Work and the Writing Life: Shifts in the Relationship Between ‘Work’ and ‘The Work’ in Twenty-First-Century Literary-Advice Memoirs

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Motto: In capitalism, where labor manifests as a distinct social category, an activity distinguished from other activities (especially art) and as one of the defining features of human existence, the means and methods of labor cannot help determining the shape and character of art. (Bernes 2017, p. 34)

Recent examples of literary advice related to the writing life reevaluate the relationship between ‘work’ in terms of labor performed for a wage or salary, domestic chores, and family responsibilities, and ‘the Work’ of a creative pursuit performed for reasons beyond material necessity.¹ The theme of how to manage and balance the demands of ‘work’ with the desire to pursue ‘the Work’ has long been a staple within the literary advice genre. Dorothea Brande’s *Becoming a Writer* (1934)

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and *Wake up and Live!* (1936), for instance, position writing and other creative pursuits as acts of living that stand in opposition to the necessity of making a living. More recently, however, a number of publications on ‘the writing life’ have begun to complicate this opposition, challenging the dichotomy of work vs. writing life and re-conceptualizing the literary advice genre therewith. Such a shift can be traced through readings of Annie Dillard’s 1989 classic *The Writing Life*, Deborah Levy’s *Things I Don’t Want to Know* (2013) and *The Cost of Living* (2018), and Alexander Chee’s *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel* (2018). While Dillard reinforces stereotypical boundaries between ‘work’ and ‘the Work,’ Levy and Chee jumble these fields. They portray the dissolution of the divide between work, personal, and writing lives, thereby also disrupting generic patterns in issuing literary advice. The blurring of fields of activity goes hand-in-hand with a blending of literary advice with memoir.

I contend that these developments take shape in relation to dominant notions of the ideal, white-collar worker in the Anglo-American contexts of the writers at hand. Literary advice on the relationship between ‘work’ and ‘the Work’ and the genre itself thus reflect not merely literary trends but also more broadly the means and conditions of labor under capitalism for a specific milieu, which in the case of my examples is the white-collar ‘creative class’ (see Florida [2002] 2012). Jasper Bernes, quoted in the epigraph to this article, presents a similar argument in *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization* (2017), his study of the relationship between US-American poetic expression and postindustrial capitalism since the 1970s. Following Bernes’s premise that “the means and methods of labor cannot help determining the shape and character of art,” I suggest that Levy and Chee’s experiments with literary advice are influenced by the demands placed upon laborers within the white-collar, postindustrial economy, and the resulting effects that these demands have had on ideas about the writing life. While management discourses since the 1970s champion workers who function like writers and artists (flexibly, creatively, emotionally), Levy and Chee portray work as something not necessarily standing in opposition to their writerly modes of being. They register both the liberating and exploitative potentials of the convergence.

Before turning to Levy and Chee’s texts, which I refer to as literary-advice memoirs,² it is worth first elaborating various accounts of how artistic discourses influenced those of management and labor and vice

versa in the latter half of the twentieth century. I will then turn to the genre of literary advice, positioning the 1930s-era advice literature of Dorothea Brande, Annie Dillard's 1989 *The Writing Life*, and lastly the works of Levy and Chee in relation to these historical accounts, arguing that the contemporary literary-advice memoir is a genre particularly poised for negotiating the tensions and dissolutions between 'work' and 'the Work,' or more widely, those of labor and art, characteristic of its time.

THE ABSORPTION NARRATIVE: LABOR TRANSFORMED BY ARTISTIC CRITIQUE AND VICE VERSA

A wealth of critical scholarship across humanities disciplines exists on the ways in which today's white-collar creative class is expected to function flexibly, creatively, and emotionally. In *Literature and the Creative Economy* (2014), Sarah Brouillette demonstrates how widely opinions on such developments differ by contrasting the work of urban-studies scholar Richard Florida, who wholeheartedly celebrates "the rise of the creative class" ([2002] 2012), with that of theorists such as Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno, and others associated with the post-Marxist autonomist movement, who position the same historical developments as producing new forms of worker exploitation and diminishing the autonomy of art.³ Despite clashing opinions about the effects of management discourses and demands placed on creative workers, all are more or less in agreement about the development of this situation, the historical narrative of which is famously chronicled by sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* ([1999] 2005). Boltanski and Chiapello establish a link between artistic critiques and political protests of the 1960s and 1970s with themes that appear in neo-management literature in response, namely identifying qualities such as:

autonomy, spontaneity, rhizomorphous capacity, multitasking (in contrast to the narrow specialization and division of labour), conviviality, openness to others and novelty, availability, creativity, visionary intuition, sensitivity to differences, listening to lived experience and receptiveness to a whole range of experiences, being attracted to informality and the search for interpersonal contacts. (Boltanski and Chiapello [1999] 2005, p. 97)

Boltanski and Chiapello find that “these themes,” which were promoted by the political and artistic left in the 1960s and 1970s in their critiques of capitalism, were appropriated by corporate management discourses in an effort to boost worker morale. In other words, they claim that these themes were absorbed by the very “forces whose destruction they were intended to hasten” (ibid.). Like the autonomists, Boltanski and Chiapello read this absorption largely in a negative light, while Florida celebrates the integration of a ubiquitous brand of creativity into the lives of what he considers an expansive and ever-expanding class of workers.

According to this narrative, as the ideal white-collar worker is increasingly encouraged to adopt the dispositions and practices stereotypically associated with artists, the social role of the artist loses distinction. It is this aspect of Boltanski and Chiapello’s account that Bernes highlights in his discussion of poetic expression in relation to labor. He notes how *avant garde* artistic movements ranging from “Fluxus and Happenings to the Situationist International,” despite fundamental differences among them, all strove for a “total negation of labor by art, a revolutionary conquest of the workday by a generalized aesthetic activity no longer confined to the limited arena claimed by art” (Bernes 2016, p. 763). Once management discourses cultivated their own versions of “a generalized aesthetic activity” in the workplace, the critical potential of the artist was challenged—“[t]he language of art could provide a challenge to the workplace only because the workplace was defined as exclusive of art” (Bernes 2017, p. 35). Bernes suggests that poetic experiments of the post-World War II-era “pick up on a mood, a structure of feeling, about the alienation of modern work and give such a mood a set of themes and ideas from which the wave of resistance at the decade’s end borrows” (ibid., p. 10). Once management developed a response to this resistance, poets began experimenting from a new position in which they consciously displayed their own absorption within capitalism’s cultural logic. For example, Bernes discusses the Flarf poetry movement initiated in 2001, which in the words of Flarf poet Drew Gardner was about “fucking around with Google on the man’s dime” (cited in Bernes 2017, p. 157). Flarf poems were often constructed according to simple protocols: “[Y]ou search Google for 2 disparate terms, like ‘anarchy + tuna melt’ [and] using only the quotes captured by Google [...] you stitch words, phrases, clauses, sentences together to create poems” (Flarf poet Mike Magee cited in ibid.). Flarf is thus produced in the office, through

the use of office equipment, and during working hours. The construction of a poem involves following a set of cut-and-paste rules, and thus becomes a purely mechanical operation (apart from the creative act of inserting two words into the Google search box). In some ways, the movement is rebellious in its mission to create poetry during work and with a re-appropriation of (digital) work tools. Yet this entails foregoing the prospect of carving out space and time for writing and simply integrating poetry production into the scheme of the workday. Whether such a move is one of resignation and necessity or liberation is a question with which Flarf poets ambivalently play.

The example of Flarf discussed by Bernes emphasizes the notion of the poet operating from within the world of work. Other scholars have highlighted how the world of art is increasingly portrayed as one characterized by constant work, wherein even artists operating outside of conventional office spaces must embody the ideals of flexible, creative, and emotional investment in both ‘work’ and ‘the Work.’ Bojana Kunst, in *Artist at Work: Proximity of Art and Capitalism* (2015), offers an illustrative example in her discussion of the introduction to a catalog of German artist Ina Wudtke’s work by philosopher Dieter Lesage (Kunst 2015, p. 134). Instead of describing Wudtke’s art, Lesage chronicles Wudtke’s daily activities, “which move between organization, production, dissemination, networking, the presentation of the artwork and the artist herself, in a fast repetitive rhythm” (ibid.). Far from merely concentrating on the production of art itself, Wudtke engages in a constant cycle of self-promotion, marketing activities, party planning, DJ gigs, etc., all of which feed into the images and themes of her art. In doing so, Kunst finds this *modus operandi*:

directly indicates the profound changes in the work of the contemporary artist that have been taking place over the last few decades. [...] [Lesage] shows that the open, interdisciplinary, unstable and flexible character of contemporary artistic work is not only an aesthetic quality but one deeply connected to the ways [in which] the works are produced. (ibid., p. 135)

Like the example of Flarf, the means and conditions under which Wudtke’s art is produced are inscribed into the art itself. The demands imposed upon the artist-as-flexible-worker inevitably translate into the aesthetic quality of ‘the Work’ itself. Kunst suggests that this dynamic affects creative workers beyond the world of art, including her own

academic work. In the introduction to *Artist at Work*, she writes that the book

contains a series of reworked essays I'd already published elsewhere. I wanted to retain the diffusion and variety of texts, and not deny conditions in which this theoretical work was created: as a fruit of the very conditions of production and methods of work that I critically reflect on. (ibid., p. 4)

The conditions of academic labor under which Kunst writes are themselves inscribed into the structure and theoretical argumentation of her book. Kunst leaves a degree of what she describes as "diffusion and variety" among the book's chapters to highlight this fact. In this, as well as in the examples of Flarf and the work of Wudtke, the blurring of boundaries between the spaces, practices, and products of 'work' and 'the Work' are positioned as consequences of the historical influence of artistic critique on the styles and management of labor, which in turn have impinged upon the autonomy of art. Work and art are not conceived of as distinct modes of activity but rather converge through the imperatives to perform and produce flexibly, creatively, and emotionally in both making a living and engaging in creative pursuits.

This dynamic, a purported consequence of labor's transformation through artistic critique and vice versa, is also put on display in contemporary instances of literary advice, which prove to be particularly stark examples of what scholars such as Boltanski and Chiapello, Florida, the autonomists, Bernes and Kunst have described theoretically and in relation to poetry and art. In the works of Levy and Chee, literary advice is blended with memoir. They are not simply guidebooks for or depictions of 'the writing life'; instead, they embed such conventional themes within accounts of the existential, emotional, familial, economic, and political conditions under which the writing life is pursued. The composition of such life-writing memoirs is characterized by "diffusion and variety," to borrow Kunst's words for describing her academic book. They depict the spaces and moments that surround the production of works of fiction, turning such depictions of process into creative projects themselves. These two ways of 'doing work' then converge on various levels and in ways that challenge established literary-advice genre conventions of the twentieth century.

VISIONS OF AUTONOMOUS PRODUCTION: TWENTIETH-CENTURY MODELS OF LITERARY ADVICE

Literary advice of the twentieth century often upholds a notion of the writing life as one of autonomous expression freed from the activities and constraints of making a living. From Dorothea Brande's books published in the 1930s, to Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life* of the late 1980s, the life of a writer is described as offset from the world of work and everyday life. Such accounts by no means romanticize the writing life. On the contrary, Dillard's work in particular is very much about exposing the creative frustrations and social isolation writers often face: "It should surprise no one that the life of the writer – such as it is – is colorless to the point of sensory deprivation. Many writers do little else but sit in rooms recalling the real world" (Dillard [1989] 2013, p. 44). In this depiction of "colorless" life, a clear separation between the writer and "the real world" is forged that implies an autonomous form of production, a unique form of labor devoted to 'the Work.'

Dorothea Brande, in publishing *Becoming a Writer* (1934), played a pioneering role in establishing this mode of literary advice by turning away from technical advice and focusing rather on popular-psychological advice related to the emotional hurdles a writer faces. Brande places emphasis on that which is "*anterior* to any problems about story structure or plot building, and that unless the writer can be helped past it there is very likely to be no need for technical instruction at all" (Brande [1934] 1981, p. 29).

Such "anterior" issues are largely psychological in nature, and *Becoming a Writer* addresses the ambivalences that aspiring writers grapple with in "writing at all," offering advice on how to overcome fears of failure and free the creative mind. For Brande, becoming a writer involves balancing the practical and creative sides of oneself: "*it is possible to train both sides of the character to work in harmony, and the first step in that education is to consider that you must teach yourself not as though you were one person, but two,*" both a technical craftsmen and an inspired artist (Brande [1934] 1981, p. 44). That the writer must live as these two selves reinforce the notion that there is a distinction between the worlds of everyday life and work, on the one hand, and the world of artistic creation, on the other hand.

In its largely therapeutic, pop-psychological tenor, Brande's work participated in the rise of the self-help book industry of its time, which

readily borrowed insights from psychoanalysis. *Wake Up and Live!* (1936) repeats many of the points of advice she develops for writers but generalizes them for a broader audience. *Wake Up and Live!* directly addresses the tensions between ‘living’ and ‘making a living’ which, according to Brande, apply not merely to ambivalent writers and artists but essentially to anyone who is not following their passion:

[The] necessity to fall upon the first work we can find is alone enough to explain why so few of us ever manage to bring our plans to fruition. Often, at first, we have a firm intention of not losing sight of our real goal, in spite of the fact that we must make a living at uncongenial work. [...] But the nine-to-five work is tiring and exacting; it takes super-human strength of character to go on working alone when the rest of the world is at play, and when we have never had any evidence that we should be successful if we continued, anyway. And so without realizing it we are swept into the current of the Will to Fail. (Brande [1936] 2012, p. 20)

Brande addresses the willpower it takes to pursue a passion in one’s free time, when the rest of the world “is at play” and the “nine-to-five” grind leaves little energy in reserve. Her key to resist getting swept into such a cycle is to “[a]ct as if it were impossible to fail,” pushing away ambivalences and fears that prevent one from beginning at all (ibid., p. 49). Like in her writing advice, Brande is not interested in advising readers on technicalities of ‘the Work’ but rather on emotional hurdles and behavioral strategies for building motivation to begin ‘living’ as opposed to simply making a living.

Brande’s work on writing/living participates in a change not only in the self-help industry, but also in the regulation of emotions under capitalism. In *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (2015), Eva Illouz discusses how self-help gurus and popular psychologists of the 1930s began framing self-actualization as vital to people’s health (see Illouz [2007] 2015, pp. 43–44). Such discourses also penetrated management theory from the 1930s to the 1970s, which, according to Illouz, “converged around one leading cultural model: that of ‘communication,’” which was emphasized to ensure the alignment of emotional investments among workers (ibid., p. 18). Thus, just as Brande turned away from content focused on writing technique and toward the emotions of aspiring writers, so too did popular psychologists and management theorists begin to focus on the regulation of worker emotions. Such

developments were certainly forerunners to the narrative of convergence related to artistic critique and management discourses since the 1970s, as discussed in the previous section. At this stage, however, work was still readily framed as an activity distinct from art. The writer, in Brande's terms, carves out space and time for a second self, with an autonomous field for creative production.

Such a conception of the writer as someone who sequesters time and space away from the world of work is maintained decades later in Dillard's *The Writing Life* (1989). Here Dillard describes her writing process, not from a technical but rather from an emotional and atmospheric standpoint. She depicts the remote cabins, library rooms, and beach houses she has occupied over the years while devoting her full energies to writing. For instance, she recounts a period spent in Virginia writing *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, for which she won a Pulitzer Prize, as an "idyll":

I slept until noon, as did my husband, who was also writing. I wrote once in the afternoon, and once again after our early dinner and walk. During those months, I subsisted on that dinner, coffee, Coke, chocolate milk, and Vantage cigarettes. I worked till midnight, one, or two. (Dillard [1989] 2013, p. 11)

She does not reveal how she and her husband have the means to focus solely on writing, but they are clearly in positions to do so, unencumbered by care-giving responsibilities or the necessity to make a living and adopting a daily routine tailored exclusively to furthering 'the Work.' As Dillard elaborates:

Putting a book together is interesting and exhilarating. It is sufficiently difficult and complex that it engages all your intelligence. It is life at its most free. Your freedom as a writer is not freedom of expression in the sense of wild blurting; you may not let rip. It is life at its most free, if you are fortunate enough to be able to try it, because you select your materials, invent your task, and pace yourself. (ibid.)

The freedom Dillard describes is that of unalienated work: the production of something determined solely by its maker, who sees herself reflected in the outcomes of her efforts. The freedom and the sense of fulfillment this brings, as Dillard indicates, is reserved for the "fortunate" who are able to "engage all [their] intelligence" to a single creative task. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, a work of nonfiction in which Dillard mixes memoir

with observations about nature and religion, is largely inspired by Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854). Thoreau famously describes his year living in a small cabin at Walden Pond in an effort to seek an unalienated mode of existence. In *The Writing Life*, Dillard reveals that not just the themes of her writing projects but also the conditions under which she works mirror the tenets of *Walden*. The writerly life is conceived of as requiring a degree of physical and social isolation through which autonomous expression—"life at its most free"—can emerge.

While Brande's writing advice is framed as motivational self-help directed at aspiring writers, Dillard's *The Writing Life* is a reflective account of what it means to work as a writer, more of a meditation than a handbook. In both cases, however, the work of writing is sequestered to autonomous space and time. Brande's readers are encouraged to cultivate second selves through a commitment to regular writing sessions protected from the bustle of the everyday 'rat race' and the necessity of making a living. Dillard, rather, describes a privileged situation: the life of a writer who has the good fortune to devote her full energy to creative projects. These conceptions of the writing life and its cultivation are premised upon the idea of autonomous expression that is spatially and temporally sequestered from work performed out of necessity. Conditions of labor do not (or should not) impress upon 'the Work.' In the recently published literary-advice memoirs of Deborah Levy and Alexander Chee, however, the boundaries between living and making a living are blurred, recasting ideas of the writing life.

This shift likely reflects a general blurring of cultural boundaries between the two categories that took hold most pervasively near the end of the twentieth century. Self-help publications and therapeutic discourses pertaining to inspired, creative work, for instance, did not fully penetrate corporate cultures until the end of the twentieth century. As Illouz reports in *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* therapeutic discourses in the US "emerged in the relatively short period from World War I to World War II" but first "became both solidified and widely available after the 1960s," particularly within the management philosophies and official languages of "the American corporation" (Illouz 2008, p. 15). Micki McGee states in *Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life* (2005) that it was not until the 1990s that "the idea of the artist as an exemplar for the postindustrial worker" was thematized most explicitly in widely read self-help books such as Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way at Work* (1998) and Laurence G. Boldt's *Zen*

and the Art of Making a Living (1992) (McGee 2005, p. 128). Levy and Chee's memoirs were thus published at a time when the white-collar worker-as-artist (and the inverse) had become a mainstream, established notion in the fields of self-help and, most generally, within corporate life. This could explain why a notion of artistic life separated from the demands of making a living begins to disappear in writing-advice memoirs of the new millennium.

CAUGHT BETWEEN 'WORK' AND 'THE WORK': LITERARY-ADVICE MEMOIRS OF LATE CAPITALISM

In their accounts of writing life in the twenty-first century, Deborah Levy and Alexander Chee reflect upon their individual positions of vulnerability, not simply as creative workers of late capitalism but also in terms of gender, sexuality, and race. Deborah Levy's *Things I Don't Want to Know* ([2013] 2014), subtitled *A Response to George Orwell's 1946 Essay 'Why I Write,'* and *The Cost of Living* (2018) are decidedly feminist accounts. These literary-advice memoirs respectively describe a trip taken to Majorca to write in a hilltop hotel and the reorganization of Levy's life in London as a mother and writer after divorce. Both mix reflections on the writing life with personal anecdotes and political convictions. Levy structures *Things I Don't Want to Know* according to the four categories that George Orwell cited as his reasons for writing: "political purpose," "historical impulse," "sheer egoism," and "aesthetic impulse" ([1946] 2019, n.p.). Under these rubrics she describes, among other things, the incarceration of her father in apartheid South Africa, which greatly impacted her awareness of injustice, and her adolescence in England following her parent's divorce, during which she embraced a bohemian fashion sense and became passionate about the idea of becoming a writer. These personal anecdotes are framed as memories recalled in conversation while in Majorca. She has brought notes with her and mentions her unpublished novel, *Swimming Home*, the work she has presumably come to work on (Levy [2013] 2014, p. 106, the novel was published in 2011). Her account of 'why I write' follows the general spirit of Orwell but with feminist interventions along the way. For instance, she speculates that:

Perhaps when Orwell described sheer egoism as a necessary quality for a writer, he was not thinking about the sheer egoism of a female writer. Even the most arrogant female writer has to work overtime to build an ego that

is robust enough to pass her through January, let alone December. (ibid., p. 17)

By discussing her position as a specifically female writer, Levy enters a lineage of feminist writers such as Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde, who have discussed the politics of their writing as giving voice to positions of oppression in respective works such as *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979–1985* (1986) and *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984). Such accounts place writing as an activity embedded in everyday experience and by necessity politically engaged. Levy's work is more akin to this tradition than to Dillard's unproblematic account of the pursuit of writing—a result of racial and a certain degree of financial privilege.

When recalling her experience raising small children, Levy similarly transitions into feminist argumentation, recalling gatherings of mothers at the playground, she writes:

Like everything that involves love, our children made us happy beyond measure – and unhappy too – but never as miserable as the twenty-first century Neo-Patricharchy made us feel. It required us to be passive but ambitious, maternal but esoterically energetic, self-sacrificing but fulfilled – we were to be Strong Modern Women while being subjected to all kinds of humiliations, both economic and domestic. (ibid., p. 15)

In her listing of the opposing traits that she finds women of her milieu are expected to embody, Levy suggests that “Strong Modern Women” of the twenty-first century struggle endlessly to meet impossible demands. This description echoes the way theorists critical of contemporary labor conditions describe demands placed on white-collar workers irrespective of gender. In fact, transformations in white-collar labor in late capitalism have often been observed as ‘feminizations’ of work. Donna Haraway, for example, writes in her “Cyborg Manifesto” that:

Work is being redefined as both literally female and feminized, whether performed by men or women. To be feminized is to be made extremely vulnerable; able to be disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labor force; seen less as workers than as servers; subjected to time arrangements on and off the paid job that make a mockery of a limited work day; [etc.]. (Haraway cited in Hicks 2009, p. 8)

Heather Hicks provides this quote from Haraway's manifesto in *The Culture of Soft Work: Labor, Gender, and Race in Postmodern American Narrative* (2009), arguing that the postmodern era has witnessed a convergence between "developments at the economic and administrative levels of [...] work and the historical conventions of femininity," in which stereotypically feminine attributes of "intuition, fluidity, faith, and emotion" have developed into prominent watchwords for white-collar laborers (ibid.). This adds another layer to the convergence narrative discussed earlier, in which the demands of the political, artistic left are appropriated by management discourses. Such discourses also idealize flexible modes of work that have historically been required of women.

The writing life described by Levy incorporates these themes. In *The Cost of Living*, the time and space she has for writing must be fought for among all of her other responsibilities following her divorce and move into a rundown apartment with her teenage daughter. Various activities encroach upon and enfold into one another: "When I wasn't writing and teaching and unpacking boxes, my attention was on mending the blocked pipes under the basin in the bathroom" (Levy 2018, p. 30); "As I battled moths [...] [a]n idea presented itself. To unfold any number of ideas through all the dimensions of time is a great adventure of the writing life. But I had nowhere to write" (ibid., pp. 40–41). The juggling act of maintaining a household, versus thinking and writing illustrated by these excerpts varies drastically from the 'idyll' that Dillard describes in *The Writing Life*. Without the luxury of devoting her full energies to creative pursuits, Levy must flexibly pass between tasks, continuously switching gears.⁴

Despite such obstacles, Levy does not lament her circumstance. She argues that the freedom she gains as a woman and a writer goes hand in hand with the various demands of everyday life. The combination of both sides becomes a source of invigoration, as she reflects "I was thinking clearly, lucidly; [...] I had energy because I had no choice but to have energy. I had to write to support my children and I had to do all the heavy lifting. Freedom is never free" (ibid., p. 22). Levy thus writes not simply out of inspiration but most acutely out of necessity. As material pressures fuel her creativity, these circumstances are brought into relation with an idea of freedom throughout the memoir, for instance when Levy states: "I was alone and I was free. Free to pay the immense service charges for an apartment that had very little service and sometimes not even basic utilities. Free to support my family by writing on a computer

that was about to die" (ibid., p. 92). Her freedom does not entail an escape from but rather an investment in the demands of everyday living. Such a conception of the writing life as enmeshed with all various other labors departs from the autonomy enjoyed by Dillard and championed by Brande. While a book like *Wake Up and Live!* suggests that the pursuit of one's passion, or true 'living,' represents a departure from merely earning a living, Levy resists such a clear-cut opposition. "The cost of living," her book's title, entertains the blending of freedom with constraint, as it can be read in two ways: the cost of living the life of a wife, mother, and eventual *divorcée* on her creative ambitions, and the cost of pursuing the writing life on all of her other roles. Such a double meaning communicates the simultaneity and contingency of costs and gains on both ends of the spectrum.

Levy eventually finds ways to carve out more substantial space and time for her writing. A friend offers a garden shed made habitable in winter by a space heater, which Levy frequents for writing time sequestered from other demands. This small measure allows her to be more productive, though Levy also acknowledges that she has quite simply chosen a life in which exclusive devotion to 'the Work' is impossible. She contrasts her choices with those of Simone de Beauvoir, who rejected an invitation by her lover Nelson Algren to move to New York and start a family, writing that she could not "live just for happiness and love" and give up "writing and working" (ibid., p. 98). Levy finds that in her attempt to fit various pursuits into one life, "[s]he [de Beauvoir] was my muse but I was certainly not hers" (ibid., p. 95). *The Cost of Living* is thus a literary-advice memoir that in many ways focuses on the issue of work/life balance so ubiquitously discussed by twenty-first-century managers, workers, the self-help industry, etc. Levy's mediation of this discourse, and her personal account of how to navigate competing demands, is the refusal of a clear opposition of terms, embracing work and life as activities and conditions that bleed into and shape one another. This is the model of, or advice on, the writing life that she offers to her readers. In doing so, however, she also embodies the ideal, white-collar worker of her time, multi-tasking between work, life, and 'the Work' with flexibility, creativity, and emotional investment.

Alexander Chee's *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel* displays a similar ethos, as Chee describes his creative work as something produced out of material necessity and completed sporadically alongside his need

to make a living. The collection of essays includes reflections on childhood, coming out, dressing in drag, living in San Francisco during the AIDS crisis, the genesis of Chee's first novel *Edinburgh*, Chee's experience with mixed identity (Korean-American), the tragic death of Chee's father, his family's subsequent financial troubles, his education in writing during both university and the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and his own work as a writing teacher. Two chapters, "100 Things About Writing a Novel" and "How to Write an Autobiographical Novel" interject Chee's narrative prose with lists that contain everything from practical advice to philosophical statements about the writing life. They are at once directed at the reader, potentially an aspiring writer looking for advice, and deeply personal reflections that condense Chee's own story into a series of lessons and insights.

One chapter, "The Writing Life," is an homage to Annie Dillard, who taught Chee writing while he was an undergraduate at Wesleyan University. When Chee is later accepted to the Iowa Writers' Workshop, almost all of his teachers discourage him from attending, saying that it would be a waste of time and resources for someone who should simply begin writing. But Dillard disagrees. She encourages him to go and delay his entry into the 'real world' for as long as possible. This advice aligns with Dillard's notion of the writing life presented in her book as one that exists apart from the everyday. Yet, while Chee ends up treasuring his time in Iowa, it is only when material necessity forces him into writing that he discovers his voice. After graduating from the Workshop, Chee moves to New York City and shares an apartment with his two siblings. His mother, running into financial difficulty and lacking substantial income, is unable to pay his sister's college tuition, and Chee thus embarks on a writing project that he thinks will be easy to complete and ensure a book deal, reflecting "I turned my back on the experimental novel I'd put forward, and told anyone I knew, 'I'm just going to write a shitty autobiographical novel first just like everyone else, and sell it for thousands and thousands of dollars'" (Chee 2018, p. 200).

Chee, therefore, sets aside his vision of an ambitious, "experimental" project and decides to tell a story based on his own experience, which he predicts will prove an easier task, all while working as a waiter to make ends meet:

The white shirt, black bow tie, and apron came to feel like a cocoon for the novel, or the writer, or both. I wrote that novel on the subway, going

back and forth to the restaurant, and sometimes I wrote it while at work – I still have a guest check with an outline that came to me while I waited for my section to be seated. (ibid., p. 116)

Faced with no other option, Chee's early life as a writer is fully entangled with his work waiting tables, so much so that he identifies his work clothes as protective of, rather than hindrances to, his novel's progress.

In the course of completing the novel and receiving significant acclaim, Chee undergoes a series of revelations. For one, he discovers that autobiographical fiction is by no means an 'easier' genre to tackle. He worked steadily for seven years before completing *Edinburgh*, so it was certainly not a source of fast income. At the same time, however, Chee recalls that "[t]he writing felt both like an autonomic process, as compulsory as breathing or the beat of a heart [...]. The novel that emerged was about things I could not speak of in life [...]" (ibid., p. 201). As he reveals near the end of the essay collection, in "The Autobiography of My Novel," the story of sexual abuse told in *Edinburgh* is based on Chee's own victimization as a child, the novel allowing him to recall memories he had suppressed and eventually leading him to seek therapy after years of emotional pain and unhealthy behavioral repetitions. Thus despite the desperate and constrained conditions under which Chee wrote, the novel's writing itself was not strained; it flowed and led Chee to profound insights as both an artist and victim of abuse. Chee ends the book with an essay entitled "On Becoming an American Writer," in which he reflects on a question asked by one of his students the day after Trump was elected president: "What is the point even of writing, if this can happen?" (ibid., p. 253) He ends the essay with an answer, stating:

Something new is made from my memories and yours as you read this. [...] All my life I've been told this isn't important, that it doesn't matter, that it could never matter. And yet I think it does. I think it is the real reason the people who would take everything from us say this. I think it's the same reason that when fascists come to power, writers are amongst the first to go to jail. And that is the point of writing. (ibid., p. 275)

His ultimate word of writing advice, composed in a state of shock following the election, is about political purpose. According to Chee, even the deeply personal, autobiographical novel can cause shifts in thinking and perception, and these shifts are "the point," the motivation

for writing. While the memoir is positioned as a “How to...”, Chee’s account is always embedded in his personal experience, never completely didactic or instructional. The work is thus both directed at aspiring writers and attendees of MFA programs as it is written for a wider audience if readers—the queer community; survivors of abuse; those devastated by the upsweep in right-wing populism. In his reflections on why he writes and the conditions surrounding his work, Chee, like Levy, highlights political themes.

Yet what are the politics of these memoirs, apart from the political topics they directly address? Both Levy and Chee present their writing lives as formed out of, rather than separate from, the energies they devote to making a living. They disrupt the idea of a writer working in focused, autonomous space and time upheld by Brande and Dillard. In their blending of literary advice conventions with memoir, Levy and Chee produce writing that is caught between ‘work’ and ‘the Work.’ This positioning, which in many ways reflects the conditions and demands placed on white-collar workers of their time, produces an ambivalent image of the twenty-first-century writing life, one characterized by both freedom and constraint.

CONCLUSION: THE AMBIVALENT POLITICS OF THE LITERARY-ADVICE MEMOIR

Levy’s memoirs are fragmented and associative; Chee’s book is a collection of essays whose links from one to another are sometimes apparent, sometimes not. As such, the component parts of these projects appear as mini-projects in themselves, individually crafted and then pulled into arrangements. They exhibit degrees of “diffusion and variety” that reflect the conditions under which they were created (Kunst, 2015, p. 4).⁵ These works, after all, have been produced in lieu of novels, for which their authors are known. In this sense, literary-advice memoirs represent time and energy spent away from ‘the Works’ that they themselves describe. They are projects that might be easier to tackle than ‘the next novel’ and more capable of being spontaneously constructed amidst the demands of everyday life, completed intermittently and between other tasks. While it is presumptuous to suggest that this is how the works were written, the assumption is based on the conditions the works themselves describe.

The literary-advice memoir as such carries implications of artistic concession and sacrifice. Its politics arise from the exposure of this fact, as Bojana Kunst argues:

Visible processes of work in the arts [...] become interesting when they [...] open up ways for representations and imagery of contemporary exploitation. In this, it is extremely important to make visible the exploitation within one's own methods of production – to work in a way that makes the production conditions visible. (ibid., p. 151)

As disclosures of the 'work' that surrounds and impresses upon 'the Work,' these mixtures of literary advice and memoir perform the function of creating "representations and imagery" of the convergences between work, art, and life characteristic of the twenty-first century with which their authors grapple. At the same time, in both the examples by Levy and Chee, this convergence is not exactly lamented. While their memoirs are positioned as having been written in lieu of other projects—namely, works of fiction—they are by no means framed as works of lesser quality or significance. In Chee's account of writing *Edinburgh* while waiting tables and Levy's tale of finding strength and inspiration to write out of the need to provide for her family, the pressures and demands of making a living are framed as sources of creative inspiration and productivity. For critics of the exploitative demands placed on the white-collar creative class, such accounts could come across as problematic in their acceptance of artistic production as something inherently, and at times even fruitfully, encumbered. The example of Flarf poetry that Jasper Bernes presents in *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization* represents more of an embrace of such conditions in its purely mechanical form of composition, performed within the space of the office during working hours. The literary-advice memoirs discussed here do not go as far as Flarf. That is, while they describe the writing life as one shaped by "the costs of living," they also uphold the conviction that creative expression is culturally and politically important and should not be handled facetiously.

In *The Work and the Gift*, a philosophical book that principally explores the history of the relationship between working and giving, Scott Shershaw delineates the terms 'work' vs. 'the Work' that I have been employing throughout this essay. In introducing these terms, Shershaw reflects on how the two can never be truly distinct from one another. 'Work' lapses into 'the Work' and vice versa at a moment's notice:

On the one side, the daily exertions that are always done and never done, labors by which one lives or, as it is said, *makes a living*. On the other side, the project or the poem, the *opus*, the *oeuvre*, or the Book: those achieved or imagined totalities [...]. There will never be an absolute distinction between the two sides of this opposition, for to consider work in any sense is of course also to rebegin the Work of (theorizing) work: the unfinished labor of thinking its value, its necessity, its purpose, or its end(s). (Shershaw 2005, p. 1)

Recent literary-advice memoirs demonstrate this dynamic, as reflections on the writing life and its relationship to the demands of making a living. In their considerations and exposures of the ‘work’ that surrounds and impresses upon ‘the Work,’ these projects engage in the unfinished labor of thinking about, theorizing, and representing the writing life. These ‘side projects,’ the backstories of the production of ‘the Work,’ become ‘Works’ in themselves, rife with contradictory messages about the work of the writer in the twenty-first century. They push the literary advice genre away from technicalities and visions of artistic autonomy and toward accounts of creative production that is always compromised, subject to the demands placed on creative workers throughout the white-collar labor market of late capitalism. While the compromises may be accepted, ‘the Work’ also continues.

NOTES

1. These terms are adopted from Shershaw’s *The Work & the Gift* (2005), to which I refer in more detail later in this article.
2. Michelene Wandor introduces the term “writing memoir” in *The Author Is Not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else. Creative Writing After Theory* to define any “autobiographical words of wisdom, interviews, aphorisms by famous, successful, money-earning writers,” which often function as “artistic memoirs” (Wandor 2008, p. 116). I suggest that the ‘writing-advice memoir’ could be classified as a sub-category of Wandor’s general term in which writing advice is embedded in memoirs about the writing life.
3. See chapter two entitled “Work as Art/Art as Life” (Brouillette 2014).
4. For a discussion closely related to these themes, see McGurl 2009, particularly the introduction to the book in which McGurl situates creative writing degree programs as institutions that mediate between the realms of “freedom and necessity” that are perpetually negotiated in writing lives (McGurl 2009, p. 3).

5. Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan have defined such auto-fictional novels as “novels of commission” that “focus on the process of writing rather than the finished, canonical work. This dereification of the novel, in turn, allows them to experience writing as a process that is already social and institutional in ways that do not necessarily exert a determining force on the final product, the finished novel” (Buurma and Heffernan 2014, p. 88). They connect contemporary novels of commission to Roland Barthes’s lecture series *Preparation of the Novel*, situated this as a forerunner to the current trend.

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