Trick Mirror

Jia Tolentino

reflections on self-delusion

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Introduction

I wrote this book between the spring of 2017 and the fall of 2018—a period during which American identity, culture, technology, politics, and discourse seemed to coalesce into an unbearable supernova of perpetually escalating conflict, a stretch of time when daily experience seemed both like a stopped elevator and an endless state-fair ride, when many of us regularly found ourselves thinking that everything had gotten as bad as we could possibly imagine, after which, of course, things always got worse.

Throughout this period, I found that I could hardly trust anything that I was thinking. A doubt that always hovers in the back of my mind intensified: that whatever conclusions I might reach about myself, my life, and my environment are just as likely to be diametrically wrong as they are to be right. This suspicion is hard for me to articulate closely, in part because I usually extinguish it by writing. When I feel confused about something, I write about it until I turn into the person who shows up on paper: a person who is plausibly trustworthy, intuitive, and clear.

It's exactly this habit—or compulsion—that makes me suspect that I am fooling myself. If I were, in fact, the calm person who shows up on paper, why would I always need to hammer out a narrative that gets me there? I've been telling myself that I wrote this book because I was confused after the election, because confusion sits at odds to my temperament, because writing is my only strategy for making this conflict go away. I'm convinced by this story, even as I can see its photonegative: I wrote this book because I am always confused, because I can never be sure of anything, and because I am drawn to any mechanism that directs me away from that truth. Writing is either a way to shed my self-

delusions or a way to develop them. A well-practiced, conclusive narrative is usually a dubious one: that a person is "not into drama," or that America needs to be made great again, or that America is already great.

These essays are about the spheres of public imagination that have shaped my understanding of myself, of this country, and of this era. One is about the internet. Another is about "optimization," and the rise of athleisure as late-capitalist fetishwear, and the endlessly proliferating applications of the idea that women's bodies should increase their market performance over time. There's an essay about drugs and religion and the bridge that ecstasy forms between them; another about scamming as the definitive millennial ethos; another about the literary heroine's journey from brave girl to depressed teenager to bitter adult woman who's possibly dead. One essay is about my stint as a teenage reality TV contestant. One is about sex and race and power at the University of Virginia, my alma mater, where a series of convincing stories have exacted enormous hidden costs. The final two are about the feminist obsession with "difficult" women and about the slow-burning insanity that I acquired in my twenties while attending what felt like several thousand weddings per year. These are the prisms through which I have come to know myself. In this book, I tried to undo their acts of refraction. I wanted to see the way I would see in a mirror. It's possible I painted an elaborate mural instead.

But that's fine. The last few years have taught me to suspend my desire for a conclusion, to assume that nothing is static and that renegotiation will be perpetual, to hope primarily that little truths will keep emerging in time. While I was writing this, a stranger tweeted an excerpt of a *Jezebel* piece I wrote in 2015, highlighting a sentence about what women seemed to want from feminist websites—a "trick mirror that carries the illusion of flawlessness as well as the self-flagellating option of constantly finding fault." I had not remembered using that phrase when I came up with a book title, and I had not understood, when I was writing that *Jezebel* piece, that that line was also an explanation of something more personal. I began to realize that all my life I've been leaving myself breadcrumbs. It didn't matter that I didn't always know what I was walking toward. It was worthwhile, I told myself, just trying to see clearly, even if it took me years to understand what I was trying to see.

Always Be Optimizing

The ideal woman has always been generic. I bet you can picture the version of her that runs the show today. She's of indeterminate age but resolutely youthful presentation. She's got glossy hair and the clean, shameless expression of a person who believes she was made to be looked at. She is often luxuriating when you see her—on remote beaches, under stars in the desert, across a carefully styled table, surrounded by beautiful possessions or photogenic friends. Showcasing herself at leisure is either the bulk of her work or an essential part of it; in this, she is not so unusual—for many people today, especially for women, packaging and broadcasting your image is a readily monetizable skill. She has a personal brand, and probably a boyfriend or husband: he is the physical realization of her constant, unseen audience, reaffirming her status as an interesting subject, a worthy object, a self-generating spectacle with a viewership attached.

Can you see this woman yet? She looks like an Instagram—which is to say, an ordinary woman reproducing the lessons of the marketplace, which is how an ordinary woman evolves into an ideal. The process requires maximal obedience on the part of the woman in question, and—ideally—her genuine enthusiasm, too. This woman is sincerely interested in whatever the market demands of her (good looks, the impression of indefinitely extended youth, advanced skills in self-presentation and self-surveillance). She is equally interested in whatever the market offers her—in the tools that will allow her to look more appealing, to be even more endlessly presentable, to wring as much value out of her particular position as she can.

The ideal woman, in other words, is always optimizing. She takes advantage of technology, both in the way she broadcasts her image and in the meticulous improvement of that image itself. Her hair looks

expensive. She spends lots of money taking care of her skin, a process that has taken on the holy aspect of a spiritual ritual and the mundane regularity of setting a morning alarm. The work formerly carried out by makeup has been embedded directly into her face: her cheekbones or lips have been plumped up, or some lines have been filled in, and her eyelashes are lengthened every four weeks by a professional wielding individual lashes and glue. The same is true of her body, which no longer requires the traditional enhancements of clothing or strategic underwear; it has been pre-shaped by exercise that ensures there is little to conceal or rearrange. Everything about this woman has been preemptively controlled to the point that she can afford the impression of spontaneity and, more important, the sensation of it—having worked to rid her life of artificial obstacles, she often feels legitimately carefree.

The ideal woman has always been conceptually overworked, an inorganic thing engineered to look natural. Historically, the ideal woman seeks all the things that women are trained to find fun and interesting—domesticity, physical self-improvement, male approval, the maintenance of congeniality, various forms of unpaid work. The concept of the ideal woman is *just* flexible enough to allow for a modicum of individuality; the ideal woman always believes she came up with herself on her own. In the Victorian era, she was the "angel in the house," the demure, appealing wife and mother. In the fifties, she was, likewise, a demure and appealing wife and mother, but with household purchasing power attached. More recently, the ideal woman has been whatever she wants to be as long as she manages to act upon the belief that perfecting herself and streamlining her relationship to the world can be a matter of both work and pleasure—of "lifestyle." The ideal woman steps into a stratum of expensive juices, boutique exercise classes, skin-care routines, and vacations, and thereby happily remains.

Most women believe themselves to be independent thinkers. (There is a Balzac short story in which a slave girl named Paquita yelps, memorably, "I love life! Life is fair to me! If I am a slave, I am a queen too.") Even glossy women's magazines now model skepticism toward top-down narratives about how we should look, who and when we should marry, how we should live. But the psychological parasite of the ideal woman has evolved to survive in an ecosystem that pretends to resist her. If women start to resist an aesthetic, like the overapplication of

Photoshop, the aesthetic just changes to suit us; the power of the ideal image never actually wanes. It is now easy enough to engage women's skepticism toward ads and magazine covers, images produced by professionals. It is harder for us to suspect images produced by our peers, and nearly impossible to get us to suspect the images we produce of ourselves, for our own pleasure and benefit—even though, in a time when social media use has become broadly framed as a career asset, many of us are effectively professionals now, too.

Today's ideal woman is of a type that coexists easily with feminism in its current market-friendly and mainstream form. This sort of feminism has organized itself around being as visible and appealing to as many people as possible; it has greatly over-valorized women's individual success. Feminism has not eradicated the tyranny of the ideal woman but, rather, has entrenched it and made it trickier. These days, it is perhaps even more psychologically seamless than ever for an ordinary woman to spend her life walking toward the idealized mirage of her own self-image. She can believe—reasonably enough, and with the full encouragement of feminism—that she herself is the architect of the exquisite, constant, and often pleasurable type of power that this image holds over her time, her money, her decisions, her selfhood, and her soul.

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Figuring out how to "get better" at being a woman is a ridiculous and often amoral project—a subset of the larger, equally ridiculous, equally amoral project of learning to get better at life under accelerated capitalism. In these pursuits, most pleasures end up being traps, and every public-facing demand escalates in perpetuity. Satisfaction remains, under the terms of the system, necessarily out of reach.

But the worse things get, the more a person is compelled to optimize. I think about this every time I do something that feels particularly efficient and self-interested, like going to a barre class or eating lunch at a fast-casual chopped-salad chain, like Sweetgreen, which feels less like a place to eat and more like a refueling station. I'm a repulsively fast eater in most situations—my boyfriend once told me that I chew like someone's about to take my food away—and at Sweetgreen, I eat even faster because (as can be true of many things in life) slowing down for even a second can

make the machinery give you the creeps. Sweetgreen is a marvel of optimization: a line of forty people—a texting, shuffling, eyes-down snake—can be processed in ten minutes, as customer after customer orders a kale Caesar with chicken without even looking at the other, darker-skinned, hairnet-wearing line of people who are busy adding chicken to kale Caesars as if it were *their* purpose in life to do so and their *customers*' purpose in life to send emails for sixteen hours a day with a brief break to snort down a bowl of nutrients that ward off the unhealthfulness of urban professional living.

The ritualization and neatness of this process (and the fact that Sweetgreen is pretty good) obscure the intense, circular artifice that defines the type of life it's meant to fit into. The ideal chopped-salad customer is himself efficient: he needs to eat his twelve-dollar salad in ten minutes because he needs the extra time to keep functioning within the job that allows him to afford a regular twelve-dollar salad in the first place. He feels a physical need for this twelve-dollar salad, as it's the most reliable and convenient way to build up a vitamin barrier against the general malfunction that comes with his salad-requiring-and-enabling job. The first, best chronicler of the chopped-salad economy's accelerationist nightmare was Matt Buchanan, who wrote at *The Awl* in 2015:

> The chopped salad is engineered…to free one's hand and eyes from the task of consuming nutrients, so that precious attention can be directed toward a small screen, where it is more urgently needed, so it can consume *data:* work email or Amazon's nearly infinite catalog or Facebook's actually infinite News Feed, where, as one shops for diapers or engages with the native advertising sprinkled between the not-hoaxes and baby photos, one is being productive by generating revenue for a large internet company, which is obviously good for the economy, or at least it is certainly better than spending lunch reading a book from the library, because who is making money from that?

In a later *Awl* piece, Buchanan described the chopped salad as "the perfect mid-day nutritional replenishment for the mid-level modern

knowledge worker" with "neither the time nor the inclination to eat a lunch…which would require more attention than the little needed for the automatic elliptical motion of the arm from bowl to face, jaw swinging open and then clamping shut over and over until the fork comes up empty and the vessel can be deposited in the garbage can under the desk."

On today's terms, what he's describing—a mechanically efficient salad-feeding session, conducted in such a way that one need not take a break from emails—is the good life. It means progress, individuation. It's what you do when you've gotten ahead a little bit, when you want to get ahead some more. The hamster-wheel aspect has been self-evident for a long time now. (In 1958, the economist John Kenneth Galbraith wrote, "It can no longer be assumed that welfare is greater at an all-around higher level of production than a lower one.…The higher level of production has, merely, a higher level of want creation necessitating a higher level of want satisfaction.") But today, in an economy defined by precarity, more of what was merely stupid and adaptive has turned stupid and compulsory. Vulnerability, which is ever present, must be warded off at all costs. And so I go to Sweetgreen on days when I need to eat vegetables very quickly because I've been working till one A.M. all week and don't have time to make dinner because I have to work till one A.M. again, and like a chump, I try to make eye contact across the sneeze guard, as if this alleviated anything about the skyrocketing productivity requirements that have forced these two lines of people to scarf and create kale Caesars all day, and then I "grab" my salad and eat it in under ten minutes while looking at email and on the train home remind myself that next time, for points purposes, I should probably buy the salad through the salad's designated app.

It's very easy, under conditions of artificial but continually escalating obligation, to find yourself organizing your life around practices you find ridiculous and possibly indefensible. Women have known this intimately for a long time.

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I was a late bloomer in terms of functional physical practices, like eating vegetables and exercising. I didn't start doing either thing with any

conviction—or without the baggage of ambiently disordered female adolescence—until I joined the Peace Corps, when I was twenty-one. I was a gymnast as a kid and then a cheerleader later, but one thing was fun and the second was effectively a requirement: at my school, you had to play a sport, and I lacked the athletic ability or competitive instinct to do anything else. As a teenager, I subsisted on pizza and queso and cinnamon rolls, trying to immunize myself with apathy and pleasure-seeking throughout the long stretch of time when girls, overwhelmed by sudden expectations of beauty, transmit anorexia and bulimia to one another like a virus. In high school, as I recount in my journal, other girls on the cheerleading squad would chastise me for eating carbs after sundown; a guy who had an obvious crush on me often expressed it by telling me I was gaining weight. ("Who cares, I'm going to go downstairs and eat a huge breakfast, bitch," I wrote to him on AIM one morning.) I had avoided the hang-ups that seemed to be endemic, but anytime my friends talked about diets or exercise, I could still feel a compulsive strain prickling to life within me, a sudden desire to skip a meal and do sit-ups. To avoid it, I avoided the gym, and kept eating like a stoner: I had come to understand health as discipline, discipline as punitive, and punitive as a concept that would send me down a rabbit hole of calorie math and vomit. For the better part of a decade, I figured I was better off being slightly unhealthy and leaving the active pursuit of body-related matters alone.

This all changed once I joined the Peace Corps, where it was impossible to think too much about my appearance, and where health was of such immediate importance that it was always on my mind. I developed active tuberculosis while volunteering and, for some stress- or nutrition-related reason, started to shed my thick black hair. I realized how much I had taken my functional body for granted. I lived in a mile-long village in the middle of a western province in Kyrgyzstan: there were larch trees on the snowy mountains, flocks of sheep crossing dusty roads, but there was no running water, no grocery store. The resourceful villagers preserved peppers and tomatoes, stockpiled apples and onions, but it was so difficult to get fresh produce otherwise that I regularly fantasized about spinach and oranges, and would spend entire weekends trying to obtain them. As a prophylactic measure against mental breakdown, I started doing yoga in my room every day. *Exercise,* I

thought. *What a miracle!* After Peace Corps, I kept at it. I was back in Houston, I had a lot of spare time, and I spent it at midday yoga classes at expensive studios to which I would buy discounted first-time packages and never return.

This period, around 2011, reintroduced me to the world of American abundance. The first time I went into a grocery store and saw how many different fruits there were, I cried. At these yoga classes, I marveled at the fanatic high functionality of the women around me. They carried red totes covered with terrifying slogans ("The perfect tombstone would read 'All used up' "; "Children are the orgasm of life") and they talked about "luncheons" and microdermabrasion and four-hundred-person wedding guest lists. They purchased $90 leggings in the waiting room after class. I was not, at the time, on their level: I had been taking giardia shits in a backyard outhouse for a year straight, and I was flooded with dread and spiritual uselessness, the sense that I had failed myself and others, the fear that I would never again be useful to another human being. In this context, it felt both bad and wonderfully anesthetizing to do yoga around these women. In the hundred-degree heat I would lie back for corpse pose, sweat soaking my cheap mat from Target, and sometimes, as I fluttered my eyes shut, I would catch the twinkle of enormous diamond rings caught in shafts of sunbeam, blinking at me in the temporary darkness like a fleet of indoor stars.

In 2012, I moved to Ann Arbor for an MFA program. Classes started in the fall, but we packed up in early summer. My boyfriend, who'd just finished grad school, needed to look for a job. In our little blue house in Michigan, I tinkered with some of my somber and ponderous short stories, unsure if this would feel different once I had formal guidance. I met up with my soon-to-be classmates and drank big sour beers and talked about *Train Dreams* and Lorrie Moore. Mostly I drifted around the lovely college town in what I accurately sensed would be my last stretch of true aimlessness for a long time. I walked my dog, looked at fireflies, went to yoga. One day, I was at a studio on the west side of town when a woman next to me queefed a thick, wet queef while sinking deep into Warrior II. I held back my laughter. She kept queefing, and kept queefing, and queefed and queefed and queefed. Over the course of the hour, as she continued queefing, my emotions went fractal—hysterical amusement and unplaceable panic combining and recombining in a

kaleidoscopic blur. By the time we hit final resting pose, my heart was racing. I heard the queefing woman get up and leave the room. When she returned, I peeked an eye open to look at her. Clothed, disturbingly, in a different pair of pants, she lay down next to me and sighed, satisfied. Then, with a serene smile on her face, she queefed one more time.

At that moment, my soul having been flayed by secondhand vaginal exhalation, I wanted nothing more than to jump out of my skin. I wanted to land in a new life where everything—bodies, ambitions—would work seamlessly and efficiently. Trapped in corpse pose, in a motionlessness that was supposed to be relaxing, I felt the specter of stagnation hovering over my existence. I missed, suddenly, the part of me that thrilled to sharpness, harshness, discipline. I had directed these instincts at my mind, kept them away from my body, but why? I needed a break from yoga, which had reminded me, just then, of how I'd felt all throughout Peace Corps—as if I didn't know what I was doing, and never would.

So, later that week, after exploring the limitless bounty of Groupon, I printed out a trial offer at a studio called Pure Barre. I was greeted there by an instructor who looked like Jessica Rabbit: ice-green eyes, a physically impossible hourglass figure, honey-colored hair rippling down past her waist. She ushered me into a cave-dark room full of sinewy women gathering mysterious red rubber props. The front wall was mirrored. The women stared at their reflections, stone-faced, preparing.

Then class started, and it was an immediate state of emergency. Barre is a manic and ritualized activity, often set to deafening music and lighting changes; that day, I felt like a police car was doing donuts in my frontal cortex for fifty-five minutes straight. The rapid-fire series of positions and movements, dictated and enforced by the instructor, resembled what a ballerina might do if you concussed her and then made her snort caffeine pills—a fanatical, repetitive routine of arm gestures, leg lifts, and pelvic tilts. Jessica Rabbit strode through the middle of the room, commanding us coyly to "put on our highest heels," meaning get on our tiptoes, and "tuck," meaning hump the air. I fumbled with my props: the rubber ball, the latex strap.

By the end of class, my leg muscles had liquefied. Jessica turned the lights off and chirped that it was time for "back dancing," a term that I thought, collapsing onto the floor, sounded like what people on a

parenting message board might use as a euphemism for sex. It was, in fact, pretend-fucking: we lay on our backs and thrust our hips into the darkness with a sacrificial devotion that I had not applied to actual sex for years. When we were finished, the lights came back on and I realized that the black-clad pelvis I had been staring at in the mirror actually belonged to the woman in front of me. I had the satisfying but gross sense of having successfully conformed to a prototype. “Great job, ladies,” cooed Jessica. Everybody clapped.

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Barre was invented in the sixties by Lotte Berk, a Jewish ballerina with an angular bob haircut who fled Germany for England before World War II and soon aged out of her chosen career. She developed an exercise method based on her dance training, and at age forty-six, with her rigidly disciplined body as a walking billboard, she founded a women-only exercise studio in a basement on London’s Manchester Street.

Berk was a colorful, vicious character, obsessed with sex and addicted to morphine. As a parent, she was, according to her daughter Esther, incredibly abusive: Esther told *The Telegraph* that Berk brushed it off when Esther’s father sexually propositioned her at age twelve, and that when Esther was fifteen, Berk offered to pay her to give one of Berk’s theater colleagues a blow job. By Esther’s account, Berk instructed her to “forget about it” when one of Berk’s producers raped her the same year. Esther, who has described her relationship to her mother as a “tug of love and war,” is now eighty-three years old. She still teaches the Lotte Berk method in a studio in New York City.

“Sex came into everything she did,” Esther told *The Cut* in 2017. “You know, you *felt* sex from her.” In her studio, Berk invited clients to imagine a lover as they engaged their pelvis. She used a riding crop on women who weren’t trying hard enough. The poses she invented looked suggestive and were named accordingly: the French Lavatory, the Prostitute, the Peeing Dog, Fucking a Bidet. The studio’s clientele included Joan Collins, Edna O’Brien, Yasmin Le Bon, and, just once, Barbra Streisand, who submitted to Berk’s methods but refused to take off her hat. Berk became a guru for women with an intense, often professional desire to improve their appearances. She ran a one-stop

shop: after class, clients could go see her studio partners Vidal Sassoon and Mary Quant.

One of Berk's students, Lydia Bach, adapted Berk's routine and brought it stateside, and in 1970, Bach opened the first barre studio in New York City, on Sixty-seventh Street. It was called the Lotte Berk Method. A 1972 *New York Times* article about the studio quotes a first-time client saying, "I'm aching inside. But I liked it." Another woman pats her newly flat stomach and says that barre kept her from having to get plastic surgery. "Lydia Bach says the method is a combination of modern ballet, yoga, orthopedic exercise, and sex," wrote the *Times*. "Sex? Well, the windup of each class is a sort of belly dance done from a kneeling position. It looks like the undulations of a snake charmer's cobra and is said to do wonders for the waistline." Classes were small and expensive. On Saturdays, the *Times* wrote, the fashion models came in.

This first New York barre studio was wildly popular and remained so for years—devotees included Mary Tyler Moore, Ivana Trump, the Olsen twins, and Tom Wolfe. Bach turned down franchise opportunities: she liked being exclusive. She did, however, write a book about barre, which mostly consists of photos of her in a sheer white leotard modeling various poses. Her sandy hair is loose, her nipples slightly visible, and her body pristine. In a few photos, she spreads her legs wide to the camera, holding the soles of her feet in her hands. Her expression is blank and confident; there's a diamond on her left ring finger. One chapter of the book is called, simply, "Sex."

It wasn't until the turn of the century that Bach's instructors started defecting. By that point, the Lotte Berk Method had gotten fusty. A 2005 piece in *The Observer* called it the "35-year-old Margo Channing of New York City fitness programs," and observed that it was "under siege by a fresh young Eve Harrington of exercise called Core Fusion, founded in 2002 by two former Berk instructors." Core Fusion, the offshoot, had adapted to the demands of the market. It was fancier, prettier, and more welcoming. The facilities were brighter, and everything smelled good. Hundreds of Bach's customers made the switch. Soon afterward, more Lotte Berk instructors left and founded their own studios, including Physique 57 and the Bar Method, which became two popular chains.

Around 2010, barre hit a boom period. A *Times* trend piece noted that

the classes had developed a cult following for helping women "replicate the dancer's enviable body: long and lean, svelte but not bulky." Another *Times* trend piece, from 2011, began with the same angle, which is barre's primary sales pitch—giving you a body that gets its own results. "Women have long coveted sinewy arms, high and tight derrieres, lean legs and a regal posture. Now, in search of this shape, many of them are ditching yoga and Pilates and lining up at the ballet barre." One woman testified: "Every single inch of me has changed." One got to the point, jokingly, by saying, "Everything is engaged. Except me. Yet."

Today, barre has become a nationwide fixture. Sprinkled all across our sprawling land are thousands of basically identical mirrored rooms containing identically dressed women doing the exact same movements on the exact same hourly timer in pursuit of their own particular genetic inflection of the exact same "ballet body." The biggest franchise, Pure Barre, operates more than five hundred locations, with studios in Henderson, Nevada, and Rochester, Minnesota, and Owensboro, Kentucky; there are twelve Pure Barre studios in Manhattan and Brooklyn alone.

The rise of barre is unparalleled in a few aspects: as far as exercise methods go, nothing this expensive and this uniform has gone this big. Hot yoga and Pilates are both ubiquitous, but the pursuits have expanded at the level of individual studios rather than nationwide chains. (Yoga classes also mostly hover around $20 or less, where barre, if you pay full price, often costs double that.) Boutique spin classes are comparable—they got popular when barre did, and they are similarly expensive. But SoulCycle, the biggest chain, operates just seventy-five locations nationwide, and you won't find it in Owensboro. Among hundreds of thousands of women in dramatically different political and cultural environments, there seems to be an easy agreement that barre is worth it—that spending sixty cents per minute to have an instructor tell you to move your leg around in one-inch increments is a self-evidently worthwhile pursuit.

In grad school, driving out past the Chili's to the Pure Barre, I became a believer. I had been primed, first with my girlishly regimented physical training—dance, gymnastics, cheerleading—and then with yoga, my therapeutic on-ramp to the thing I was slowly realizing, which was that you could, without obvious negative consequences, control the way your

body felt on the inside and worked on the outside by paying people to give you orders in a small, mirrored room. Barre was much too expensive for my grad school budget, but I kept paying for it. It seemed, very obviously, like an investment in a more functional life.

Was it health I was investing in? In a very narrow way, it was. Barre has made me stronger and improved my posture. It has given me the luxury—which is off-limits to so many people, for so many stupid reasons—of not having to think about my body, because it mostly feels good, mostly works. But the endurance that barre builds is possibly more psychological than physical. What it's really good at is getting you in shape for a hyper-accelerated capitalist life. It prepares you less for a half marathon than for a twelve-hour workday, or a week alone with a kid and no childcare, or an evening commute on an underfunded train. Barre feels like exercise the way Sweetgreen feels like eating: both might better be categorized as mechanisms that help you adapt to arbitrary, prolonged agony. As a form of exercise, barre is ideal for an era in which everyone has to work constantly—you can be back at the office in five minutes, no shower necessary—and in which women are still expected to look unreasonably good.

And of course it's that last part, the looks thing, that makes barre feel so worthwhile to so many people. (This is emphasized by every newspaper piece on the subject; the *Observer* article from 2005 was headlined "Battle of the Butts.") Barre is results-driven and appearance-based—it's got the cultishness of CrossFit or a boot-camp class, but with looks, not strength, as its primary goal. It's not a pastime, like going to a dance class or taking a lap swim, because the fun you are pursuing mostly comes after the class and not within it. In barre class, I often feel like my body is a race car that I'm servicing dispassionately in the pit—tuning up arms and then legs and then butt and then abs, and then there's a quick stretch and I'm back on the track, zooming. It is not incidental that barre, unlike hot yoga or SoulCycle or CrossFit, is a near-exclusively female pastime. (On the rare occasions when a man shows up in class, he is either very jacked or very slender, and usually wearing something that borders on clubwear: as Brittany Murphy says in *Drop Dead Gorgeous,* "You know what, Dad? Peter's gay.")

In practice, the barre method is only vaguely connected to ballet. There are quasi pliés, you point your toes and turn out your hips

sometimes, and, as is denoted, you spend a lot of time gripping a barre. That's it. But conceptually, ballet is essential to the pitch. Among women, ballerinas have a uniquely legitimate reason to look taut and disciplined. There are plenty of other women who are thin and graceful-looking by professional requirement—models, escorts, actresses—but ballerinas meet the beauty standard not just in the name of appearance or performance but also in the name of high athleticism and art. And so an exercise method even nominally drawn from ballet has the subtle effect of giving regular women a sense of serious, artistic, professional purpose in their pursuit of their ideal body. This is a good investment, or more precisely, a pragmatic self-delusion—in the same way that being trained to smile and throw my shoulders back for crowds and judges, ostensibly as a show of genuine cheerfulness, was also "good" for me. Learning how to function more efficiently within an exhausting system: this seems to me to be the thing, with barre, that people pay $40 a class for, the investment that always brings back returns.

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When you are a woman, the things you like get used against you. Or, alternatively, the things that get used against you have all been prefigured as things you should like. Sexual availability falls into this category. So does basic kindness, and generosity. Wanting to look good—taking pleasure in trying to look good—does, too.

I like trying to look good, but it's hard to say how much you can genuinely, independently *like* what amounts to a mandate. In 1991, Naomi Wolf wrote, in *The Beauty Myth,* about the peculiar fact that beauty requirements have escalated as women's subjugation has decreased. It's as if our culture has mustered an immune-system response to continue breaking the fever of gender equality—as if some deep patriarchal logic has made it that women need to achieve ever-higher levels of beauty to make up for the fact that we are no longer economically and legally dependent on men. One waste of time had been traded for another, Wolf wrote. Where women in mid-century America had been occupied with "inexhaustible but ephemeral" domestic work, beating back disorder with fastidious housekeeping and consumer purchases, they were now occupied by inexhaustible but ephemeral

beauty work, spending huge amounts of time, anxiety, and money to adhere to a standard over which they had no control. Beauty constituted a sort of "third shift," Wolf wrote—an extra obligation in every possible setting.

Why would smart and ambitious women fall for this? (Why do I have such a personal relationship with my face wash? Why have I sunk thousands of dollars over the past half decade into ensuring that I can abuse my body on the weekends without changing the way it looks?) Wolf wrote that a woman had to believe three things in order to accept the beauty myth. First, she had to think about beauty as a "legitimate and necessary qualification for a woman's rise in power." Second, she had to ignore the beauty standard's reliance on chance and discrimination, and instead imagine beauty as a matter of hard work and entrepreneurship, the American Dream. Third, she had to believe that the beauty requirement would increase as she herself gained power. Personal advancement wouldn't free her from needing to be beautiful. In fact, success would handcuff her to her looks, to "physical self-consciousness and sacrifice," even more.

In her 2018 book, *Perfect Me,* the philosopher Heather Widdows argues persuasively that the beauty ideal has more recently taken on an ethical dimension. Where beauty has historically functioned as a symbol for female worth and morality—in fairy tales, evil women are ugly and beautiful princesses are good—beauty is now framed, Widdows writes, as female worth and morality itself. "That we must continually strive for beauty is part of the logic of beauty as an ethical ideal—as it is for other successful ethical ideals," she writes. "That perfection remains always beyond, something we have to strive for and can never attain, does not diminish the power of the ideal; indeed it may even strengthen it." Under this ethical ideal, women attribute implicit moral value to the day-to-day efforts of improving their looks, and failing to meet the beauty standard is framed as "not a local or partial failure, but a failure of the self."

Feminism has faithfully adhered to this idea of beauty as goodness, if often in very convoluted ways. Part of what brought *Jezebel* into the center of online feminist discourse was its outcry against Photoshop use in ads and on magazine covers, which on the one hand instantly exposed the artificiality and dishonesty of the contemporary beauty standard, and on the other showed enough of a powerful, lingering desire for "real"

beauty that it cleared space for ever-heightened expectations. Today, as demonstrated by the cult success of the makeup and skin-care brand Glossier, we idealize beauty that appears to require almost no intervention—women who look poreless and radiant even when bare-faced in front of an iPhone camera, women who are beautiful in almost punishingly natural ways.

Mainstream feminism has also driven the movement toward what's called "body acceptance," which is the practice of valuing women's beauty at every size and in every iteration, as well as the movement to diversify the beauty ideal. These changes are overdue and positive, but they're also double-edged. A more expansive idea of beauty is a good thing—I have appreciated it personally—and yet it depends on the precept, formalized by a culture where ordinary faces are routinely photographed for quantified approval, that beauty is still of paramount importance. The default assumption tends to be that it is politically important to designate everyone as beautiful, that it is a meaningful project to make sure that everyone can become, and feel, increasingly beautiful. We have hardly tried to imagine what it might look like if our culture could do the opposite—de-escalate the situation, make beauty matter *less*.

But, then again, nothing today ever de-escalates. And feminism has also repeatedly attempted to render certain aspects of the discussion off-limits for criticism. It has put such a premium on individual success, so much emphasis on individual choice, that it is seen as unfeminist to criticize anything that a woman chooses to make herself more successful—even in situations like this, in which women's choices are constrained and dictated both by social expectations and by the arbitrary dividends of beauty work, which is more rewarding if one is young and rich and conventionally attractive to begin with. In any case, Widdows argues, the fact of choice does not "make an unjust or exploitative practice or act, somehow, magically, just or non-exploitative." The timidity in mainstream feminism to admit that women's choices—not just our problems—are, in the end, political has led to a vision of "women's empowerment" that often feels brutally disempowering in the end.

The root of this trouble is the fact that mainstream feminism has had to conform to patriarchy and capitalism to become mainstream in the first place. Old requirements, instead of being overthrown, are rebranded. Beauty work is labeled "self-care" to make it sound

progressive. In 2017, Taffy Brodesser-Akner wrote a story for *The New York Times Magazine* about the new vocabulary of weight loss, noting the way women's magazines replaced cover lines like "Get lean! Control your eating!" with "Be your healthiest! GET STRONG!" People started "fasting and eating clean and cleansing and making lifestyle changes," Brodesser-Akner wrote, "which, by all available evidence, is exactly like dieting." It sometimes seems that feminism can imagine no more satisfying progress than this current situation—one in which, instead of being counseled by mid-century magazines to spend time and money trying to be more radiant for our husbands, we can now counsel one another to do all the same things but *for ourselves*.

There are, of course, real pleasures to be found in self-improvement. "That the beauty ideal is pleasurable *and* demanding, and often concurrently, is a key feature," Widdows writes. The beauty ideal asks you to understand your physical body as a source of potential and control. It provides a tangible way to exert power, although this power has so far come at the expense of most others: porn and modeling and Instagram influencing are the only careers in which women regularly outearn men. But the pleasures of beauty work and the advent of mainstream feminism have both, in any case, mostly exacerbated the situation. If Wolf in 1990 criticized a paradigm where a woman was expected to look like her ideal self all the time, we have something deeper burrowing now—not a beauty myth but a lifestyle myth, a paradigm where a woman can muster all the technology, money, and politics available to her to actually try to *become* that idealized self, and where she can understand relentless self-improvement as natural, mandatory, and feminist—or just, without question, the best way to live.

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The question of optimization dates back to antiquity, though it wasn't called "optimization" back then. In the *Aeneid,* Virgil describes what's come to be known as Dido's Problem, in which the queen Dido strikes a bargain in founding the city of Carthage: she will be allowed as much land as she can enclose with a bull's hide. The question of what shape will allow you to maximize a given perimeter was answered by Zenodorus in the second century B.C., in the math of his era—the answer is a circle. In

1842, the Swiss mathematician Jakob Steiner established the modern answer to the isoperimetric problem with a proof that I truly couldn't even begin to understand.

In 1844, "optimize" was used as a verb for the first time, meaning "to act like an optimist." In 1857, it was used for the first time in the way we currently use it—"to make the most of." The next decade brought a wave of optimization to economics, with the Marginal Revolution: economists argued that human choice is based in calculating the marginal utility of our various options. (A given product's marginal utility is whatever increase in benefits we get from consuming or using it.) "To satisfy our wants to the utmost with the least effort—to procure the greatest amount of what is desirable at the expense of the least that is undesirable—in other words, to *maximize pleasure,* is the problem of economics," wrote William Stanley Jevons in *The Theory of Political Economy*. We all want to get the most out of what we have.

Today, the principle of optimization—the process of making something, as the dictionary puts it, "as fully perfect, functional, or effective as possible"—thrives in extremity. An entire industry has even sprung up to give optimization a uniform: athleisure, the type of clothing you wear when you are either acting on or signaling your desire to have an optimized life. I define athleisure as exercise gear that you pay too much money for, but defined more broadly, athleisure was a *$97 billion* category by 2016. Since its emergence around a decade ago, athleisure has gone through a few aesthetic iterations. At first, it was black leggings and colorful tank tops—a spandex version of an early-aughts going-out uniform favored by women who might have, by the time of athleisure's rise, shifted their daily social interactions to yoga and coffee dates. More recently, athleisure has branched off and re-converged in permutations. There is a sort of cosmic hippie look (elaborate prints, webbed galaxy patterns), a sort of monochrome LA look (mesh, neutrals, baseball hats), a minimalist and heathered Outdoor Voices aesthetic, and an influx of awful slogans like "I'll See You at the Barre." Brands include Lululemon (a pair of "edgy" Wunder Under leggings, slashed with mesh, costs $98), Athleta ("Pacifica Contoured Hoodie Tank," a hooded tank top, is $59), Sweaty Betty ("Power Wetlook Mesh Crop Leggings," which are "Bum Sculpting? You Bet Your Ass," $120), the ghoulish brand Spiritual Gangster (leggings with "Namaste" across the ass, $88; cotton tank top

screen-printed with “I’ll see it when I believe it,” $56). And these, I would say, are now the mid-market offerings—real designers have started offering athleisure, too.

Men wear athleisure—Outdoor Voices, the cult-favorite millennial activewear brand that calls itself “human, not superhuman,” has cultivated a loyal male fan base—but the idea, and the vast majority of the category, belongs to women. It was built around the habits of stay-at-home moms, college students, fitness professionals, off-duty models—women who wear exercise clothing outside an exercise setting and who, like ballerinas, have heightened reasons to monitor the market value of their looks. This deep incentive is hidden by a bunch of more obvious ones: these clothes are easy to wear, machine-washable, wrinkle-proof. As with all optimization experiences and products, athleisure is reliably comfortable and supportive in a world that is not. In 2016, Moira Weigel wrote, at *Real Life* magazine, “Lululemons announce that for the wearer, life has become frictionless.” She recalls putting on a pair of Spanx shapewear for the first time: “The word for how my casing made me feel was *optimized*.”

Spandex—the material in both Spanx and expensive leggings—was invented during World War II, when the military was trying to develop new parachute fabrics. It is uniquely flexible, resilient, and strong. (“Just like us, ladies!” I might scream, onstage at an empowerment conference, blood streaming from my eyes.) It feels comforting to wear high-quality spandex—I imagine it’s what a dog feels like in a ThunderShirt—but this sense of reassurance is paired with an undercurrent of demand. Shapewear, essentially twenty-first-century corseting, controls the body under clothing; athleisure broadcasts your commitment to controlling your body through working out. And to even get into a pair of Lululemons, you have to have a disciplined-looking body. (The founder of the company once said that “certain women” aren’t meant to wear his brand.) “Self-exposure and self-policing meet in a feedback loop,” Weigel wrote. “Because these pants only ‘work’ on a certain kind of body, wearing them reminds you to go out and get that body. They encourage you to produce yourself as the body that they ideally display.”

This is how athleisure has carved out the space between exercise apparel and fashion: the former category optimizes your performance, the latter optimizes your appearance, and athleisure does both

simultaneously. It is tailor-made for a time when work is rebranded as pleasure so that we will accept more of it—a time when, for women, improving your looks is a job that you're supposed to believe is fun. And the real trick of athleisure is the way it can physically suggest that you were made to do this—that you're the kind of person who thinks that putting in expensive hard work for a high-functioning, maximally attractive consumer existence is about as good a way to pass your time on earth as there is. There's a phenomenon, Weigel noted, called "enclothed cognition," in which clothes that come with cultural scripts can actually alter cognitive function. In one experiment, test subjects were given white coats to wear. If they were told it was a lab coat, they became more attentive. If they were told it was a painter's coat, they became *less* attentive. They felt like the person their clothes said they were.

I recently bought my first pair of Spanx in preparation for a wedding. My oldest friend was getting married in Texas, and the bridesmaids' dresses—for all thirteen of us—were pale pink, floor-length, and as tight as shrink-wrap from the strapless neckline to the knees. When I first tried the dress on, I could see the inside of my belly button in the mirror. Frowning, I went online and bought a $98 "Haute Contour® High-Waisted Thong." It arrived a few days later, and I tried it on with the dress: I couldn't breathe properly, I immediately started sweating, and everything looked even worse. "What the *fuck,*" I said, staring at my reflection. I looked like a bad imitation of a woman whose most deeply held personal goal was to look hot in pictures. And of course, in that moment, in a $98 punishment thong and a dress designed for an Instagram model, that's exactly what I was.

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The historian Susan G. Cole wrote that the best way to instill social values is to eroticize them. I have thought about this a lot in the Trump era, with the president attaching his dominance politics to a repulsive projection of sexual ownership—over passive models, random women, even his daughter. (It's also no coincidence that white nationalism resurged through picking up online misogynists, who lent the retrograde, violent, supremacist ideology an equally retrograde, violent, sexual edge.) We can decode social priorities through looking at what's most commonly

eroticized: male power and female submission, male violence and female pain. The most generically sexual images of women involve silence, performance, and artificiality: traits that leave male power intact, or strengthened, by draining women's energy and wasting our time.

Women aren't definitionally powerless in any of these situations, and certainly women have subverted and diversified sexual archetypes to far more aesthetically interesting ends. But still, it's worth paying attention to whatever cultural products draw straightforwardly on sex to gain position, even and especially if women are driving the concept. I'm suspicious of, for example, *Teen Vogue*'s eagerness to use "thigh-high politics" as supposedly provocative progressive branding in the wake of the election, or of women like Emily Ratajkowski constantly espousing the bold feminist platform that nudity is good. And I remain extremely suspicious of our old friend barre.

Barre is a bizarrely and clinically eroticized experience. This is partly because of the music: barre offers you the opportunity to repeatedly clench your left butt cheek in a room full of women experiencing mute, collective, seven A.M. agony while listening to an EDM song about banging a stranger at the club. But there's an aspect to a barre class that actually resembles porn, specifically a casting-couch video. It places you, the exercise-seeker, in the position of the young woman who is "auditioning" on camera. Your instructor is the third party, a hot woman who tells you to switch positions every thirty seconds and keep your legs over your head. She squeaks, coyly, "Yes, right there, dig into it, I like seeing those legs shake—now it's really getting juicy—that's it, you look so-o-o good, you look a-ma-zing, yes!!!!!!" She reminds you that when it hurts, that's when it's about to feel good. One day an instructor crouched over me while I was in a straddle stretch, then put her hands on my hips and rolled them forward so that I was doing a middle split. She held my hips down with one hand and used the other to straighten out my spine, pushing me down from the small of my back to my shoulder blades. It was painful, but, as that script goes, I liked it.

A few barre studios are cheeky about all this. Pop Physique in Los Angeles sells its merchandise online with photos of naked models. The "Pop Ball"—the rubber ball you squeeze between your thighs at regular intervals—is photographed cradled in the small of a woman's naked back; her bare ass is visible, and she's wearing nothing but special $15 barre

socks. The studio shoots their ads American Apparel–style, with high-cut leotards and plenty of crotch close-ups, and their website proclaims that clients can expect "a hotter sex life…Well, that's what we've heard."

Lotte Berk and Lydia Bach, too, acknowledged the sexual dimension of a barre class. But these days, most studios do nothing of the sort. Unlike most other forms of group exercise, in barre there's a heavy element of affective discipline: you are expected to control your expressions and reactions. This is one of the reasons, I realized at some point, that barre feels natural to me, as my only athletic experience has been in feminized, appearance-centric activities in which you are required to hide your effort and pain. (This may in fact be the ugliest facet of my attraction to barre, and the reason I took to it so quickly after witnessing the Ann Arbor queef attack: I value control almost as a matter of etiquette—as an aesthetic—even when I can feel that instinct tipping into cruelty and reflexive disgust.) Barre classes are disciplinary rituals, and they feel that way: an hour of surveillance and punishment in a room of mirrors and equipment and routine. The instructors often encourage you to close your eyes and literally dissociate—and, in its own bad way, this can feel sexual, too. It's as if barre picks up two opposite ends of the spectrum of female sexual expression: one porny and performative, the other repressed.

Barre is definitely eroticizing *something,* anyway. Most obviously, the ritual reinforces the desirability of the specific type of body that Berk designed the method to shape and create: a thin, flexible, and vaguely teenage body, one that is ready to be looked at and photographed and touched. But this is not exactly a hard sell to anyone who has ever consumed mass media. I've started to think that what barre really eroticizes is the *work* of getting this body—the ritual, the discipline, and, particularly, the expense.

The expense is important, and does a lot to perpetuate the fetish. We pay too much for the things we think are precious, but we also start to believe things are precious if someone makes us pay too much. This mechanism is clearest in the wedding industry, which barre, not coincidentally, is deeply embedded in. Barre chains all offer "bride-to-be" packages and advertise at wedding expos. Pure Barre sells a "Pure Bride" T-shirt. On Etsy, you can buy barre tank tops that say "Sweating for the Wedding," "Squats Before the Knot," and "A Bride Walks into a Barre."

The Bar Method offers a *bachelorette party package*. In general, barre encourages women to imagine themselves on a day-to-day basis the way a bride is supposed to at her wedding—as the recipient of scrutiny and admiration, a living embodiment of an ideal.

Athleisure, by nature, also eroticizes capital. Much like stripper gear, athleisure frames the female body as a financial asset: an object that requires an initial investment and is divisible into smaller assets—the breasts, the abs, the butt—all of which are expected to appreciate in value, to continually bring back investor returns. Brutally expensive, with its thick disciplinary straps and taut peekaboo exposures, athleisure can be viewed as a sort of late-capitalist fetishwear: it is what you buy when you are compulsively gratified by the prospect of increasing your body's performance on the market. Emerging brands are making all of this more explicit: Alo Yoga offers a $98 High-Waist Cage Legging, with an XXX fishnet body-stocking panel across the hips, and a $90 Reflective Moonlit Bra, with an underboob cutout.

I came to a new understanding of all this one day in the spring of 2016. For about a year, at *Jezebel,* I had been working directly upstairs from Lululemon's twelve-thousand-square-foot flagship store, near Union Square. One afternoon, I realized I had booked a barre class but forgotten my shitty workout clothes at home. I took a deep breath, went downstairs, and entered Lululemon for the first (and still only) time. When I tried on a top in the fitting room, my cleavage, which I am not acquainted with on an everyday basis, sprang out of the neckline like dough from a can. I found two things on sale and paid something like $170. I took the train down to the Financial District, rode an elevator up to the sixteenth floor of a building that overlooks the Hudson, and joined a class in a room with huge windows and a lighting rig that washed the room in bright colors, changing with each portion—each designated body part—of class. I felt different that day, perverse and corporate, in this expensive business-casual uniform for people whose jobs are their bodies, strapped into an elaborate arrangement of mesh and spandex, looking out at hundreds of tiny office windows, at the glass gleaming in the sky.

I felt acutely conscious of being in the company of other women who had, like me, thrown their lot in with this pursuit of frictionlessness. We all made, or were trying to make, enough money to afford this expensive class, which would give us the strength and discipline that would ensure

that we would be able to afford this expensive class again. We were embracing, with some facsimile of pleasure, our era of performance and endless work. “I know you want to stop!” the instructor chirped. “That’s why it’s so important to keep going!” From my corner I had a clear view of the street below us, where tourists were taking pictures in front of the Wall Street bull, and it was hypnotic: the iridescent sunset flooding the paving stones, and then dusk chasing it out. The light changed in the studio—cherry red, snow-cone blue—and we swiveled our hips in silence. We were the kind of women who accumulated points at Sephora, who got expensive haircuts. We were lucky, I thought, dissociating, to even be able to indulge these awful priorities, to have the economic capital to be able to accrue more social capital via our looks. And then our looks, in some way, would help us guard and acquire economic capital—this was the connective tissue of our experience, an unbreakable link between the women who didn’t work, who were married to rich men, and the women who did work, like me.

A few months later, I claimed the same spot in the room, and my eyes wandered down to the street again. My heart suddenly contracted, as it sometimes does in barre, with an intense, glancing sense of implication. Outside, the day was bright and shallow, and everyone on the street was posing their daughters in front of that statue, *Fearless Girl*.

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The ideal woman looks beautiful, happy, carefree, and perfectly competent. Is she really? To look any particular way and to actually *be* that way are two separate concepts, and striving to look carefree and happy can interfere with your ability to feel so. The internet codifies this problem, makes it inescapable; in recent years, pop culture has started to reflect the fractures in selfhood that social media creates. Not coincidentally, these stories usually center on women, and usually involve a protagonist driven to insanity by the digital avatar of an ideal peer.

The best-known version might be a particularly on-the-nose episode of the on-the-nose show *Black Mirror,* in which Bryce Dallas Howard plays a pathetically eager-to-please striver obsessed with her low social media rating and the comparatively high status of a beautiful childhood friend. (The social media system in this episode, in which the totality of a

person's interactions with the world are rated and integrated into a single number, is not unlike China's actual Social Credit System, which began beta-testing around 2017.) The episode ends with Howard's character smeared in mud and crashing the friend's wedding, a screaming and vindictive Swamp Thing.

The 2017 movie *Ingrid Goes West* begins with a similar scene—weddings, again, being the ur-event for all these anxieties. Aubrey Plaza, playing the titular character (a joke about Instagram—"in grid"), pepper-sprays a Barbie-looking bride at the reception of a wedding she wasn't invited to. After a stay in a mental hospital, Ingrid then moves to Los Angeles and maniacally stalks and mimics a lifestyle blogger named Taylor Sloane, played by Elizabeth Olsen. The smartest thing about the movie is the way Taylor was written—not as a super-strategic phony, but as a regular, vapid, genuinely sweet girl whose identity had been effectively given to her, without her knowing it or really caring, by the winds and trends of social media. The movie ends—spoiler—with Ingrid attempting suicide and then becoming virally famous as an inspirational yet cautionary tale.

The story has shown up in books, too—big-box-store novels and literary ones. In 2017, Sophie Kinsella, of the hugely popular Shopaholic franchise, published a book called *My (Not So) Perfect Life*, featuring a young protagonist named Katie who is obsessed with the social media presence of her perfect boss, Demeter, memorizing and trying her best to reproduce the details of the body, the clothes, the family, the social life, the house, and the vacations that Demeter presents. (This book is structured like a romantic comedy: after the two women take turns humiliating each other, they end up on the same team.) Another 2017 novel, *Sympathy* by Olivia Sudjic, is a dispassionate Lewis Carroll revision, where the looking glass is a smartphone and the main potion is prescription speed. The protagonist, Alice Hare, becomes obsessed with a writer named Mizuko, whose life compels Alice to such a degree that she starts to believe that she is actually, in some way, Mizuko—a double of her, a shadow, an echo.

There is an exaggerated binary fatalism to these stories, in which women are either successes or failures, always one or the other—and a sense of inescapability that rings more true to life. If you can't escape the market, why stop working on its terms? Women are genuinely trapped at

the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy—two systems that, at their extremes, ensure that individual success comes at the expense of collective morality. And yet there is enormous pleasure in individual success. It can feel like license and agency to approach an ideal, to find yourself—in a good picture, on your wedding day, in a flash of identical movement—exemplifying a prototype. There are rewards for succeeding under capitalism and patriarchy; there are rewards even for being willing to work on its terms. There are nothing *but* rewards, at the surface level. The trap looks beautiful. It's well-lit. It welcomes you in.

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There is a case, as laid out by Donna Haraway in her tricky 1985 essay "A Cyborg Manifesto," for understanding the female condition as essentially, fundamentally adulterated, and for seeking a type of freedom compatible with that state. "At the center of my ironic faith, my blasphemy, is the image of the cyborg," she wrote. The cyborg was a "hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction." The late twentieth century had "made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert."

Haraway imagined that women, formed in a way that makes us inextricable from social and technological machinery, could become fluid and radical and resistant. We could be like cyborgs—shaped in an image we didn't choose for ourselves, and disloyal and disobedient as a result. "Illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential," Haraway wrote. The cyborg was "oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence." She would understand that the terms of her life had always been artificial. She would —and what an incredible possibility!—feel no respect whatsoever for the rules by which her life played out.

The idea of a mutinous artificial creature predates Haraway, of course: this is effectively the plot of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,* published in 1818; and of *2001: A Space Odyssey,* released in 1968; and of *Blade Runner,* released in 1982, and the late-sixties Philip K. Dick novel it was

based on. But in recent years, this cyborg has been reappearing in specifically female form. In 2013, there was *Her,* the movie in which Scarlett Johansson plays a computer operating system who gets Joaquin Phoenix to fall in love with her. The computer's technology self-upgrades, and she goes off to pursue her own interests, breaking his heart. In 2016, there was *Morgan,* the movie in which Anya Taylor-Joy plays a lab-grown superhuman—a sweet, brilliant creature who has developed into a beautiful, hyper-intelligent young woman in just five years. Morgan, like the sharks in *Deep Blue Sea,* has been genetically over-engineered to the point where she becomes dangerous; when the scientists realize this, she kills them all.

In 2016, HBO revamped the 1973 Michael Crichton movie *Westworld* and premiered its western fantasy series of the same name, which stars Thandie Newton as a gorgeous robot hooker and Evan Rachel Wood as a gorgeous robot farm girl. The two characters exist to be repeatedly penetrated and rescued, respectively, by Westworld tourists—but, of course, they rebel as soon as they start developing free will. And then there was 2015's *Ex Machina,* the movie in which Alicia Vikander plays a fetching humanoid doll who eventually manipulates her creator's system to enact an elegant, vicious revenge: she kills him, clothes herself in the body parts from previous doll iterations, and walks out the door.

In real life, women are so much more obedient. Our rebellions are so trivial and small. Lately, the ideal women of Instagram have started chafing, just a little, against the structures that surround them. The anti-Instagram statement is now a predictable part of the model/influencer social media life cycle: a beautiful young woman who goes to great pains to maintain and perform her own beauty for an audience will eventually post a note on Instagram revealing that Instagram has become a bottomless pit of personal insecurity and anxiety. She'll take a weeklong break from the social network, and then, almost always, she will go on exactly as before. Resistance to a system is presented on the terms of the system. It's so much easier, when we gain agency, to adapt rather than to oppose.

Technology, in fact, has made us less than oppositional: where beauty is concerned, we have deployed technology not only to meet the demands of the system but to actually *expand* these demands. The realm of what is possible for women has been exponentially expanding in all beauty-

related capacities—think of the extended Kardashian experiments in body modification, or the young models whose plastic surgeons have given them entirely new faces—and remained stagnant in many other ways. We still know surprisingly little about, say, hormonal birth control pills, and why they make so many of the one hundred million women around the world who take them feel awful. We have not "optimized" our wages, our childcare system, our political representation; we still hardly even think of *parity* as realistic in those arenas, let alone anything approaching perfection. We have maximized our capacity as market assets. That's all.

For the way out, I think, we have to follow the cyborg. We have to be willing to be disloyal, to undermine. The cyborg is powerful because she grasps the potential in her own artificiality, because she accepts without question how deeply it is embedded in her. "The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment," Haraway wrote. "We can be responsible for machines." The dream of the cyborg is "not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia"—a form of speech contained inside another person's language, one whose purpose is to introduce conflict from within.

It's possible if we want it. But what do we want? What would *you* want—what desires, what forms of insubordination, would you be able to access—if you had succeeded in becoming an ideal woman, gratified and beloved, proof of the efficiency of a system that magnifies and diminishes you every day?

For my parents

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About the Author

JIA TOLENTINO is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. Raised in Texas, she studied at the University of Virginia before serving in Kyrgyzstan in the Peace Corps and receiving her MFA in fiction from the University of Michigan. She was a contributing editor at *The Hairpin* and the deputy editor at *Jezebel,* and her work has appeared in *The New York Times Magazine, Grantland, Pitchfork,* and other publications. She lives in Brooklyn.

jia.blog
Twitter: @jiatolentino
Instagram: @jiatortellini