"Smart drugs," Gender, and the Rhetorical Turning

Kate Maddalena
University of Toronto Mississauga
Toronto, Ontario

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Abstract: This article uses the example of nootropics—a flexible term that capitalizes on the flexibility of the brain—as a category to describe how seemingly oppositional tropes, or turns, can occupy the same rhetorical topos, or space, and produce distinct ethos, political identity, and commitment within that space. It considers two dialectical, gendered tropes in nootropic discourse. The tropes are a falsely binary and highly problematic set of subjectivities, a Gothic masculine and an ostensible Gothic feminine. These two tropes exemplify how rhetorics of wellness produce identities whose turnings towards a politics does not map cleanly onto electoral politics or even identity politics in the US and Canada.

Keywords: nootropics, tropology, wellness, gender

*Nootropic*s are a market-defined, non-medical category of supplement that now includes almost any substance that claims to enhance cognition. The term has evolved into a trending buzzword in certain wellness circles. The terminological umbrella covers non-medical supplements (pills, beverages, food products) as well as medically prescribed, off-label, and unregulated drugs such as adderall and microdosed psychedelics when they are used in the context of enhancement. In wellness marketing discourse, the term *nootropic* can refer to pills-in-bottles pharmaceuticals like pervetin, modafinil, and some amphetamines as well as agricultural products like coffee and psilocybin mushrooms. The market space is so broad and changeable that psychiatric researchers in Europe patented a webcrawler in 2020 in order to monitor new cognitive enhancers as they came on the market; in 2020, the group identified a total of 142 "novel psychoactive substances" in 10 materially/chemically distinct categories (Napoletano et al., 2020). The rhetorical space around nootropics, then, is almost unmanageably large.

This article reads two examples of nootropics discourse through the lens of rhetorical tropology to illustrate how seemingly

oppositional tropes, or turns, can occupy the same rhetorical topos, or space, and produce distinct ethos, political identity, and commitment within that space. Vice magazine's coverage of "nootropics," between 2009 and 2020, which focuses on certain stimulants that purportedly maximize mental energy and attention for work is my first object of analysis. The second is a psychedelic mushroom microdosing community called Moms on Mushrooms. My analysis considers two gendered tropes in these representative examples of nootropic discourse. The tropes are a falsely binary and highly problematic set of subjectivities: a Gothic masculine and an ostensible Gothic feminine.

The Gothic framework I use here comes from Jeremy Tirrell, my colleague and coauthor, whose work on the rhetorical Gothic is featured elsewhere in this special issue. My concept of genderedness is informed by Judith Butler (2011), Jack Halberstam (1998), and others invested in deconstructing gender for the sake of a liberatory theory. In discussing Gothic masculinities and Gothic femininities as separate rhetorical turns in a shared rhetorical space, I do not mean to reify a gender binary. Rather, I mean to describe markedly gendered performances of identity in particular spaces—the discursive spaces around pharmacological solutions to problems of the mind in the form of brain limitations—and the resultant production of subjective bodies in that space. These tropes do not remain divided. Because they belong to what Kenny Walker (2020) calls "heterogeneous yet interdependent worlds" (p.225) they turn into each other in multiple, interesting, confusing, and complicated ways. And although these very different communities produce different subjectivities, they value their nootropics for a similar reason: to manage a subjectivity that is productive for the system it serves.

Rhetorical Tropology and Gender

My interest in tropology seeks to enrich the current topological trend in rhetorical studies (see Walsh & Boyle, 2017; Walker, 2020). Where rhetorical topologies focus on mapping discursive spaces, a tropology attends to movement within those spaces. Janet Horne (1993) proposes tropology, via Richard Rorty's anti-foundationalist pragmatism, as a method by which rhetorical analysis can correct rhetorical theory's hyper-focus on argumentation. John Muckelbauer (2016) calls for heliotropism as a paradigmatic image for the contemporary rhetorical imaginary. The tropology, argues Horne, is an alternative to logos-driven epistemology. Horne's proposal allows for rhetoric to see things like "orientation" in place of "stance," and tendencies or directions

rather than overdetermined paths. Such a lens is well-suited to the murky context of health-related consumption, where the literary and cinematic are in conversation with the scientific and medical. Historian F.R. Ankersmit (1994) has criticized tropology as a methodology for history because of an overdependence on the power of metaphor and a resulting history that seems to rely on transcendental rather than imminent workings of cultures, making tropological history an ahistorical ghost-chase. When used for rhetorical analysis, tropology can point to a rhetoric's problematic ahistoricity. Specifically—a consumer identity can be constructed by and for the sake of a market, like the psilocybin mushroom whose very chemistry has been pulled out of its ecological and historical context in order to be commodified by Western psychedelic therapy products.

A tropology as I intend it requires not only a rhetorician's typical attention to figures like metaphor, or "tropes," in writing and speech. Rather, my tropology is a more comprehensive attention to trope as a turning or tendency that produces a subjectivity. In The Psychic Life of Power, Judith Butler (1997) strives for an "account of how the subject comes to be," and finds it impossible to articulate that account without the metaphor for turn—a trope—and finds it ironic, perhaps a bit amazing, that accounting for a turn (a movement to subjectivity) can't be separated from its figuration:

> Does subjection inaugurate tropology in some way, or is the inaugurative work of tropes necessarily invoked when we try to account for the generation of the subject? We will return to this question toward the end of this inquiry when we consider how the explanation of melancholia participates in the mechanism it describes, producing psychic topographies that are clearly tropological. (1997, p.4, emphasis mine)

Following Butler, a tropology, then, or attention to the turning, requires a "suspension of ontological commitments," an assumption that the subject is acting or acted upon to constitute itself and that this work is unfinished. The trope is a movement through space rather than a position in it. Butler is concerned with the power driving that motion in terms of subjection or subjugation; I am similarly concerned, in perhaps finer-grained and more rhetorically oriented ways. Where Butler asks questions like, "how does a body turn into a subjective identity called 'woman?'", I want to use tropology to ask, with attention to the italicized section of the excerpt above: "how do the explanations of nootropic practices, as well as the substances themselves, 'participate in the mechanism[s] [they] describe,' and/or 'produce psychic topographies that are clearly tropological?'"

If we are to take Butler at their word and allow the trope itself to be inseparable from its figuration, then a turning must be a turning-towards. Tropos implies orientation and movement. Answering the question of where or what a turn is towards produces affect, and thus tropology belongs in the realm of affect. At the simplest level, if we consider two nootropic supplements—modafinil and melatonin—they are meant to produce very different affective states—alertness and sleepiness, respectively. Butler's suspension of ontological commitments could also be read as a trip. Maria Cichosz (2014) writes about Obetrol, a predecessor to Adderall, which is commonly understood as a nootropic in the work of David Foster Wallace as a "signpost or directional sign, pointing to what might be possible if [the subject] could become more aware and alive in daily life" (p.59). Cichosz calls the drug trip an "ethical value attunement." If we consider the (personal) trip or drug experience in a larger (social or rhetorical) space, it becomes a space-making practice for turning towards a politics.

Trope 1: Gothic Masculinities

It is fitting that nootropics claim a "founding father" in Corneliu Giurgea. After working for some time on pharmaceuticals to enhance sleep, Giurgea dedicated his career to defining a class of chemical cognitive enhancers—nootropics. In his writings, Giurgea clearly sees the role of the scientist as a maker-of-man, creator of a technological body that is better than nature. The supplement company NooTroo, which sells nootropics in the largely unregulated market online, quotes Giurgea's writings as a part of its branding, and it chooses high-flying prose that compares the scientist to Michaelangelo, cutting away the marble that isn't the sculpture: "Scientific creativity often resembles [Michaelangelo's marble-carving] process… He only removes the excess of misunderstanding [from nature]"(Nootroo, 2021). Giurgea, as characterized by NooTroo, sees the human as a creature not bound by natural processes: "Humanity will not wait millions of years for Mother Nature to hand it a functionally better brain…Humans will directly, openly and consciously take part in evolution" (Nootroo, 2021). Giurgea's human will have a man-made brain, a brain better-than-nature, thanks to the scientific power of maximization. Mind-altering drugs are a part of this evolution-shaping, a material way to affect the turning-towards the maximal.

A hypothetical mind/body maximization regime has long been part of military projects to render the soldier's body into a more dependable and indefatigable killing technology. The most famous of these is pervitin, the methamphetamine that turned young

German boys into supersoldiers for the Third Reich. In his history of methamphetamine use in Nazi Germany, Blitzed, Norman Ohler (2017) describes a Nazi scientific obsession with the purity of the chemical drug and a characterization of Jewish people as "mushrooms" and addicted to morphine—an odd and feminizing attachment of an ethos and cultural character to the physical effects of a mind-altering substance. The masculine, military ideal is an upper, the kind of substance that makes man into machine. The association of the Nazi, the ultimate villain, with methamphetamines has bled into the mythos of contemporary warfare as well. A Vice article addressing rumors that Hamas soldiers used the wakefulness aid Captagon, an inconsistent cocktail of fenethylline and other substances, during the October 7, 2023, attack on Israeli civilians, concludes that "it's an incredibly unlikely claim with little evidence to back it up. While it's possible that some militants were high on uppers at the time of the attack, recent reports that captagon induces a violent mania are unfounded—while claims that Islamic extremists routinely use captagon to go into battle is a rumor that has been discredited before" (Gault, 2023). While near-mythical mania-inducing uppers are common to the way media publicly narrativize and dehumanize enemy others, Andrew Bickford's (2021) book Chemical Heroes describes the US military's ongoing research into cognitive enhancers for its own soldiers. Nicole Vincent, a scholar who studies the social impacts of cognitive enhancement technologies, observes how the military mentality seeps into the mundane: "This is the stark reality of how a particular group of medications have come to be known as 'smart drugs.' Because meritocratic (or, if you prefer, competitive) societies have weaponized our very bodies, brains, and precious hours of our lives" (qtd. in Kolitz, 2019). Instead of smart drugs, perhaps they should be called pharmaceutical weaponry.

The line between maximal and violent is a thin one. Brian Baker (2007) describes Gothic masculinity via Derrida's violent hierarchy as a dyad, with reason battling passion. Baker posits that a Gothic masculine subjectivity predates the historical Gothic, revealing "pre-existing fault lines in the masculine subject" (p.165). Eve Sedgwick (2003) describes violent and homicidal raids on molly houses in London as a moment in which the epistemic establishment of homosexuality becomes a device of power over all of European society connected to gender (which, Sedgwick argues, is all of European society in that moment). Sedgwick sees the articulation of European homophobia in the 18th century as an early move to a Gothic topos; it "delineates…a space, and perhaps a mechanism, of domination, rather than the agency or motivation or political thrust of that domination"(pp. 87-88). Sedgwick goes on to

articulate a literary Gothic "commonsense" that tests edges—the edge of patriarchy by women experimenting with authorship and readership and the edge of "decadence" by having "close, relatively visible links to male homosexualities" (p.92).

Male homosexuality includes a turning-towards the maximal. An extreme but extensive subset of adherents to the contemporary homosocial behavioral regime are devoted to the alchemical maintenance of the masculine body-mind with drugs, supplements, synthetic hormones, cosmetic grooming (sometimes surgery), and diet. The development of such regimes, of course, requires extensive discourse across a multiplicity of media: podcasts, social media spaces, online magazines, and markets. Fashion journalist Liz Flora (2023) aptly describes the topos "Alpha-male 'bromeopathy'" or "bro science." And although the practitioners of bro science may cover a political spectrum, a 21st century "male panic" to echo the 19th century "homosexual panic" attaches the mainstream public discourse emerging from this space firmly to the political right. "Like the more feminine wellness space," writes Flora, "health concerns beyond aesthetic physical fitness are prevalent. But these concerns are generally associated with fears of a decline in perceived masculinity: Wellness treatments promise to raise testosterone and sperm count, which Tucker Carlson's 'End of Men' special ominously warned were in decline." Interestingly, the specific fear of being perceived as homosexual has largely faded from mainstream discourse; it is as though advances in social practices have allowed the vigilant protectors of manhood to subsume gay men as part of their cause (and, importantly, their market) and move on to more important concerns, like worrying about testosterone, or "T," levels. T level vigilance requires a whole new level of behavioral scrutiny: "Paul Saladino, also known as the 'Carnivore MD'…recently posted a video titled, 'Here's how I poop' for his 1.3 million Instagram followers. In the post and the video he urges his followers not to use toilet paper because it's 'filled with hormone disrupting compounds.' So, he says, he avoids toilet paper in order to 'protect' his 'hormonal health'" (Sandlin, 2023). The bromeopathic manifestation of contemporary Gothic masculine paranoia focused on the maximal body/mind is exemplified by the discourse around "alpha-male" targeted supplements like Modafinil and Piracetam, two stimulants often categorized as nootropic supplements. The rhetors in this space are the (actual and aspirant) beasts at the gym, looking for the secret formula to unlock their bodies and their brains. They are the practitioners of "men's wellness," a phenomenon that Eleanor Cummins (2020), writing for Slate, calls a "hypermasculine spin on wellness culture" in which

female-marketed equivalents are re-packaged for the beasting male identity.

Speculation—both intellectual and financial—is another marked feature of this space; speculation lends itself to the turning rather than the stance. Neşe Devenot (2023) attaches the TESCREAL (transhumanism, Extropianism, singularitarianism, cosmism, Rationalism, Effective Altruism, and longtermism) ideology, another articulation of this masculinity trope, to "esoteric aspirations" that are market driven and inequality amplifying rather than transformational or radical in the way that they claim to be. The dominant epistemology is questioning rather than claiming, and everything is a gamble. The companies that sell nootropic supplements overlap in the Silicon Valley venture capital space with Soylent and Viome. Joe Rogan famously acts as an influencer for and "co-founder" of Onnit, which sells nootropic uppers (Alpha Brain) as well as supplements designed to help you relax (New Mood) (Onnit, 2023). Eric Matzner, the founder of Nootroo, a company that still sells personalized supplement regimens and that grew along with other supplement outfits during a venture capital race from 2014–2016, was the center of media attention during that time but has since dropped out of the public eye. Matzner had a personal motto that he sported on a black t-shirt during media appearances: "end aging or die trying." He's the textbook one-man tech startup, a self-proclaimed "biohacker, futurist, nootropics historian, and budding geoengineer" in Silicon Valley (Flora, 2023) ; the tech in question is carbon rather than silicon. According to Vice journalist Liz Flora (2023): "one thing [the most enthusiastic nootropic users] all seem to have in common: they know how to sell supplements."

Rogan, the poster child for contemporary maximized masculinity, is not only famous for his beefy meatspace avatar, but also for his self-avowed stance-less approach to the topics and guests on his podcast. Rogan's commitment to "just asking questions" allows him to say that wearing a mask is "for bitches" (JRE Clips, 2020) and elide moral responsibility for misinforming more than ten million listeners about things like the efficacy and safety of COVID vaccines and ivermectin as a COVID treatment (Funwie, 2022). Rogan uses the just-asking-questions defense to rationalize platforming guests who promote bunk medical science (Andrew Weil, Bret Weinstein), fascist revisionist history (Alex Jones), and trans-exclusionary radical feminism cloaked in

pseudoscience (Abigail Shrier) (Wikipedia, "Joe Rogan's Guests," 2023).

Example: Vice Media's Coverage of "Noots"

There are roughly 34 articles available from Vice Media's online magazine under the heading "nootropics" (Vice search results, 2023). The archive stretches from July 2014 to January of 2023. Vice Media's publications and audience share topoi with Wired, Bitch media, Jezebel, and BoingBoing: technology, futurisms, science fiction, and hyper-contemporary pop culture. In that shared rhetorical space, though,Vice leans markedly masculine. Its voice, its ethos, co-constitutes a certain North American way of being a man. One tie that establishes Vice in a rhetorical turn to the (politically problematic) masculine its founder, Gavin McInnes. McInnes began the magazine in Montreal, and established its tone as irreverent, sarcastic, and a certain flavor of manly: porn-celebrating, libertarian, always joking, disdainful of the politically correct left. It was partly this seemingly intelligent exceptionalism that made Vice into a popular underground magazine and allowed it to become a publicly traded media company. McInnes left Vice Media in 2008-2009 to pursue "ideas" that he famously said would "blossom into fruition like a hundred humid vaginas in the presence of God's boner"(qtd. In Gollner, 2021). One of these ideas was the formation of the far-right terrorist group The Proud Boys, who were instrumental in getting Donald Trump elected. McGinnes left the Proud Boys in 2018 (Flynn, 2020), but he continues to be a voice for popular white supremacy in the US and Canada.

Vice isn't easily written off as a right-wing online rag, though; its entanglements are far more complicated, and its affinities, at the point of this writing, tend to the Left. But the brand of Leftism is of Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron's (1996) "Californian Ideology" kind—it is a techno-utopian, venture-capital-loving Left that gives weird ideas a chance. Vice articles tagged "nootropics" begin to be written in 2014, along with Eric Matzner's rise to fame on the supplement scene, marketing his company Nootroo, and Vice's authorship reflects a politically-driven shift that occurred at the publication in 2015. The shift was towards gender balance in its writing and an incorporation of "feminism," emphasis on the scare quotes, into its brand ethos. At the time, the change raised eyebrows in the Leftist popular media space. A staff writer for Feminist Current at rabble.ca (2015), for example, wrote an article titled "Vice Magazine Discovers Women," with Vice-like cynicism. Part of Feminist Current's distrust was Vice's relationship to sex work and pornography. Another reason was that the ostensible feminist turn was a market-driven choice. "The traditionally dude-centric company…Vice ," they write, "has realized that human women with human lives exist and matter in terms of capital"

(Feminist Current, 2015). This shift in attitude tracks with higher quality, long-form writing and, if popular opinion is to be believed, better journalism on the platform in general.

The first 18 articles on nootropics are pro-nootropic in the sense that they report on what the drugs claim to do and, if they spend any more time at all, speculate about what a future could look like with nootropics as mainstream enhancements. The short articles are basically advertisements—one can imagine that they are Nootroo press releases reproduced on the page. And the speculation serves to produce agreement. One stand-out headline by Victoria Turk in 2015 announces the arrival of Modafinil as "the first real smart drug"; "students, execs, and hacker types have documented taking the drug even when they're sleeping just fine" Turk (2015) writes, "and getting brain enhancing effects as a result." The article cites a meta-analysis in European Neuropsychopharmacology and embellishes with anecdotes from Reddit. A similar article published one month later by Sydney Lupkin (2015) reports on the same study, with more drug-in-use details: the drug is called "moda" by users (elsewhere in Vice, nootropics are referred to as "noots"), and they tout its benefits for studying and focus: "[one user] first tried modafinil pills last academic year after a friend sent them to him and told him they would make him feel like Bradley Cooper in the 2011 movie Limitless … His only complaint is that it sometimes makes it hard for him to go to sleep, an expected side effect of a narcolepsy drug" (Lupkin, 2015). Lupkin's piece also notes that moda user communities are predominantly made of men whose personal and professional lives are marked by high-risk activities.

From 2015 on, some of Vice's coverage of the nootropic community continues in a more critical vein, while other articles continue to focus on how to use the drug to hack cognitive function. The critical articles are often categorized in the "Health" section, and the user-guide articles are categorized in the "tech" section. For example, an article by Spencer Davis (2015) titled "Your Friendly Guide to Nootropics," profiles a YouTube noot guru, Steve Cronin, who documents his experiments with diet and smart drugs to counteract the lasting effects of a Lyme disease infection. The article is filed under "Tech," and frames the nootropic community as what Cronin calls "crowdscience," or a very prolific online community that is making knowledge faster and with more practical implications than the mainstream community is. The retired NFL star Bill Romanowski similarly claims that he designed his own noot cocktail to treat the brain fog that resulted from multiple concussions on the gridiron (Davis, 2015). In the category of "Health," Sebastian Serrano (2015) pens a first-person narrative about his own experimentation with Modafinil called, "Taking the

'Smart Drug' Modafinil Made Me Love Work but Hate People." Serrano's reflection is ultimately a critique of capital markets and the kinds of drugs we are driven to desire by these markets. "In the rat race that is modern life, it's sort of the only drug that makes sense," Serrano writes, "[h]ow awful is that?" Serrano goes so far as to ask whether performance-enhancing drugs at work could cause an unlevel playing field and/or increased expectations for productivity for workers who weren't using them.

The promise of productivity hints at another theme among the Vice stories about nootropics: the get-rich story. In Spencer Davis's (2015) profile of Cronin, the noot guru mentions that the online moda community's motivation is largely to get ahead in "the grind," or to find an edge that will help them push through to success in the post-boom Silicon Valley startup scene. "In terms of being able to make hundreds of thousands of dollars a day because you're on a drug, that's not something I see happening," Cronin tells Davis. "That's probably best left to science fiction and fantasy realms" (qtd. in Davis, 2015). But considering films like the aforementioned Limitless as an aspect of rhetorical context, the promise of wealth in exchange for maximized productivity cannot be left out of this analysis—science fiction is cultural context for the nootropic community's practices. Another Vice article from 2015, "Can the Pills That Claim to Make You Clever Also Make You Rich?" by Dale Eisinger, focuses on the market for the products themselves and the market's drive for (pseudo)scientific ethos. Eisinger's story details a Gonzo-style few days he spends with a nootropic salesman, taking the supplements and feeling great: "the world seems brighter, the air sharper, colors and sounds more distinct." But Eisinger concludes that neither selling the supplements themselves nor using them to "get ahead" will really substantially benefit the little guy trying to break into the big time. It's a different story for investors with capital, however, especially if they are media personalities with an audience to whom they can sell. Joe Rogan invested in and then promoted the nootropic supplement company Onnit, which was started with an $80,000 loan and then sold to Unilever in 2021 for over $100,000,000 (Hefferman, 2022).

Trope 2: Gothic Femininities

If I required this gendered analysis to be cleanly symmetrical, which I do not, I might begin the story of a feminist or feminine discourse around nootropics with the famous example of Miltown, the brand name for Meprobamate, or "mother's little helper," an addictive predecessor to Valium from the 1950s and, according to historian Jonathan Metzl, "America's first psychotropic wonder

drug" (Metzl, 2003, p.229). Metzl's analysis links the feminized practice of Miltown dosing with the same kind of gender "crisis" that Sedgwick attaches to the production of Gothic masculine subjectivity, with one key twist: the crisis in women was a problem for men, because they lost their wives' home-making labor because of it (p. 230).

The most common Gothic mother is an absent one. Mothers in the literary Gothic are usually already dead, and if they aren't dead they are killed, institutionalized, or locked in an attic. Although one way to read this trope is that it stems from the basic fear of being without the nurturing care and comfort of a mother figure, Ruth Bienstock Anolik (2003) argues that Gothic "representations of marriage as dangerous and confining to the wife, and of motherhood as resulting in the disappearance of the mother, work to literalize and thereby to reveal the horror implicit in two legal principles that governed the lives of women in England through the middle of the nineteenth century: coverture and primogeniture" (p. 62). So rather than the Gothic being only a simple representation of the disappearance of mother (the nightmare of children and heterosexual men), it is also a referential device that points out the legal and societal erasure of women's identity perpetrated by 19th Century marriage and motherhood (the nightmare of the woman).

The Gothic erasure of womanly identity is familiar in a contemporary, late-capitalist context. Legal erasure of womanhood is concentrated more now on policing womanhood's boundaries—denying trans identity, ignoring women beyond reproductive capacity, and the like; in these cases, Gothic femininity manifests in woman-as-monster. The gender-conforming woman as mother and wife continues to face immurement, but of a different kind: she is allowed to exist as a (legal, financial, desiring, power-holding) human, but that existence must coexist with her familial identities without disrupting them. Moreover, it is the task of the legitimately human post-feminist woman to take care of the body that mediates these identities herself. And the trope is no secret—it is painfully recognizable to the women who occupy the subject position. Journalist Katherine Rowland (2023) reports on the immured-in-wellness feminine identity in an article titled "We're Sedating Women with Consumerist Self-Care" in The Guardian. Rowland takes her title from a statement by wellness journalist Rina Raphael. Raphael's choice of verb, "sedated," evokes the immurement of the locked-away, absent Gothic mother. This immured Gothic mother is the "wine a little" woman who needs a break, but for whom the break-taking is now a job. She is a trope of the isolated, self-sufficient subject of wellness.

The grotesque or horrific claustrophobia caused by the combination of isolation and responsibility is a contemporary trope of the Gothic feminine that Benjamin Brabon and Stéphanie Genz (2007) would categorize as a postfeminist Gothic. "[T]he term 'postfeminism' is [sometimes] used to suggest that the project of feminism has ended," they write, "either because it has been completed or because it has failed and is no longer valid" (p.3) The "project of feminism," we should remind ourselves, is an embodied and collective one; it requires women to radically risk occupying time and space, to persist in identification, emphatically not to disappear. Although postfeminism can serve as an historical heuristic to describe a thread of feminist history, there are some who subscribe to it more literally, as a politics. "The most prominent advocates of [postfeminism]," Brabon and Genz (2007) maintain, "support an individualistic and liberal agenda that relies on a mantra of choice and looks upon feminism as a 'birthright' that no longer needs to be enforced politically" (pp. 3-4). This individualistic, liberal subject entirely responsible for themselves. Collective investment is either not possible at all or only possible at an anodyne distance that causes no trouble for productivity. In the same volume, Fred Botting (2007) reads a postfeminist Gothic in the "flight of the heroine" and/or the feminized monster (p. 170). The woman as heroine subject is, in one guise, the mommy blog reader, podcast listener, or microdoser, escaping the stress of contemporary life without abandoning her productive labour in the household. The trope of woman as objectified monster is so many more things: the menstruating werewolf; the disease-bearing whore; the sleepless perimenopausal zombie; the self-made trans woman and her laboratory of hormones; the pimply, lumpy teenaged girl; the hairy, angry, goblin queer; the malfunctioning cyborg IUD-bearing Frankenstein woman; the confusing, larger-than-life, makeup-masked queen; the heart-eating non-monogamous woman; and the post-menopausal crone—just to name a few.

Example: Moms on Mushrooms

Moms on Mushrooms (M.O.M.) is a Colorado company founded by Tracey Tee, a Denver mother. Tee has also been a comedian on "The Pump-and-Dump Show" and co-producer of a Warner Brothers podcast called "Band of Mothers" with her friend Shayna Ferm since 2012. The pair published a book, Parentally Incorrect: True Tales by Real Moms About the F**ked-Up Things Their Kids Have Done, in 2018. Tee's mini media franchise sits squarely in the Goop-adjacent mommy-blog space, with all the attendant

uneasiness of self-commodification, privilege and platforming, and representation politics that the space entails (Van Cleef, 2015). Tee and Ferm's ilk—folks who vary widely on the political spectrum, electorally speaking—capitalize on online community; the mommy blogosphere promises connection without the pesky constraints of time and space. One Medium reviewer (and mommy blogosphere member), Ilyssa Panitz (2021), "The Divorce Blogger," characterizes Tee and Ferm's audience community this way: "Joining this female-only alliance is as simple as sitting at a computer or putting on a set of earphones that attach to your smartphone to drown out the world around you." Drowning out the world implies an exit—a desire to leave, a desire that tropes neatly into the absent Gothic mother. A mother online is a mother simultaneously here and elsewhere. Instead of taking up space and time for a distinct identity, the postfeminist "community" of the blog or podcast requires no test or ritual for affiliation and helps the busy contemporary woman mark "community"—a requirement of postfeminist womanhood, if feminism is finished with its work—off of her self-care checklist without leaving her home.

Tee's newer venture, M.O.M., extends this claim to convenient exit in the form of the psilocybin microdose to the spiritual searcher. M.O.M. is a website that sells curated content as an online school or camp; it offers a set of weekly, synchronously delivered classes (as well as asynchronously available "access" to materials and "instant downloads" for customers who want to skip the classes and learn by themselves) led by teachers over the course of a season—roughly the time period covered by a University term—to train people how to microdose psychedelic mushrooms. Microdosing is a new, trendy practice that involves taking small amounts of psilocybin or other psychotropic drugs on an intentional and interval-based schedule in order to improve quality of life. Microdosing enthusiasts maintain that the practice can improve cognition, enhance creativity, elevate mood, and even fight depression. Some of these claims seem to piggyback on promising clinical findings that macrodoses of psylocibin (i.e., full-on psychedelic trips) may prove to be effective therapy for PTSD and depression, among other things (Polito & Stevenson, 2019). Since an uptick in research interest in microdosing around 2019, though, little empirical evidence of microdosing's benefits has been produced. At the time of this writing, one prevailing hypothesis is that the expectation of benefits from microdosing are producing the perceived effects in groups being studied (Bershad,2023). Influencers like Tracey Tee are capitalizing on that same expectation. The introductory course advertised on the site costs

$1,100 for online course materials and seven class meetings across three months (“Course.1 - A Microdosing Course for Moms.”, 2023).

These professionally psychedelic mothers grow identities by turning-towards the spiritual and/or the psychological. As access to experts is the main product being sold, the site carefully constructs the ethos of its facilitators with a combination of humility, spirituality, and institutionally credentialed expertise. The two facilitators who are not Tee take very different approaches to ethos. The first, Anastasia Lopes, connects expertise with personal experience and spiritual language:

> I weave a sacred facilitator approach to my M.O.M. circles, connecting you back to yourself through prayer, herbology, grounding, nature and, of course, plant medicine. My own journey through reproductive health issues, provides me with a unique and very deep level of compassion for mothers and allows me to hold space for health, birth and womb trauma while also offering practical tips for you—a likely overwhelmed and busy mom—to simply feel better in your body. (“Course.1 - A Microdosing Course for Moms”, 2023)

The other facilitator, Kristin Taylor, establishes herself firmly in an institutional ethos by evoking her many scholarly and clinical credentials, including her status as a certified counselor: “[m]y Microdosing practice is enhanced by my BS in Health Ed; Therapeutic Certification through Salt City Psychedelic Therapy & Research; Mycology Psychology Holonic Practitioner Certification as well as my postgraduate certificate in Applied Positive Psychology from the University of Utah”(“Course.1 - A Microdosing Course for Moms”, 2023). These two constructions of ethos might be flagged as conflicting in a different kind of space, but the M.O.M. platform, like Goop, Viome, and the other companies in this speculative space, frames itself as a hybrid that is radically different from more traditional institutions. Director Tracey Tee’s profile includes a kind of editor’s letter/manifesto to establish her own ethos and intention. She is “not a guru, influencer, life coach, or healer,” she writes. Rather, she “considers [her]self to be a lifelong student of spirituality, plant medicine, and health” (“Moms on Mushrooms - Teaching Moms About Microdosing Mushrooms”, 2023). This claim is in the Wasson legacy—the self-made “ethnomycologist” with a platform to amplify her power. She frames her power in the Judeo-Christian value of service, and evokes God multiple times in her text. “I come to you,” Tee writes,

“as a humble teacher + guide who finds immense joy in being of service to moms” (“Moms on Mushrooms - Teaching Moms About Microdosing Mushrooms”, 2023). She goes on about how she wants to reconnect mothers with their bodies and their passions.

Then things get weird. Tee starts talking about the mushrooms themselves, and uses a fungal metaphor to create the image of a cosmic network that is speaking to her. “The mycelial network has really gotten into my heart,” she writes, “telling me to reach out to moms”(“About Tracey Tee & Moms on Mushrooms”, 2023). A Gothic lens, of course, tints this image dark and sees Tracey overgrown by fungus, merging into a wall like a victim of The Upside Down in Stranger Things or one of The Infected in The Last of Us. She goes on to call the mushrooms’ voice the Source, and connects it to what she calls a new form of feminine divinity:

> With all the respect I can give, I'm accepting its guidance to use its healing powers as the basis of this new work with mothers. The old ways, paradigms, and ideas that have become the norm in our society are breaking apart and there's a growing presence of the Divine Feminine force that needs us to build up a better and more lasting way of living. (“Course.1 - A Microdosing Course for Moms”, 2023)

Tee’s “old ways” are not, one would assume, some ancient mystical practice, but rather the mundane practices of post-industrial, post-colonial modernity. Tee’s text is not terribly clear. Whatever the old ways are, Tee claims that they are giving way to a New Earth:

> I see moms at the forefront of creating this developing New Earth. Moms taking control of their own destiny and their right to be happy. Moms who understand there's something beyond us in the cosmos. Those who value dialogue, openness, bravery, and amour, and are eager to make it part of their daily lives. Moms who are ready to bring up their kids in a new way, far away from damaging patriarchal, business, and religious principles. (“Course.1 - A Microdosing Course for Moms”, 2023)

The mushrooms, it would seem, are telling Tee to escape the patriarchy. Tee is listening to them, and she will teach you how to listen, too, for just $1,100.

Tee’s language of escape to another place—”a new way, far away”—is crucially interesting to a rhetorical analysis attuned to

space. The M.O.M. platform offers escape in two ways, both of which do not require the subscriber to move an inch in physical space. First, microdosing itself is offered as an escape. Ironically, the "trip," a metaphor of travel, is, for M.O.M. a means by which to be more present as a mother. So the microdosing trip is a way to travel without leaving, to escape to be present—a contradictory metaphysics for mothers on New Earth. Secondly, the online course is another escape without escaping; one can attend a course online without leaving the house. The M.O.M. community, like all online communities, is not a physically co-present one. She is the Gothic mother locked in the attic; her madness is a wellness practice.

There is another marked absence in the language of the M.O.M. platform—an absence of explicit politics, a turning-away from activism. M.O.M. is visually and rhetorically a White "feminist" space, with no mention of the pre-colonial provenance of the mushrooms that are key to its courses. The declaration of motherly power and the feminine divine is not a stance that needs to be argued in the platform's cultural context. Its orientation to divinity disavows any specific religiosity. The evocation of a New Earth is too far beyond reality to have political purchase. The use of psilocybin mushrooms and other psychedelics like peyote and ayahuasca by wellness facilitators in the late-capitalist North American post-colonial context is an extractive practice, as are many of the practices that wellness culture captures, commodifies, and turns to profit (Roisin, 2024). To begin to undo or ameliorate the colonial violence done by uncritical, so-called-feminist fumbling with magic mushrooms, for example, the mushrooms themselves would need to be removed from the market and somehow returned to the hands of indigenous elders and practitioners for transformative purposes (Martin, 2020; Devenot, Conner, and Doyle, 2022; Williams et al., 2022). The site's focus on personal transformation for individual microdosing mothers elides a requirement for any kind of collective transformation. There is nothing here to scare off subscribers or investors. A turning-away from politics makes the platform perfectly marketable to any kind of voter, linkable to any mass media vehicle, without compromising the stances there. M.O.M. is the perfect media object wife and mother; it is a trope that can exist in other topos. It's a turning that doesn't take up space.

Conclusion

The gendered tropes I've described here don't remain distinct. According to John Semley (2020) at The Guardian, Kevin O'Leary, a Canadian investor who appeared on ABC's Shark Tank, has

invested millions in a neuro-pharmaceutical company developing psychedelic drugs to treat addiction. “Like [Gwyneth] Paltrow,” Semley writes, “who waxes on the potential of psychedelics in a process she calls the ‘optimization of self,’ O’Leary—an investor who has spoken to the role Ayn Rand’s Atlas Shrugged played in shaping his business acumen—doesn’t exactly seem like an avatar of free love, mind-expansion, and other platitudes of the psychedelic sixties.” Because the subjectivities they produce enact a turning-away from politics or activism, nootopics discourses (and other wellness discourses) are prone to enter and become entangled in very different spaces than the ones they first appeared in.

Although the founding moms of M.O.M. may identify as left-leaning, their pointedly apolitical platform copy and investment-inviting platform design turns them gently and decidedly away from any material commitment to the ethos they commodify. Neoliberal capture is one of the more innocuous implications of these tropes, though; exceptionalism often meets, among other things, neoconservative hyper-nationalism, for example. During the pandemic, journalists documented several cases of QAnon conspiracy theories and disinformation being spread in wellness circles, as well as cases of organized resistance to the same (Guerin, 2023). Historian Kathleen Belew (2022) calls this tendency the “crunchy-to-alt-right pipeline.” Anthropologist Danielle Carr (2020) documents the same tendency and attributes it to a metaphysics of liberalism that identifies a cousin to the wellness regime’s isolated subject in cognitive therapy—a kind of behaviorism-to-totalitarianism pipeline.

By critiquing the structures and markets that put the wellness-tasked subject in their exceptionalist, self-made, and sometimes ignorant position, I do not mean to blame or shame that subject. I am, in fact, empathetic to the brain-fog sufferer who fashions a nootropic cocktail to function, the worker who seeks uppers to work better and faster, and the mother who wants to feel more connected to herself, her children, and a force she might describe as the divine. I do mean to point out a set of conditions that produces the brain fog, the drive to produce, and the isolation in the first place. I don’t even entirely reject the idea that mind-altering drugs may, in the right circumstances, be tools for a turn away from that alienation.

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