who labors at home. In this way, freelancers can move in and out of subject positions through processes of identification with a community, *love*, that contributes to the recreation and maintenance of unequal conditions and shared sentiments, in a sense of

generative alliances—akin to Turner's concept of *communitas* that is experienced among initiates—but also of dependency and incompleteness.

Following Turner and Agnes Horvath, et al., I adapted liminality from social anthropology to an interpretative and ethnographic study of labor to describe how its condition makes the "technological reconstruction of irrational fragments the very principle of rationality" (Horvath et al., 2015, p. 2). In borrowing and adapting a concept to new circumstances and objects of study, I have changed the concept as well (Bal, 2002). My aim is not to suggest or expose an innate contradiction between the gendered, in-between experience of freelancing—as I observed it and as it was reported to me—as incomplete or seeking to become or be completed by/as an autonomous liberal subject. I do not wish to recover either the ideal of an ephemeral temporary, untethered worker, nor the ideal of a secure, unitary, workplace-situated full-time worker subject position. That strategy would pit people who do writing work as freelancers, workers who operate in complex, intersubjective ways across platforms, *against* presumed idealized accomplishments of a specific historical moment and set of economic conditions that has *never been fully realized*—and, I want to emphasize, must nevertheless exist as an ideal for the perpetuation of the market. Rather, I consider ways networked configurations of gender, technologies, and subjectivities do liminal work. The freelance writers who have done and continue to do liminal work maintain a threshold experience of being betwixt and between conceptual frameworks, professional identities, and practices.

Throughout the dissertation, several themes and conceptual propositions are articulated. In this conclusion, I will describe and further explicate the *intersubjective* and *feminist* themes. I'll then describe my *reading* techniques and *attunements* as an ethnographer and participant-researcher and end by returning again to my formulation of *liminal work* and possibilities for future research raised by this dissertation.

## Dissertation themes

### *Intersubjective*

At the center of my inquiry is a model of "intersubjectivity" that posits that humans are responsive to and formed by their social and affective interactions. Intersubjectivity has been theorized across disciplines and is a theoretical portal to understanding agencies and situated actions. I notably drew on and advanced work in feminist film theory and human-computer interaction, specifically that of Lisa Cartwright in *Moral Spectatorship* (2008) and Lucy Suchman's discussion of distributed agencies and non-human agents in her work on *Human-Machine Reconfigurations* (2007), which identifies agencies "at the interface." These foundational works undergirded my theoretical and interpretive efforts throughout this dissertation.

In Chapter 3 and 4, I use affect theory to analyze shared sentiments and intimacies among freelancers, and the ways in which turning toward and away from each other forms what Turner calls the *communitas* of liminality. Cartwright's

attunement to the ways that the self is constituted by "borrowing myself from the other" (citing Levinas, 1993, alluding to Merlo-Ponty; Cartwright, 2008, p. 3) and the attentive work with psychoanalysis and affect theory guided this analysis. Following Suchman's attention to tending to the "materialization" of things by looking to the relations between them (Suchman, 2007, p. 286), I look to, for instance (in Chapter 4), the vocabularies that freelancers used to report on disappointment and shame around their pitches in relation to the platforms upon which they were working.

Attunement to self-other was also significant in my interpretative approach. I carried with me the focus on psychic and intersubjective processes as crucial to formations of meaning, guiding my attention to the subtle ways that screened interactions could form intimacies, to the "emergent properties of action . . . arising out of ongoing activity" (Suchman, 2007, p. 177). A focus on the nuances of interface led me to draw out how agential differences in automated features, including organization, temporality, and form co-construct users. In these chapters, I traced reports of freelancers working with specific platforms and took up analysis using literacy devices—apostrophe and metaphor—to describe how intersubjective action takes place. In this way, intersubjectivity has been a foundational premise of this study. By viewing situations as intersubjective and emergent-with, becoming-with (Kember & Zylinska, 2012), I consider feelings as always already co-constructed through human-machine interactions, and use this to suss out discursive-material consequences, in which I identify the persistent specter of a sovereign, neoliberal subject position: reached for, summoned, and marshaled.

I introduced the neologism liminal work to explain the complicated intersections of emotional attachments and psychic attunements with the innerworkings of the technical and the commercial in a neoliberal economy of the 2010s. Across four chapters, I offered interpretative readings and analysis of “situations” wherein I developed and took up the concept of liminal work to attune to the enactments and configurations of technologies, subjectivities, and gendered labors. Chapter 1 and 4 focused on descriptive and interpretative readings of processes of becoming-*with* in relation to designs and discourses of innovation, particularly in Chapter 1. Work that happens with and through technologies, as “fixed labor,” are also epistemological accomplishments that advance racist-scientific apparatuses of economics. Dependencies and intentions co-construct infrastructures of crowd work and the constructs of innovative practice. Kember and Zylinska’s (2012) work on the vitality of remediation provides attunement to online freelance writing labor as situations where humans are becoming-*with*, and in a position of responding *to*. A deep reading of Marx’s reference to “fixed labor” as evoked in van Goethe’s retelling of the legend of Faust, and a chorus line bespeaking a theme of ambiguity about perception and pregnancy (vital energy): *As if she had love in her body / as she were by love possessed*, captures how the rhythms of work that emerge with the technologies used—which are themselves fixed labors with gendered dependencies—result in formations of world-building, knowledges, and subject positions. Some of these are

visible and actionable, while others are invisible or seem impossible behind the discourse and practice of that visible world.[37]

In Chapter 4, I bring to bear this analysis to understand communities of practice. By looking at ancillary channels of community-building, I argued that the communicative processes they facilitated, through technical affordances and commercial design, were significant to freelancers' sense of professional identity, worth, and membership in a community. I looked at how metaphors show these intersubjective interdependencies of the publishing-platforms with social media forums. The concept of this practice doing liminal work is apt here. As double-edged spaces were not always safe or positive, writers also experienced letdown or disappointment as they sought to promote their work or gain recognition from publishers that would validate their authority and provide monetary compensation. For Turner, *communitas* is emergent across instances of marginality and interstitial movement, experienced among migrants and jesters, for instance, as they turn toward social structure, and away, responding to each other.

In Chapter 3, I do a close reading of the first-person narrative genre to address why and how the process of reading, writing, and sharing first-personal confessional writing is meaningful, and what connections these forms of expression have to economic and commercial values animating everyday life. The liminal work taking place is through the reliance on and elevation of a second person, *the you*. This "you " plays a significant role in the freelance writer subject position. Though it is created and

[37] E.g. Margarete kills her infant.

maintained through intersubjective processes, it is *through* this "you" that the freelancer engages and is figured in response to, as a gendered neoliberal subject. I look to Lauren Berlant's (2011) notion of "cruel optimism," which describes a "public feeling" of longing, the desire that everyone is always trying to catch up to. In Chapter 3, I note that the "intimate public" of readers-participants-writers find comfort and stability in the process of recognizing how a protagonist navigates uncomfortable circumstances, in being "hailed" very specifically to then participate in the collective platform. Thus, the reader-writer-participant does "liminal work" by co-creating in this world-building along with the protagonist, whose stories hailed them to re-signify their own stories and produce feminism as an act of consciousness-raising online. Crucially, the radical capacity to critically reflect is predicated on the collective experience with an intimate public.

### ***Feminist***

As I have described above, part of the effort of this dissertation has been to document the ways that technologies form vectors of practices for explicitly feminist discourse and visions of the future. As I describe at great length in Chapter 3, first-person confessional writing for publisher-platforms such as xoJane used the term "feminist," in part, as branding, and a series of practices and vocabularies unfolded therein. I look at how these explicit claims to feminism, and to feminist acts, reinforce a

neoliberal idealization of the individual, and energize what Banet-Weiser calls "empowerment feminism" as the dominant vision of a feminist publisher-platform. This vision of an empowered feminist sovereign subject reinforces desires to seek out a future imagined through the lens of this subject, however diminishing the rewards may be. The vision is buttressed by success cases, those who achieve the future that is envisioned. Such a vision also sustains an ignorance about the experiences of people, of women, who are unable or unwilling to work from home or participate in the online commercial writing ecosystem, or are uninterested in doing so.

In addition to my analysis of material-discursive enactments of empowerment feminism, I also grapple with themes in feminist theories writ large. Questions of labor, bodies, and reproductions have been key themes and debates taken up in feminist works. I am also sensitive to, and moved by, Black feminist characterizations of myth and mythic time as a non-representational onto-epistemological approach to knowing (Jackson, 2016; H. Spillers et al., 2007). In Chapter 1, I mine myths at work in freelancing and cultures of innovation, as templates or models of human relationship to each other, to conceptualize the meanings of platform design, culture of innovation, and the treatment of freelancers, and the expectations behind the conditions under which they work. I note that myths can buttress the powerful discourse of the sovereign liberal subject, the human, and the notion of smart AI and technology, building on the work of feminist science and technology scholars (Gershon, 2011; Gray & Suri, 2015; Irani, 2015b, 2015c). I also offer an ethnographic example of humans treated as stop-gaps in the innerworkings of the development of the smart

machine and the seamlessly operating platform, thus doing liminal work and prohibiting the enactment or viability of alternative visions of hardware and humanness.

### Attunements

As feminist ethnographer and participant-observer, I have been focused on following the directives of ethnographers before me who have considered how to orient research practices in ways that mindfully and respectfully attune to situated knowledges (Visweswaran, 1994). My aim has been to understand through participation, and to be accountable to struggles for self-representation. This has unfolded across these pages in the accounts I've offered of freelance writer legal claims to authorship and copyright; the variety of reports of pleasure, anxiety, failure and success in relation to finances; and the efforts of first-person confessional writing and in online communities to affect change in the perceptions and understandings of social and political issues that matter to the women involved. I have noted throughout the tendency for these struggles to borrow from, or lean on, a concept of the sovereign subject and attendant vocabularies to bulwark such claims, aspirations, and imagined futures, and have noted the pitfalls of relying on this historically-contingent concept of white sovereignty as it affected the freelancers' present.

This dissertation's research and writing was supported financially through a patchwork of grants and support systems over the course of my doctoral program. I

took nearly two years' leave from my PhD program for a significant side project as a full-time contractor on a grant-funded project on Wikipedia and libraries; this left me savings to use when I spent the next eighteen months writing this dissertation. In addition to travel and the conference support I mentioned in the acknowledgements, I have received funding and tuition support from the UCSD Science Studies Program, the UCSD Department of Communication, and research funds and support from my dissertation chair. Finally, my partner has been a significant source of financial and emotional support as he has worked in full-time employment, which has subsequently extended to us, and our children, the security of health insurance and consistent funds for essential household expenses. In addition, unpaid caregiving by my family, namely my mom, saved us the expense of paying for full-time childcare; this is an act of love and care for which I am grateful. The significance of my research topic for the anxieties and ironies of my own life and its gendered and racial dependencies have not gone unnoticed by me, though when I set out on this project, my circumstances and dependencies were very different. Now, though, my own labors in slowly writing this dissertation have been an effort to explain circumstances, privileges, desires, and confusions that I have passed through, exercising, in them, liminal work and the reproduction of problematic conditions and opportunities for situated insight that I have laid out above.

As an ethnographer, a participant-observer, and a cultural critic, I also sought to incorporate a creative lens into my embodied methodological approach and had initially planned for more explicit collaborations with writers, including a possible art

show, focus group, and home-office tours. These initiatives in collaborative, action research, I planned, would enact and deepen affinities between us, and enable more generative research findings, to consider the metaphor and enactment of freelancing as an “open system of many scales” (Fortun, 2009, p. 169). However, as I began to develop relationships with freelancers, events led me to shift my focus. Firstly, the freelancers I began to meet were not local to me, which made arranging home-office visits less reasonable. I also was privy to the power of ownership, and the power dynamics of my requests as a white researcher, which I discuss in this dissertation. I had freelancers turn me down for interview requests, particularly freelancers who appeared to me to be rising in their successes, and therefore perhaps extra careful with their time, balancing an ongoing need for them to be spending their time doing billable activities. If I was going to ask them to participate in my research study, which was unpaid, there was the perception that I would benefit from their interviews or work-practice. For instance, a columnist for the *Seattle Times* special section on diversity and the workplace wrote an essay about why it can be inappropriate, insensitive and even disrespectful, to ask women, particularly women of color, to do “office housework” and aid with professional development, such as spending part of their day going out to coffee to share professional development tips and advice (Tulshyan, 2018). On one hand, this discourse aligns with the discussion I have had in this dissertation about the pervasive, and attractive, ideology of “empowerment feminism. But I was also mindful that my requests for research subjects, particularly women of color, to participate in my unpaid study, could be seen as a power grab and exercise of

subordination. I followed the lead of my informants, those who agreed to participate knowing the terms, and I made accommodations and work-arounds. Two of my informants requested that we communicate by email, as they were not comfortable having a phone or video interview. Both did ghostwriting and copywriting work and explained to me the benefits of freelancing for their social aversions; they did not want to participate in the attention economy or lead a "memoir-worthy life," but were finding ways to do work that was meaningful to them in the digital ecosystem. Another freelancer I communicated with primarily by chatting, but she ghosted me during our scheduled phone interview. I let it go, and sent her an email thanking her for her interest and communicating that if she ever wanted to share her story for my research project, she could reach out, but no pressure. Those who participated were forthright about their interest in contributing to a study that advanced understanding of freelance work practices in a digital ecosystem, particularly for women. In interviews I followed a general script of questions, approved under the IRB I had cleared at UCSD. I explained that I could also offer to do a home visit or video tour of office spaces, and though interviewees made gestures of curiosity ("oh wow," for instance), when there was no initiation or invitation to go forward with such a visit, I did not pursue the effort further.

Though I wished to be seen as a co-collaborator and fellow freelancer, I also viewed myself as subject to the judgements of other writers who might evaluate my claim to authority based on my publication history. The majority of the work I have done as a freelancer was for regional newspapers in the U.S., and in travel writing for

in-flight magazines and online portals, the latter of which have since gone out of business or are offline. And, as I describe in Chapter 4, I did copywriting, and sometimes wrote under an assigned pseudonym, as I did for my work on the Demand Media Studios "content farm." I had experience publishing first-person essays, prior to the advent of internet publication. But, like some of my informants, the prospect of "selling" one's worst, most embarrassing, or most traumatic story was off-putting. Though certainly not all of the stories that have been published in these publisher-platforms meet that stereotype, the kind of experiences and letdowns that writers experienced impacted me during my research period and made me shy to try. As a result, I did not develop what I had previously planned to be a prominent feature in my research design. I attribute this as well to feeling overwhelmed by the need to master multiple skillsets. I sought to grapple with and gain mastery in the innerworkings of internet publishing, web design and front-end development, academic theories and genres, disciplines and writing styles, qualitative research and sensitive ethnographic practices, and parenting. I felt ill-equipped to shoulder the practices involved in the evolving culture and technologies of online freelance writing to the extent that I might be seen as a colleague of *all* of my informants. Though what I write here is my perception of their perceptions, I did not ask them what they thought of me. I shifted my attunements, then, to understanding, while knowing I was moving within and out of cultural vocabularies and worlds. In any case, at the risk of repeating again what I've already emphasized, it's worth acknowledging that the effort that goes into freelance writing—from self-presentation, pitching, writing, networking, researching, managing

content management systems, updating, editing, publishing, and billing—is time-consuming, stressful, emotional, highly skilled work.

In this way, my efforts as an ethnographer and participant-observer might be consistent with the varied work experiences of an online freelance writer, who is situated in a shifting network of connections that can be pursued or left behind through the remoteness and distance from the humans involved in her working relationships. The culture that becomes-*with* this is under consideration in Chapters 3 and 4. In the workplace study that I did of Content Runner, I had sought to spend more time physically present at the office location, but again found my plans were difficult to enact due to the office's operating through a culture and practice of remote digital labors. Thus, while I meditate on the times that I did spend there in person at length in Chapter 1, these were more aligned with the kinds of ethnographic encounters that a "traditional" ethnographer or qualitative researcher may have with research subjects, rather than becoming opportunities for collaboration, co-enactment. I found myself retreating to familiar cultural scripts and habits (Wierzbicka, 2013), and I would at times regret this afterwards. In Chapter 1 and Chapter 4, I discuss how my own feelings and senses can be heuristics into the workings of culture (Cerwonka, 2012; Pink, 2009). Throughout, I've sought to recognize that my research outcomes are an effort of respectful recognition of the complex ways that each person I encountered was also living their lives in what I called earlier a "minefield" of conflicting and contradictory messages. Kim Fortun suggests this recognition is in fact necessary for ethnographers, calling on us to memo and map out the ways that our ethnographic

sites are “peopled,” wherein “each person is a tangle of different cultural impulses” (2009, p. 178). In this respect, my dissertation reveals an uneasy, but honest, acceptance of the anxieties and power dynamics and entanglements that I operated within.

**Further directions**

By researching instances of explicitly feminist online writing work and the material-discursive enactments of online crowdsourcing platforms for freelance writers, a feminized semi-professional field, I have presented an ambitious study. This project makes a unique theoretical contribution through the expansive scope of crossing disciplines, time periods, and theories. I “followed a metaphor” (Marcus, 1995) and chose specific “situations” to focus my attention, giving pause to read situations, and their anxieties, through the lens of becoming-*with* to address the theories of risk society and modernity, as I described in the introduction. Formations and technologies of work are tethered to the global economic order. I advanced an analytic that approached my research sites and the work practices therein with a focus on moments or instances of interaction, collision, and collusion between human-machine, as I describe with my first research question, how is online freelance writing accomplished digitally and emotionally? The creation, distribution, circulation, and monetization of both writerly communication exceedingly necessary for getting and doing online work

and the subsequent online writing are, in part, accomplished through assemblages of human and non-human activities in a commercial media ecosystem. I address this question by following my informants, themselves, and myself, in a journey across the field of online freelance writing in the post-2008 recession era, which was vast and includes many more perspectives and practices than this study could feasibly attend.

Aspects of each site, or “situation” of my study, deserved more attention than was in the scope of the project as it had been written. For instance, though I motion to the rich histories of both feminist science studies and feminist literary criticism as relevant to the work of women writers online, this interdisciplinary effort begs more thorough engagement. In particular, this work could invite deeper conversation with feminist and Black literary criticism, which was taken up intermittently throughout. More attention can carefully be paid to the specific disciplinary histories and research trajectories in these intersecting but distinct fields, in relation to mythic time, dependencies, gendered labors, women writers, and technologies of writing work.

Further updates and integration of my work can be brought to bear on discourses of feminism from fall 2016 onward. The research for this project closed in mid 2016, before the presidential election in the United States, which saw a sea change in discourse and attention to the mechanism of news and information circulation, including emphasis on “fake news,” calling into question the tense relationships between commercial aggregation services, social media companies, economic models of business for newspapers, and the viability and opportunities to bulwark journalistic intentions with the erosion of the news-making routines that had

been crucial to establishing trust in years prior. As well, this period ushered in the wide-spread use of hashtags, such as the #metoo movement, to share stories of sexual harassment and hold perpetrators accountable. The first-person stories of redemption I discussed in Chapter 3 are suggestive of how #metoo was an extension and expansion of an existing feminist conversation on rape and empowerment.

In Chapter 2, I relied on primary and secondary sources to analyze this historical period and, specifically, the history of debates about "public access" and "freedom" in the 1990s, revealing how contested concepts were conceptual vehicles through which authorial rights for freelancers were negotiated, and detailing decisions about technologies and commercial access that foregrounded freelancers' claims to copyright. Though I focus my attention on the New York Times Co. v. Tasini, 533 U.S. lawsuit and eventual decision by the U.S. Supreme Court, there are numerous related responses, reports, and interviews that would be fodder for a deeper study of the period and the relationship between freelancing and information services.

The work that freelancers do, I wrote, is subject to multiple forms of commodification due to the nature of communicative practices online taken up by freelancers, parallel to their online paid work. This specific kind of effort could be brought to bear on conversations about the labors of influencers and microcelebrities, who are predominant in the mediated visuality of the internet culture and gained attention in media and communication studies. In addition, there has been needed attention on the experiences, labors, and futures of "gig" economy workers and

precarious workers who are increasingly having their working experiences mediated through apps, becoming remote workplace technologies of control (Ticona, 2015).

Chapters 3 and 4 each raised themes for future research directions. First, they provide a model or template for future readings of the intersubjective engagement and becoming-with that can be understood through a close reading of the situated actions and responses of users. Given the wide uptake of both platforms and freelance services, this approach brings an unusual sharpness to formulating understandings of friction, engagement, and culture. In particular, the work in Chapter 4 offers an unusual insight into another timely theme of this contemporary milieu, the Anthropocene, in bringing discourses of climate and the esoteric to make sense of futility and aborted connections. In looking to the common linguistic styles and vocabularies that freelancers adopted in relation to the online platforms and interstitial spaces they were connecting, I learned that freelancers were taking up specific kinds of metaphors, namely climate metaphors and ghosts, to convey their experiences. This learning offers an opportunity for future research on the metaphor more generally, and a thorough reading of the possible impacts of the association with concepts of climate change for science communication.

In addition, the analysis I provided in Chapter 4 on the significance of companion socialization spaces for professional development and meaning-making amongst freelancers can be an opportunity for future research and an expanded site of analysis contributing to scholarly debates on the role of algorithmic and technical protocols in relation to the circulation of affects, sentiments, publics, and communities,

notably by Safiya Noble's (2018) work on algorithms and oppressive discursive constructions of race and gender and Zizi Papacharissi's (2015) work on affective publics and social movements.

The process of analysis that I have developed to understand how material-discursive stories and practices unfold in a networked information economy through the analytic of "liminal" raises the question of safely crossing the threshold, metaphorically and literally. I'll take up the work of Bal (2002), in her description of failures in conceptual travel, by naming the process/labor of "metaphoring" that happens and attempting to explain how performative speech acts without an illocutionary force are a promise without the social conditions that can make promises effective (p. 78). In the "metaphoring" I do in this dissertation, I'm performing a conceptual violence to "liminal" by cutting it off from anthropological research and theories on coming-of-age rites. I have suggested that the situations I've carefully examined in this dissertation can enact liminality, are doing *liminal work*. The violence, then, is part of the explanatory force: through this removal, I'm ripping liminal from the social conditions that made the premise of the concept reasonable; it is unreasonable now, and dangerous, because I suggest that the conditions of work are unmooring. Thus, this unreasonableness is the explanatory force of the neologism of liminal work: it is reasonable precisely because it is unreasonable, as are the situations of invisible labors, becoming-*with* sentiments, and contingencies that I have described herein.

The recommendations I make for further research are also an effort to reinforce the unique contribution of this dissertation to scholarly debates on digital work, gender,

race, subjectivity, feminism, and mediated cultures that pave the “paths” of thought throughout this work (Bal, 2002). However, future theoretical research could consider this question of the crossing over. I foreshadowed themes and propositions for doing so, and how, in my discussion of gratitude, borrowing from Hyde, in Chapter 1, wherein I describe the literal and figurative incorporation of external labors through a kind of radical self-other recognition and submission. This way of thinking is also at work in the way that I describe the formations of the apostrophic “you” in Chapter 3, which could be deepened with more discussion of theories of face, touch, and psychic intra-action as advanced by Cartwright (2008). Continued consideration of the contours of social life through Black feminist concepts of mythic time and non-representational onto-epistemology would be crucial to this next work (Jackson, 2016). This way of thinking on submission could be developed in conversation with becoming-*with* in relation to “fixed labor” and Luce Irigaray’s work on the preposition of “I love *to* you” as an extension of non-possession, a radical recognition of intersubjectivities and the life-flow of human culture, “relations founded upon a form of indirection” (p. 102). Suchman also discusses the work of imagining-enacting configurations of assemblages for redistribution (2007, p. 285). Indeed, it is my aim that this work has furthered, with new empirical evidence, Suchman’s advancement of the material-discursive enactment of technoscience in the 20th and early 21st centuries, and the specter of autonomous agency as “primary apparatus for the identification of humanness” (2007, p. 285). I documented the efforts to marshal authorial agency, to elevate a story of a collective of “Janes” working together to serve

each other, to be shepherds to care—but then, in a twist, in a proverbial rug-pull, an aborted promise, that story receded into invisibility through the struggle over possession of circulation. Future work on these paths can begin, then, with the uncomfortable aporia of these configurations of liminal work.

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