

# Neoliberal Gaslighting, Quality Journalism, and Podcasting

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## The American Dream

**I**n the spring of 2018, ABC aired the family-oriented sitcom *Alex, Inc.*, the story of a man who risks his family's savings on starting a venture-funded podcasting company. Alex Schuman impulsively quits an uninspiring job in public radio, where his diverse but aging co-workers favor stories about, for example, gorillas learning sign language. By getting away from this mild political correctness and starting a private company, Alex will "change the world." His

son tells him at the dinner table, "Nobody thinks radio is cool, but when you do it, it's amazing." This praise gives Alex the confidence to bust his car through a safety gate at the airport to catch a billionaire tech investor before he departs on his private jet. Chris Sacca, the venture capitalist, plays himself. On the tarmac, Alex makes his pitch. Sacca is convinced! Alex shows passion and drive!

Sacca asks what the first podcast will be about. Somehow, Alex is stumped. His wife, who is Indian American, suggests that "this" — she waves vaguely at their car and their interracial family — "is the first show," the authentic narrative of a bumbling public radio producer turned entrepreneur. Sacca says, "I love it, it's the American Dream." The airport police then arrest Alex and he runs away from them, cuffed. This is played for laughs.

A man in 2018 America running from the cops at the airport after using his car as a weapon can only be played for laughs if the man is white. The show is aware. It draws constant attention to race and gender, in a joking mode that Michelle Colpean and Meg Tully have described as weak reflexivity. In their analysis, this allows white feminists in particular "to joke about their whiteness without critically examining it, ultimately reproducing dominant racial ideologies rather than working to dismantle them." <sup>1</sup> Comics such as Amy Schumer and Tina Fey are prominent examples. *Alex, Inc.*, too. But if Schumer and Fey use weak reflexivity about race in the name of feminism, *Alex, Inc.* lacks any critical edge, making it yet more awkward than the **most tone-deaf** of **Fey** or Schumer.

The sitcom, though fiction, is based on the true story of Alex Blumberg, the CEO of Gimlet Media. In 2013, he said he was launching "the HBO of podcasts," where all the shows would be "united by some kind of **commitment to quality**" — specifically, *Alex Inc.* is based on Gimlet Media's first podcast, ***StartUp***, which followed Blumberg as he went to venture capitalists, including Sacca, asking for money. In both cases, the initial podcast of the podcasting company is about Alex, starting a podcast company. In this mise-en-abyme, the purpose of the company recedes beyond the horizon,

replaced by the picture within the picture, creating layers of Alex making a story about Alex making a story about Alex.

This points to the abyss at the center: what is quality podcasting? Neither the sitcom nor the podcast nor Gimlet could articulate Alex's editorial mission. How did Alex want to change the world? And why did he need his Asian American wife or an Asian American woman as a co-host, as in the podcast, to help him do it? With each iteration, the sense of purpose behind the story of the white male entrepreneur spiraled further away. Meanwhile, in the show and in the podcast, Alex needs his podcasts to be successful, or show proof of concept with consistent audience growth rates. On the actual podcast, he was clear that he wanted to make the high-production value, high-concept shows he had spent his early career making at NPR. But in order to stay in the for-profit arena, his company had essentially set itself up to deliver what no media company, including HBO, has ever delivered: a consistent formula for hits. Thus it's not surprising that the flagship quality podcast, after Blumberg began to discuss some of the challenges of being a CEO on the air, tried to keep audiences engaged with a dash of controversy. And then Alex Blumberg dodged the question when he sold Gimlet Media to Spotify for \$230 million.

## Neoliberal Gaslighting and Quality

Stories of entrepreneurial success and self-help, or hustle culture, have a long and deep archive in American media, from *How To Win Friends and Influence People* to the Covey Empire to Tony Robbins. A prime source of cruel optimism, this neoliberal genre perpetuates the American Dream that anything is possible, along with its dark underside, where everything is the individual's fault. Such cruelty is particularly cruel for, say, people trying to hustle in the face of systemic racism or sexism. Gary "Crushing It" Vaynerchuk, the king of hustle culture, promises radical honesty to his fans. He used to tell Black people to suck it up because "the market just doesn't care."

In 2020, even Vaynerchuk has had to recognize the existence of systemic racism. But absent any contextualizing vision of how the moves he recommends play differently for white men, "Gary Vee's" recognition just creates cognitive dissonance. It becomes neoliberal gaslighting, where talk about race, gender, and class contributes to making realities about race, gender, and class less and less clear.

Just before 2020, we witnessed a brief moment of expansion in digital media and online journalism that tracked with venture capital investment and commitments to "quality" from people like Alex Blumberg at Gimlet or James Bennet at *The Atlantic*. In their use of it, quality was a category meant to consolidate market share in a fracturing media landscape. James Bennet, who went on to get ousted as Opinions editor at the *New York Times*, embodied the convergence between neoliberal gaslighting and **"quality" journalism**. He first made a name for himself at *The Atlantic* by expanding digital media coverage, including audio, and even started a digital **consultancy**. When he was expanding *The Atlantic's* DC coverage in 2015, he and his co-editor cited the magazine's charter: "In Politics, *The Atlantic* will be the organ of no party or clique, but will honestly endeavor to be the exponent of what its conductors believe to be the American idea." And then they promised to bring more of their **"ideas-focused approach"** to politics. Blumberg and Bennet were golden boys in the brief golden era of digital audio, quality journalism, and the idea-focused approach. (This was at the height of a period of enormous expansion for TED talks and podcasts. TED's slogan is "ideas worth spreading." Also in 2015, a MacArthur grant-winning radio producer won the TED prize for his work with the digital audio organization StoryCorps.) Bennet needed to turn the print magazine around, and his solution to audience engagement in "quality" ideas was to provoke liberals. Once the controversy was viral, he retreated to a **"marketplace of ideas"** defense, cowering behind the notion that after his "ideas" entered the cage fight of market competition, only the true and righteous ones would emerge.

As journalistic conventions and outlets fractured across an increasingly enclosed media landscape, the many voices unleashed by the

internet amplified the extremes of political discourse.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, social media shed light onto what was once a closed white and male editorial process, and allowed movements like Black Lives Matter to organize. In the build-up to the global protests in 2020, the blatant racism and misogyny that emanated from the current President made it harder and harder to claim that racism and misogyny did not exist, or that they were being meaningfully addressed by the marketplace of ideas. This did not stop many pundits from insisting that cancel culture or identity politics was the problem.<sup>3</sup> As the chaos amplified, digital media and social media expanded together. Front pages ceased to function. The role that online controversy played in the circulation of "quality" journalism also expanded. Carefully calibrated doses of toxic masculinity, neoliberal feminism, racist and / or racialized content served as Bennet and kin's "dangerous ideas" (his words). In an increasingly polarized digital context, they told stories about race, gender, and class, in the name of quality. But overall the idea-focused approach did not tend to bring discrete ideas into focus, it muddied the waters even further, culminating in Bennet's ouster. Or, as one media critic of Bennet's put it, his commitment to "quality" was just "draping a **troll in a philosopher's toga**." This was the heyday of neoliberal gaslighting.

Blumberg had even less of an account of what quality might mean than Bennet, though he used HBO as an analogy. Michael Szalay, in his discussion of HBO, describes quality as a network attribute that served a crucial role in Time Warner's financialized creation of brand equity. On HBO, shows functioned as "stock markets in proprietary brand equities," modeling scenarios that captured and represented the shows' ability to "internalize and negotiate conversions between otherwise diverse corporate properties." In this, quality *is* HBO's brand, which functions as a technology of calculation and conversion. "Quality" is "ideologically neutral," immune to the vagaries of ratings, and, at the same time, it becomes the attribute that ensures the network's success.<sup>4</sup> Quality, for HBO, was also a means of associating its ability to portray graphic sex and violence not with porn but with high art, geared towards quality audiences who could pay for the hookup. Quality, and specifically the

original branding of *The Sopranos*, helped HBO tell its story as the victory of quality programming in intense free market competition, as opposed to as a story of increasing access to monopolized distribution. *The Sopranos* represented auteur-created and cinematic ambition, combining the promise of artistic merit with access to well-heeled audiences. <sup>5</sup>

Blumberg aspired to this kind of branded quality. The term stood in for a business plan. It committed Gimlet to an ostensibly neutral ideology. Blumberg believed that the market would validate his version of quality. Michael Imperioli, the Emmy-award winning actor who played Tony Soprano's beloved nephew desperate to be a made man, played Alex's business partner and sales guy on *Alex, Inc* — just to lock in the HBO connection. Somehow, Blumberg's family podcasting business was going to make podcasting friendly and sexy, like the mobster with a therapist. "Quality" podcasts in the age of digital expansion were intimate-feeling, mostly white, friendly places to talk about things like starting a business during the Great Recession without talking about the Great Recession. Other quality podcasts covered **incels** without talking about sexism, or **mass incarceration** without talking about mass incarceration, or **suicide and mental health** within the LGBTQ community without talking about the nation's suicide epidemic or mental health or the LGBTQ community. <sup>6</sup> Quality podcasts, I contend, raised pressing issues in the mode of neoliberal gaslighting, specifically without naming the systemic or abstract terms that might locate these narratives in history — that is, quality podcasts practice, and arguably succeed because of, neoliberal gaslighting.

*StartUp* exemplifies this trend. It is a show about podcasting entrepreneurship at a podcasting startup, a show about Gimlet Media making media, and also a show made by Gimlet Media, serving as the anchor for Gimlet's brand of quality. This self-reflexivity, voiced in Blumberg's own voice, provided a sense of intimacy with the CEO himself, what one reporter called "a sense of **radical, authentic transparency**." This was how Gimlet was launched, but to perpetuate its brand, *StartUp* had to compete with other radical, authentic,

intimate audio in the context of an exploding number of formats and corporate consolidation.

Neither Sacca, the tech investor, nor Blumberg saw Gimlet as a technology business; it was always a content play. It was as if Blumberg really believed that the circulation of ideas would replace explicit editorial missions and pre-existing market dominance (like at the *Times*), or that quality podcasting would replace the history of technological change and pitched battles over mergers, acquisitions, and distribution rights (like at HBO) — all with nothing more than "storytelling." As Sacca and any media critic could have told Blumberg, execution-dependent bets are always long. The media landscape is more chaotic than Blumberg saw, creating bigger waves than he could ride, and it was not long before *StartUp* began to cover his conflicts with his business partner, his visits to [a business therapist](#), and the difficulties of making money.

## Cool New Things

Before Gimlet, Alex Blumberg launched the podcast [Planet Money](#), and his eventual co-host at *StartUp*, Lisa Chow, had worked as a correspondent for him there. Both spent time covering [the financial crisis of 2008](#). It did not break their faith in the world of finance. They entered the private sector with enthusiasm, adopting Silicon Valley techno-utopian good cheer. Blumberg said, regarding [the transition from public radio](#), "[I]t's hard to describe just how accurate the term 'not for profit' is. It's very, very accurate. There is a tendency to see the profit motive as turning people bloodthirsty and cutthroat, and certainly that happens, but my experience so far has not been that. They're just trying to create cool new things."

Of course, the thing that Alex Blumberg was making was arguably not all that new, it was the same type of audio that he had been making at NPR, especially at the radio show *This American Life*, which launched Blumberg's first successful podcast on their own

already-popular feed. Blumberg would arguably never have become successful without Ira Glass's support and prototype for his friendly brand. But Blumberg interpreted his early success as a validation of his own storytelling abilities, his good ideas, and his commitment to unbiased journalism. As an economics journalist he must have known that generally speaking, most start-ups fail. Particularly since 2008, venture-funded success stories like Blumberg's have been hard to come by, and anyone paying attention could see the **dearth of investment opportunities** outside of real estate for venture capitalists in the States. But Blumberg the innovator did not draw on the knowledge that Blumberg the economic reporter must have had, nor did he mention that the capitalists he was trying to impress might be desperate for both good PR and the mere possibility of a good ROI, leading them to risk money on a content play.

Radical transparency might have suggested that Blumberg share his understanding of the financial landscape in which he was being handed money to make quality podcasts. In that bigger picture, you could see that most small and new businesses continued to struggle for access to capital. New tech firms were entering the lending space, but they remain unregulated and "worrisome" (read: tending towards predatory). <sup>7</sup> Under neoliberal leadership, most financial innovation was going into consumer installment loans, payday loans, high APR automobile and student debt, and other strategies of monetizing the poor. The VC-funded companies that made it to unicorn status built platforms to profit off of the growing number of under-employed gig economy workers. They sought monopoly dominance while parking their capital in the **Cayman Islands** until they could figure out a way of replacing everyone with **AI**. It seemed hard, at first, to imagine the folksy, friendly, persona that Blumberg used at *StartUp* covering the **sex and drugs** culture of Silicon Valley or even bad-boy CEO **Travis Kalanick** at Uber — once a **good buddy** of Chris Sacca's. Blumberg's aura of vulnerable honesty combined with his chipper unwillingness to say mean things about venture capitalists may have been the primary selling point for them. Sacca and kin were structurally positioned to know that the search for cool, new, feel-good founder stories was bound

to be tough. But *StartUp*, even if as a loss-leader, was great PR for venture capitalism in the guise of a friendly and seemingly transparent and objective podcast.

## Gaslighting and Normal CEOs

Blumberg's Indian American wife provided "color" for the story of his family business, in the podcast and on the TV show. And as Blumberg struggled to find the formula for continued growth and served as the CEO of a private company, he gave the job of scouting colorful potential founders for *StartUp* to cover, after Blumberg, to a woman of color, Lisa Chow. Chow loved her job at Gimlet, at first. She said so repeatedly in a video for Columbia Business School, her alma mater, which was entitled "[Lisa Chow Loves Her Job](#)." Going to business school, she said, helped to strengthen her "bullshit meter." Chow had also worked at Nate Silver's data analytics [FiveThirtyEight.com](#), as well as at Planet Money. But despite having been in business journalism through 2016, none of her experiences seemed to have shaken her [faith in data](#), or in the basic tenets of neoliberalism. In 2017, she recorded an episode about her experiences with online dating for Planet Money in which she claimed to have succeeded at it because she used a [spreadsheet](#). For Chow and Blumberg, Gimlet Media initially seemed the place where data, entrepreneurship, and creative fun could plant a garden for a thousand ideas to grow.

Shortly after the Hollywood access tape and the 2016 presidential election, I sat in my car listening to Lisa Chow as she introduced *StartUp*'s next cool new thing. She was beginning a multi-part series about Dov Charney, the former CEO of American Apparel who had been ousted by his board after allegations of financial mismanagement, sexual harassment, and sexual assault. <sup>8</sup> *StartUp* would follow Charney's efforts to start another company. Chow promised they would discuss the "issues" raised by the allegations against him later in the show.

Charney's was not a subtle case. He had been taken to court on multiple allegations of assault and coercion. He lived, and may yet live, in a concrete mansion near my house in Los Angeles where a rotating cast of very young women lived with him. Most worked for American Apparel. By even the most generous accounts, the house functioned as something between a dorm, company headquarters, and a coercive harem. Charney was volatile and unpredictable, and while he promoted some women, he expected deference, loyalty, and sexual availability. His board let boys be boys until the company started to have financial difficulties.

When I heard Lisa Chow on the radio in November 2016, it was before #MeToo pulled so many powerful men down. I sat in my car and listened as she followed Charney around with cheerful enthusiasm. She sounded like a smart person, carefully letting Charney paint himself as a passionate entrepreneur who wanted to change the world. If only the **feminist killjoys** would be more civil, he could rebuild his version of the American Dream. Chow spoke with a young woman who had once moved into the concrete mansion but wouldn't tell her family where she was living.

LISA: Did it ever feel weird to you?

AMY: To be there?

LISA: Yeah, just to be living in the CEO's house.

AMY: Um, it did feel weird. Because I was like this is his home. But once you're there and fully living there, you realize it's not his home. It's the company's home. He lets you live there. The fridge is yours, the garage is yours, he, he — it's everyone's space. It's a shared space.

LISA: It's not what a normal CEO would do. It's what friends or family would do. And somehow, you get the sense that's how Dov feels about a lot of the people working with him, living with him. They're like family.

*Alex, Inc.*, of course, is also the story of a CEO who makes his business the family business and his home the company's home — partly by employing his wife, partly by making his personal life into the story that is also the company's story. Charney was like the coercive, toxic version of the personal turned entrepreneurial. It was nonetheless surprising to me that in 2016, an otherwise intelligent reporter could not see that Charney's penchant for very young thin women was deadeningly "normal," while also describing the situation at the concrete mansion as "what friends and family would do."

When *StartUp* launched its fourth season with a deep dive into Charney's charisma, they promised that while the controversial Charney and his new business were the focus, they would air "all sides" of the issue. <sup>9</sup> This framed the story in terms of the marketplace of ideas, where the side that was most convincing would win. It connoted the language of "he said, she said" or the idea that when it comes to matters of gender in the workplace, no one can really know what happened. As the philosopher Kate Manne explains in *Down, Girl*, this is part of a misogynistic logic. In our society, despite some changes since #MeToo, most parties and institutions still extend *himpathy* to men like Charney when they are accused of wrongdoing. We "sympathize with men's pain over women's, unless and until a privileged man can be cast in the role of hero or savior." Women who speak out against privileged and powerful men in particular are perceived as suspicious, as if they were seeking "personal vengeance." Women who speak up, or insist upon their version of events, or who try to level moral criticism in public in the body of authority, are perceived as untrustworthy ("Lock her up"). As Manne puts it: "claiming the moral spotlight as a woman over an equally or more privileged man is about as fraught as giving testimony against him, given a tacit — and often mistaken — competition for sympathetic attention and moral priority." <sup>10</sup>

My personal history made me well aware, by 2016, of just how normalized harassment by powerful and charismatic men had become. I had the experience that many women had in 2016 of feeling that I could no longer go along to get along. I worked full time in journalism from 1996-2003, and have since continued to work in media.

When I heard Chow disavowing messy gendered emotion, playing to the CFOs, and leaning in to the language of business, I got it: being a woman of color in journalism meant repeatedly trying to be *just one of the guys*. This gendered performance entailed repeated demonstrations of one's commitment to a shifting definition of objectivity, and it especially demanded this performance from non-white women in journalism in the 1990s and early 2000s. I was required to accept gendered assignments about feminized and racialized topics while performing my distance from them — like covering my own participation in a cattle call for models, or writing about my own dating life but being a postfeminist **cool girl** about it, or writing about minority communities without mentioning systemic racism. When I covered a labor issue, the editor-in-chief made me produce all of my notes (never required of the rest of the all-male writing staff). Often, I had to brush off sexist and racist behavior from both bosses and subjects without complaining. Maintaining relative silence about my experiences as a woman or a person of color, performing my gender and color-blindness, not making anyone uncomfortable — this was step one. <sup>11</sup> Step two was performing empathy for privileged white men and their messy emotions, even if, or especially if, they were accused of sexual harassment. I now have the clarity to articulate these insights, but the truth is that even when I first heard Chow's episodes about the CEO of American Apparel in my car, I just yelled at the radio in frustration.

As a former journalist, I knew there was no way that Charney had agreed to let them tape those stories unless he had felt he retained some control over the narrative. It is standard practice for journalists who need ongoing access to participate in a dance of negotiation around the terms of what goes on and off the record. Reporters need sources to trust them, so if they say they won't publish something, they'll usually protect it with everything they've got. Charney was not only a savvy public figure who would have known his way around these rules, but also, the multiple accusations against him were embroiled in both private arbitrations and lawsuits. The very young models who appeared in his highly sexualized advertisements had signed punitive contracts locking them into secretive

arbitration agreements. This meant that the women could mess up their own legal cases if they talked to the press.

So of course, once Chow started to dig into the accusations against Charney, he used his off-the-record privileges to rage at her **behind the scenes**. And, of course, he tried to get her to lie down with him in his bed **on the air**. Of course, women and their allies on social media turned in rage against Chow, asking why she was giving Charney so much airtime. Chow later wrote on Reddit, in a conversation with listeners, "I think I was naive walking into the story. I underestimated the toll this reporting would take." She walked into that story thinking her hard-headed business degree would protect her, that her boss had her back. She may also have legitimately imagined that Charney's story was unusual. Maybe she saw becoming sexually entangled with Charney as a neutral choice that women made, women who liked messy emotions more than spreadsheets. Perhaps she thought that the multiple women who had risked their livelihoods to speak out against Charney were untrustworthy or claiming the moral spotlight as an act of revenge. And so, she participated in testimonial injustice against other women, women who needed to continue working in a fashion industry that is notoriously **sexist** and **exploitative** of women (even Alex Blumberg has covered **gendered exploitation** in fashion).

As I wrote about *StartUp*, it became clear to me that my own most reactive response was to the way Charney seemed so frustratingly familiar, so normal. <sup>12</sup> But it was Chow's inability to connect Charney's charismatic appeal to his politics around the American Apparel factories, not around **the ads**, that created the most cognitive dissonance. Many of the workers and business owners in the garment industry who seemed to still "love" Charney on the podcast were structurally vulnerable. Many were immigrants or the sons and daughters of immigrants who needed the jobs that American Apparel had once been able to provide. The company's growth, at the outset, came in part because their soft t-shirts were "Made in the USA." That was a major aspect of the brand's appeal. Charney divided and conquered public sympathy, using the jobs he provided in

garment work as cover for him to spin his sexual demands as creative license.

Charney papered over stories about his sleaziness, at the outset, by giving himself a runway of ethical goodwill around the label "sweatshop free." This was always a suspect promise on his part. He did advocate immigration reform, especially after the Obama administration raided his factories and fired **1500 undocumented workers**, but he was always anti-union. Los Angeles Apparel, the comeback that *StartUp* was covering, was shut down by the Los Angeles Department of Public Health for "flagrant" health violations during the pandemic after **four employees died**. Mostly "sweatshop free" was Charney's way of muddying the waters, as he pit the interests of vulnerable groups against each other.

From the perspective of intersectional feminism, it's easy to see that in order for Charney to assert that the women at the mansion were "**creative equals**," white-collar women had to reinforce their separation from the vast reserve army of unemployed factory workers, precarious digital laborers, and **care workers** dominated by women of color. <sup>13</sup> Evacuated of its systemic critique, neoliberal feminism itself can be a form of gaslighting. It can make a young female journalist of color feel that in order to remain a creative equal she must turn a blind eye to the suffering of others. It can make her think that feminism has not protected her in the past, so she should keep her head down, just act like one of the guys.

This might explain why Lisa Chow felt that she ought to stay "objective," hang tough, and give Charney free PR. But it doesn't explain why the cult of the white male CEO produced a somewhat lurid story about Charney at the moment that digital audio was valorizing venture capital and #MeToo was about to explode. The system that the cult of white male CEOs helps to hold in place exploits people across the board, but *StartUp's* dedication to that cult was particular to its moment, and to its simultaneous commitment to friendliness and a sense of radical transparency.

Press coverage of Charney as either a scandal or as a success, coverage that swept his bad behavior under the rug, or coverage that

blamed the business failure on the negativity of women — this would have been par for the course. The previous narrative regime linked toxic masculinity with "boys will be boys" finance, where Wall St erupted in normalized periodic crises and scandals. <sup>14</sup> What was new in *StartUp* was the way Chow's jovial tone linked Charney's behavior with masculine creativity *and* with "what friends and family would do," as if toxic masculinity itself was both the mark of an innovative business leader *and* a good subject for an ABC family show. <sup>15</sup> You could almost hear how thin Chow was stretched between her friendly approach and the brand's commitment to truth-telling. Neoliberal gaslighting in the moment of quality journalism blended provocation disguised as honesty with peppy entrepreneurial optimism. The VC-funded podcast was marked by this special blend.

## **Dear Lisa Chow, I'm not mad at you. I'm angry at myself.**

Eugenia Zuroski wrote in 2018 about being an [Asian American woman in academia](#): "Dear colleague: I'm not mad at you. I'm angry that I've learned not to say difficult or challenging things to you, while I've also learned how to absorb the difficulty of the things that are said to and around me all the time. I don't need to blow off steam. I need my knowledge to land." I imagine that once Lisa Chow realized that her own bullshit meter was off, it was hard to know how to get her knowledge to land.

One of the trickiest things about gaslighting is that it becomes hard to trust yourself once you realize that you were duped and complicit. It is hard, when talking with my current students, to explain to them how I was complicit, how different it was before, when the backlash to the movements of the '60s and '70s was still in full force. It was impossible not to be complicit, so much could only be said inside whisper networks, during the heyday of neoliberalism. The culture wars have brought us wave after wave of backlash to

the backlash. The personal is still political. You have to understand that when I was a journalist, you couldn't say "feminist" out loud in mixed company and if you wanted to get ahead you didn't talk about race and class. We knew that the market didn't care.

Lisa Chow reminded me of a younger version of myself, gaslit and just trying to survive. <sup>16</sup> It still feels, years later, like writing about this knowledge and these experiences is against the rules, a truly dangerous idea. Amy, the young woman Chow interviewed on *StartUp*, said of working at American Apparel: "You realize it's not his home. It's the company's home. He lets you live there." I learned quite young that I lived in the company's home, that even or especially liberal institutions would close ranks around powerful white men, that I should keep my head down and make the boss feel special. I learned that getting labeled as a feminist killjoy would end my job at best and put me in danger at worst. I wondered if other people could see this reality, but I couldn't talk about it, and I often felt crazy. It made me feel gaslit all over again when Alex Blumberg, via Lisa Chow, tried to sell the idea that it was cool and transgressive in a fun way to live in the company's home and have your boss control your body, your future, and your access to the fridge.

On *Alex, Inc.*, one of the running jokes is that Alex's younger female colleague is in love with him, and says sexually inappropriate things to him in the workplace, because in the imaginary quality workplaces funded by Chris Sacca, it's novel and funny to remind young women that they **are the source of the problem** at the office.

In a moment of expansion in digital media, it looked briefly as if the pursuit of quality — as a self-reflexive aesthetic, generously backed by venture capital, that sought above all to valorize itself — could hold in place the disciplinary edge of entrepreneurial subjecthood. But Bennet is out, *Alex Inc* barely survived one season, and in the past few years, **eloquent rage** from all quarters has widened the **space of argumentation**.

On *Alex, Inc.*, Alex explicitly promised to be honest about his mistakes and ups and downs. But on the show, his mistakes were depicted as the shortcomings of his lame neutrality, where his whiteness functioned as the butt of jokes about his emasculated blandness. His wife and interracial family became his secret weapon. Their color ostensibly offered Alex cultural capital, in a world depicted as one where being "diverse" made you cool in elementary school. Besides his family's well-behaved Otherness, whatever set Alex apart — whatever made his radio different from NPR — was always deferred. Alex went on a for-profit journey to amazing radio that can never quite be described or represented, except as the authentic essence of white male Alex, expressed through his friendly honesty about his interracial marriage. But do not be neoliberally gaslit: this was not a radically transparent story about race; racialized otherness is not a form of cultural capital that can be valorized by friendly VCs in the podcast markets; and the *StartUp* about Charney was not a quality account of creative business leadership.

In the 1970s, in the [Combahee River Collective statement](#), Audre Lorde and her sisters named Black women's "feelings of craziness" from being gaslit. What allowed them to stop feeling crazy was "becoming conscious of the concepts of sexual politics, patriarchal rule, and most importantly, feminism, the political analysis and practice that we women use to struggle against our oppression." In 2020, my feelings of craziness remain, but thank God for Audre Lorde. I'll take the clarity of her poetry over the muddy waters of podcasts and hustle culture any day.

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5. Deborah L. Jaramillo, "The family racket: AOL Time Warner, HBO, The Sopranos, and the construction of a quality brand," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 26, no. 1 (2002): 59-75. [[↗](#)]
6. I discuss *Serial* and mass incarceration to some extent in my article: Michelle Chihara, "Behavioral Economics and Genre," in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Economics*, edited by Matt Seybold and Michelle Chihara (England: Routledge, 2018), 392-403. [[↗](#)]
7. Karen Mills and Brayden McCarthy, "The state of small business lending," *Harvard Business School* (2014). [[↗](#)]
8. There are countless articles about Charney and the claims against him, which cover financial [mismanagement](#), the contracts he used to [silence models](#), the multiples charges of assault and [harassment](#). [[↗](#)]
9. Shilpika Devarachetty, "Women as charismatic leaders," PhD diss. (University of Akron, 2012). [[↗](#)]
10. Kate Manne, *Down girl: The logic of misogyny*, (Oxford University Press, 2017), 193, 204. [[↗](#)]
11. For my money, the best account of the politics of complaint remains Sara Ahmed's, in *Willful Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), and on her blog, linked above. [[↗](#)]
12. My next to last boss in journalism was Don Hazen. Here is a one-hour episode of *This American Life* about Hazen and #MeToo: <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/640/transcript> [[↗](#)]
13. Niels Van Doorn, "Platform labor: on the gendered and racialized exploitation of low-income service work in the 'on-demand'economy." *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 6 (2017): 898-914. [[↗](#)]

14. Leigh Claire La Berge, *Scandals and Abstraction: Financial Fiction of the Long 1980s*, (Oxford University Press, USA, 2015). [[↑](#)]
15. For more on new forms of economic masculinity, see Michelle Chihara, "The Rise of Behavioral Economic Masculinity," *American Literary History* 32, no. 1 (2020): 77-110. [[↑](#)]
16. Rachel McKinnon, I. J. Kidd, J. Medina, and G. Pohlhaus. "Gaslighting as epistemic injustice." *The Routledge handbook of epistemic injustice* (2017): 167-174. [[↑](#)]