

## Exhausted...

RUTH ABRAMS

*University of Surrey*

r.abrams@surrey.ac.uk

### Abstract

This short commentary which acts as a radical, vulnerable selfie, reflects on Millennial notions of manifestation, leaning in and Girlbossing. In doing so, this selfie critically engages with how these concepts have come to organise the female protagonist of our times. By applying principles of 'writing differently', readers are taken on a reflective, vulnerable journey. In doing so the contribution of this article is co-constructed: you are invited to reflect on your own toxic webs of organising and may indeed feel exhausted by the end. Insights are framed inside of contemporary cultural references, positioning this text as a hybrid of academic prose that sits outside of traditional academic writing.

The Myth of Female Inferiority

The best slave

Does not need to be beaten

She beats herself.

Not with a leather whip,

Or with sticks or twigs,

Not with a blackjack

Or a billy club,

But with the fine whip

Of her own tongue

& the subtle beating

Of her mind against her mind.

For who can hate her half so well

As she hates herself?

And who can match the finesse

Of her self-abuse?

Years of training

Are required for this...

(Jong, 1973)

## 1. Writing differently, writing vulnerably

This piece pays homage to Writing Differently (Gilmore et al., 2019) by drawing on my hopes, memories, stories and feelings (Glozer, Brewis and Harding, 2021), in order to put forward a radical selfie which demonstrates learning and understanding about what it means to be a professional woman. The Writing Differently movement upholds the notion that the norms of academic writing restrict the development of knowledge and dehumanise experiences (Gilmore et al., 2019). When writing differently, lives and life itself are foregrounded to better connect, debate new ideas and ultimately act as a form of resistance. This piece may therefore unsettle some readers because of the way it challenges the assumption that there is a 'right way' to 'do' academic writing. Is it prose? Is it academic? Well, it is neither and both. It is experimental, reflexive, passionate, autobiographical and ultimately, vulnerable (Helin, 2019). Writing in this way invites you as the reader to co-construct the contribution of this piece through the way it leaves you feeling...

## 2. Organising the perfectly failed working woman

She grew up in a conventional household, white, middle class, parents still married, one sibling. Her mum 'didn't work' but as our protagonist grew up, she began to realise that her mum did work, just in a role that had limited status in the eyes of the economy (i.e., housewife). Unlike her mum, who was always there when they woke up, her dad would usually be gone early in the morning and would often arrive home as her and her sister were going to bed. He travelled to exotic places, had a fancy title and was high up the ladder of success. She never really knew what he actually did but she aspired to do it regardless. In her childhood games she experimented with 'careers'. Was she going to be a fashion designer, ballerina, private detective, journalist, archaeologist, lawyer? The list was endless.

She couldn't wait to work. She begged her parents for a paper round. At 14, she was allowed to waitress at the local village pub and by 17, after her crushingly failed ambitions of becoming a ballet dancer, she did an aerobics instructor course and set herself up as self-employed. Her unquestioning obsession with work meant that she decided against university and instead opted for vocational qualifications and went into full-time work at 19.

She was hugely disappointed by her first foray into the world of work and quickly decided that she needed to further her education, seeing it as a commodity to purchase, a tickable box for attaining success more quickly (Thornton, 2013). Fortunately, she had the resources to allow this. Now, she recognises the privilege this conferred her.

She graduated in 2010. She spent most of the time trawling online job boards online to find her 'dream' job, sending off job applications daily. The UK had not successfully bounced back from the 2007 recession. She was oblivious to this, and persisted day and night, wondering why no employer was replying to her emails or inviting her to interview.

This lasted months.

Then her dream job finally appeared. She relocated to London, entering the workplace with a Starbucks latte, a pencil skirt and a bright pink handbag. Her inspiration: Elle Woods, from *Legally Blonde*. She lasted 18 months before starting over.

LinkedIn became an obsession, tracing the education and career histories of those she wanted to be like. She applied for jobs all the time because there was always something better promised around the corner.

In the ten years that followed her earlier career self, she has sent off hundreds of job applications, attended countless interviews and worked in at least ten different jobs, frequently working in more than one role at a time. She has read almost every career book under the sun and taken every available test designed to tell her, her strengths, skills and ideal jobs. She is a serial job seeker, always in pursuit of the perfect job. She has done \*so\* much self-development.

She is a woman of a generation; a woman born to thrive whilst living the everyday entanglement of what it means to be a woman. It has been institutionally embedded in her that she is here to perform well, at all times. She is a woman who sees everything as a vehicle to doing better and being more. School was all about getting good grades in order to get a job. University was about getting the rubber stamp to get a good job. A good job was only the next step to get a better job. Within this paradigm, success feels like a moral duty, but also one that causes constant pain (McRobbie, 2015).

Our protagonist no longer knows whether she is leaning in, leaning out or doing the hokey cokey and shaking it all about! She is exhausted. Challenging the organisation of her current existence is beyond her grasp. She is too embedded in it to see it. She blames herself constantly. She is always trying to fix herself, determined to find the root of the 'problem' and then work hard to rectify it and become a better version of herself. She is relentlessly positive and keen to take up space with her self-made 'confidence'. She is a self-development queen, utterly reliant on herself and keen to prove this to the world. She never pauses in her pursuit, and never, ever contextualises her experiences as anything other than her fault or responsibility. She always feels flawed.

This self-interrogation can be contextualised. For example, Kauppinen, (2013) notes the heavy influence of women's magazines such as Cosmopolitan which have, for over a decade, pushed the notion of women as entrepreneurial selves without critique. More recently, Adamson and Kelan, (2019) noted the demand for women to exhibit confidence, control and courage as a professional identity highlighting, as a result of their analysis of autobiographical texts of celebrity businesswomen, a cultural ideal of the 'female hero'. In an analysis of coaching websites aimed at businesswomen, Swan (2017) showed how cultivated content is replete with ideals indicating the need for professional women to achieve work-life balance, careful grooming and positivity to demonstrate their success. Finally, Orgad (2016) has shown the cruel optimism promulgated by TV shows specifically targeted at women, through their ability to create compelling fantasies about what it means to be a professional woman.

Work is our protagonist's weak spot. It is the thing she thinks about all the time. Other people might organise their becoming more strongly through dating, love, babies, money, or the body. The beauty and the horror of the words on these pages are that they transgress one area. Therefore, whilst work is the primary site of organising *her* being, *your* organisation might be different, but still painful. How will you undo it? Do you want to?

### 3. Manifesting, leaning in and Girlbossing

Circa 2009, our protagonist read Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret* (2006). *The Secret* is a short book, written in the style of an ancient manuscript. It is based on the belief in the law of attraction. The basic premise of the law of attraction is that you can control your life with your mind. More specifically, the thoughts you think shape the life you have. *The Secret* doesn't deal with contextual complexities. Instead, it states that:

*"Every thought of yours is a real thing - a force."*

*"Your thoughts are the primary cause of everything."*

*"When you're happy, it's as though the entire universe is conspiring on your behalf and presenting whatever you need in the moment you need it".*

In 2009, she bought this hook, line and sinker. She pinned inspirational quotes around her bedroom until the sun from her window turned the paper yellow and made the quotes illegible. She then worried that, by getting rid of them, she might somehow disrupt the flow of attraction she had been manifesting. She then started to worry about worrying because that meant she wasn't happy, and if she wasn't happy, then she would be punished somehow.

She refused to think about the negative. She only cared about willing what she wanted into being with her thoughts, so as to create her very best life.

She became paralysed by the fear that her thoughts were going to conspire against her and bad things would start to happen. Or not even bad things; just that good things wouldn't come her way. This was her introduction to Manifestation, the notion that, through mental visualisation, all your wants and desires can be achieved.

2013 had her devouring Sheryl Sandberg's recently released *Lean In*. This book is about how to get a seat at 'the table', seizing opportunities, getting promoted and taking up space in the workplace. The take-home message in this book is don't blame the system, overcome it. Sandberg made millions of women believe that they (we) deserved to be at the table. Our protagonist felt emboldened and capable after reading this book.

Leaning in is now a cultural catchphrase synonymous with female ambition and success; an organising framework, some might say. There are lean in circles, reports, resources, monetary rewards and, of course, inspirational quotes to sustain us. For example:

*"We hold ourselves back in ways both big and small, by lacking self-confidence, by not raising our hands, and by pulling back when we should be leaning in".*

And

*"We need to stop telling women, 'Get a mentor and you will excel'. Instead, we need to tell them, 'Excel and you will get a mentor'".*

Following swiftly on the heels of this narrative came #GirlBoss (Amoruso, 2015). #GirlBoss fed straight into the minds of the younger millennials, whereas *Lean In*, with its corporate aspirations, tapped into older millennial yearnings for a glass office, a la the Devil Wears

Prada and Legally Blonde. #GirlBoss became a ‘movement’ and model for the self-empowered woman seeking success. The phrase followed the publication of the book (and subsequent Netflix series) *Girlboss* by Sophia Amoruso, founder of the bankrupted fashion brand Nasty Gal and current online community *Girlboss*.

A girl boss is someone who juggles it all, including their looks, their style, social media presence, career and having a family, if or when the time comes (Ewens, 2019). The fact that Nasty Gal imploded in 2016, resulting in Sophia filing for bankruptcy, has not dented the movement, which is seen as both ironic and aspirational. Ironic because we are aware of its many flaws, starting with the fact that grown women seeking empowerment are referred to as girls. Aspirational because we still want that type of success for ourselves.

She has certainly wised up to some of these organising frameworks. She recognises their exclusivity, their whiteness, their lack of context, their pursuit of power. She recognises that business models such as Nasty Gal’s pummel our natural resources and are unsustainable. She considers the possible implications that when child carers are employed in order for her to lean in, this may be done so at the expense of marginalising other women, often those from the global majority, through low paid, emotionally exploitative labour within capitalist business models that fill the pockets of the business owners with unregulated profits. This is evidenced in the gross underpayment of early years staff, employed on precarious contracts, the majority of whom are women (Social Mobility Commission, 2020; Department for Education, 2017).

There are many eloquent critiques of the girl boss movement both inside and outside of academic organising. Inside, academics refer to this paradigm as neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2014) or postfeminism (Gill, 2017; McRobbie, 2015), discussing the transformation of femininity away from being devalued to now being seen as powerful, strong, independent and desirable – but as a commodity nonetheless. Academics are aware that femininity is a neoliberal desire that privileges status quo systems of power as a means to success whilst also placing the responsibility on women as individuals rather than on the systems of oppression.

Outside of academia, and in places perhaps more familiar to our protagonist are websites such as *Elle*, *Vice* and *Vox*, which hold a certain currency due to their speed, visibility and accessibility. For example, in July 2022, Rosamund Urwin wrote an article for *Elle* called ‘Beyond the GirlBoss’ in which she surmises that the age of climbing the career ladder (i.e., leaning in for older millennials) or building your own entrepreneurial empire (aka girlbossing it for younger millennials) is dead. Instead, the new generation of working women are into pausing, resting, being friends with their co-workers and leading in a truly feminine style (i.e., collaboratively, regeneratively and relationally). In this vein, femininity is viewed as a powerful strategy in its own right, used to the advantage of women, rather than as a conditioned response (Barton and Huebner, 2022). However, for those steeped in leaning in and girlbossing, this sounds both untrustworthy and like yet another organising framework and demanding trope for women to excel at becoming in order to just ‘be’ in the workplace.

Urwin’s argument is also arguably not yet true. For example, in her article, she shared the working practices of a company called the Stack World. The Stack World is, like *Lean In*, a resource for women which makes a pledge “to ban language which perpetuates internalised misogyny (when the belief in women’s inferiority becomes part of one’s own worldview and self-concept), and instead tool women up.” It is a membership site packed full of resources

around five pillars (Beauty, Wellness, Business, Culture and Society) to serve a woman's 'whole self'.

Our protagonist looks at the Stack World for inspiration, and instead, she feels overwhelmed.

Click through all the content...

Feel the demand to be more, to be a better woman.

Oh look, here are all these beautiful, aspirational, successful women who have made it.

Here are all the things you need to do.

Who doesn't want a piece of that?

Sign me up because God forbid I'm not in on these secrets.

Don't leave me behind!

Where else is our protagonist organised? Try Amazon. Start with *Lean In* and #GirlBoss, warm up the algorithms. Up next will come *Thrive* by Arianna Huffington (2015) of Huffington Post, then *How to be an Overnight Success* by Maria Hatzistefanis (2017) (founder of beauty brand Rodial), then *Leave your Mark: Land your Dream Job. Kill it in your Career*. *Rock Social Media* by Aliza Licht (2015) and finally *Little Black Book: A Toolkit for Working Women* by Otegha Uwagba (2018) (founder of Women Who and selected for the Forbes 30 under 30 list).

Uwagba's Sunday Times bestselling book covers topics including: getting it done; overcoming creative blocks, building your brand, public speaking 101, money talks, back to school, networking, navigating the workplace, looking after number one, inspirational words of wisdom and a whole host of everyday resources. It is designed to help her when her career is in a rut by giving her a selection of tools. This book tells her to: Get up earlier. Find her niche. Dress the part by expressing her personality AND looking professional. Be easy to find (on social media) BUT have boundaries. Self-promote, BUT be authentic. Go the extra mile BUT remember to say NO. Negotiate her salary. Be self-sufficient. Network, network, network. Stay current. Exercise. Sleep. Share your opinions. Be friendly.

And she tolerates being organised like this. Still. Because she believes in the persuasive language and the fantasmatic perils of not manifesting.

She can buy courses in confidence building, purchase entrances to exclusive mentorship programmes, women's only work clubs, membership sites and merchandise. The list goes on. This trend is referred to by Kelly Diels as the 'Female Lifestyle Empowerment Brand' (2016) and, in her view, it's not a good thing. Why not? Because, like the dieting industry, it is organised by the fear of failure and lack. It is exploitative. It creates anxiety, guilt and blame. Yet on the surface, it looks like it has our best interests at heart. This makes it both very hard to critique, and very hard to disentangle from.

She is locked into the maze of manifestation which demands gratitude, vision, constant inspiration and the elimination of doubt (Nafousi, 2022). Personal success is decontextualised from the political and societal and attributed solely to the power of individual, mental visualisation. However, this requires an exhausting and indefinite period of self-discipline,



self-improvement and constant self-assessment (McRobbie, 2016), through – you guessed it – more self-work, in order to eventually become more self-empowered. The rub? Latent feelings of anxiety and failure.

She tells herself that with the ‘perfect job’ she will become the person she wants to be: a successful, happy, confident, glamorous do-gooder. She projects what all those things might bring her or make her feel. She has a desire, but she also has this lack. She represses this lack. It is too distressing, too anxiety-inducing. Instead, it becomes buried, silenced. But always present. Is the ideal worker still male (Acker, 1990)? It is certainly young and commitment free.

Let’s play a game, because maybe you don’t relate yet... It’s called, I am someone who...

She will go first.

She is someone who...

Has always wanted a glass office with her name on the door. Has always wanted to wear Christian Louboutin heels to work, with a pencil skirt and briefcase. Has always wanted to change the world for the better. Has always wanted to be in charge.

Now it’s your turn... repeat after her...

I am someone who...

What is your toxic web of organising? And what might it mean to you if you never achieve it?

The maze of manifestation works because of both lack and anxiety. It attaches itself to our psyche by making us feel bad.

We lose sight of who we are. It all becomes too much...

*“I want someone to tell me what to wear in the morning. I want someone to tell me what to wear every morning. I want someone to tell me what to eat. What to like, what to hate, what to rage about, what to listen to, what band to like, what to buy tickets for, what to joke about, what not to joke about. I want someone to tell me what to believe in, who to vote for, who to love and how to tell them”.*

*“I just think I want someone to tell me how to live my life, Father, because so far I think I’ve been getting it wrong, and I know that’s why people want people like you in their lives, because you just tell them how to do it. You just tell them what to do and what they’ll get out at the end of it, and even though I don’t believe your bullshit, and I know that scientifically nothing I do makes any difference in the end anyway, I’m still scared. Why am I still scared?” (Fleabag, 2019, cited by O’Neill, 2019).*

Let’s resume our story.

We join our protagonist in mid-June, 2020 and 32 degrees in London. She is 30 weeks pregnant, the world is in lockdown amidst the global pandemic of COVID-19. She has just completed her PhD viva over Zoom, from her bedroom. She closes her laptop. She hangs her head. She has heard the words a PhD candidate dreads: RESUBMISSION. The saving grace; without a further viva.

She is stunned. How can this be?

And just like that, the spell of success is broken. She becomes undone.

She now has a choice: to continue to accept and absorb the cult of perfection, or realise its refutability. Encountering this choice, she becomes unsilenced. She begins to emerge, seeing all the ways in which she'd been unquestioningly 'leaning in' to the pursuit. She sees her failure, shame, guilt and self-blame for what they are. Nuanced human experiences.

She begins to slowly unhook from her previous beliefs.

She grieves. She mourns the idea that in striving to become, she has been aiming for the top of the ladder, only to find it's against the wrong wall. A period of desolation follows. She descends, excavates, searches for lost parts previously given over to an internalised organising.

She is filled with rage, silence and darkness.

She practices being undone day, after day, after day. Her mind still beats against her mind.

She tries to create something beautiful from her experiences.

This is her selfie. Her radical, vulnerable selfie, intended to create community (Schwartz, 2022). In this vulnerability is the risk of harm but also self-representation. It is a strategic mobilisation to help make sense of what has happened (hooks, 1991) and to reclaim her imperfect mind.

Do you see it?

Are her words of comfort to you?

*"If you don't break your ropes while you're alive*

*Do you think*

*Ghosts will do it after?"*

*(Kabir, 1977)*

## Keywords

Organising Outside Organisation; Gender

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