



BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
Bloomsbury Publishing Inc
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK

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First published in the United States of America 2022

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN: HB: 978-1-5013-5973-6
ePDF: 978-1-5013-5975-0
eBook: 978-1-5013-5974-3

Typeset by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.
Printed and bound in the United States of America

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New Directions in Print Culture Studies

New Directions in Print Culture
Studies

*Archives, Materiality, and Modern
American Culture*

Edited by
Jesse W. Schwartz and Daniel Worden

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
NEW YORK • LONDON • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

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The Real Productivity: Creative Refusal and Cultish Tendencies in Online Print Journal Communities

Michelle Chihara

Recently, a group of friends and I were sharing survival strategies in the year of the global Covid-19 pandemic. Those of us with full-time work we could do from home were privileged, and we knew that. We still found it almost impossible to make a living while frantically trying to replace the social and academic structures of classrooms for our kids during the slow-moving crisis known as “distance learning.” Some friends acquired Panda Planners, a trademarked paper planning system that recently partnered with Rocketbook to make one’s planning uploadable via digital tablets and erasable pens. Print trends like this one, which combine journaling and therapeutic artistic practices with online communities, have driven a large segment of print sales in recent years. And self-help trends like this one capitalize on social problems. People need to get by. The tagline for the Panda Planner is “You deserve to thrive,” and the system promises “scientifically designed tools” to help you be “present with the people who matter most” and develop “deeper connections.”¹ These goals seemed worth a twenty-five-dollar risk in 2020 (Figure 5.1).

In text conversations, my friends discussed the fact that uploading to Panda Planner’s digital interface would mean one could digitally search last month, almost like Googling inside your own memories. But while combining paper and pen note-taking with digital search was appealing, we shared a suspicion that the Panda Planner might add both surveillance and labor to our days. One friend reminded the group that we should not imagine that a new planner would render us fully efficient. “The goal is not to become someone who never has problems managing s*&t. Too high a goal!” she said. A new system is just “a way to trick yourself for a little while.”

Both the Panda Planner and the system that I use, the Bullet Journal TM, are print-based methods of getting by. They help prioritize, clarify, and organize complicated lives. They’re also ways of tricking yourself for a little while. Bullet Journals—or BuJo

¹ Panda Planner website, <https://pandaplanner.com/>.

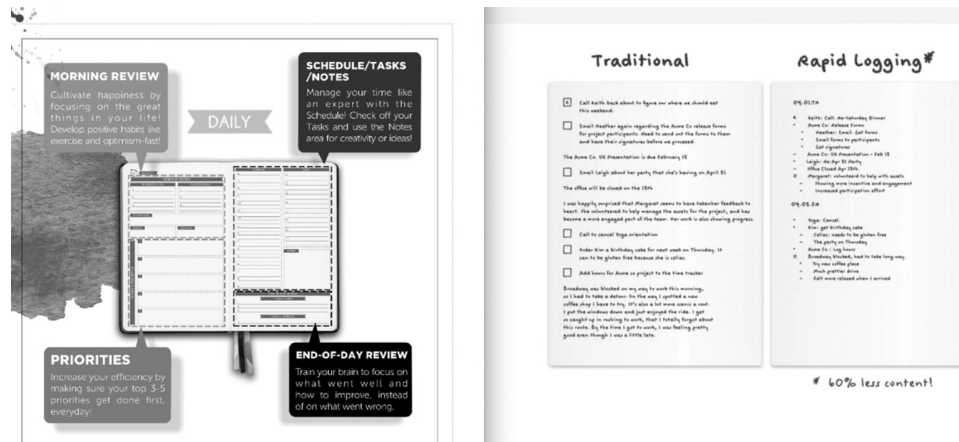


Figure 5.1 Images from Panda Planner (pandaplanner.com) and Bullet Journal (bulletjournal.com) websites, December 2020.

to insiders—in particular have been adopted by a significant online community who share digital images of their paper-based habits, connecting dedicated practitioners in a variety of aesthetic sub-groups who create and share “spreads” online (Figure 5.2). The trademarked company created by Bullet Journal’s creator, Ryder Carroll, does not sell paper journals but does sell an app that allows people to upload and archive their BuJo. His website touts the ostensible benefits of paper journaling based on neurological research about the benefits of mindfulness and creativity.² These commitments link the inner state of being present, or mindful, to the outer state of working efficiently, or what might be known online as hustle. As practices that promise inner peace, these print trends are “digital detox” systems meant to treat technological overload in the gig economy. As practices that arose in a period where individual workers need to brand themselves online while managing multiple gigs and projects, these trends capitalize on impossible neoliberal pressures.

The BuJo was a Silicon Valley-created self-help trend online that has also materially shifted the media ecology in which people consume and circulate print books. They are a print genre which constructs and circulates an aesthetics of narrative self-presentation. As habit-trackers meant to manage what they measure, BuJo are not unlike Benjamin Franklin’s diary, which inspired Gretchen Rubin’s 2009 *Happier Project*. They thus fit within the world of positive and behavioral psychology and the publishing output of *The Happiness Industry*.³ With their indices, calligraphic quotes, and reading lists, they share features with sixteenth-century commonplace books, as instruments “for redistributing text so as to ensure maximal retrievability and optimum

² Bullet Journal website, <http://www.bulletjournal.com>.

³ See Daniel Horowitz, *Happier?: The History of a Cultural Movement that Aspired to Transform America* (New York: Oxford UP, 2017), especially 177–81. See also William Davies, *The Happiness Industry: How the Government and Big Business Sold us Well-being* (New York: Verso, 2015).



Figure 5.2 Google Image search results for “Bullet Journal December Spreads,” December 2020.

application.”⁴ They plug into practices of social distinction that fetishize the book as an object, while circulating images that help journalers feel more peaceful and productive. They carry strands of print culture’s emergence from books of piety and text-networks that evolved long before computers, invoking and absorbing cultural contradictions around Protestant performances of disinterested, virtuous hard work and the promise of rewards in this world.⁵ Straddling the line between private diary and public play for online self-branding, between mindfulness and hustle, they don’t carry a specific politics. But BuJo do provoke questions, ultimately, about what journalers believe they are working toward. Print journaling communities online can, sometimes, open out onto wider horizons about what it means to live a productive life.

An interest in mindfulness, in the early 2000s, rose up both as a means of soothing stress under the cult of productivity and as a means of managing one’s time efficiently within that cult.⁶ Both Buddhist-inspired gurus and hustle culture motivational speakers have fanned out from Silicon Valley across the nation and the internet.⁷ In *Dissent*, Laura Marsh called the interest in mindfulness the “coping economy,” where

⁴ Ann Moss, “The Politics of Justus Lipsius and the Commonplace-Book,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 59, no. 3 (1998), 423.

⁵ For a complete account of the novel’s emergence as a genre from the media ecology that included books of piety, along with text-networks and dynamics of confession and vulnerability, see Jordan Alexander Stein, *When Novels Were Books* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2020). I also use the term “media ecology” as Stein defines and elaborates it.

⁶ Ron Purser and David Loy, “Beyond McMindfulness,” *Huffington post* 1, no. 7 (2013), 13.

⁷ For example, Andy Puddicombe, the Buddhist monk and CEO of the venture funded startup Headspace. For hustle culture, see Sarah Kessler, “GaryVee Is Still Preaching the Hustle Gospel in the Middle of a Pandemic,” *Medium* (August 11, 2020). <http://www.medium.com/>. Online.

meditation rooms at GM lulled workers into being more peaceful about layoffs.⁸ Ron Purser called the “neoliberal cooptation” of Buddhist practices “McMindfulness,” where meditation was weaponized in the name of optimization, “refashioned as performance enhancement methods in alignment with institutional goals, whether it’s a corporation or the military.”⁹ When the source of the stress is not politicized, the mind called to #alwaysbehustling can use Eastern-inspired techniques to calm down on demand, or to Rise and Grind with equanimity.

The contradiction between always being peaceful and always hustling is inherent in this form of capitalist neoliberal subjectivity, which individuals must by necessity internalize. In order to survive one or two or three gigs, sometimes without daycare or grocery stores, one must manage one’s time and adopt a “sleep when you’re dead” attitude, to some extent. Whatever tool allows people to cope, whether it’s a paper planner or a guided meditation, cope they must. In this capitalist context, the slow but steady decline in the practice of sitting quietly with a paper book has been offset by the sale of journals and notebooks, mostly in service of tracking personal time.¹⁰ Amidst the unprecedented amplification of a media- and data-centric form of capitalism—what Sarah Brouillette has called the “creative economy,” or what Nick Srnicek calls platform capitalism, or what Jennifer Odell calls the attention economy—the neoliberal subject is distracted, sleep deprived, and overwhelmed.¹¹ McKenzie Wark wonders if this new regime of precarity and technological production isn’t even capitalism any more, but something worse.¹² Whatever the master narrative, the rhythm and pace of human survival in the contemporary moment produces a living longing for pauses, for analog experiences with a different temporality, as well as for community and human connection.

The Panda Planner and the Bullet Journal promise productivity, but they also index a certain ambivalence around hard work. They promise to save time and labor, to help people work better but not longer. They also threaten to waste time. The online aesthetic excesses of BuJo influencers provoke regular accusations of gimmickry. Created to make people efficient, BuJo’s elaborate decorations look feminine, slow, and unnecessary. Suspicious (often male) commentators on Reddit have looked at the drawings and Japanese stickers and asked, does this really work? Are there “any actual

⁸ Laura Marsh, “The Coping Economy,” *Dissent* (Winter 2018). <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/>.

⁹ See Liza Featherstone, “How Mindfulness Morphed from Ancient Spiritual Practice to Big Business: An interview with Ron Purser,” *Jacobin Magazine*, December 6, 2019. Web.; Ronald E. Purser, *McMindfulness: How Mindfulness Became the New Capitalist Spirituality* (London: Repeater, 2019).

¹⁰ According to market research firm The NPD Group, US consumers spent \$210 million on unrulled spiral, composition, graphing and other notebooks in 2017–18. “Bullet Journaling Trend Lifts Sales of Notebooks and Writing Instruments, Reports NPD” Press Release, *NPD Group* (June 26, 2018). <http://www.npd.com/>.

¹¹ Sarah Brouillette, *Literature and the Creative Economy* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2014); Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2019); Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Malden, MA: Polity P, 2017); Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019).

¹² McKenzie Wark, *Capital is Dead: Is this Something Worse?* (New York: Verso, 2019).

business leaders” who use it?¹³ As Sianne Ngai writes, in *A Theory of the Gimmick*, the gimmick “indexes a bigger wrongness in the way a society goes about valorization as such.”¹⁴ The bullet journal is a device to save labor, an outgrowth of a cult that seeks to intensify work. And yet it appears as “doing too much and yet also not enough work,” and in this, it indexes the wrongness of how work is valorized, it both “attracts and repels us.”¹⁵ BuJo are devices which provoke aesthetic judgments and encapsulate and instantiate profound problems in capitalism. In their online community of amateur artistic production, bullet journals are efficiency tools that also cultivate resistance to the cult of productivity, a line of flight toward something else, or part of what Odell calls the “creative space of refusal.”¹⁶

A short YouTube video called How to Bullet Journal, promising “an analog system for the digital age,” was viewed more than 11 million times in the five years after it was posted in 2015.¹⁷ Carroll, the consultant and designer who made it, speaks openly about an early diagnosis of attention deficit disorder, and says he wanted to tame his unruly mass of post-it notes. Using a blank paper journal with 5 mm dot grids, a pen, and a simple set of symbols, he promised a means of taming and disciplining the mind and the task list. Like BJ Fogg, the tech company consultant and habit industry behavioral researcher at Stanford, Carroll first promoted his technological services by warning of technology’s dangers.¹⁸ Technologically induced feelings of overwhelm and distraction were harming us. He provoked digital anxieties and then, on YouTube and in the name of capitalist productivity, offered a soothing solution. Bullet journaling went on to launch a massive, multi-million dollar trend that spurred a chunk of growth in the office supplies industry.¹⁹

Carroll specifically calls BuJo a “mindfulness” practice and the marketing industry categorizes bullet journaling with digital detox trends like coloring books geared for adults.²⁰ There is little clarity in the popular press around what is happening to print,

¹³ Reddit thread, “Anyone who’s highly successful and using BuJo method? Anything they do differently?,” https://www.reddit.com/r/bujo/comments/cpk32g/anyone_whos_highly_successful_and_using_bujo/

¹⁴ Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2020), 45.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁶ Odell, *How to Do Nothing*, xxi.

¹⁷ “How to Bullet Journal,” YouTube (May 21, 2015). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fm15cmYU0IM>.

¹⁸ See mostly his website, <http://www.bjfogg.com>, but also Brian J. Fogg, *Tiny Habits: The Small Changes That Change Everything* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019).

¹⁹ According to the marketing data firm NPD, “guided journaling” sales rose 40 percent in 2018, and the bullet journaling “craze” in particular drove up sales of notebooks and writing instruments, particularly among women. Guided journals bridge “the coloring book phenomenon” with BuJo and “other organizationally based journaling activities.” See “Bullet Journaling Trend Lifts Sales of Notebooks and Writing Instruments, Reports NPD” Press Release, *NPD Group* (June 26, 2018) and “Guided Journal Sales Rose 40 Percent in 2018 the NPD Group Says,” *NPD Group* (May 13, 2019). <http://www.npd.com/>.

²⁰ Ryder Carroll, *The Bullet Journal Method: Track the Past, Order the Present, Design the Future* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 19.

besides a great deal of death-of-print anxiety, but it's clear that digital detox is a growing force. The fate of the literary novel as a genre and locus of meaning remains, as it was in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, bound up in a media ecology shaped both by commercial pressures for certain forms of expression *and* by the pull of all that is being lost—cubicles, physical stores, small businesses, print sales, and sustained attention itself.²¹ Media scholars have written extensively on the changing landscape of genre in the neoliberal era.²² Meanwhile, articles about the death of the e-book and the return of print, the end of genre, or the victory of crime thrillers and podcasts all cycled through the headlines during the years of BuJo's rise. In 2015, adult coloring was a major part of Barnes & Noble's retail business. The CEO bet big on it, but this particular trend, it turned out, was not creative enough. Coloring was subsumed into a much larger turn toward flexible self-authoring, or "adult creative expression." Books with pre-given outlines failed to produce gift sales in the next holiday season; the CEO was ousted.²³ Meanwhile, the wider trend includes printed books like bullet journals, guided journals, and guided sketchbooks, while encompassing writing instruments, and other art supplies.

In mid-July of 2019, many of *Publisher's Weekly's* headlines detailed losses in print sales, and the end of paper textbooks. E-readers and new types of digital tablets and stylus are still changing, creating constant shifts in what might count as a writing implement, an archive, or an artistic practice.²⁴ At the same time, before the global pandemic, *Vox* reported that independent shops for print books, in the UK and the United States, had been opening new stores.²⁵ *Vox* attributed this to the independent stores' social role in their brick-and-mortar communities, as well as to Instagram—where the visual circulation of images of books and bookstore events, like the circulation of BuJo spreads, was part of an "indie" brand that fetishizes paper books as lifestyle objects. While the future of print remains uncertain, the backlash against digital anomie, isolation, and immateriality is likely to play a major role in preserving the physical affordances of paper.

All of this consumer activity skews heavily toward women, in a period also marked by poverty wages, wage theft, and increasing numbers of underpaid and feminized workers.²⁶ These are gendered trends emerging out of the rubble of previous industrial

²¹ For how the emergence of the novel was affected by the subtraction of books of piety from the market, again see Stein, *When Novels Were Books*, 155.

²² See Lee Konstantinou, ed., "The 7 Neoliberal Arts," *Post45* (August 31, 2020) and Jeremy Rosen, ed., "Ecologies of Neoliberal Publishing," *Post45* (April 8, 2020). <http://post45.org/>, among others.

²³ Daphne How, "Coloring books, Adele leave Barnes & Noble hanging at the holidays," *Retail Dive* (January 6, 2017). <http://www.retaildive.com/>; and Alexandra Alter, "Barnes & Noble CEO Ronald Boire Steps Down," *New York Times* (August 16, 2016). <http://www.nytimes.com/>.

²⁴ For example, the reMarkable tablet or the RePaper tablet that sync print note taking or drawings with digital reproductions. See <http://www.reMarkable.com>.

²⁵ Nisha Chittal, "Instagram is Helping Save the Indie Bookstore: Stores like Books Are Magic and the Last Bookstore are benefiting from love on #bookstagram," *Vox* (December 19, 2018). <http://www.vox.com/>.

²⁶ See Leigh Clare LaBerge, "The Effective Turn: Affect, Gender, and the Wages of the Labor Film," *Post45* (January 10, 2019). <http://post45.org>.

orders, however, not out of gendered essences. In the early twenty-first century, a massively unequal platform economy rewarded a few male-dominated “unicorn” companies for hoarding billions of dollars of venture capital based on their ability to continue exploiting a reserve army of contingent laborers.²⁷ For decades, American workers increased their productivity but watched their wages stagnate, while the uppermost income brackets reaped the gains.²⁸ In 2020, most American households were staggering under heavy debts, taking on multiple gigs for inadequate pay, and struggling to survive. In the face of all this, at the beginning of his book about the Bullet Journal Method™, Carroll cites a slight decrease in worker productivity in the US economy and implicitly lays the blame at workers’ feet. He asks, “Maybe our rapidly evolving technology that promises us near-limitless options to keep us busy is not, in fact, making us more productive?”²⁹ Most workers in the United States had no job security; large numbers faced compounding problems around hyperexploitation.³⁰ But Ryder Carroll thought maybe the problem was that the Internet was distracting people, and Bullet Journals were the solution.

Of course, on one level, Carroll was right. Technology plays a role in a media regime which undermines the collective capacities that make political change possible. The artist Jennifer Odell documents a technology-obsessed culture looping in fruitless cycles of intense emotion and anxiety, “people caught up not just in notifications but in a mythology of productivity and progress, unable not only to rest but simply to see where they are.”³¹ Unable to create space in their own thoughts or to connect with the physical immediacy of their bodies in space, people become cut off from compassion for each other and then unable to do the work of collective thinking and planning that makes up activism. The social body that “can’t concentrate or communicate with itself is like a person who can’t think and act.”³² In the face of constant distraction, immediate gratification, and the atomized nature of online media, paper and pen offer sustained attention. They give access to the mental state that psychologists call flow.³³

Digital detox trends emerge out of a popular and historically specific recognition of the need to take conscious retreats, gather the self, and restore our capacity for solitude. In *Reclaiming Conversation: The power of talk in a digital age*, Sherry Turkle references

²⁷ For the exploitation of digital labor in particular, see Veena Dubal’s work, for example: Veena B. Dubal, “The Drive to Precarity: A Political History of Work, Regulation, & Labor Advocacy in San Francisco’s Taxi & Uber Economics,” *Berkeley J. Emp. & Lab. L* 38 (2017), 73. For income inequality trends, see <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2020/01/09/trends-in-income-and-wealth-inequality/>.

²⁸ Productivity Pay Gap at the Economic Policy Institute, <https://www.epi.org/productivity-pay-gap/>.

²⁹ Carroll, *Bullet Journal Method*, 17.

³⁰ For an account of the spirit of capital in this moment, see Annie McLanahan, ed., “Issue 1: Deindustrialization and the New Cultures of Work,” *Post45* (January 10, 2019). <https://post45.org/>.

³¹ Odell, *How to Do Nothing*, xiv.

³² *Ibid.*, 81.

³³ For example, see Anne E. Dickerson, “The Power and Flow of Occupation Illustrated Through Scrapbooking,” *Occupational Therapy in Health Care* 12, no. 2–3 (2000), 127–40; and Pam A. Mueller and Daniel M. Oppenheimer, “The Pen is Mightier Than the Keyboard: Advantages of Longhand Over Laptop Note Taking,” *Psychological Science* 25, no. 6 (2014), 1159–68.

Thoreau's analysis that society needs one-, two-, and three-chair conversations.³⁴ Turkle was one of the first people to see the potential and the possibility inherent in social networked technologies. She has now come full circle to warn society of the losses we face. The first chair is solitude. "Solitude does not necessarily mean being alone," Turkle writes. "It is a state of conscious retreat, a gathering of the self. The capacity for solitude makes relationships with others more authentic. Because you know who you are, you can see others for who they are, not for who you need them to be. So solitude enables richer conversation. But our current way of life undermines our capacity for solitude."³⁵ In Turkle and Odell's understanding, an embodied return to physical place and face-to-face conversation carries a fundamental politics, almost a pre-politics, in the sense that calm self-governance provides individuals with the psychic space to face uncertainty, governance, and the needs of the group (potentially still a necessary skill in a democracy).

These writers suggest that a different quality of attention might, in fact, encourage individuals to find their sense of purpose in something other than capitalist value. A different quality of attention, produced and guided collectively, might bring about more powerful and imaginative groups. Pressing material realities demand collective action and probably sacrifice on the part of individuals who will need to share a sense of what they're working toward. Neoliberal capitalism's answer to all problems remains the market itself, based on individuals who internalize the model of the human subject as entrepreneur, the self who plans and cares and labors to invest in self-optimization. It's an impoverished model, but especially in the face of intractable and diffuse problems, this model of the self provides a focused sense of purpose, however cruelly optimistic.³⁶ Suggesting that people *cease* to think of themselves as entrepreneurs doesn't give them options. Artists and scholars like Odell and Turkle suggest that people with the lived and authentic ability to be alone, people who carry a rooted understanding of human and bio-regional interdependence, might be a necessary precursor to new strategies for a shared sense of meaning and human connection—strategies that aren't #alwaysbehustling.

Print products that promise productivity emerge out of hustle culture's extreme drives to work, harnessing cultish energies for capitalist ends, but it's important to recognize that those cultish energies tap into wider social longings for a sense of purpose. At the other end of the coping economy, on the more aggressive edge of the cult of productivity, hustle culture seemed both impossible and impossibly strong, in the early twenty-first century—a form of neoliberal capitalism's biopolitical control, on steroids. Even as work became more grueling and precarious, the allure of endless hustle only seemed to get more intense. As steady jobs disappeared, workers were increasingly encouraged to see themselves as monads of human capital moving seamlessly among projects, always one self-perfecting tip away from success. At

³⁴ Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin, 2016).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

³⁶ See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011).

WeWork, the multibillion “tech” company that subleased office space to independent contractors, rented office space was sold as a complete hustle-based lifestyle and worldview. In one WeWork building, even the cucumbers floating in the water cooler were carved with mottos: “Don’t stop when you’re tired. Stop when you’re done.”³⁷ WeWork’s brand promised productivity and a sense of purpose and belonging. Not only would you have an aesthetically pleasing place to be, with cucumber water, but when you stepped through the doors you wouldn’t ever want to stop working.



Like so many Silicon Valley promises, WeWork was smoke and mirrors, a toxically masculine con job that ensnared global tech investors right up to the moment its IPO failed spectacularly and the company dissolved into air. Such investors had made a great deal of money by betting on platforms, as innovations in labor exploitation. But WeWork didn’t really have a platform and it didn’t really have a new method of exploitation, in fact, it promised a brick-and-mortar service. The WeWork CEO was tall and had good hair. But his charisma does not explain why a scheme built on subletting office space was so compelling to so many. That’s because the vision that WeWork peddled was not focused on its core business, commercial real estate, but on a more nebulous and transformative “work experience.” WeWork promised space to breathe, inside what the CEO called “a capitalist kibbutz,” with a sense of community.³⁸ A kibbutz is a community organized around shared religion and shared values. The WeWork hype promised transformative culture, it implied that WeWork work would be imbued with a special something. Hard work performed within its chic spaces would pay off in more than money; autonomous work would deliver collective meaning. WeWork’s business model promised that bringing freelance workers together in a nice space, plus vegan lattes, would release profits from the heavens. This was nonsense. But inside the longing for work to be a place that you never want to leave is a longing for life to be more meaningful than your day job. The live-to-work impulse carries within it an impulse to live *for* something.

WeWork, Panda Planners, and BuJo all carried the promise of replacing boring cubicle days, organized and supervised by someone else, with self-directed time that lets you “do what you love.”³⁹ Hustle culture gave focus and discipline to the flexible worker’s inner manager. For the laborer with multiple duties, and no steady income, self-help and hustle culture internalize management theory, such that the population desperately seeks to perfect itself on its own dime. The neoliberal subject, responsible for everything in her life, takes on both the need to dream big (Ryder Carroll asks, *what do you want?*) and the intense pressure to be efficient and plan (*what have you done to get it?*). Like the Bullet Journal, WeWork promised the entrepreneurial self a streamlined space and a community, a shared practice that would make everyone

³⁷ This is a real thing that happened, reported in Erin Griffith, “Why Are Young People Pretending to Love Work?,” *New York Times* (January 26, 2019). <http://www.nytimes.com>.

³⁸ Amy Chozick, “Adam Neumann and the Art of Failing Up,” *New York Times* (November 02, 2019). <http://www.nytimes.com>.

³⁹ WeWork website from 2013, see <https://web.archive.org/web/20140110054321/https://www.wework.com/>.

more productive and focused. At WeWork, it came with foosball and a coffee maker. But bullet journals promised to combine contemplation with a system for tracking and controlling each task and every day.

The cult of productivity, or the dominant and culture-wide hangover from the Protestant work ethic, is what Kathi Weeks describes as “productivism.” In *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics and Postwork Imaginaries*, Weeks makes clear that the issue with work “is not just that it monopolizes so much time and energy, but that it also dominates the social and political imaginaries.”⁴⁰ We have trouble, in these United States, separating ourselves from the idea that waged work should be our calling and that our work should rank us reliably against other humans. Our inner and our outer lives are wrapped up in work. Given this, management theory folds the critique of alienation into itself. It re-inducts workers into creating value for employers by making work more engaging, by building meditation rooms or gamifying the boring parts.⁴¹ Weeks also articulates the ways in which Marxist, feminist, and socialist movements—including those to which she is indebted—can get caught up in productivism, or in seeing bad work as the problem and better work as the only answer. The anxiety produced by economic uncertainty in a society haunted by the religious idea that God’s elects are productive can produce both an ascetic and “ritualistic” devotion to the cult of productivity.⁴²

Precisely because they appear virtuous, efficient, and motivated by something beyond naked self-interest, BuJo influencers fit well into these ascetic Protestant dynamics. At the Christian website *Redeeming Productivity* a woman named Emily Maxson wrote about solving her “crisis of productivity,” that was also a “crisis of character,” with the Bullet Journal: “I was failing to steward faithfully the things which God had entrusted to me. It was sin.” BuJo helped her “shake off the mental chaos” and get back to “glorifying God through faithful and diligent work.”⁴³ In *Redeeming Productivity*, the Protestant work ethic combines with an Enlightenment model of mind-body dualism that is endemic to a particular brand of modern evangelicalism, where a rational Christian mind can and should control the body’s irrational impulses. Particularly when material rewards seem hard to come by, this ascetic and ritualistic devotion to loving your work provides an alternative sense of reward.

This ritualistic devotion functions within and outside of Protestantism itself. In hustle culture, in Silicon Valley, in the entertainment industry, the workaholic

⁴⁰ Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011), 36.

⁴¹ For more on management theory folding the critique of alienation into itself, see Weeks, *Problem with Work*, 105–6.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 45–6.

⁴³ Emily Maxson, “How I Use the Bullet Journal Method to Steward my Attention,” *Redeeming Productivity* (March 3, 2019), <https://www.redeemingproductivity.com/>. Let me be clear that while there is significant BuJo and white Christian overlap, it has been taken up by a diverse set of groups. Many Asian and Asian American fans of Japanese calligraphy and paper products follow it. BuJo spreads responded to the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020. And groups who would not at all respond to evangelical overtones, including a professional dominatrix who made a “Bullet Journal for sex workers” video, are also common.

impulse connects *doing what you love* and loving your work to an ascetic strain of committing the entire self to labor.⁴⁴ Within evangelicalism, a martyred giving-over of the self to work in the name of the Lord connects with a righteous indignation in the name of Christianity, *tout court*. *Redeeming Productivity* exists inside the ecosystem of a megachurch whose pastor saw California's pandemic restrictions on gathering as an attack on his right to worship. He is part of what one writer called a Christian martyrdom movement that gave "a sense of solemnity and purpose" to the forty-fifth president's victory and to the evangelical community's willingness to put everything on the line for their political choices.⁴⁵ Living-to-work, or putting all of your mental and material resources on a single leap of faith, is the flip side of being ready to die for work. The cult of productivity connects at different point with both ascetic and martyred impulses.

Academia is not exempt from these dynamics. The "mind-over-matter work ethic" is generally "inhumane for everyone it ensnares," it "obscures and rationalizes academia's austerity crisis."⁴⁶ In the face of demands that knowledge production justify itself in instrumentalized market terms, many academics internalized a labor-of-love work ethic that is particularly hard on sick and disabled people. For people struggling to force their bodies past healthy limits, for women carrying more of the labor of social reproduction, or for other precarious groups, it can be harmful, ableist, or abusive, to suggest that they might have been able to thrive in academia if only they had loved it more, organized their lives better, or hustled harder.

In the absence of long-term contracts, at a time when jobs have become more and more tenuous and abusive, the cult of productivity has gotten stronger through these martyred dynamics. The "privatization of stress" at the turn of the twenty-first century pushed society away from asking, as a collective, "how has it become acceptable that so many people, and especially so many young people, are ill?"⁴⁷ And yet illness may also connect people with moments where they are forced to imagine themselves outside of the wage relation. In the life of an individual, illness can force a step back from work. Illness itself often results from injustice, but it carries no inherent politics. Like other forms of uncertainty and obstacles to work, illness can bring interruptions, a necessary pause. And pauses may be the necessary condition for the kind of contemplation that allows individuals to shake off the cult of productivity, to ask: Wait, what was it all for?

⁴⁴ For academia see Francesca Coin, "When Love Becomes Self-Abuse: Gendered Perspectives on Unpaid Labor in Academia," in *Feeling Academic in the Neoliberal University*, eds. Yvette Taylor and Kinneret Lahad (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 301–20. For the entertainment industry see John T. Caldwell, "Stress Aesthetics and Deprivation Payroll Systems," in *Behind the Screen: Inside European Production Cultures*, ed. Peter Szczepanik and Patrick Vonderau (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 91–111. Discussions of Silicon Valley are widespread, but see for example Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2015).

⁴⁵ Peter Manseau, "The Christian Martyrdom Movement Ascends to the White House," *The New Republic* (June 5, 2020). <https://newrepublic.com/>.

⁴⁶ Liz Bowen, "The Job Market is Killing Me," *Post 45* (February 24, 2020). <https://post45.org/>.

⁴⁷ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Washington: Zero Books, 2009), 19.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, shifts in the flows of global finance and manufacturing created what Lauren Berlant, via Hardt and Negri, calls a “labile labor environment.” Read: no more cubicles and single-job careers. With less and less economic security for more and more people, some middle-class workers “saw labor as a system that could be gamed on behalf of forging a more satisfying life” while “others opted out of a live-to-work ideology altogether.” This was part of an “affective shift toward valuing lateral freedoms and creative ambitions over strict upward mobility.”⁴⁸ In this same history, it’s also clear that while steady jobs declined, workers were no longer rewarded for loyalty to particular organizations. They thus learned to value flexibility, creative ambition, and the ability to be their own boss. This freedom only intensified their need for internalized discipline. What powered this discipline was an intensified commitment to a sense of calling. When you feel in charge of your own destiny, you are even more inclined to feel responsible to it.

Bullet journals, and other tools for creative ambition and the optimized self, come along when this affective shift away from steady jobs and toward personal calling hits up against the hard and frantic reality of needing to earn to survive. Print culture has long existed at the intersection of practices that mediate social distinction, leisure, and mental discipline.⁴⁹ As an aesthetic pursuit navigating these dynamics, the BuJo re-packages discipline to feel like escape, but it also explicitly asks people to pause. Ryder Carroll writes: “Mindfulness is the process of waking up to see what’s right in front of us. It helps you become more aware of where you are, who you are, and what you want.”⁵⁰ Bullet journaling walks right up to an ethical question and asks about deeper motives. It creates a spiritually adjacent space that can then cut right or cut left, pushing people either toward a compassionate Eastern practice with ascetic strains or toward other more Protestant cult of productivity gurus.

There is no inherent class or race politics in paper or in digital detox, and the pressure individuals put on themselves, within punishing capitalist systems, will certainly not be lifted by pen and paper alone.⁵¹ Insisting on heavy print books can be ableist and a form of pernicious nostalgia. But the appeal, and the power, of both hustle culture and mindfulness practices lie not only in their instrumental abilities to make money or to help us cope, but also in their ability to connect daily practices and disciplines around work with profound questions about why we do the work we do. Weeks makes specific political demands: for a universal basic income and shorter working days. She calls for these demands as rallying points on a broader utopian horizon that opens out onto visions of life postwork. Thus, while stronger unions and more pay are important (they are!), as political demands they can remain stuck inside the terms of the wage relation. She sees a refusal of work as a first step in

⁴⁸ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 193.

⁴⁹ See Deidre Shauna Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998).

⁵⁰ Carroll, *Bullet Journal Method*, 20.

⁵¹ See Jennifer M. Silva, *Coming Up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty* (New York: Oxford UP, 2013).

transformative social change. A postwork imaginary must find ways to value human relations outside of the wage relation, rephrasing what are we working toward as a question about who we are together, beyond work. In order to move toward broader social change around these questions, the broader ethical and ultimately spiritual context that grounds the ritualistic aspects of daily practice must be part of the conversation.

As artists and cultural producers focused on presenting an authentic and self-directed self, BuJo influencers promote the connections between reflexivity and flexibility in what Sarah Brouillette calls the “creative economy.” In this neoliberal regime, a “fundamentally ahistorical conception of creativity” is seen “as the natural expression of an innate opposition to routine and to management.”⁵² Mindfulness and adult creative expression, like the figure of the author, promise to help uncover an authentic expressive self, apart from market imperatives. And yet this self is also imagined as necessary in order to better function on that same market. BuJo influencers are, like authors, figures for the valorized mental laborer. At the same time, a resistant potential remains in noticing that an authentic creative self is hard to find and doesn’t always pay off. This is illustrated particularly well by one BuJo influencer and anti-capitalist author, a young woman named Rachael Stephen who wrote an anti-capitalist novel called *Flux* in 2013, majored in philosophy, and according to her YouTube videos and website, failed to find a steady white collar job.⁵³ She worked as a barista for a while before she committed to full-time to gig work and influencer videos. In 2019, she posted a video about “seven mistakes” she was making in her BuJo, a standard influencer trope.⁵⁴ She has thirty thousand followers and her video was viewed almost four hundred thousand times, putting her in the middle range of influencers in this space. After she details her seventh mistake, the video cuts to a buddy of hers who makes anti-capitalist documentaries. He asks her how she can go from an “anti-capitalist diatribe” to giving productivity advice. Isn’t she being hypocritical?

Stephen replies that her eighth mistake is the mistake that underpinned all her other mistakes. She had been using the bullet journal with an incorrect sense of purpose. When she came at it from an “entirely productivity-based mindset,” she was just beating herself up for not getting everything done. She says that the goal of achieving and making money might seem “innocuous to almost everyone,” because the assumption across society and productivity advice is that success and personal productivity are universally desirable and aligned. But Stephens questions this received wisdom. She describes her epiphany: “Creating profit and succeeding” were no longer her top priority. The bullet journal was a tool to help her get by. She saw that it was important not to beat herself up for wanting to get by. But productivity was not her primary purpose in life.

⁵² Brouillette, *Literature and the Creative Economy*, 6.

⁵³ See Rachael Stephen, <https://www.rachaelstephen.com/>.

⁵⁴ Rachael Stephen, “What I was doing wrong in my bullet journal,” *YouTube* (June 12, 2019). <https://youtu.be/mIy5RnDuIGk>. All quotations.

Here she is worth quoting at length:

I switched from being just another person trying to hack the system for their own personal success and snag a bigger slice of the pie, to wanting to change the whole system. So that we didn't have to compete for slices of pie anymore. (This is dumb! There's plenty of pie! Share the pie, god damn it! #THERE'S PLENTY OF PIE #BUT FIVE PEOPLE OWN ALL OF IT)⁵⁵



Before, my bullet journal had started to feel heavy as lead, just like this thing I was dragging around that was stressing me out, and every time I looked at it I got more stressed out. But then it went to something really kind of magical.

And it became more than that, it became more than just a hamster wheel for endless productivity. Instead, it really became a place to declutter my mind, to help me prioritize what I'm doing and why I'm doing it, to be more mindful of how I spend my time—yes, to organize my responsibilities and the things I have to do to survive. But also, to claw back some space outside of work to balance work and this crazy thing called Not Work—life—having fun—and even activism!

When I let my bullet journal grow in this way, and I stopped using it against myself as this kind of productivity whip, it really started to become fun and light in a way it hadn't been in a long time. It really became this little haven in my everyday life, this little comfy cozy place that I could go to collect my thoughts and gain clarity and be silly and doodle. It finally started really working for me, really making me less stressed,



Figure 5.3 Rachel Stephen, “what I was doing wrong in my bullet journal,” *YouTube* (June 12, 2019). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mIy5RnDuIGk>.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

making me less overwhelmed and just improving my life in this whole new way. So, I guess, you can see the real productivity was . . . the class consciousness we made.

In order to survive in this capitalist system, we meet the demands of waged work. Quiet, safe havens that create space for who we are outside the wage relation don't force anyone to think beyond it, but they hold the potential to facilitate such thinking. As anti-racist activists and a Zen priest put it: "Without inner change, there can be no outer change. Without collective change, no change matters."⁵⁶

Inner work, like the work that people do by pausing to journal, relates to outer work. In their focus on sustained attention, intention, and community, print detox trends like the bullet journal emerge out of a symptomatic and collective need to pause. They are attempts to counterbalance the very real neurological and psychological effects of the screens. The need for solitude and a gathering of the self is familiar to many religious practitioners. It may be more foreign to Silicon Valley, which then "innovates" secular and instrumentalized versions of what others might call ritual and prayer. The bullet journal creates daily habits, and its aesthetic aspects ritualize and to some extent sanctify those routines. In print, away from the screens, the blank dot grid asks journalers to listen to their own larger intentions, using that sense of purpose to structure each day. It then offers a digital archive of this practice.

Fastidious flexibility may not by itself have a class politics, but it echoes the intentionality of Occupy Wall Street's endless remaking of systems. Jedediah Purdy wrote, of the "anarchist lending system" in Zuccotti Park, that the catalog said "nothing about the library's present holdings except what has been there," and was thus "an instantly obsolete memorial produced by tirelessly fastidious people who refuse to turn their fastidiousness into a rule for anyone else. It sits at the meeting-place of the database, the civic institution, and public art."⁵⁷ This could also describe the print-based bullet journal community online.

Occupy Wall Street and the mic check were nothing if not inefficient.⁵⁸ The movement's critics derided its lack of bullet points—Occupy refused lists of demands—but the daily liturgical practice of amplifying speakers by having everyone repeat their words, as a group, line by line, felt transformative for many participants (including me). As Purdy wrote, "What's most striking is to see those who disagree sharply, and palpably dislike and mistrust one another, reciting each other's attacks. Even when the speaker was agitated, an audible care governed the phrasing, as if the anticipated echo of the crowd and the memory of other voices in one's own mouth dissolved the ordinary narcissism of oratory."⁵⁹ It's true that the mic check was not a specific redistributive demand. But Occupy's forms nevertheless had a politics, including the mic check's

⁵⁶ Reverend angel Kyodo Williams, Lama Rod Owens, with Jasmine Syedullah, *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2016), 209.

⁵⁷ Jedediah Britton-Purdy, "Observations from Occupy Wall Street," *fieldwork* blog (October 11, 2011). <http://jedfieldwork.blogspot.com/2011/10/observations-from-occupy-wall-street.html>.

⁵⁸ See Meredith Hoffman, "Protestors Debate What Demands, if Any, to Make," *New York Times* (October 16, 2011). <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

form of analog conversation and profound listening. Many of those who were marked by their time in Occupy went on to continue to participate in other activist movements. The inner and outer work they did there was influenced by the free-floating library and the mic check. That work connected many people to a sustaining sense of purpose, outside of the wage relation.

The bullet journal, like the mic check, invites people into aesthetic communities that emphasize creative credit, respect, and shared resources. Neither BuJo nor the Panda Planner will, by itself, change the world, but the form of the bullet journal connects the pause and its inner work with a wide range of communities, some of whom are well-positioned to notice the failure of capitalist promises. In its most highly decorative instances, BuJo is unquestionably a gimmicky performance that bleeds easily into a feminized gender discipline around making one's life look pretty. The fetishized spreads become a competitive pastime in their own right, which are indeed unlikely to make "actual business leaders" more efficient through line drawings of snowflakes. But actual business leaders probably aren't the ones who need the help getting by. The range of December drawings registers both an aesthetic longing for pure efficiency and the distance the BuJo community has traveled away from a pure dedication to efficiency, anyway. Ngai writes that the gimmick is the "objective correlative" of the ambiguity at the heart of late capitalist technological regimes.⁶⁰ In that ambiguity lies collective potential and the seeds of creative refusal.

In the intensity of social commitments to productivity lie the seeds of cultish tendencies. Racialized and gendered vectors push lines of flight within these practices to break in different directions, along different kinds of vulnerability to different types of gurus. I can't give you an estimate for how many BuJo fans, like Rachael Stephens, became aware through BuJo that the real productivity is the collective consciousness we make. I can only say that I use my own dot grid journal and my meditation practice to connect with a sense of purpose in living for more than work—to pause and consider our interdependence, outside of and beyond the wage relation. That's the real productivity.

#Share the pie, god damn it.

⁶⁰ Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 55.