

ABSTRACT

The Reward of Merit: Digital Constructions of the Economic Self

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This paper utilizes rhetorical criticism to situate three rhetors within larger discourses surrounding work ethic and economic success. It argues that the work of John Perry Barlow, Paul Graham, and Gary Vaynerchuk are important to an understanding of the evolution of economic discourse in the digital age. Specifically, it shows that Graham and Vaynerchuk rely on themes present in Barlow's work to position individual merit as the sole determining factor in economic success. Those arguments emphasize three main themes: the value of individual tenacity, technological inevitability, and the positioning of the market as an omnipotent and nonpartisan deity. By critiquing the rhetorical appeals, metaphors, and narrative tropes employed by the rhetors, this paper situates digital motivation or "hustle" discourse within the larger realm of economic rhetoric.

The Reward of Merit: Digital Constructions of the Economic Self

by

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To Kaitlyn, who listens—and to all who have labored
their entire lives without any reward of merit

CHAPTER ONE

From the Frontier to the Hustle: Work Ethic Discourse in The Digital Age

“Later on in life you expect a bit of rest, don’t you? You think you deserve it. I did, anyway. But then you begin to realize that the reward of merit is not life’s business.”

-Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending*

Gary Vaynerchuk describes himself as someone who builds businesses and deals in attention. He stars in *DailyVee*, an internet video program in which he regularly pontificates on matters related to business, success, and his past as an investor. “This whole question of ‘where’s the time,’” he notes in one video, “I just think people are loaded with excuses. I think that the Vayner nation thinks they’re hustling, and straight to your face, like 99.9% of you are not.” For Vaynerchuk, dedication is the virtue that determines success. “I think that people like to claim that they work hard and smart, and they’re not putting in the work, and they work nine to six. It’s just not enough,” he comments in the same video.¹ Vaynerchuk’s promotion of dedication and work ethic as the only route to success follows a long line of economic and social thinking that considers personal responsibility the key factor in distributing merit.

Robin Clair, Megan McConnell, Stephanie Bell, Kyle Hackbarth, and Stephanie Mathes write in *Why Work: The Perceptions of a “Real Job” and the Rhetoric of Work through the Ages* that the theoretical arguments surrounding work and labor furthered by activists, philosophers and theorists have had a profound effect on how societies shape their perspectives on employment. “At times,” they write, “these philosophical and

rhetorical arguments have held such powerful sway that they have influenced entire cultures and changed the face of how people live and work.”²

In the early days of the internet, many cyberculture theorists hoped to shed the requirements of the body altogether. “Everyone has a physical appearance,” wrote Jack Goldsmith and Tim Wu, “and everyone is born somewhere; these are two facts over which we have little control. Even in the most open real-space societies, where we are born and what we look like influence our life paths and prospect—the kind of opportunities we get, how we are treated by others, the extent to which those around us share our values and commitments.”³ They write, however, that the impulse of a liberal meritocratic society runs in another direction. It “says that individuals should be able to shape their lives as they wish, provided that those choices respect the dignity of others.” In the real world, however-- especially within the “traditional system of territorial governance”—those unchosen characteristics prove uncomfortably limiting. “The internet,” they counter, showed early in its life that it could “render these morally irrelevant physical qualities *actually* irrelevant.”⁴

Years later, Gary Vaynerchuk took to his YouTube channel to promote the idea that the very world of cyberspace once thought to have the potential to free us from our bodies had also liberated us from the typical constraints of work. The internet, he asserted, had leveled the playing field. “If you’ve got the right DNA,” he explains in one of his short films, “and you’re a 72-year-old female, you’ve just as good a bat as a 27-year-old dude.” Thanks to the power of technology, he explains, the limitations keeping that 72-year-old female from her dreams had been obliterated. Tapping his laptop, he

reasons that “you’ve been trained...in a fifty year matter that doesn’t feel like this thing here is a practical way to build that. But it is...so stop making excuses.”

I contend that Vaynerchuk’s positioning of the market as an impartial and fair arbiter of success constitutes the laborer as a rational economic actor upon whom the responsibility for success lies. This thesis utilizes rhetorical criticism to argue that Vaynerchuk’s participation in the discourse of work ethic is not unique to the internet at all. Rather, I demonstrate that economic discourse surrounding the free market and personal responsibility has simply transformed to accommodate the promise of the internet itself. More than ever before in the public square, individuals are encouraged by technological discourse to consider themselves autonomous and capable economic actors.

My study will begin with an exploration of the rhetorical tactics and appeals in John Perry Barlow’s 1996 “Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,” and will continue with an analysis of two essays by venture capitalist Paul Graham. My study will conclude with a discussion of the rhetorical appeals utilized by Gary Vaynerchuk’s video documentaries. These texts have had a noted effect on economic discourse—Barlow’s “Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace” exemplifies the halcyon days of internet optimism, and was widely influential throughout internet circles. The essays of Paul Graham—a prolific author and one of the founders of Y Combinator (an American seed accelerator and venture capital company)—have received outsized response from the business media world and have prompted a mountain of internet discourse. Gary Vaynerchuk’s YouTube channel has at the time of this writing 510,000 direct subscribers, and his videos have been viewed millions of times on other networks such as Snapchat, Twitter, and Facebook.

Through an exploration of those three texts, I explore the rhetorical appeals utilized by each rhetor and demonstrate their connections to larger questions of work and economic selfhood in the digital age. John Perry Barlow's "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace" hailed the arrival of the internet as a new era of frictionless interaction and freedom of the mind and economic self. The conditions celebrated by Perry Barlow were key in Silicon Valley's rapid expansion into the market and provided an environment in which Paul Graham's defenses of unfettered venture capitalism and labor purity could flourish and Gary Vaynerchuk's appeals to work ethic could crystalize. I contend that Barlow's "Declaration," Graham's essays, and Vaynerchuk's "hustle rhetoric"—all of which revolve around arguments for individual tenacity, technological inevitability, and the treatment of the market as an omnipotent and nonpartisan deity—are rhetorical responses to market and social exigencies that can be critiqued in order to further a productive understanding of how discourse and rhetoric shape our ideas of economic selfhood.

This thesis considers three chief questions. First—in what ways do each of these texts rhetorically constitute the economic or social individual and the responsibility that they have toward their work? Secondly—what connection do appeals to personal purity and work ethic in the digital age have with religious and philosophical questions of selfhood? Finally—what rhetorical themes can be charted throughout all three rhetors and their participation within larger discourses of work ethic and labor? Rhetorical criticism is an effective tool for analyzing public discourse surrounding work and labor because it allows the critic unique opportunities to trace the impact that historical and sociological forces have upon texts while still maintaining a focus on the immediate argumentative

qualities of the text itself. William Rodney Herring notes the role of physical reality in the development of philosophies in early America, specifically writing that “competing political philosophies developed in response to material and economic exigencies and to the policies meant to address those exigencies.” In addition, he cites the work of other scholars who “have thus attempted to situate rhetorical and political theories within their economic context.”⁵ Herring’s conception of rhetorical analysis—marrying understandings of economic and social reality with critical analysis of the rhetorical situations that necessitate, facilitate, or result from their existence—serves as an excellent pattern for my thesis.

Literature: Individual Tenacity

Work ethic discourse constitutes the subject of such discourse as an individual with agency to act, as “homo economicus.” As such, Maurice Charland’s “Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the People *Quebécois*” is an essential text through which I consider this study. Charland’s assertion of constitutive appeals is essential to most of the arguments made in this thesis. Many of the appeals established within my texts of interest function by a process of identification, calling a public into being while constituting an economic or social identity to be inhabited. Charland’s analysis of appeals centered around selfhood gain their force through another concept of rhetorical theory, interpellation. Louis Althusser writes that “all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects, by the functioning of the category of the subject.”⁶ The act of interpellation, or “hailing,” creates the subject by inviting the individual to inhabit an ideological subject position. The individual, therefore, is constituted not only as a sole

actor in the economic market, but “homo economicus,” a being already situated within economic discourse as a whole by way of ideology.

Stephanie A. Martin writes in “Recession Resonance: How Evangelical Megachurch Pastors Promoted Fiscal Conservatism in the Aftermath of the 2008 Financial Crash” that “a conversation...exists inside evangelicalism that stresses American exceptionalism and the power of personal responsibility.” She also notes that “this discursive emphasis, in turn, works to justify an inclination toward conservative economic policy.”⁷ Martin’s work is useful to an investigation of narratives of personal responsibility because she balances concepts of religious ideals and the rhetorical practice of public ethics. Martin’s analysis also values the grounds upon which conceptions of work ethic are based. She writes that “the value of personal responsibility runs through evangelical doctrine. In part, this is because the theological tradition of evangelicalism is ‘strongly individualistic’ in nature and based in the authority of the Bible and the idea that salvation is the product of one’s personal decision to choose to follow Christ.”⁸ My work is less concerned with public or national policy than it is with the regulation of the self, and Martin’s analysis provides concrete links between those regulative forces of discourse.

One author who takes up the question of personal purity in regards to consumption and ethics is Helen Zoe Veit, whose book *Modern Food Moral Food* is an excellent investigation of the ways in which food and the practice of daily life promote the regulation of the body. She writes that “Americans’ food choices are regularly pointed to as vital factors in public health, social justice, national security, climate change, and even geopolitics. On a scale unrivaled since the Progressive Era, food choices have again

become moral choices.”⁹ I contend that those moral choices play a large role in the construction of work ethic discourse, and that the regulation of the self through the establishment of approved patterns of consumption in work discourse bears a striking resemblance to the Progressive Era’s discussion of food as a source of moral purity and propriety.

This thesis relies on the excellent work forwarded by Judith Shklar in *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion*. She writes that the dignity of work and of personal achievement, and the contempt for aristocratic idleness, have since Colonial times been an important part of American civic self-identification. The opportunity to work and to be paid an earned reward for one’s labor was a social right, because it was a primary source of public respect.”¹⁰ She specifically notes that the “vision of economic independence...took the place of an outmoded notion of public virtue, and it has retained its powerful appeal. We are citizens only if we ‘earn.’”¹¹ Another text that addressed ideas of earning and morality is *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber’s influential essay on the roots of work ethic and capitalist ethos. Weber’s writing concerning asceticism will be of particular use, as many of the appeals utilized by Vaynerchuk and Graham originate in a reverence of asceticism and its relation to dedication.

Mary E. Stuckey’s “The Donner Party and the Rhetoric of Westward Expansion” serves as a useful text for analyzing the ways in which Barlow’s conception of the internet as a frontier serves as a “secular creation story” that facilitates a commitment to heroic individualism. She notes that frontier mythos provides peoples with “building blocks of national identity.” I argue in a similar manner that Barlow’s utilization of

frontier mythos provides the early internet with certain structural characteristics that come with what Stuckey would term “colloquial common sense.”¹²

Literature: Technological Inevitability

Robert McChesney’s *Digital Disconnect* will be a fundamental text for my project. An understanding of how internet discourse functions must have at its core a working understanding of the internet’s role as a force in society, and McChesney’s *Disconnect* is a phenomenal tool for understanding the evolution of the internet and modern capitalism into a fractured media machine. McChesney notes early on in his text that discourse surrounding the internet has been grouped largely into “celebrants” and “skeptics.” His exploration is, in his own words, an effort to put forth “a means to take the best of what each side has to offer and make it part of a far more serious discussion with real political implications.” He writes that the internet has “tremendous democratic potential” that has been “undermined.”¹³ McChesney argues in *Digital Disconnect* that, in the future,

the center of the political debate will be economics: what sort of economy can best promote democratic values and structures and self-governance while nurturing the environment? And at the center of *everything* will be the internet. The democratization of the internet is integrally related to the democratization of the political economy. They rise and fall together.¹⁴

Commentators such as Barlow contended that the internet created an environment in which anyone can participate with equal footing in the economy. That idea, the roots of which lie exposed in Barlow’s “Declaration of Internet Freedom,” is expressed in Paul Graham’s defense of venture capital and the “start-up” economy and *DailyVee*’s emphasis on work ethic and “hustle.” McChesney’s *Digital Disconnect* provides an excellent place to begin an investigation of that idea.

Aimée Hope Morrison writes in “An Impossible Future: John Perry Barlow’s ‘Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace’” that Barlow participates in a “larger Silicon Valley politics of technolibertarianism,” arguing that “revolutionary politics are assumed to be immanent in the machines that structure and enable networked communication.”¹⁵ Morrison’s examination of Barlow’s declaration serves as an excellent entry point into larger conversations surrounding the nature of technological inevitability.

Robert McChesney wrote about the effects of deregulation in media environments in his book *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*. While many writers during the dawn of the internet hailed the coming digital revolution as a net positive, McChesney noted in 1999 that the system hailed by Barlow and Graham as a frontier free of limitation was actually “dominated by a handful of massive firms, advertisers, and firms’ billionaire owners,” adding that “the system is spinning in a hypercommercial frenzy with little trace of public service, or public accountability.” He contends specifically with the idea that the internet “will set us free,” writing that those arguments amounted to little more than “utopian notions.”¹⁶ He adds that the current system should be correctly called “neoliberal democracy,” writing “neoliberal democracy is one where the political sector controls little and debates even less,” and adding that arguments concerning the media future often “maximize the role of market and profit-making and minimize the role of nonmarket institutions.”¹⁷

Ronald Walter Greene concerned himself with the rhetorical aspects of capital and, by way thereof, investments, in “Rhetorical Capital: Communicative Labor, Money/Speech, and Neo-Liberal Governance.” He writes that neoliberalism is the chief

organizing principle of the modern economy, adding that the ways in which capital functions as investment interests and political speech should render rhetorical critics more interested in investigating the rhetorical aspects of capital itself.

Literature: The Omnipotent Market

Another prominent communication scholar whose work will be important to this endeavor is James Arnt Aune, whose book *Selling the Free Market* inspects the appeals and arguments leveraged and shaped by free-market advocates. “Markets are useful things,” he writes, “but they should not have been turned into a religion. Politics is, ultimately, the search for the optimum balance of exit and voice in a polity.”¹⁸ *Selling the Free Market* focuses on “the strategies used to promote the ‘market revolution’ that appears to have triumphed around the world since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.”¹⁹ Throughout the book, Aune utilizes rhetorical criticism of arguments surrounding “political correctness” to position criticism of market rhetoric writ large.

At various points in his discussion, Aune contextualizes arguments as being extra-rhetorical—positioned as being beyond persuasion, some arguments for the free market escape the confines of discourse and become accepted as fact. Edward M. Panetta and Hasain Marouf examine the work of Richard A. Posner, arguing that many of his anti-rhetorical appeals to law and economics were in fact a rhetorical position. They write:

Antirhetorics have become an integral part of many Western texts because they give the appearance of being authoritative and authentic. The philosophical or empirical claims to knowledge that purport to reveal some truth invite audiences to believe that experts possess a special finding that mandates the acquiescence of other discursive participants, for these findings are allegedly prepared independent of the chaos and politics of ordinary life.²⁰

Michael Souders writes in “The Prophetic Imagination and the Rhetoric of Freedom in the Prosperity Gospel” that freedom and liberation serve as rhetorical devices. “The Christian prosperity gospel,” he writes, “is a type of evangelical preaching that promises that the right expression of faith, attuned to God’s desire that His followers be wealthy and disease-free, can lead to divine benefits for believers’ finances and physical health.”²¹ This hope, for redemption through personal and physical dedication, defines the actions of the self within economic discourse, placing the burden of freedom and success on the dedication of the faithful. He writes that

unfortunately, [that success] does not often result. No evidence supports a relationship between prosperity belief and future wealth. Moreover, believers that fail to receive “blessings” feel deep anxiety and often blame themselves for their lack of faith, especially since preachers tell their congregations to understand the lack of abundance as a failing of the individual, rather than of the prosperity message..²²

Souders’ analysis of the rhetorical aspects of the prosperity gospel are especially helpful to my analysis because many of the appeals leveraged in work ethic discourse are structured in a similar manner to those of the prosperity gospel. Workers are advised that the key to success and wealth lies not in conditions outside of themselves, but solely on the quality of their faith and strength of their dedication. These appeals position a resulting “lack of abundance” as a “failure of the individual.” Many workers then translate that failing into deep and pressing anxiety surrounding their work-life balance and work ethic, which can aggravate the original cause of financial distress itself.

David G. Levasseur and Lisa Gring-Pemle take up the discussion of capital in their 2015 article “Not All Capitalist Stories are Created Equal: Mitt Romney’s Bain Capital Narrative and the Deep Divide in American Economic Rhetoric.” This article is of particular concern for the strong emphasis that its authors place on economic narrative

as a political and social force. Mitt Romney's narrative of business competence as demonstrated through his time at Bain Capital, they contend, was counteracted by conceptions of the immaterial economy and of "real" labor.²³ In addition, Megan Foley has investigated the role of economic metaphor in her article "From Infantile Citizens to Infantile Institutions: The Metaphoric Transformation of Political Economy in the 2008 Housing Market Crisis." Foley argues that the economic metaphors provide the inflection point at which contrasting ideological arguments can find common space within a democratic polity.²⁴ In addition to literature from within the field of communication, some economic and sociological writing is extremely important to a working understanding of market dynamics. Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* is a complete investigation of the role of economic inequality in the twenty-first century global market.

In *Enforcing the Work Ethic*, a study of work incentive programs, Gale Miller makes the argument that the rhetoric utilized by "street-level bureaucrats" is in fact political. As part of their arguments, participants "take partisan positions on the issues at hand." Those positions, she notes, are "often expressed as quasi-theories which are rationales for explaining and justifying a person's preferred solutions to practical problems."²⁵ These theories, which contain and are reinforced by their internal logics, are given substance by their ideological commitments. "Because the conclusions of quasi-theories are foregone," Miller continues, "quasi-theorizer's major concern is with identifying 'facts' which others will treat as convincing evidence for their conclusions."²⁶

In a turn reminiscent of Charland's "Constitutive Rhetoric," Miller continues her brief argument for the consideration of street-level labor policy and bureaucracy as rhetorical by writing that "bureaucrats also cast other's acquiescence as voluntary actions based on rational assessments of the issues at hand and their options in responding to them."²⁷ In "Constitutive Rhetoric," Charland writes:

the freedom of the protagonist of this [nationalist] narrative is but an illusion. ...Freedom is illusory because the narrative is already spoken or written. ...the narrative is a structure of understanding that produces totalizing interpretations, the subject is constrained to *follow through*, to act so as to maintain the narrative's consistency..²⁸

Some books such as *One Market Under God* by Thomas Frank have attempted to make sense of the rise of market "faith" in the 21st century. Frank writes that market populism "imagines workers as fully rational economic actors, totally capable of making their needs known in the marketplace and of looking out for their own interests."²⁹ That argument—the primacy of the individual in economic fate—is one of the chief rhetorical tactics upon which motivation discourse relies. More than helpless in the face of fate, this discourse constitutes the subject of discourse as someone who has the power to act, as "homo economicus."

Text and Method

This thesis consists of three main sections, with an introduction and a conclusion bookending the three chapters. Each of the main chapters will contain an interrogation of one text, while drawing upon the larger themes established in the introduction. The second chapter of my thesis will contain an analysis of John Perry Barlow's "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace." Published in 1996 and popularized throughout the following years, Barlow's work provides an excellent point at which to begin an analysis

of discourse surrounding work ethic. Barlow's prose is lean, but it contains a number of avenues for investigation, including the portrayal of governments, the primacy of free and unfettered intellectual pursuit, and the chief roles of freedom, economic liberty, and independent speech in early discourse surrounding the potential of the internet. Barlow's positioning of the internet as the frontier is particularly interesting, as the frontier metaphor allows for the creation of the economic self through a narrative of revolution and reclamation of a transactional identity. Barlow's text also serves as an excellent introduction to several themes and arguments that run through the other texts, and his utilization of economic metaphor is relevant to the entirety of this study.

The third chapter of this thesis will focus on two essays by Silicon Valley investor and venture capitalist Paul Graham—"You Weren't Meant to Have a Boss" and "Economic Inequality." Graham's essays have influenced economic rhetoric, prompted op-ed columns in the *New York Times*, and have spurred a mountain of internet discourse—from Paul Krugman's *New York Times* column "Is Vast Inequality Necessary?" to popular leftist writer Holly Wood's essay "Paul Graham is Still Asking to be Eaten." Graham's texts focus on several key appeals, including the constitution of a pure economic selfhood through a narrative of self-employment, technological inevitability, and the positioning of the market as an impartial and fair arbiter of value.

The fourth chapter of this thesis will explore the rhetorical appeals present in Gary Vaynerchuk's *DailyVee* video series. *DailyVee* began in 2015, and continues through the present. *DailyVee* documents Vaynerchuk performing his daily work and management tasks, along with a number of what Vaynerchuk himself calls "rants"—speeches which vary in length and content, but tend to focus on work ethic, "hustle," and business. Since

there are so many episodes of the program (many of which are between ten and twenty minutes in length), I will limit my criticism to four videos. I have selected “Purging of the Posers,” “Six Minutes for the Next Sixty Years of Your Life,” “The Most Important Word Ever,” and “Hard Work & Patience” because they provide an accurate sampling of the appeals to personal dedication and the nonpartisan market that are staples of Vaynerchuk’s rhetorical style.

Michael Calvin McGee wrote in “Text, Context, and the Fragmentation of Contemporary Culture” that rhetors and speakers in a fragmented culture fulfilled a role of interpretation, and that critics and audiences performed the construction of texts. “Rhetors,” he writes, “*make* discourses from scraps and pieces of evidence. Critical rhetoric does not *begin* with a finished text in need of interpretation; rather, texts are understood to be larger than the apparently finished discourse that presents itself as transparent.”³⁰ In choosing these three texts for analysis and extending the themes found in them to other internet discourses, I have performed much the same function, gathering together textual fragments from discourse surrounding economics and the business world and treating them as a text worthy of analysis. The significance of each text therefore relies on its contributions to those “larger,” “apparently finished,” discourses.³¹

Writing about the internet involves charting the evolution of those “apparently finished” discourses. Smaller texts such as social networking posts and images scattered around cyberspace can be critiqued on their own grounds, but they may also be representative of much larger circulations. As such, this thesis approaches the study of the internet as a study of fragmented themes and texts, many of which serve as access nodes for much larger conversations. The texts discussed within this thesis are diverse.

They range from a single essay posted on a bare-bones website in 1996 to the ongoing development of what Vaynerchuk considers his personal brand. To study the internet is to study fragments.

Conclusion

This thesis will serve as an entry into a long line of scholarship aimed at deciphering the ways in which technological realities impact ideological formations and influence rhetorical situations. It will, in other words, serve to answer a call made by Martin Medhurst for technological scholarship to move “beyond either/or reasoning.” Medhurst writes in the introduction to *Communication and the Culture of Technology* that “between technology as a miracle and technology as mirage lies the gray area of human choice making, human valuing.”³² Economic decision making and technological valuing share many characteristics, as both require the subject of discourse to weigh the political, economic, and social realities of their time against a complex and shifting code of values and morals that have influenced their position in the market or technological spectrum.

Technological advancements quicken these shifts, accelerating decision making and valuing and requiring that the temporality of labor fundamentally change. Alfredo Tamborlini writes of these impacts:

Technological innovation seems to favor a loosening of the rigidities of the temporal organization of labor for another reason as well: the accelerating rate of change requires permanent updating of the human factor and makes not only more practical but more necessary, the various initiatives or proposals that have been made for the alternation between training and work, in a prospect of permanent education..³³

Understanding this “permanent education” is central to developing a working thesis surrounding the rhetorical tactics utilized in discussions of labor’s evolution in the 21st century. If the worker is to be permanently reeducated, then the worker must always be in flux, moving between employment and education. The destabilization of the American worker (and workers around the world) fundamentally restructures conversations surrounding work and productivity. As those discourses are restructured, arguments involving temporality and permanence of labor change, and tracking those changes allow us to draw connections between evolutions in dialogue utilizing what Philip Wander called the “ideological turn” in criticism.³⁴ Ideological formations create reasonability—they enforce common sense. This thesis investigates the ways in which ideological commitments surrounding work and labor manifest themselves as arguments for the “permanent education” of the self and the participation in the discourse of self-regulation.

Ideological criticism, as Wander notes, “leaves the asylum offered by a world of ideas to confront the world of affairs, the sensual, material ‘is’ of everyday life.”³⁵ John Perry Barlow’s “Declaration of Internet Freedom,” Paul Graham’s essays, and Gary Vaynerchuk’s video series, far from freeing the body from the temporal and emotional constraints of work, champion the role of individual merit and dedication in economic success in the digital age.

NOTES

¹ Vaynerchuk, *Word*.

² Robin Patric Clair, ed., *Why Work?: The Perceptions of a “Real Job” and the Rhetoric of Work Through the Ages* (West Lafayette, Ind: Purdue University Press, 2008), 17.

³ Jack L. Goldsmith and Tim Wu, *Who Controls the Internet?: Illusions of a Borderless World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 16.

⁴ Goldsmith and Wu, *Controls*, 16–17.

⁵ William Rodney Herring, “The Rhetoric of Credit, the Rhetoric of Debt: Economic Arguments in Early America and Beyond,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 19 (2016): 47.

⁶ Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta, eds., *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, Blackwell Readers in Anthropology 9 (Malden, MA ; Oxford: Blackwell Pub, 2006), 105.

⁷ Stephanie A. Martin, “Recession Resonance: How Evangelical Megachurch Pastors Promoted Fiscal Conservatism in the Aftermath of the 2008 Financial Crash,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 18 (2015): 41.

⁸ Martin, “Resonance,” 46.

⁹ Helen Zoe Veit, *Modern Food, Moral Food: Self-Control, Science, and the Rise of Modern American Eating in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 2.

¹⁰ Judith N. Shklar, *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion*, 1. ed., 5. printing, The Tanner Lectures on Human Values (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Pr, 2001), 1–2.

¹¹ Shklar, *Citizenship*, 66–67.

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CHAPTER TWO

“Weary Giants:” John Perry Barlow, “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,” and the Beginnings of the Digital Economic Frontier

In his seminal 1996 manifesto on the future of interconnected computing and the digital life, John Perry Barlow claims to write “on behalf of the future.” Barlow, a writer and activist who had penned lyrics for the Grateful Dead and essays for the early internet, wanted the “weary giants of the flesh and steel” that governed the physical world to recognize that they had “no moral right to rule” the coming digital realm.¹ In her book *Cyberselfish*, Paulina Borsook calls Barlow the quintessential “cowboy/ Robert Waller stud-about-town/free-range technolibertarian,” adding that he was “perhaps the most high-profile member of the digerati on the planet. He wrote for, and was written about, in *Wired*” and several other prominent digitally focused publications.²

Brian Doherty wrote in *Reason* that “John Perry Barlow is one of those fascinating figures that American culture regularly produces to our great benefit and occasional consternation.”³ He continues his nearly mythic interpretation of Barlow’s life by adding that Barlow founded the Electronic Frontier Foundation (the EFF) in 1990. The EFF is “a San Francisco-based political advocacy and legal action group dedicated to preserving and extending liberty in cyberspace.”⁴ Barlow became “the Thomas Jefferson of the wired generation by authoring the doc forwarded ‘round the world.”⁵

Barlow’s declaration, that “doc forwarded ‘round the world,” was written in the late winter of 1996 at the World Economic Forum. The WEF, sometimes referred to as

“Davos,” is a gathering of global influencers and “globe-trotting elite” at which “the big story is the world economy.”⁶ It originated in 1971, when Klaus Schwab gathered businessmen to discuss “American management practices” in Davos, Switzerland.⁷

Barlow published the “Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace” from The World Economic Forum when interconnected computing was beginning to enter the modern era of commercial consumption that we refer to as “the internet.”

Barlow wrote his declaration of cyberspace’s independence at Davos in response to the passage of The Telecommunications Act of 1996. The Telecommunications Act, passed by the United States Congress in 1995 and signed into law by President Bill Clinton on February 8, 1996, was the first U.S. telecom law since the emergence of interconnected computing (in fact, it was the first overhaul of its kind since the Communications Act of 1934, which it amended). The goal of the law, per the Federal Communications Commission, was to “let anyone enter any communications business—to let any communications business compete in any market against any other.”⁸ The law, intended to foster and encourage competition among communication markets, aimed to strike down regulatory barriers to entry into the media market. By 1996 the internet had begun to take shape in the consumer market. Although it bore little resemblance to the social platforms of modern interconnected computing, the internet was capable of many of the basic actions upon which modern web interactions are based, including packet switching networks and large-scale file transfer mechanisms—the basic infrastructure that constitutes the instant exchange of information.

Reactions to the passage of the Act were mixed, but some commentators regarded the moment as particularly troubling for the expansion of corporate power that it

represented. Thomas Frank, founder of *Baffler*, argued in *One Market Under God* that “the passage of the Telecommunications Act was thus one of those tableaux of greed, legislative turpitude, and transparently self-serving sophistry that American culture ordinarily delights in exposing and deriding,” noting that “the only really celebrated blast to break the silence was concerned not with the astronomically growing power of telecoms and the broadcasters but with exactly the opposite: *Congress hadn’t deregulated enough.*”⁹

That blast came from John Perry Barlow, who published his “Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace” on the same day that President Clinton signed the bill into law. Barlow took issue with the Communications Decency Act, an attachment to the bill that criminalized internet pornography. The Decency Act, or Title V of the Telecommunications Act, was subsequently neutered in 1997 when the United States Supreme Court limited the power of the anti-indecency provisions of the act. Many internet freedom activists found the law inherently oppressive, asking that, in the words of Barlow’s declaration, “Governments of the Industrial World...leave us alone.”

As a missive directed at the old world from self-appointed representatives of the new, Barlow’s declaration was widely cited and referenced. It relied on several rhetorical devices, including the creation of a revolutionary narrative and the constitution of a digital identity. The “Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace” reimagines the expanding horizons of the early internet as a frontier, and the use of that metaphor creates a discursive space in which the digital self can be imagined as a discrete economic and democratic agent.

Weary Giants

Barlow's "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace" begins with a call to the "governments of the industrial world," which he labels "weary giants of flesh and steel." He hails, in his words, "from cyberspace, the new home of Mind." This new home has "no elected government," and no government is likely to exist there. This entitles Barlow to speak with the authority from which "liberty itself always speaks." He "declares the global social space we are building to be naturally independent of the tyrannies you seek to impose on us." Those tyrannies and governments have "no moral right to rule us," and possess no "methods of enforcement" that citizens of the new world have reason to fear.¹⁰

The governments which have held power over the world before the dawn of the internet age, he writes, "derive their powers from the consent of the governed." The new realm of cyberspace, unlike the realm of the physical, "does not lie within your borders...it is an act of nature and it grows itself through our collective actions." Those actions, according to Barlow, have been unaided by governments, which have "not engaged" in cultural discourse and did not "create the wealth of our marketplaces." Governments plan to use the "problems among us" as an "excuse to invade our precincts" through actions such as the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and its decency provisions. Many of those problems "don't exist" for Barlow, and "where there are real conflicts...we will identify them and address them by our means."¹¹

The concepts by which the physical world is governed, such as "property, expression, identity, movement, and context" do not apply to Barlow's digital world. The laws created by the United States (he specifically cites the Telecommunications Act)

“insult the dreams” of the founders and other philosophers. Those dreams, he writes, “must now be born anew in us.” The holders of those new dreams are “your own children,” who are feared by existing governments because “they are natives in a world where you will always be immigrants.” The “expressions of humanity, from the debasing to the angelic,” are “the air upon which wings beat.” That air is threatened by “increasingly obsolete information industries” that “would perpetuate themselves by proposing laws, in America and elsewhere, that claim to own speech itself throughout the world.” Those laws must be resisted, for they “declare ideas to be another industrial product.”¹²

The actions of those industries are “increasingly hostile and colonial measures” that “place us in the same position as those previous lovers of freedom and self-determination who had to reject the authorities of distant, uninformed powers.” The selves of the new world are “immune to your sovereignty,” despite their continuing “consent to your rule over our bodies.” The world that will be created in cyberspace, writes Barlow, will be “more humane and fair than the world your governments have made before.”¹³

Whether that new world became humane or fair in the ensuing years, however, is a topic of some contention. Barlow’s declaration still holds relevance today, as many current debates surrounding internet discourse and social climates online reference arguments that have as their ancestry Barlow’s words. Amanda Hess wrote for *Slate* in October 2015 that “read one way, Barlow’s declaration gives marginalized communities permission to speak truth to power. Read another, it discourages women and people of color from discussing their bodies and identities online while emboldening others to bully

them into silence.”¹⁴ She adds that “It was almost as if the Web had been calibrated from the very beginning to allow a bigoted harassment campaign to flourish.”¹⁵

Barlow responded to this vein of criticism in 2016, when he told *The Economist*:

[If I could write the text again] I probably wouldn't have imitated the grandiloquent style of a notorious former slave holder. And I would have been a bit more humble about the “Citizens of Cyberspace” creating social contracts to deal with bad behavior online. The fact remains there is not much one can do about bad behavior online except to take faith that the vast majority of what goes on there is not bad behavior. Yeah, I hate spam, and viruses, and worms, and surveillance [by America's National Security Agency], but the fact remains that if you can censor one of these bad behaviors, you've endowed yourself with the ability to censor almost anything you don't like online. This is not an ability I wish to extend to any existing government in the physical world. If we assert it, what's to prevent Saudi Arabia from doing the same?¹⁶

Barlow's argument contends that, despite the possibility of abuse and “bad behavior” online, governments should be limited in their ability to respond to those instantiations of speech. The exchange between the proponents of hate speech reform such as Hess and libertarian actors such as Barlow is indicative of many conversations surrounding speech on the internet in 2016. In July 2015, *The Verge*'s Adi Robertson wrote that “At some point, debate isn't a good-faith act, it's a stalling tactic to protect the status quo.” She adds that “committing to absolute, hands-off openness will eventually mean defending speech that is truly worthless and harmful,” and that “it's fine to decide that this is worth the cost. It's ridiculous to pretend we should be grateful it exists.”¹⁷ The debate begun by Barlow concerning speech, freedom, and the nature of online discourse still continues today.

Revolutionary Narratives

In what remains the most thorough and comprehensive analysis of Barlow's declaration to date, Aimée Hope Morrison wrote in “An Impossible Future: John Perry

Barlow's 'Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace'" that "revolutionary politics are assumed to be immanent in the machines that structure and enable networked communication."¹⁸ Morrison's piece is anchored on three points concerning Barlow's work: that "newness is rooted in history; revolution is effected by commercial transaction; and liberal democracy becomes libertarianism."¹⁹ She continues to write that "the true legacy of the declaration has been to depoliticize its addressees, encouraging them to abandon concrete political action in favour of a less effective politics of identity," specifically indicting the document as emblematic of a "larger Silicon Valley politics of technolibertarianism."²⁰

That abandonment of concrete political action has ties to later movements of political activism into the online sphere. To some, action within that sphere lacks the impact of action outside of it. The performance of that liberty, however, is important. Morrison writes that "any universalizing proclamation about the essential character and 'truths' of this 'space,' then, must be read with an eye to the way in which it performs itself and its subjects into being, and the real-world repercussions of this formation."

The declaration itself, she writes, is a "performative document" that "asserts and enacts systems of meaning that ultimately legitimize certain identities, behaviors, and realities at the expense of the others."²¹ She likens the idea of Barlow's "Declaration" to the long tradition of political manifestos, adding that "the word 'manifesto' has roots in the Latin *manifestus*, meaning 'clear' or 'evident.' ...the manifesto and declaration take part in the determination of the very essence and bounds of their subject."²² Liberty, then, takes on a performative aspect: founding documents enact independence, thereby

cementing their claims to independence by their own existence. To draw new lines of demarcation is to enact them, and to have enacted them is to have drawn them.

Another important element in the consideration of a declaration such as Barlow's is the concept of the signature. Barlow's essay is not signed, and does not engage in what Derrida calls the "actual or empirical nonpresence of the signer."²³ The signature carries with it the presumed or supposed intent of the signer, who surmounts their "nonpresence" by establishing a claim over the content itself. That claim "marks and retains his having-been present in a past *now* or present [*maintenant*] which will remain a future *now* or present [*maintenant*]," which, coupled with its reproducibility, its "repeatable, iterable, imitable form," can be "detached from the present and singular intention of its production."²⁴ The signature is an act of intent and ownership by which a signer claims both her existence as author and her agency as rhetor. Barlow's declaration is signed with only a location and a date—his attribution (in the online copy) is placed below the title of the document. The lack of signature attached to the document creates a space for readers to identify themselves as a part of the greater whole, as an agent and actor in the new realm of cyberspace. Readers are rhetorically positioned to envision themselves signing on the dotted line.

Morrison writes that "Barlow's declaration participates in a kind of rhetorical bootstrapping, in that its assertions of a particular reality constitute one of the acts that generate that reality." Barlow himself participates in the kind of organic world building that he considers to be a principal power of the internet. The same can be written of Thomas Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence"—by declaring oneself a free people with the power to create and dissolve bonds of statehood, that power has been both

declared and performed. To borrow from Stephen Toulmin, the document is its own warrant. Readers recognize themselves as citizens of the new world, as occupants of the realm of cyberspace. That recognition is a vital element of what Althusser calls “hailing,” or “interpellation,” the act by which ideological claims “recruit subjects” or “transform subjects.” Althusser writes that “all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects, by the functioning of the category of the subject.”²⁵

For Althusser, it is the actions of the everyday that are rooted most certainly in ideology. He notes that “what thus seems to take place outside ideology (to be precise, in the street), in reality takes place in ideology.”²⁶ Those actions most mundane are reconsidered in this lens to be the actions of a discrete and functioning ideology that influences their expression and performance. Barlow’s declaration performs that hail by the construction of metaphors surrounding the frontier, the digital future, and individualism in the coming new era of the web.

The Frontier and the Constitution of a New Digital Identity

Barlow is able to argue for the existence of cyberspace as an undiscovered territory precisely because it lacks any territoriality. Governments of the world have always drawn their chief roles from the circumnavigation of constraint—the delivery of water, the securing of foodstuffs, the construction of borders, and safety measures. Cyberspace is both an infinite plane and a subject of limitation. It acknowledges no limit to expansion, but is practically limited by internet access, bandwidth, and server capacity. Those constraints, however, are fairly easy to surmount—comparing the purchase of another “server farm” to the construction and maintenance of an irrigation system reveals a clear advantage of economies of scale.

Barlow argues that the internet will/should be necessarily free of governmental interference because the governments “of the world” have no moral right to rule over digital bodies. He neglects to mention, however, the factors that *do* influence the digital body, such as platforms (Facebook, Twitter, various blogging outlets and content management systems such as *Chorus*) and service providers like Comcast, Time Warner Cable, and Google Fiber. Barlow isn’t arguing for extinction of governments; he’s arguing for a transformation in the perceived autonomy of the citizen. The online citizen in Barlow’s conception of cyberspace possesses a supposed level of capability and capacity that necessarily structures the digital self. The cybercitizen consents, but she does so in a much different way than the citizen of a nation. The citizen of the nation consents with tax dollars and obedience, while the cybercitizen consents through the purchase of digital habitation and upkeep of interconnect space.

Sally Wyatt, in her article “Danger! Metaphors at Work in Economics, Geophysiology, and the Internet” writes of internet metaphor: “it is therefore important to think about metaphors of the Internet not only because they reveal what different actors think it is but also because they tell us something about what they want it to become.” Those intentions, she continues, are important. “Metaphors are thus not only descriptive, they may provide clues to the design intentions of those who use them and, as such, they may help to shape the cognitive framework within which such actors operate.”²⁷

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson write in *Metaphors We Live By* that “metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish—a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language,” noting specifically that metaphor is typically understood as “a matter of words rather than thought or action.” This conception

of metaphor, they continue, lacks an understanding that metaphor is more than a poetic device. The human “conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.”²⁸ Metaphor constructs, defines, and enforces the bounds and texture of the social worlds that we inhabit. Kenneth Burke writes in “Four Master Tropes” that

metaphor is a device for seeing something *in terms of* something else. It brings out the thisness of a that, or the thatness of a this. If we employ the word “character” for whatever can be thought of as distinct (any thing, pattern, situation, structure, nature, person, object, act, role, process, event, etc.,) then we could say that metaphor tells us something about one character as considered from the point of view of another character. And to consider A from the point of view of B is, of course, to use B as a *perspective* upon A..²⁹

In *Permanence and Change*, Burke’s conception of metaphor specifically includes the revealing of “hitherto unsuspected connectives” that “appeal[s] by exemplifying relationships between objects which our customary rational vocabulary has ignored.”³⁰ Those relationships don’t necessarily compromise dialogue as some might think—Burke notes that “those who have criticized the use of metaphor have for the most part not realized how little removed such description is from the ordinary intellectual method of analysis.”³¹ It’s important to note that when Burke considers metaphor in *Permanence*, he’s speaking at least in part on the use of metaphor as a kind of heuristic. Later endeavors such as Lakoff and Johnson’s would focus specifically on the power of world building possessed by metaphor, but Burke already noted in “Four Master Tropes” the power of metaphor to structure associations of the mind. Later in *Permanence*, his structuring of metaphor turns to the intellectual power of metaphor itself:

Indeed, as the documents of science pile up, are we not coming to see that whole works of scientific research, even entire *schools*, are hardly more than the patient repetition in all its ramifications, of a fertile metaphor? Thus we have, at different eras in history, considered man as the son of God, as an animal, as a political or

economic brick, as a machine, each such metaphor, and a hundred others, serving as the cue for an unending line of data and generalizations. The attempt to fix argument by analogy as a distinct kind of process, separable from logical argument, seems increasingly futile.³²

In this example, it seems logical to draw a connection between what Burke calls “schools of thought” and ideological structures such as the ones Althusser focuses on in his work on ideology and the state. For Althusser, the ideological constitution of the subject is the process by which an ideology maintains and centralizes its power. Metaphor, therefore, is the process by which power is consolidated, order is maintained, and the social world is figured and responded to by rhetors.

One such metaphor that aids in the construction of social reality by using one frame of reference as a perspective upon another is that of the frontier. Janice Hocker Rushing wrote that “every culture” possesses a “supply of myths which defines its identity and dictates its moral vision.” She notes specifically that “from birth to maturity, America has drawn upon the frontier for its mythic identity.” America, therefore, “has constantly sought new frontiers as the old are tamed, and as long as it has found them, has preserved the backdrop of its identity even as the drama has evolved.”³³

Mary Stuckey writes that “the frontier myth functions as ‘America’s secular creation story.’” She also notes that myths such as that of the frontier have the power to compile “national cultural fictions” into myths “created by a society” that function as “building blocks of national identity.” Those building blocks “are used by different people at different times, to differing political ends.”³⁴ Stuckey and Zoe Carney have also written that “the frontier myth appeared as colloquial common sense that served to ‘validate a certain social order.’” That appearance of common sense, they write, often serves as a way to “instruct [a] community’s future decision making, actions, and

beliefs.” In a similar way, metaphors attempting to constitute the internet as a frontier borrowed from America’s presupposed “emergence as a nation-state, its economic growth, and its process of modernization.”³⁵

James McDaniel writes in “Figures for New Frontiers, From Davy Crockett to Cyberspace Gurus” that “public discourses that constitute new frontiers characteristically evoke novel senses of place and displacement as well as subjectivities capable of flourishing in these sense-spaces.”³⁶ Barlow’s text does just that. His declaration creates a sense of “place and displacement” in its admission of newness: “ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere,” he writes, “but it is not where bodies live.”³⁷ He writes in his 1991 essay “Coming into the Country” that in cyberspace, “everyone is as virtual as the shadows in Plato’s cave,” and that “place” is perhaps not even a correct word by which to judge cyberspace.³⁸ It is the world of the always already, the continuous plane of the mind. Its newness is inherent, and Barlow casts it as a place of constant innovation. Barlow also created in “Coming into the Country” and his declaration a sense of displacement, writing in “Country” that “our financial, legal, and even physical lives are increasingly dependent on realities of which we have only dimmest awareness. We have entrusted the basic functions of modern existence to institutions we cannot name, using tools we’ve never heard of and could not operate if we had.”³⁹ This displacement isn’t just indicative of a kind of “user error,” it’s inherent to the realm of the digital itself. The “fear” that Barlow names in the governments of the world also speaks to their displacement in the new world order. He writes in “A Declaration” that “you are terrified of your own children, since they are natives in a world where you will always be

immigrants.”⁴⁰ That displacement, along with the creation of a sense of specific place in cyberspace itself, is the appeal by which Barlow structures his new frontier realm.

Morrison writes of the libertarian discourse present in Barlow’s declaration, noting that “true to its emerging epic form, the declaration appeals to emotion in a style more appropriate to jingoism than to thoughtful reflection on governance.”⁴¹ While her critique is based in an ideological reading of the text, it oversamples the “jingoist” overtones of the text itself. By the standard that Morrison sets out, any declaration of independence or political document that uses terse language and a simple declarative style can be read as militaristic. Rather than consider a jingoist tone present in the text, I propose that it’s more productive to examine Barlow’s application of those aggressive tones to a consideration of frontier subjectivities.

Barlow’s declaration can be read as an attempt to claim the new territory of the digital as a kind of frontier that beckons to a certain kind of explorer and rewards a certain kind of drive. Barlow constructs the hero of cyberspace as the unlimited mind, the rational liberal actor who can navigate both the pressures of an emerging hyper-democratic system and the barren wasteland of the frontier itself. Since cyberspace is “largely an imagined space, an artifact built from narrative,” then the idea of cyberspace as a frontier calls into being a public hardened and resistant to its harsh climate.⁴² Barlow constitutes an imagined audience that, as Edwin Black indicates, necessarily calls into being “a model of what the rhetor would have his real auditor become.”⁴³ Barlow wrote in 1991 that “for all its importance to modern existence, cyberspace remains a frontier region, across which roam the few aboriginal technologists and cyberpunks who can tolerate the austerity of its savage computer interfaces, incompatible communications

protocols, proprietary barricades, cultural and legal ambiguities, and general lack of useful maps or metaphors.”⁴⁴ The individual thus becomes more than a citizen—she is an explorer, an inhabitant of the new world that must fend for herself.

Barlow’s estimation of the digital frontier as a space without “useful maps or metaphors” fails to account for the very metaphor of the frontier itself that he utilizes. His discourse specifically calls into being what McDaniel would name “subjectivities capable of flourishing in these sense-spaces” of cyberspace.⁴⁵ Morrison links those subjectivities to Barlow’s use of the “founding American myth,” writing that “by contrast, Barlow’s declaration chafes against the constraints of any national law while explicitly riding the (rhetorical and) political coat-tails of the American revolution.”⁴⁶ Morrison’s estimation of Barlow’s appropriation of the American revolutionary mythos, however, neglects to consider the dimensions of space and morality that specifically color Barlow’s consideration of cyberspace as a frontier with distinctly American lineage. Barlow constitutes his audience as citizens of the new digital frontier. Morrison objects to Barlow’s treatment of politics—“he writes, without noting that the commonweal and self-interest (corporate or personal) are often at odds.”⁴⁷

Considering the role of metaphor and mythic frontiers within Barlow’s text allows us to fully probe that opposition. Since the digital world is a space that Barlow insists is not within the borders of the governed (or governable) world, it must therefore be governed by the morality, conviction, and character of those that come to it. The liberty to reshape the frontier as one sees fit is naturally at odds with the creation of the new community of the future from which Barlow hails. Hillary Jones writes in “Them as Feel the Need to Be Free” that “navigating the frontier myth’s traditional dialectics requires

balancing civilization with savagery and the individual with the communal.”⁴⁸ In order to justify the need for a new order on the frontier, she argues, rhetors channel “what it means to be ‘American,’” which (mythically and somewhat literally) involved “moving into new spaces, defining the self as civilized by denigrating an Other as savage, and balancing the individual with the communal.”⁴⁹

Those patterns and balances are present in Barlow’s figuring of cyberspace as a frontier. The realm of interconnected computing is the “new space,” the outdated “weary giants” of government are the “savage Other,” and the individual must enter a continual negotiation with the communal. Barlow’s new space is the realm of the digital in which “roam the few aboriginal technologists and cyberpunks who can tolerate the austerity of its savage[ry].”⁵⁰ His fellow digital pioneers must be comfortable with the navigation of a rough and rugged terrain, and must tolerate the “savagery” of the other. Barlow constructs the “other” as the outside world, those from “away,” the outdated and outmoded governments of the industrial world that exist in fear of the new realms of the digital. The individual, without the fear of corporeal punishment, exists for Barlow both outside of and within the new social order, entering and participating as they wish—the ideal democratic subject.

John Jordan makes specific reference to the utility of frontier mythos, writing that “rhetors have frequently used frontier imagery as a mythic framework for proposed human action,” and that “rhetoric evoking the mythic frontier has provided Americans with a guiding sense of identity.”⁵¹ Barlow’s use of the metaphor similarly provides citizens of the digital frontier with a guiding sense of identity—they are constituted as a people capable of navigating the treacherous terrain of the future, reminiscent of the

“rugged individualists” who occupied the American Western frontier.⁵² By making the claim that “cyberspace does not lie within your borders,” Barlow reserves the digital frontier as the natural birthright of those who understand it.⁵³

Later in his declaration, Barlow writes:

I address you with no greater authority than that with which liberty itself always speaks. I declare the global social space we are building to be naturally independent of the tyrannies you seek to impose on us. You have no moral right to rule us, nor do you possess any methods of enforcement we have true reason to fear.⁵⁴

Barlow constructs the occupant of the frontier as someone over which no government has the right to rule, because those occupants possess their own inalienable moral rights. In doing so, he brings his future into alignment with the democratic identities constructed by Thomas Jefferson in his own “Declaration of Independence.” Documents such as these are performative, but they also participate in mythic narrative and metaphor to constitute what Maurice Charland would call “an ideological subject...so constituted that sovereignty is a natural and necessary way of life.”⁵⁵ Barlow’s ideological subject is constituted in such a way that liberty and freedom of mind are foregone conclusions. Sovereignty over the digital space, therefore, is “natural and necessary,” for their liberty is their own right to rule. Claiming that legitimacy, then, is a forceful act, and requires a negotiation between self and society very fitting to libertarian ideology.

From the Frontier to the Economic Subject

Lincoln Dahlberg calls the adoption of democratic-revolutionary language by the early internet “teledemocracy,” which he believes draws “directly upon liberal individualism.”⁵⁶ The central tenets of the techno-democracy that Barlow posits therefore

draw their justification from the idea of the “Cartesian subject.”⁵⁷ They “posit the individual as a rational, autonomous subject who knows and can express their own best interests.” The rational subject of a democratic polity is assumed to be a “self-seeking utility maximizer.” This positioning of the individual “parallels the classic economic agent.”⁵⁸ Dietz writes that, under this ideology of economic agency, “citizenship becomes less a collective, political activity than an individual, economic activity—the right to pursue one’s own interests, without hindrance, in the marketplace.”⁵⁹

Barlow is calling into being a public that acts rationally upon their own self interest, and does so by marrying his ideas of the new territory of cyberspace to the frontier of American mythos. Along with the American mythos comes American economic mythos through the principles of liberal democracy and the concept of the Cartesian subject. The one who thinks, is, and he can govern himself. The central act of citizenship becomes *investment*—in democratic practice, in the marketplace, and in the maintenance of cyberspace itself. This conception of democratic idealism stands in contrast with what Morrison terms a conventional “structure of government rhetorically allied to an outmoded materiality and corporeality.”⁶⁰

James Arnt Aune wrote in *Selling the Free Market* that “the typical libertarian distrust of public discussion and debate suggests that utopia either is impossible or paradoxically can develop only under an initially authoritarian regime,” but Barlow seems to answer that idea with his insistence on the mind as the turning point of the future.⁶¹ The “civilization of the mind,” Barlow contends, will be “more humane and fair” than those that came before it, because the mind can operate unfettered in cyberspace.⁶² Barlow seems to point to public discussion and debate as problems when

they take place in the realm of the physical, as opposed to the transactional politics of the interconnected digital age.

Barlow's text is specifically transactional—his first indictment of the existing “governments of the world” is that they are “weary giants of flesh and steel.”⁶³ In addition, Barlow specifically mentions that a benefit of the new media landscape is that the human mind's creations can be recreated at no cost. He writes that concepts of “property, expression, identity, movement, and context” are outdated, and cites “economic power” as a factor that will not be considered in the new world order of the internet.⁶⁴ Years later, this stands out as Barlow's most naive misconception. The internet became incredibly commercial, dominated by monetary interests and corporate giants. In the late 2010s, as some telecom giants fall and others rise, one thing has become clear—there is a lot of money at stake, and that money influences who can play. Shane Greenstein writes that “the commercialization of the internet merits attention” because “it illuminates important relationships between transformation in industrial structure and innovation.” Later, he notes that “replacing one economic structure with another is often called the process of ‘creative destruction.’”⁶⁵ That process of destruction and economic destabilization begins at the frontier.

Morrison writes in “Impossible Future” that “We can read the declaration, with its transaction-based politics and vehement denouncing of regulation, as the complaint of the moneyed against the powerful, hardly the ‘Everyman’ narrative that the text promotes itself to be.”⁶⁶ Morrison's analysis of Barlow's “everyman,” however, fails to acknowledge the liminal space created within the text itself for the actions of the common and everyday:

Governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. You have neither solicited nor received ours. We did not invite you. You do not know us, nor do you know our world. Cyberspace does not lie within your borders. Do not think that you can build it, as though it were a public construction project. You cannot. It is an act of nature and it grows itself through our collective actions..⁶⁷

The citizen does not need the powers of the government to enact social or industrial projects—in Barlow’s estimation, the act of the social is created organically, by the continuing actions and contributions of everyday participants in the digital world. It is precisely for this reason that the document held (and continues to hold) such sway: the space for invention hollowed out by Barlow in his writing is a space that is left just empty enough for other inventions to fill.

One such rhetor that occupies the discursive space created by Barlow in his declaration is Paul Graham, whose essays frequently focused on how the internet, and the age of startup economies and disruption that it would usher in, provided a new world for economic participation and transactional citizenship. Graham’s calls for what Greenstein might call “creative destruction” originate in Barlow’s construction of the internet as a place where those economic roles shift..⁶⁸ Barlow’s creation of the digital citizen as the ultimate economic agent rings through Graham’s calls to disrupt economic paradigms and Gary Vaynerchuk’s calls for the economic self to take flight on the internet. Barlow’s construction of the digital self as the rugged individualist speaks to that development of discourse surrounding politics, identity, and economics online. Paul Graham and Gary Vaynerchuk take up the narrative of the frontier and construct the individual as a cunning and nimble economic actor, one capable of reading and responding to shifts in the market with ease. If the internet became a digital space for the construction of new economic selves, then John Perry Barlow was indeed its Thomas Jefferson after all.

NOTES

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CHAPTER THREE

Reductio Ad Absurdum: Paul Graham and the Search for the Economic Agent

“If rhetoric has permeated human existence, it has partly done so because neo-liberalism encourages people to imagine themselves and others as value-producing subjects.”

-Ronald Walter Greene, “Rhetorical Capital: Communicative Labor, Money/Speech, and Neo-Liberal Governance”

Paul Graham would like it if we stopped working as though we were sitting on the couch and eating donuts. “A normal job,” he writes, “may be as bad for us intellectually as white flour or sugar is for us physically.”¹ Digital laborers, Graham continues, work best when self-employed. Laborers of the future owe no allegiance to state or society in Graham’s constitution—only themselves and the products of their labor. The assumption that self-interest and deregulation are principles upon which economies are built is reminiscent of James Arnt Aune’s claim that “the market assumes the role of hero in vanquishing government” in libertarian ideologies such as those espoused by John Perry Barlow.² That ideology of the heroic individual migrated to cyberspace in the early days of the internet, as Barlow constituted early internet users as brave pioneers on a new frontier. That frontier narrative necessarily brought with it the ideological conditions that make the frontier a borderland, and those conditions were ripe for transformation into a general “can-do” success narrative. In Barlow’s estimation, anyone could make it on the frontier—they only had to want it enough. The internet worker was constituted as an economic agent of change and disruption. Robert McChesney has argued that the “tremendous assets” of “media giants” creates a resistance to that disruption and provides

the raw capital necessary to establish new markets in media and economic sectors that traditional internet optimism asserted would be havens for invention..³

In this chapter, I argue that Paul Graham's rhetorical positioning of startups as the purest form of the digital frontier allowed those assets to retain their grip on work discourse, even as conversations surrounding work ethic and startups alleged that the internet allowed more freedom for labor than ever before. "Economic Inequality" and "You Weren't Meant to Have a Boss" serve as excellent examples of Graham's larger fusion of both libertarian economic ideological commitment and his focus on the self as the sole agent of economic success. In doing so, Graham's essays perform a critical fusion of classic economic metaphors that allows the ideals of classical liberalism and economic libertarianism to find a symbiotic home on the internet.

Paul Graham is a co-founder of Y Combinator, a technological investment "accelerator" in Silicon Valley. Y Combinator has funded, or "accelerated," 564 companies since it opened in 2005. Among the companies that it has funded are social news aggregator Reddit, the travel and lodging service Airbnb, and the storage system Dropbox. The companies that Graham and Y Combinator fund have raised more than \$1.7 billion, and have been valued at \$11.7 billion..⁴ He's also the author of *On Lisp: Advanced Techniques for Common Lisp* (1993), *ANSI Common LISP* (1995), and *Hackers & Painters: Big Ideas from the Computer Age* (2010). In addition to publishing books and funding companies, Graham has become something of an internet personality. He's a frequent contributor to technological summits and roundtables, and his personal essays circulate widely on internet entrepreneurial circuits.

While Paul Graham has not been a subject of particular research within the field of communication, larger conversations surrounding Silicon Valley and economics have been the subject of much analysis. Of particular interest to this investigation is writing at the nexus of rhetorical criticism and economic or political ideology. Perhaps the most prescient of those works is Aune's *Selling the Free Market: The Rhetoric of Economic Correctness*. Aune's main proposal is that American conservatives, while lamenting the rise of political correctness, established a climate in which economic arguments that furthered the idea of free-market solutions to public policy issues were considered sacrosanct. He terms this climate "economic correctness," and holds it responsible for damage to "families, jobs, neighborhoods, and the traditional 'liberal arts' education."⁵

Agile Agents: "You Weren't Meant to Have a Boss"

"Technology," Paul Graham writes, "tends to separate normal from natural. Our bodies weren't designed to eat the foods that people in rich countries eat, or to get so little exercise. There may be a similar problem with the way we work: a normal job may be as bad for us intellectually as white flour or sugar is for us physically." Graham notes that, in his experience, there is a distinction between programmers that have worked for their own startup ventures and those that have worked for a large company. Those who work for their own companies are not necessarily happier, as he writes that "starting a startup can be very stressful." Rather, those who work for themselves through the internet are described as "happier in the sense that your body is happier during a long run than sitting on a sofa eating donuts." Though their work is abnormal in the sense that not many programmers founded their own companies, Graham believes that "startup founders seem to be working in a way that is more natural for humans."⁶

Graham likens the experience of programmers and founders working for themselves through the internet to his experiences in Africa. He notes that animals in the wild were different from the animals that he had seen in zoos, specifically citing lions as an example. “Lions in the wild seem about ten times more alive,” he writes. “They’re like different animals. I suspect that working for oneself feels better to humans in much the same way that living in the wild must feel better to a wide-ranging predator like a lion. Life in a zoo is easier, but it isn’t the life they were made for.”⁷ Graham’s comparison here couples with the food metaphor to bolster the first section of his argument. Humans, he argues, should ideally operate like predatory animals do in the wild—without constraint of their own agency. The key concept to his first argument is that of predation: humans, when correctly feeding their urges to both consume and produce, should have the same control over their own progress and drive as the predator does over its own.

Graham continues his argument with a declaration: “The root of the problem is that humans weren’t meant to work in such large groups.” “Certain species thrive in groups of a certain size,” he continues. “Humans also seem designed to work in groups.” He cites social science research and anthropological data concerning the hunter-gatherer, adding that “we are clearly not meant to work in groups of several hundred. And yet—for reasons having more to do with technology than human nature—a great many people work for companies with hundreds or thousands of employees.” This kind of pessimism regarding technological gains in streamlining workplaces is extremely relevant to Graham’s argument. His essay balances the pressure to work in a more focused and independent manner in the technological future with a contrasting pressure to resist normalizing the conditions that have developed out of that future. While advancements in

communication technologies have allowed digital labor to span continents, Graham maintains that these arrangements necessarily introduce something unnatural to the human labor condition—bosses..⁸

Bosses, Graham explains, are limiting because they serve a mediating function between the worker and the labor that they are willing or able to produce. Programmers cannot be free to work through their own problems in creative and interesting ways if they are forced to submit their will to another employee that has control over the process. “Anyone who’s worked for a large organization has felt this,” he writes. “You can feel the difference between working for a company with 100 employees and one with 10,000, even if your group has only 10 people.”⁹ This difference, he elucidates, is that working for a large organization maintains some simulation of working for oneself, but doesn’t actually offer any of the long-term benefits to starting one’s own career. To Graham, that’s just like corn syrup.

“A job at a big company is like high fructose corn syrup,” Graham continues. “It has some of the qualities of things you’re meant to like, but it is disastrously lacking in others.” In Graham’s estimation, corn syrup, like other “normal foods,” appeals for the same reason that working for a large company appeals. First, they have “immediate appeal.” “You may feel lousy an hour after eating that pizza,” he writes, “but eating the first bite is incredible.” The second reason that consumers choose foods that are not good for them is “economies of scale.” “Producing junk food scales,” he notes, “producing fresh vegetables doesn’t.” He writes that taking a job with a large company is “the job equivalent of the pizza they had for lunch. The drawbacks will only be apparent later, and

then only in a vague sense of malaise.” “In an artificial world,” he concludes, “only extremists live naturally.”¹⁰

Graham includes a note, writing that the limitations of large companies are particularly hard on programmers, “because the essence of programming is to build new things.” While other workers perform the same actions every day, such as sales and support employees, programmers are in the business of invention. Graham casts programming in the light of a noble calling, seemingly constituting the job as something just shy of raw creation. Those programmers, in his estimation, would be better off working for themselves. “A programmer deciding between a regular job at a big company and their own startup,” he declares, “is probably going to learn more doing the startup. You can adjust the amount of freedom you get by scaling the size of company you work for.” He writes that large companies inhibit both freedom and speed. “The head of a small company may still choose to be a tyrant. The point is that a head of a large organization is compelled by its structure to be one.”¹¹

Graham concludes his essay by offering advice to graduating or beginning programmers:

The reason I suggested college graduates not start startups immediately was that I felt most would fail. And they will. But ambitious programmers are better off doing their own thing and failing than going to work at a big company. Certainly they’ll learn more. They might even be better off financially. A lot of people in their early twenties go into debt, because their expenses grow even faster than the salary that seemed so high when they left school. At least if you start a startup and fail your net worth will be zero rather than negative.¹²

The founders that Graham works with seem to him to be “kind of conservative.” After they work on their own for a time, however, “they’re transformed: they have so much more confidence that they seem as if they’ve grown several inches taller. Strange

as this sounds, they seem both more worried and happier at the same time. Which is exactly how I'd describe lions in the wild.”¹³

While Graham makes several core claims about the nature of work and the ideal life for digital laborers, the main rhetorical feature of his essay is the constitution of the digital worker as separate from the “herd” of other value-producing animals in the marketplace. Greene defines the assessment of human value by market trends as “neo-liberalism.” He writes that “today, the hegemonic form of capitalism is neo-liberal, a rationality that governs the economy by ‘freeing markets’ from regulation. More radically, it calls for the organization of all social life as a market.”¹⁴ Graham’s claim is a neoliberal appeal in that it relies on workers motivating their decisions based on their idea of the value of their work in the marketplace and links the social existence of the workers to an animal life much akin to existence in the global market.

“If rhetoric has permeated human existence,” Greene writes, “it has partly done so because neo-liberalism encourages people to imagine themselves and others as value producing subjects.”¹⁵ Graham’s claims about zoos and animals in the wild are a clear instantiation of that appeal. Workers, in Graham’s estimation, should use their labor to enhance their own values in a predatory manner not unlike the lion roaming the countryside. Graham’s essay reflects the use of rhetorical appeals to constitute a public of workers that continue to perpetuate the system of value that drives startup economies.

Maurice Charland, in his influential article “Constitutive Rhetoric,” notes the power that certain appeals have to constitute publics through the production and maintenance of narrative appeals. Charland notes that constitutive rhetorics “have power because they are oriented towards action.”¹⁶ Those actions contribute to ideological

processes, but Charland specifies that “constitutive rhetorics are not ideological merely because they provide individuals with narratives to inhabit as subjects and motives to experience, but because they insert ‘narratized’ subjects-as-agents into the world.”¹⁷ Earlier in his article, he notes that “subjectivity is always social, constituted in language, and exists in a delicate balance of contradictory drives and impulses.”¹⁸ Those drives and impulses, much like the drive to eat corn syrup or pizza as Graham notes, are sublimated, resisted, or indulged in as the balance of subjectivity shifts.

While Charland’s essay on constitutive rhetoric focused on the power of those narratives in forming national movements, I contend that essays such as Graham’s perform a similar function for the worker—they constitute the laborer as a member of a long-standing and noble history of those working for themselves. They recognize themselves as what Greene would call “value producing subjects.”¹⁹

Graham’s essay constitutes the digital laborer in three ways. First, it calls to the laborer as a responsible, self-governing individual. To survive in the wild, the narrative contends, laborers must control both their impulses and harness their drives. Secondly, the essay constructs an ascetic public of workers. These workers engage in the aforementioned denial of self for a higher calling—self-fulfillment. Finally, the essay constitutes the independent worker as an agile agent of a mobile economy, capable of “making it” in the market without the capital that typically buffers such efforts at entrepreneurship.

Graham’s first appeal is to the self-governance of the worker. As the conditions of digital labor change the face of work, the conditions by which labor is maintained and guaranteed change as well. George Monbiot wrote in *The Guardian* that “neoliberalism

sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations. It redefines citizens as consumers, whose democratic choices are best exercised by buying and selling, a process that rewards merit and punishes inefficiency. It maintains that ‘the market’ delivers benefits that could never be achieved by planning.”²⁰ While critiques of the neoliberal state aren’t hard to find, one section of Monbiot’s thesis deserves closer attention. He writes that neoliberalism “rewards merit and punishes inefficiency.” That dynamic, the push and pull of economic success in capitalism, is aggravated under what Monbiot would term the neoliberal condition. It encourages infighting, resentment of the self and of others, and inculcates a feeling of consuming loneliness.

Graham’s essay, on the other hand, argues that the increased government of the self that is required to succeed in the world of the digital economy is healthy. In fact, he draws a clear connection between the economic health of the worker and the physical health of the worker as well. His writing positions food consumption as a moral act akin to the dedication one should show to his work. Helen Zoe Veit writes in *Modern Food, Moral Food*:

Meanwhile, driven by concerns ranging from food safety to food quality to environmental degradation to exploitative labor practices, Americans in growing numbers have become invested in knowing where their food comes from and how it is produced. As a result, interest in home food production has seen an unprecedented revival, from home baking, home canning, home brewing, and home cheese making to vegetable gardening to domestic livestock husbandry. At the same time, participation in farm shares and farmers’ markets has grown rapidly, while demand for organic and local products in even conventional supermarkets has boomed. Commitment to local, seasonal, and sustainable eating has been fueled by a new genre of books and documentary films that decry the production methods of industrial food systems. Americans’ food choices are regularly pointed to as vital factors in public health, social justice, national security, climate change, and even geopolitics. On a scale unrivaled since the Progressive Era, food choices have again become moral choices.²¹

Graham's positioning of physical health as something close to moral purity is a link in a long procession of arguments about food and morality. Most religions have some edict or decree concerning food, ranging from the Judaic abstinence from pork to the Catholic denial of meat during Lent. Food has long been linked to narratives of purity and redemption. Stephanie Houston Grey notes in *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* that

Soylent, like many diets and other food fads, may be seen as extensions of the fear and anxiety that accompany the monumental abundance and consumptive excesses of modern food culture. While eating is among our most personal behaviors, it is increasingly recognized as a political activity, particularly in a world dominated by corporate food production on a mass scale that has turned the means of sustenance and traditional rituals of identity and community into the parade of products and brands that is the fruit of a hydrocarbon economy..²²

Those food choices take on added significance in a culture that cherishes efficiency and purity, as those choices which support efficiency and production are encouraged. Instead of something done to nourish the body, food becomes fuel for work, and the good or "pure" kinds of food are those which best encourage our continued production of value. Mary Douglas writes in *Purity and Danger* that what is impure, or what is "dirt," is "matter out of place...[a] by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter." This construction of a hierarchy then demonizes or condemns any action or matter that is "likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications."²³

Daniel A. Grano and Kenneth S. Zagacki expand on Douglas' work by referencing Kenneth Burke's illustration of filth, writing:

For Burke the guilt produced by filth—whether concealed in the symbolism of the "fecal motive" or the demonic trinity's "principles of the erotic, urinary, and excremental"—must be purged before redemption can be achieved. The transfer of dirt from material to symbolic, and the moral logic whereby filth discloses human nature and motives, shape public judgments of people and communities who are other and out of place; indeed, filth is often viewed as an external sign of interior contamination that comes out in observable, perverted acts (masturbation, incest, sodomy, and so on).²⁴

I contend that Graham's structuring of work and food consumption as similar qualities participates in that same heritage of argument—Graham's equating of certain kinds of work with unhealthy eating rests upon a notion of what pure eating does to the body. That consumption is then allied with healthy attitudes toward work—specifically, working for oneself—that also purify the soul, resetting the human condition to what Graham terms its natural state, like the predator in the wild.

Graham's essay also constitutes the worker in a second way—it encourages the self-employed to view themselves as participants in a higher calling of labor, as ascetic predators in the job market. This appeal rests on the previously explored purity mythos, but it also borrows from the long tradition of asceticism in labor. Jennifer Reilly Bluma has outlined the history of asceticism and rhetoric in her writing on the early Christian desert fathers—ascetic monks that would engage in various types of self-denial in order to grow closer to their faith and God. Graham Gould has written that much of that early movement's commitment to asceticism and denial must be understood in context—he writes that many scholars attribute the early ascetic movement to economic hardship, cultural malaise, or a time of social anxiety. Regardless of asceticism's origins, it proffered an early Christian response to Middle Eastern cultural movements at the time, prominent among which was a concern with economic frugality and excess.²⁵ Bluma adds to an understanding of asceticism a rhetorical context, specifically noting that “much of the desert sayings convey that complete presence with God and heightened awareness of the natural and supernatural through living at the edge of the city where the demons and angels were, was to live the ‘hard work’ of spiritual warfare, or ‘ascesis.’”²⁶

Graham asserts that, despite lacking a sustainable income or salary, the freedom to create that is afforded to those who take on financial risk will ultimately fulfill them. This claim is related to the history of asceticism and self-denial outlined above. The worker, Graham's essay asserts, is better off moving outside of the "city" to do the real work of laboring under a kind of spiritual warfare. The process will not only strengthen her—it will purify her, allowing her to unlock the potential afforded to the predator in the wild.

This assertion of potential is especially encumbered by an assumption of economic stability. It presumes that the sudden pivots that startup workers often have to make into other ventures will continue to be financially and economically viable. Jenna Wortham writes in the *New York Times* that "to pivot is, essentially, to fail gracefully. While the term has been in the start-up lexicon for decades, it is coming up more often in the current Internet boom, as entrepreneurs find that many investors are willing to keep the money flowing even if a start-up takes a hard left turn." Those pivots are often outlined by the evolution of technology itself. Wortham notes that "Sometimes a pivot is necessary when the pace of Internet evolution has made a start-up's original plan obsolete."²⁷

That asceticism is closely linked to the third core rhetorical appeal of Graham's essay. His constitution of the self-employed worker as an ascetic capitalist allows the worker to imagine himself as an economic predator, an agile agent of the economy. This constitution is accomplished by linking the essay's previous claims concerning the denial of pleasures to the long history of asceticism in capitalism.

Graham's text casts the living of one's financial potential as the momentary denial of pleasure in the hope of an eternal (or temporal monetary) reward. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber links the tradition of asceticism to its "worldly" applications in capitalism.²⁸ "The Quaker ethic," he writes, "also holds that a man's life in his calling is an exercise in ascetic virtue, a proof of his state of grace through his conscientiousness, which is expressed in the care and method with which he pursues his calling."²⁹ Graham links the acquisition of a salary to other temptations to accumulate debt, which is in line with Weber's assertion that "wealth is thus bad ethically only in so far as it is a temptation to idleness and sinful enjoyment of life, and its acquisition is bad only when it is with the purpose of later living merrily and without care."³⁰ The denial of wealth and excess, whether in the form of a salary from Google or a pizza, works toward the eventual purification of the soul that allows the worker to come closer to his true calling as a predator, one who stalks the market looking for an economic opportunity. "The Puritan wanted to work in a calling;" Weber writes, "we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of the monastic cells and into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order."³¹

The predatory instinct, when safeguarded by a commitment to moral and physical purity, allows the economic actor a certain agility that protects him against the movements of the market. In a way, this appeal functions as a guard against possible market movements that upset the balance of the entrepreneur's life—if the market rejects your idea and you fail to make a "pivot," then you have failed a commitment to your own work. For, as Luke Winslow outlines in *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, "our social contract

tells us that if we work hard enough for long enough, make the tuition and loan payments, and go to class, our economic arrangements are fair enough to ensure an eventual reward.”³² The game you’re playing is fair, Graham’s essay assures us. If you fail, then it’s because you’ve eaten too many donuts.

The Game will be Played: “Economic Inequality”

After the economic crash of 2008, economic inequality became a subject of chief concern to many political commentators. The *New York Times* explains the new focus:

The mid-20th century was characterized by public policies and societal norms that fostered broad prosperity, including a rising minimum wage, firm rules for time-and-a-half for overtime, strong private-sector unions and cultural and political taboos against high pay and bonuses for executives in the face of layoffs of workers. In contrast, the decades since 1979 have been characterized by erosion of the minimum wage and overtime-pay standards, a decline in unionization and cultural and political acceptance of excessive executive pay..³³

Economic inequality dominated many cultural conversations, and the 2012 election cycle was occupied by many conversations about wealth gaps. One distinction that bears inclusion in this exercise is the difference between income inequality, wage inequality, and wealth inequality. While the three terms are often used interchangeably, they have different meanings. Income inequality measures the gap between wages in different sectors of the economy, and often between individual workers. This means that when political or social commentators discuss wealth inequality, they’re often actually discussing wage inequality—the concrete monetary difference between one worker’s wage (the CEO) and another’s (a janitor). Those gaps can often be shockingly wide, and for this reason they’re often focused on as the main subject of economic inequality. A more productive argument concerning social and economic inequality would focus on *income* as a wide bracket, containing long-term investments, wages, capital, and other

sources of wealth such as rents, interest, and dividends. Those measurements are more valuable to the larger economic conversation because they often have a role in the creation of broad social inequality as well—the control of rents, markets, and interest rates has very little to do with the measurement of short-term wages, but can be a site of intense social strife—with 2008’s economic crash as a prime example.

Thomas Piketty released *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* in 2014. Widely regarded as a foundational text in the study of economic inequality and twenty-first century global markets, Piketty’s book explores the relationship between capital investment as a source of wealth and wages. Picketty notes that “income inequality is the result of adding up these two components: inequality of income from labor and inequality of income from capital.” “The more unequally distributed each of these two components is,” he continues, “the greater the total inequality.” It’s important to contextualize that those two components are not necessarily tied to each other. In Piketty’s words, “it is perfectly possible to imagine a society in which inequality with respect to labor is high and inequality with respect to capital is low, or vice versa, as well as a society in which both components are highly unequal or highly egalitarian.”³⁴

Piketty’s book is based on a central thesis that explains why inequality is of concern—“When the rate of return on capital exceeds the rate of growth of output and income, as it did in the nineteenth century and seems quite likely to do again in the twenty-first, capitalism automatically generates arbitrary and unsustainable inequalities that radically undermine the meritocratic values on which democratic societies are based.”³⁵ Continuing, he writes:

To be sure, income from labor is not always equitably distributed, and it would be unfair to reduce the question of social justice to the importance of income from

labor versus income from inherited wealth. Nevertheless, democratic modernity is founded on the belief that inequalities based on individual talent and effort are more justified than other inequalities—or at any rate we hope to be moving in that direction.³⁶

Eight years after authoring “You Weren’t Meant to Have a Boss,” Graham released an essay entitled “Economic Inequality.” He began his essay with a simple declaration: “Since the 1970s, economic inequality in the US has increased dramatically. And in particular, the rich have gotten a lot richer. Nearly everyone who writes about it says that economic inequality should be decreased.” In Graham’s view, he has been assisting in the creation of that inequality. “I was one of the founders of a company called Y Combinator,” he writes, “that helps people start startups. Almost by definition, if a startup succeeds its founders become rich. Which means by helping startup founders I’ve been helping to increase economic inequality.”³⁷

Graham continues his essay by elucidating what he feels is the main shortcoming of mainstream discussions of economic inequality. “The solution to this puzzle,” he writes, “is to realize that economic inequality is not just one thing. It consists of some things that are very bad, like kids with no chance of reaching their potential, and others that are good, like Larry Page and Sergey Brin starting the company [Google] you use to find things online.”³⁸ Most writing concerning economic inequality “squash[es] together all the aspects of economic inequality as if it were a single phenomenon.” While “sometimes this is done for ideological reasons,” Graham clarifies that poor discussion surrounding inequality in the economy often results from an author who “only has high-level data and so draws conclusions from that, like the proverbial drunk who looks for his keys under the lamppost, instead of where he dropped them, because the light is better

there.” Worse still, some writers don’t “understand critical aspects of economic inequality, like the role of technology in wealth creation.”³⁹

Many writers, Graham explains, regard the economy as children might. They think that “wealth is a fixed pie that’s shared out, and if one person gets it it’s at the expense of another. It takes a conscious effort to remind oneself that the real world doesn’t work that way.” Actual economic issues are the result of many competing factors, he writes, and therefore “except in the degenerate case, economic inequality can’t be described by a ratio or a curve. ...to understand economic inequality in a country, you have to go find individual people who are poor or rich and figure out why.” An adult understanding of the economy, per Graham, “should ask what those people would have done when it was different.”⁴⁰ Progress in the economy, he writes, should be explained using technological innovation, not ratios:

Before Mark Zuckerberg started Facebook, his default expectation was that he’d end up working at Microsoft. The reason he and most other startup founders are richer than they would have been in the mid 20th century is not because of some right turn the country took during the Reagan administration, but because progress in technology has made it much easier to start a new company that grows fast..⁴¹

To Graham, there should be a distinction between wealth creation and theft, not between the strata of the economy. “I’m all for shutting down the crooked ways to get rich,” he writes. “But that won’t eliminate great variations in wealth, because as long as you leave open the option of getting rich by creating wealth, people who want to get rich will do that instead.” He argues that “most people who get rich tend to be fairly driven,” clarifying that “whatever their flaws, laziness is not among them.” In a system that dissuaded making wealth through the manipulation of money, Graham asserts, the driven would simply participate in the mechanisms of wealth creation—specifically, he writes

that they would found startup businesses. “While it would probably be a good thing for the world if people who wanted to get rich switched from playing zero-sum games to creating wealth,” he argues, “that would not eliminate great variations of wealth, but might even exacerbate them.” He also notes that the technologies and services that they would create would foster “further accelerated variation in productivity.”⁴²

If those who were determined to get rich moved their efforts to startups, Graham argues that those efforts would stimulate even deeper variations in productivity, which “[are] the irreducible core” of economic inequality. If those variations were to be quelled, then the determined would have to be “paid enough to prevent them from doing it,”⁴³ something that Graham terms a “Baumol penumbra.” All of this, in Graham’s mind, means that “you can’t prevent great variations in wealth without preventing people from getting rich, and you can’t prevent people from getting rich without preventing them from founding startups.” Since that prevention would only extend “in your own country,” he contends that “people who wanted to do that would just leave and do it somewhere else.”⁴⁴

Graham links the current explosion of wealth within Silicon Valley to “underlying forces” that have been at work for “thousands of years.” “You do not want to design your society in a way that is incompatible with this curve,” he writes. “The evolution of technology is one of the most powerful forces in history. The conversations that we need to be having as a society ask whether we “can have a healthy society with great variation in wealth.” The solution to America’s immediate problems, he writes, is taking a harder look at what he regards as the underlying conditions to inequality. Graham contends that poverty and “a lack of social mobility” should be addressed immediately. “Let’s attack

poverty,” he argues, “and if necessary damage wealth in the process....and if there are people getting rich by tricking consumers or lobbying the government for anti-competitive regulations or tax loopholes, then let’s stop them. Not because it’s causing economic inequality, but because it’s stealing.”⁴⁵

While “You Weren’t Meant to Have a Boss” was released to mild notoriety, “Economic Inequality” landed with quite the splash. It spurred a wide range of responses. Graham himself released a shortened version of his own argument a few days later. At 207 words, it’s a good deal shorter than the original, which tops out at around 3,400 words. In it, Graham defends his original point in much terser terms, writing that “unlike high incarceration rates and tax loopholes, startups are on the whole good,” and that “instead of attacking income inequality, we should attack poverty.” His shortened essay ends with a distillation of his larger point, which is of particular concern to this endeavor: “If we fix all the bad causes of economic inequality, we will still have increasing levels of it, due to the increasing power of technology.”⁴⁶

Zac Cogley responded to Graham’s initial essay with an essay for *The Critique* in which he writes that “if we want great products like Dropbox, Graham seems to say, we have to accept the founders getting rich, and thus, we have to accept economic inequality.” He also writes that “The main aim of [Graham’s] piece is to argue that we should permit the good variants [of inequality]: startups, etc., while going after the bad ones: rich people breaking the rules to exploit the poor, for example.” Graham, he notes, “doesn’t say explicitly what the moral lesson is but it seems clear he thinks people who create wealth—like Zuckerberg—deserve their riches. Deserve them way more, for

example, than people who get rich through rent-seeking or playing zero-sum economic games.”⁴⁷ One of Cogley’s most cogent points follows:

It gets worse, as Graham wants to set aside rent-seeking from the discussion. But rent-seeking can be a huge part of startup profits. There’s a point where Facebook gains profits from creating wealth AND because it’s the default social network. We can’t separate that point from all the others. If riches gained by rent-seeking are undeserved, we have to acknowledge that startups make real money for their founders in an undeserved way.⁴⁸

Other writers launched more personal critiques. Of the many responses posted on personal blogs, perhaps the most critical was written by Holly Wood, who wrote “Paul Graham is Still Asking to be Eaten” in January 2016. “For Paul Graham,” Wood writes, “Silicon Valley Ideology is the ideology America should run on, and ergo, being a puppet of Silicon Valley Ideology, Paul Graham thinks himself a political genius.”⁴⁹ She writes:

About 80% of his essay about economic inequality is a thinly veiled condemnation of poors who Paul Graham thinks are too stupid to understand why the rich are wealthy. They are stupid, he says, because they demand wealth redistribution as a means of addressing poverty rather than attacking poverty itself...he offers these hopeless poors a corrective, modeling himself as a legitimate wealth producer different from those dirty Wall-Street rent-seekers.⁵⁰

Ezra Klein, Editor-In-Chief of *Vox*, wrote a response to Paul Graham in which he argued that “There’s no particular level of inequality that is inevitable, and it’s both pessimistic and ahistorical...to believe the drive towards technological progress is so flimsy that modest changes to the tax code or social programs will derail it.”⁵¹

Graham’s “Economic Inequality” relies on two core appeals to bolster its argument. First, it attempts to draw a distinction between legitimate wealth and illegitimate wealth. Secondly, it constructs widening gaps in inequality and productivity as inevitable forces. I propose that investigating those relationships allows for the

connection of Graham's earlier writing to his 2016 essay concerning economic inequality.

Graham clarifies early in his essay that legitimate trades and work create wealth. "In the real world," he writes, "you can create wealth as well as taking it from others."⁵² He claims that "a woodworker creates wealth. He makes a chair, and you willingly give him money in return for it. A high-frequency trader does not. He makes a dollar only when someone on the other end of a trade loses a dollar."⁵³ David G. Levasseur and Lisa M. Gring-Pemble note that the same distinction between material economies and speculative markets was leveraged by rhetors in the 2012 election when countering accusations of Bain Capital's success. "Rhetorically," they write, "it's difficult to undercut the impressiveness of Bain Capital's profits unless one undermines the nature of the work generating those profits. In the 2012 presidential race, many rhetors attempted to do just that by constructing a division between legitimate and illegitimate capitalistic pursuits."⁵⁴ Mitt Romney, Republican presidential candidate in 2012, "relied upon his Bain Capital narrative to construct a crucial argument." They detail that "Romney told of his Bain Capital experience to advance the claim that he was someone who understood how to help businesses. As the logic goes, someone who knows how to help businesses is well positioned to strengthen businesses and create jobs in tough economic times."⁵⁵

Levasseur and Gring-Pemble note that Donny Box, a critic of Romney's, described the candidate as someone who had never built anything for himself. "Box's discourse," they write, "creates a division between real economic producers and those who make money without producing anything."⁵⁶ They note that those distinctions

engendered a divide between the tangible and the speculative sectors of the economy. In the tangible economy, individuals make things—real things like cars, and houses, and textiles, and computers. This is the part of the economy where individuals engage in real labor to produce a real product or service that possesses real value. The speculative economy, on the other hand, is an altogether different realm. The work accomplished by speculators produces nothing; it simply involves the risky business of making money off the hard work performed by others in the tangible economy. This division between economic sectors is not new; rather, it is a distinction deeply rooted in the American psyche—roots running as deep as the very architects of American democracy.⁵⁷

Graham's essay goes to great lengths to justify the production of wealth through startup technology ventures as descended from that long line of American labor. He asserts that those who create value, such as a chair or an application, cannot be considered nefarious because they are building something for themselves. This rhetorical position of production ignores two things. First, it does not acknowledge the speculative economic ventures that are often necessary to generate the kind of wealth to invest in startup endeavors. Not all investors make their initial capital in the same way, but Graham's prose invites us to overlook that, directing our attention instead at the product of the creator's labor—the chair that we sit in, or the application that we use to book our dinner reservations. Graham's essay specifically calls some understandings of the economy childish, yet he writes that the woodworker “makes a chair, and you willingly give him money in return for it” as if it's inconsequential that all money has to originate somewhere.

Secondly, it presumes that all products made from this “honest labor” are of the same value. To Graham, the failed application engineered at the startup (and most startups fail) is of the same worth as a product delivered directly to market, such as the aforementioned chair.⁵⁸ Graham's essay doesn't acknowledge that what Graham and other Silicon Valley investors trade in is *potential*, not value. While it could be said that

the chair and the startup are both simply economic potential, the difference is one of scale. Silicon Valley investors manipulate millions of dollars into technological ventures. The ideology that they propagate—which clarifies that what they deal is honest labor—is ultimately self-serving. It papers over the fact that what investors like Graham do is invest in ventures that they *think* will succeed—and when so many startups fail, narratives like the one of legitimate wealth serve to bind their cause to that of the “honest rich” throughout history. Investors in Silicon Valley are running a numbers game—if they spend enough time and money working with enough ventures, they might stumble upon the next big thing.

The second core appeal of Graham’s essay is its acknowledgment of technological inevitability. Graham’s essay rests much of its argument on a central tenet—our efforts to investigate economic inequality should be cautious, because the digital future is on its way, and we want to be on the right side of it. Aune writes that a core principle of libertarianism is “that the transition to an information society is inevitable.”⁵⁹ He writes:

No sooner had Marxists given up on the idea of historical determinism than the free-marketers reinvented it with a vengeance. Bill Gates’s “frictionless capitalism” will be brought into being by the Net. Libertarians assert that no criticism or attempt to regulate the new communication technologies should be allowed. ...it is widely argued in libertarian and even more mainstream business journals that the Internet will not only create an integrated global market but will also radically reduce taxation and social services, eventually making government itself obsolete.⁶⁰

This argument, which bears nearly exact resemblance to Barlow’s argument for the deregulation of the internet, relies on a key assumption—that technological progress will happen regardless of economic actors. Graham relies on an understanding of productivity variation as increasing indefinitely and without cause. James Heilbrum

writes that “increases in productivity over time may occur for the following reasons: (1) increased capital per worker, (2) improved technology, (3) increased labour skill, (4) better management, and (5) economies of scale as output rises.” These factors influence productivity measures in the larger economy, which economists measure as “physical output per work hour.”⁶¹

Graham writes in his essay that “variation in productivity is far from the only source of economic inequality, but it is the irreducible core of it, in the sense that you’ll have that left when you eliminate all other sources.”⁶² Graham is certainly correct that productivity varies in the digital age, but those broader increases don’t necessarily prove his point. As Ezra Klein has written, it’s hard to track productivity changes now.

Specifically, the core products of startup ventures make measuring the productivity variations that they bring about difficult. He writes:

We’ve never measured productivity perfectly. We’ve always been confounded by consumer surplus and step changes. To explain the missing productivity of recent decades, you have to show that the problem is getting worse — to show the consumer surplus is getting bigger and the step changes more profound. You have to prove that Facebook offers more consumer surplus than cars once did; that measures of inflation tracked the change from outhouses to toilets better than the change from telephones to smartphones. That turns out to be a very hard case to make..⁶³

Simply put, the productivity gains produced by digital advancement are not easy to track, and they may not be changing the labor market in easily predictable ways.

Graham’s argument concerning productivity hinges on his understanding of Baumol’s cost problem. “Baumol’s penumbra,” as he terms it, refers to the work of William J.

Baumol and William G. Bowen, whose book *Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma* was released to acclaim in 1966. In it, they argue that in some fields, specifically the performing arts, funding new ventures becomes problematic because “ineluctably rising

unit costs” force a “productivity lag.”⁶⁴ Simply put, as costs for producing a symphony or art show rise in accordance with wages, rent, and electricity, the actual output of the art does not change. The higher wage required by the conductor does not encourage the symphony to produce a necessarily *faster* or *better* performance.

Graham applies this idea in his essay to explain why all avenues to wealth creation must be enabled. If the “driven,” as he terms them, must be “paid enough to prevent them” from creating wealth, then that payment would force a productivity lag—their wages would rise, but no increase in productivity would be seen from them. This argument rests on the premise that technological advancement is inevitable, and that societies must accommodate any measure that allows the creation of wealth, lest another society beat them to it. Graham never tells us *how* any of this works—the essay doesn’t illustrate specific policies that, despite their intentions, widen productivity gaps or damage the opportunities of startup founders. It also doesn’t elucidate any specific objections to economic policy writ large, or specify any action that could be taken to reduce poverty without damaging the availability of economic expansion or “scalability.” Ultimately, the text doesn’t reveal any possible responses to that purported complexity—only that we should get out of technology’s way.

Agents of the Technological Future

Megan Foley writes that economic metaphor allows for the comfortable juxtaposition of seemingly incompatible ideas. She notes:

Historically, political economy has operated through a family metaphor that positions citizens as the infants of a paternal government. However, the rhetoric of the 2008 mortgage market crisis flipped that family metaphor upside down, depicting government-sponsored enterprises as little babies and transforming citizens into grown-up babysitters by comparison. As the conservatorship of

Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac symbolically refigured those government-sponsored enterprises as the wards of American taxpayers, it also materially reconfigured the legal and fiscal relationship between citizens and those politico-economic institutions. In this way, the rhetoric of the mortgage crisis inverted both the metaphorical and material structure of political economy..⁶⁵

Foley's example of the 2008 housing market crisis demonstrates how economic metaphors "have the ability to bring two separate domains of thought into mutual relation, transforming the meaning of both domains in the process."⁶⁶ In a similar way, Graham's two essays featured here perform a critical fusion of economic thought. While many supposed that the digital future would free citizens from work and the role of laborer, Graham's texts provide a concrete link between the world of abundance within which we live and the economic responsibility required of citizens in the digital future. The metaphor of the digital body in Barlow's work is then married to the metaphor of purity and asceticism elaborated by Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

In "You Weren't Meant to Have a Boss," Graham draws clear connections between the responsibility of the self and the responsibility of work. He asserts that individuals have the responsibility to treat their bodies and their careers with care. The work in which we engage, he writes, is as important as the food that we put inside our bodies. "Economic Inequality" reveals one possible reason for that care. If the "driven" are those who create wealth, then it stands that the driven should be those for which economic policy is designed. This alignment of personal worth and economic fortune places the frontier narrative of Barlow in new light.

If, as Graham asserts, the driven will always create wealth, then it stands that our economic arrangements should allow that process with as little interruption as is possible.

This most likely involves returning the rules of the economy and the digital landscape to that of Barlow's writing—the frontier. On that frontier, identity and personhood become malleable, protean ideas, and every individual has the chance to participate in the grand game of the technological economy.

This thinking is reminiscent of the early days of internet optimism. The early internet was regarded as having tremendous potential for personal development. If, as Barlow asserts, the coming of the internet establishes a civilization of the mind free of embodiment, then the rules of the physical economy do not apply to that realm. Our ideas of economic fairness, justice, and equality transform into the self-care of the new future—we feed ourselves correctly so that we might work correctly. If we are working well, for ourselves, Graham argues, then we can participate in the nearly limitless expansion of wealth that the new frontier will bring. Thus is the economic frontier reimagined again as a perfectly meritocratic future—one in which there are no limits to our participation in the market other than those that we bring to the table. Those discourses encourage the restriction of regulation and expansion of wealth gaps that will supposedly encourage a rising tide to lift all boats. All that is required of us, the logic follows, is to regulate ourselves well—fortunately, economic tutors such as Gary Vaynerchuk stand ready to help us get our sea legs.

NOTES

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⁸ Graham, "Boss."

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⁵⁶ Levasseur and Gring-Pemble, “Stories,” 11.

⁵⁷ Levasseur and Gring-Pemble, “Stories,” 12.

⁵⁸ Erin Griffith, “Startups Are Failing Because They Make Products No One Wants,” *Fortune*, September 25, 2014, <http://fortune.com/2014/09/25/why-startups-fail-according-to-their-founders/>.

⁵⁹ Aune, *Market*, 9.

⁶⁰ Aune, *Market*, 9–10.

⁶¹ James Heilbrum, “Baumol’s Cost Disease,” in *A Handbook of Cultural Economics* 2nd ed. (Cheltenham: Elgar), 2013.

⁶² Paul Graham, “Economic Inequality,” *Paul Graham*, January 2016, <http://paulgraham.com/ineq.html>.

⁶³ Brad Plumer et al., “Technology Is Changing How We Live, but It Needs to Change How We Work | the New New Economy,” *Vox*, September 26, 2016, <https://www.vox.com/a/new-economy-future/technology-productivity>.

⁶⁴ Heilbrum, “Cost,” 91.

⁶⁵ Megan Foley, “From Infantile Citizens to Infantile Institutions: The Metaphoric Transformation of Political Economy in the 2008 Housing Market Crisis,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98 (2012): 402.

⁶⁶ Foley, “Infantile,” 402.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Thankless Compromise: Gary Vaynerchuk and the Language of Work

In his short film *Hard Work & Patience*, Gary Vaynerchuk asks the camera operator to “zoom in.” “You know why I’m sitting here right now?” he asks. “Because I outworked you.”¹ His answer is indicative of the word that Vaynerchuk claims to live his life by—hustle. “Hustle” refers in this context to the application of hard work to one’s life or business. Gary Vaynerchuk, described by *Business Insider* as a “lifelong entrepreneur and longtime tech investor,”² built a retail business in New Jersey into the internet serial “WineLibrary TV.”³ After working the lecture circuit for much of the late 2000s and investing in several successful tech companies such as the social network Twitter and the transportation service Uber, Vaynerchuk launched VaynerMedia in 2009, an advertising outlet that quickly grew into one of the most successful social media advertising agencies.⁴

In addition to running VaynerMedia, Vaynerchuk doles out advice to other business professionals on his YouTube channel. Vaynerchuk’s YouTube channel is replete with movies and videos on hard work and business success, including *Hard Work & Patience*, *A Five Minute Plea To Do*, and *6 Mins for the Next 60 Years of Your Life*. In 2015, Vaynerchuk transitioned into the expanding market of “vlogs,” video diaries that catalog the daily life of their subjects. His vlog, entitled *DailyVee*, encompasses over a hundred episodes ranging from five minute diaries to two-hour epics. The release of *DailyVee* ushered in a new era for Vaynerchuk—it grew his social media and business

presence considerably, and transported his channel on YouTube from a relatively unknown presence to an audience of nearly half a million subscribers.

The focus of *DailyVee* is nearly entirely on Vaynerchuk's daily dealings in running his business and personal life. It documents meetings and business trips, describes his work-life balance, and outlines his trips to the gym. In the show, Vaynerchuk doesn't shy away from giving advice—the predecessor to *DailyVee*, the less successful *AskGaryVee Show*, was predicated entirely on a question-and-answer format. Viewers of the show would write in with business or personal concerns, and Vaynerchuk would respond. After the conclusion of the show's main run, the bulk of the material was collected into *#AskGaryVee: One Entrepreneur's Take on Leadership, Social Media, and Self-Awareness*, a book released in 2016.⁵ Much of the advice doled out in the book, on the show, and on *DailyVee* is focused on Vaynerchuk's experience as an entrepreneur. As a direct product of the social media and startup explosion of the 2000s, many of his responses are focused on responding to situations in the same way that an entrepreneur or Silicon Valley investor would. As such, much of his writing and public speaking utilizes the same appeals to industriousness and self-reliance as Paul Graham in his essays such as “You Weren't Meant to Have a Boss” and “Economic Inequality.”

Ben Horowitz, venture capitalist and one half of the founding duo of major capital fund Andreessen Horowitz, represents the mantra of determination espoused in Silicon Valley and echoed by Gary Vaynerchuk and Paul Graham: “Ideas are like lightning in a bottle,” he claims in an interview with the *New York Times*, “so if the company is small enough and didn't seem to capture lightning on their first try, it makes sense to try again.” For Horowitz, it's determination, not the character of the idea, that determines success:

“The art of the pivot is to do it fast and early. The older and bigger the business, the harder it is to change directions.”⁶

And change direction they do. Many of the workers in California’s hotbed of innovation are working for their second or third companies, having abandoned the ideas that brought them out of their college careers and onto the west coast. Matthew Rosenberg, a software developer stationed in New York, spoke of this cycle of pivots and innovation— “It almost felt like gang warfare. The nerdiest gang warfare ever, but still, gang warfare.”⁷ For companies like Andreessen Horowitz, gang warfare is just the beginning. Their discourse positions digital innovation as the saving grace of a world being “eaten by software.”⁸ Their podcast, *AI6Z*, features business and development personalities lending their opinions to cultural and business news, including topics related to life in prison, the nature of artificial intelligence, and data networks.

Meanwhile, on another end of the cultural spectrum, that same mentality of determination and warfare begins to color discourse surrounding work and labor. The business world has always been depicted as a realm of treachery and competition—take, for example, *American Psycho*’s quite literal juxtaposition of business competition and murder, *Wall Street*’s charismatic Gordon Gekko, *Glengarry Glen Ross*’ mantra “always be closing,” or Tom Wolfe’s characterization of 1980’s “yuppie” culture in *Bonfire of the Vanities*. Recently, however, rhetorical appeals of competition, merit, and hard work have escaped sales rooms and board rooms and found new homes on the internet, entering the public sphere in a way not seen before in American culture. I call this phenomenon the rise of “motivation discourse.” This chapter will examine the presence of motivation discourse in Gary Vaynerchuk’s short films and vlogs. I argue that analysis of these texts

allows us to better understand the evolution of work and labor online. Specifically, I will show that Varynerchuk's appeals to self-determination and personal dedication develop out of an understanding of the self as a capable actor in the fair and free market.

Motivation discourse has many different (perhaps competing) synonyms. One of the most popular in young culture is "hustle," a term that has begun to manifest itself on laptops, backpacks, and coffee mugs from American college campuses to Tribeca apartments. In times of economic insecurity, motivation discourse emerges as a method of separating workers along lines of personal dedication and merit, drawing attention away from inequalities and injustices in the labor market. Motivation discourse entrenches dividing lines between the authentic and the inauthentic undeserving, forcing laborers to work longer and harder to claim legitimacy. Motivation discourse functions to tie notions of worth and dedication to the self, rather than society at large, positioning the worker as the agent of her own success in a way that isn't supported by actual economic evidence. If you didn't succeed, "hustle rhetoric" maintains, it isn't because you were up against a tough economy and a poor job market—you didn't want it enough. You should have worked harder to build your empire. Motivation discourse and hustle rhetoric serve another important purpose for labor discourse as a whole. While they distance workers from one another, they also calcify the position of the market as an unassailable, unfailing mediator—the fair and just arbiter of capitalism.

Aune wrote that "the 'market revolution' ...appears to have triumphed."⁹ His investigation is concerned with larger economic and political trends in light of those rhetorical appeals, but many of the same themes can be traced in the tactics employed by Vaynerchuk in his work. He specifically cites the "romantic drama spun by libertarians"

in which “the market assumes the role of hero in vanquishing government.”¹⁰ In addition, he indicts several of what he calls “libertarian policy prescriptions” that bear inclusion in a discussion of work ethic and economics. The first, the belief that “social problems can be solved by a market,” provides the basis on which many discussions of neoliberalism are based.¹¹ The adoption of motivation discourse as a rhetorical strategy relies on the assumption that “personal problems can be solved by the market.”

Vaynerchuk positions personal responsibility as a main element of economic success. Should a worker fail in her efforts, it falls to her to assess where her time or her efforts were misspent. This argument has deep ties to religiosity. Martin claims that “a conversation...exists inside evangelicalism that stresses American exceptionalism and the power of personal responsibility,” adding that “this discursive emphasis, in turn, works to justify an inclination toward conservative economic policy.”¹² Martin specifically discusses the religious roots of public discourse surrounding work ethic and personal responsibility: “The value of personal responsibility runs through evangelical doctrine. In part, this is because the theological tradition of evangelicalism is ‘strongly individualistic’ in nature and based in the authority of the Bible and the idea that salvation is the product of one’s personal decision to choose to follow Christ.”¹³ Souders focuses on the role of freedom and liberation as rhetorical devices, writing that “the Christian prosperity gospel is a type of evangelical preaching that promises that the right expression of faith, attuned to God’s desire that His followers be wealthy and disease-free, can lead to divine benefits for believers’ finances and physical health.”¹⁴ This rhetoric of freedom from pain and uncertainty, he continues, places the role of success on the strength of the faithful’s dedication. He notes that

Unfortunately, [that success] does not often result. No evidence supports a relationship between prosperity belief and future wealth. Moreover, believers that fail to receive “blessings” feel deep anxiety and often blame themselves for their lack of faith, especially since preachers tell their congregations to understand the lack of abundance as a failing of the individual, rather than of the prosperity message.¹⁵

Motivation discourse emphasizes the importance of economic and personal achievement, often through the conflation of economic and emotional fulfilment. Judith Shklar writes in *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion* that “the dignity of work and of personal achievement, and the contempt for aristocratic idleness, have since Colonial times been an important part of American civic self-identification. The opportunity to work and to be paid an earned reward for one’s labor was a social right, because it was a primary source of public respect.”¹⁶ The negotiation of citizenship, she writes, is tenuous— “what renders any group or individual unfit for citizenship,” she continues, “is economic dependence, race, and gender, which are all socially created or hereditary conditions.”¹⁷ The act of working and earning, she writes, is fundamental to American’s conception of citizenship:

Modern citizenship is not confined to political activities and concerns. Important as governing, voting, military service, and taxpaying are, they are not nearly as significant as the endeavors that constitute what Hegel called “civil society.” It is in the marketplace, in production and commerce, in the world of work in all its forms, and in voluntary associations that the American citizen finds his social place, his standing, the approbation of his fellows, and possibly some of his self-respect.¹⁸

Citizenship, Shklar maintains, requires standing as an “equal member of the polity,” but also requires a function of independence. “He must be an earner,” she writes, a free remunerated worker, one who is rewarded for the actual work he has done, neither more nor less.”¹⁹ The “vision of economic independence,” she concludes, “took the place of an outmoded notion of public virtue, and it has retained its powerful appeal. We are

citizens only if we ‘earn.’”²⁰ That idea of citizenship extends to much of motivation discourse—to belong is to earn, and to earn is to be fulfilled.

A central difficulty in writing about the internet is contextualizing issues for criticism while maintaining the scope and focus of an investigation. The trouble with digital texts as a site of criticism is that those texts often rely on each other in ways that complicate clean lines of sight. The job of the rhetorical scholar in the study of online texts is often to do what Michael Calvin McGee called *making* discourses from “scraps and pieces of evidence.” “Critical rhetoric,” he continues, “does not *begin* with a finished text in need of interpretation; rather, texts are understood to be larger than the apparently finished discourse that presents itself as transparent.”²¹ This study entails that same construction of a completed text through the gathering of those scraps and pieces from throughout the digital landscape. The digital presence of Gary Vaynerchuk and other modern rhetors extends from video platforms such as YouTube to text platforms such as Medium and visual platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Forming a complete understanding of social movements and concepts in the digital age is the act of gathering those disparate fragments together to create a cohesive text that can then be critiqued.

In many fragments of the popular press, the hectic lifestyle demonstrated by Vaynerchuk and aspired to by those who bring themselves to Silicon Valley is portrayed in a positive light. Photograph essays appearing in the *New York Times* balance young faces smiling with their coworkers against photographs of other laborers asleep in front of their computers, illustrating the “work as life” mindset as something to which one should aspire. The work/life balance of these young entrepreneurs is illustrated perfectly by photographs of young people living in “20Mission,” a “co-living space” in San

Francisco.²² *New York Times* writer Laura Morton explains their style of living in the photo essay “The Silicon Valley Hustle,” published in February 2016: “They often live on the cheap while working on their companies, a process known as bootstrapping. They work long hours with hopes to build empires. And their lives are intertwined: They live with each other, network with one another in co-working spaces, compete with everyone and party together.”²³ This illustration of Silicon Valley and the “hustle” lifestyle portrays the daily struggles of the young people working together in those environments as something of a utopia of productivity.

Morton notes that the utopia might soon draw to a close, citing “gyrating tech stocks and questions over the broader economy.” Yet still the dreams persist— “most of these dreamers,” she writes, “believe that the industry remains a true meritocracy: that those who deserve to succeed will do so.”²⁴ With little else to sustain them through gyrating times, the “dreamers” rely on motivation discourse to buffer their hopes—trusting that their work ethic alone will assure that their ideas are given an equal chance in the unsure tech economy.

While the languages of work ethic and dedication have been mainstays in the business world for years, I argue that they’ve found a new home on the internet, as YouTube and online personalities have made a name for themselves as work ethic prophets. Motivation discourse functions in three distinct ways. First, it catalyzes the division of labor along the lines of dedication, positioning the individual as submitting their worthy ethic to the fair market for judgment. Secondly, motivation discourse constitutes the worker as an empowered agent of her own success. Motivation discourse’s

final function is the creation of a neutral market narrative in which no barriers to financial success exist outside of the self.

Filmmaker and self-proclaimed “YouTuber” Casey Neistat made a name for himself in digital culture circles by travelling the globe and filming small independent movies focused on his life in New York and his relationships with his son and wife. Until 2015, his fame was limited to a number of viral sensations such as “Bike Lanes,”²⁵ “Make It Count,”²⁶ and “Snowboarding New York City.”²⁷ Neistat’s films showcased travel, political issues relevant to New Yorkers, and some technological concerns. In 2015, however, Neistat began “vlogging,” releasing a new film every morning that showcased his previous day. His popularity exploded, and with it came a new focus in Neistat’s films—his work ethic. Neistat was the first mainstream vlogger whose focus on work and productivity became a main aspect of his appeal. Neistat’s May 7, 2015 release, entitled “Fat and Lazy,” introduced viewers to his thoughts on work and dedication. The film depicts a neon sign that hangs in Neistat’s office that reads “work harder,” and features Neistat outlining his day-to-day schedule for the viewer as he says “right now it’s go time for me. I want to maximize every waking second. ...I know this is crazy person talk, but the truth is, the only time I get bummed out or depressed is when I’m not being productive, when I’m not accomplishing or doing or contributing in any way. Nothing makes me less happy than relaxation and sitting around with nothing to do.”²⁸ Neistat then outlines his typical day with dominoes, leaving no free time unaccounted for in opposition to his 13-hour work days. “The finish line is the same for everyone,” he comments, “but while we’re here, what contribution can you make? Work, and building things, and making things, and spending time with your family, those are the ways that I

feel I'm accomplishing something. ...that is why I say free time is the enemy of progress, because free time, sitting around, is not doing, and that's why I try to omit that entirely from my life.”²⁹

Successful entrepreneurs espousing lessons on productivity and maximizing their life's contributions aren't particularly innovative in and of themselves—in fact, in “Fat and Lazy,” Neistat is recounting an age-old tale of time maximization employed by the likes of Benjamin Franklin, whose penchant for outlining his days has been well-documented. Unlike Neistat, who found sudden fame after his daily vlogs catapulted him to internet stardom, Gary Vaynerchuk has been building his brand for a long time. After the vlog explosion of 2014-2015 that saw many stars rise to national prominence, including Tyler Oakley and Casey Neistat, Vaynerchuk began his own vlog, “DailyVee.” Although they haven't reached the prominence of other vlogs, his videos have been well-received in the business community, and have become a standard of young professional circuits online. In the videos, Vaynerchuk expands on some of the ideas he had first posited in earlier releases, including his emphasis on work ethic and dedication.

Vaynerchuk's vlogs are filmed and cut in a style that contributes to his constructed persona. The videos, despite often exceeding twenty minutes in length, are shot in a deliberately action-oriented style. The camera often lingers on Vaynerchuk during meetings, sometimes through doors or glass. The design of the show is meant to give the viewer a sense of direct access not unlike that offered by reality television. The quick cuts and transitions reinforce a conception of Vaynerchuk as a man of action as his cameraman David Rock follows him from his morning workout to his last meeting.

Vaynerchuk speaks frequently and often on the nature of the work/life balance and motivation. “This whole question of ‘where’s the time,’” he notes in one video, “I just think people are loaded with excuses. I think that the Vayner nation thinks they’re hustling, and straight to your face, like 99.9% of you are not.”³⁰ For Vaynerchuk, as for Horowitz, dedication is the attribute that determines success. “There’s so many people giving up,” he says in a video entitled “The Most Important Word Ever,” “I think the fear of losing trumps the excitement of victory for so many people. So for me, hustle means putting all your effort into achieving the goal at hand, and for me that means making every minute count. Look, you need a break? Good, get your break. But the bottom line is every minute that you can apply to your game, you need to.”³¹ This total dedication to productivity forms a discursive barrier between the workers who deserve to achieve success and those that don’t, with their dedication to the “the game” as the chief determining factor.

“Playing the Game of Life”

In *Sporting with the Gods: The Rhetoric of Play and Game in American Culture*, Michael Oriard asserts that the “Pauline metaphor of the ‘race’ for God’s ‘prizes’” provides the “rhetorical link” between “America’s Puritan past” and its present.³² The “game of life,” he writes, “belongs to this socially dominant liberalism, specifically to the conjunction of moral and material striving that defined its place in American culture.”³³ He contradicts Max Weber, who wrote that “the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meanings, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which actually often give it the character of sport.”³⁴ Oriard counters, writing:

I am suggesting that religious meanings were not “stripped” but transformed, that the sportiveness of business redefined its “ethics”—that business enterprise, in short, remained a transcendent calling even when its object seemed to have become mere material gain. For my purposes, the popular metaphor of “the game” provides a record of the disappearance of the distinctions between the material and the spiritual. Sporting rhetoric did not invest business with spiritual consequences in the nineteenth century but the other way around: its association with business raised “the game” to quasi-religious importance.³⁵

Moreover, Oriard emphasizes a facet of “the game” with central importance in what I term “motivation discourse.” The rhetorical construction of performance in the game of life as a connection to one’s worth “inscribed the preeminence of process in its fundamental assumption that ‘winning’ lay in playing itself.”³⁶ The construction of secular business practices as part of the game of life necessarily aligns those business practices with the spiritual components of those ancient Pauline metaphors. Thus, business struggle is rhetorically aligned with spiritual warfare, the eternal contestation for the soul’s integrity. Our work doesn’t just provide us with material compensation that aids our living—it purifies us, makes us worthy of secular redemption.

In motivation discourse, workers fall into two categories—those that hustle, and those that don’t. “I think that people like to claim that they work hard and smart,” Vaynerchuk claims, “but they’re not putting in the work, and they work nine to six. And it’s just not enough. ...you’re spending an hour or two on things every day that aren’t achieving this extra brand or extra monies that you’re chasing.”³⁷ The division between legitimate and illegitimate usage of time creates a standard by which productivity and worth can be judged. The temporal aspect of work (and, therefore, the worker) is rhetorically constructed as a factor of moral purity.

This discursive division of labor has impacts reaching outside of YouTube, as economic turbulence provides an environment ripe for the rise of the “gig economy.” The

study of economics is the study of the allocation of scarce resources. As labor becomes cheaper and less encumbered by protective laws and unions, companies like AirBnb, Uber, and Slack have found opportunities for making money by exploiting the fractured nature of America's current labor markets. Airbnb, a company that David Roberts claims has "rocked the travel industry by offering short-term rentals, often in private homes,"³⁸ has provided home and apartment owners opportunities to rent out their spaces for profit. Uber, a politically contentious startup, has provided part-time employment to drivers willing to use their cars as transportation services for users of Uber's app. Slack, a team chat app, has enabled temporary and freelance employees of large companies to simulate in-office presence without having to take up space in the offices themselves—or taking space on company medical insurance rolls.

The gig economy was hailed as a boon for professionals interested in what some called the "side hustle." Carl Richards, writing for the *New York Times*, encouraged readers to invest in themselves by finding "a side gig," wondering "what could you do to earn an extra \$1000 each month?"³⁹ He also encourages readers to consider "this side hustle as an opportunity to do something you love to do."⁴⁰ For Richards, the gig economy represents an opportunity for professionals to expand their skill sets and invest in activities that they've always wanted to break into, a message that may resonate with many workers facing economic downturns who feel locked into jobs that they would rather leave.

Collette Shade, writing for *Jezebel*, noted the prominence of hustle merchandise on retail site *Etsy*, writing that the mugs, prints, and water bottles represented a

“connotative shift in this loaded word.”⁴¹ While many, including Shade, have rightly criticized the appropriation of the term “hustle” from hip-hop culture, she writes:

Hustling is about getting by—thriving, even—when traditional means of economic security aren’t there. Poor black communities like the one Jay Z came from have long been burdened by unemployment rates many times the national average, and an anemic job market made up of minimum wage service jobs. But in the wake of the 2008 recession and its “jobless recovery,” the problem of trying to thrive in a world of scant resources, stagnant wages and structural unemployment spread to people who had never before experienced it. In the new economy, everyone became a hustler..⁴²

Shade is drawing a connection that bears repeating here—even as the barriers between historically disadvantaged communities and the larger community of workers in the American labor market were disassembled by the economic recession, motivation discourse swept in to erect new divisions of labor—between the worthy and the unworthy, between those willing to take up a side hustle and those unwilling to sacrifice their personal life and relaxation time to build their empire or chase their dreams. As Vaynerchuk established, hustle is a slippery narrative—it is at once visible and yet invisible, it should be communicated but not focused on—after all, the narrative maintains, if you’re telling your friends about your hustle, you should probably be spending more time hustling.

Motivation Discourse in the Economy of the Self

Motivation rhetoric feels empowering for the same reason that many economic responsibility narratives feel empowering—while the risks are high, the rewards promise absolute command of the self. Success is not something found—according to hustle rhetoric, it is something created. Motivation discourse functions by constituting the self

as a solitary, empowered agent, in charge of its own future, its own success, and its own destiny.

This pattern of motivation amidst turbulent times extends to video avenues of motivation as well—Gary Vaynerchuk’s movies have illustrated what he calls a coming “purging of the posers” instead of the limitless opportunities afforded to the worthy. Motivation discourse bends back upon itself to assure that it’s sectioning off workers properly—whereas before the only requirement for success was work ethic, recent months have seen a renewed focus on authenticity. “As soon as I started seeing kids who never had an entrepreneurial bone in their body,” notes Vaynerchuk, “who never sold a thing in their life, who never cared about any of that stuff, and were coming out of college and starting businesses, that’s when I was like... 24 months ago... that’s when I was like, uh-oh, this is starting to get a little awkward.”⁴³

The model of “actual” business person serves to filter out the “posers” who only go through the motions of business and work-ethic—those who only perform motivation and work-ethic discourse instead of internalizing its mores. He asks of an unnamed caller: “My man, do you know how many goddamn entrepreneurs right now that are 24 years old that raised 10 million dollars that have gone skiing the last four weekends in a row?”⁴⁴ While Vaynerchuk’s point may seem to indict actors in what’s often called the “tech bro” universe, it illustrates a broader, less convenient point. While some momentary phenomena make easy targets out of motivation discourse, powerful ideologies protect themselves, and begin to section off those individuals to be purged who have become obvious “posers.” This movement from inclusivity to winnowing is a necessary function of a personality-driven discourse that needs visibility to succeed. If

the market floods with workers eager to emulate Vaynerchuk's delivery and acumen, then it becomes time to purge again.

This language of authenticity illustrates the way in which motivation discourse constitutes the worker as a self-contained agent of economic success. In hustle rhetoric, inherent human worth has no role, replaced with an ever-changing model of authenticity and worthiness. Charland notes that, in addition to methods of identification written of by Burke in *A Rhetoric of Motives*, rhetors (and in this case, discourses as a functional unit) use constitutive rhetoric to shape their audience into a politically and socially motivated public that functions within an ideology existing long before their interpellation into it.⁴⁵ Motivation discourse constitutes its public as having three distinct characteristics—the ability to succeed, the raw talent to succeed, and a personality that lends itself to personal marketing—after all, in hustle rhetoric, the product ultimately sold is the self.

The restless energy of motivation discourse—constantly defining and redefining its audience, negotiating over and over again the credentials of entry—mimics the movement of capitalism as a whole. Labor markets have never been stable, but motivation rhetoric capitalizes on their fragility to emphasize its own importance—in an era of increasing economic turbulence, figures like Carl Rogers emphasize that the only reliable asset in which to invest is the self.⁴⁶ Narratives of exceptionalism are commonplace in economic discourse—for a field that deals in patterns, as Joshua Hanan and Catherine Chaput have noted, economic actions and policy such as the 2008 Emergency Economic Stabilization Act are largely framed by warrants of exceptionalism.⁴⁷

This continuous narrative of exceptionalism and innovation, highlighted by writers and commentators such as Michael Lewis, is offset by the technology industry's distaste for convention—it fuels a kind of innovator that is always searching for the next exception—the phrase has now become “unicorn.” From Lewis' *The New New Thing*:

The new new thing is a notion that is poised to be taken seriously in the marketplace. It's the idea that is a tiny push away from general acceptance and, when it gets that push, will change the world. The searcher for the new new thing conforms to no well-established idea of what people should do for a living. He gropes. Finding the new new thing is as much a matter of timing as of technological or financial aptitude...he chooses to live perpetually with that sweet tingling of discomfort of not quite knowing what it is he wants to say. It's one of the little ironies of economic progress that, while it often results in greater levels of comfort, it depends on people who prefer not to get too comfortable.⁴⁸

Motivation discourse constitutes workers as agents of that restless movement—unhappy, unsatisfied, and always groping for the new thing. They are the agents of the gig economy—always working for the next \$1000, always pushing for the next side hustle, always discontented. They reject, because they're told they have to, ideas of comfortable employment, workplace amenities, health insurance, labor unions, and protections, because they have to move fast and light in order to succeed in the hustle economy. As with many other discourses, motivation rhetoric relies on a positive social image to constitute its public. We are hailed because we want to believe those things about ourselves. We want to view ourselves as the active, complete agent of our own success—we desire success in the hope that it will calcify some part of our self that has been made permanently restless by capitalism itself.

This constitution of the self as an economic agent often has a political or monetary goal. Uber often takes quite blunt measures to engage its public in the political process—users of the app are periodically prompted to take political action if they wish

to keep using Uber in their local area. Uber has even inserted political commentary into its app, allowing riders in New York to select a “de Blasio” option that would show no cars available, taking a political jab at New York Mayor Bill de Blasio’s resistance to Uber’s expansion.⁴⁹ This in-app addition constitutes consumers of Uber’s services as political actors, responsible for the continued existence of the product they consume. Ultimately, motivation discourse exists not to empower the self, but to encourage behavior that leads to an increased profit margin. In times of economic turbulence, hustle rhetoric constitutes the individual as a political and social force while also encouraging that individual to work and consume more, making the self a commodity.

Workers envisioning themselves as the most empowered generation of laborers are actually being encouraged to eliminate any remaining distance between their personhood and their economic or consumer identity—a lifestyle that Robert W. McChesney notes is largely comprised of brands “linking” themselves to people’s “emotions and deep wiring.”⁵⁰ In an era of pervasive corporate branding, discourses arise that encourage individuals to think of themselves as their own brands, which network and interface with larger brands through consumption and labor. McChesney notes in his book *Digital Disconnect* that pervasive branding and advertising, “by focusing obsessively on the individual,” may contribute to epidemics of unhappiness and narcissism.⁵¹ Citing Twenge and Campbell’s writing in 2009’s *The Narcissism Epidemic*, McChesney notes that advertising’s idea of the individual as fundamentally unique might interact with the rise of self-branding, as individuals have been primed to think of themselves as discrete actors in an economic, political, and consumerist society.⁵² Ultimately, obsessive self-branding leads not to happiness, but to the kind of restless

movement that corporate brands exemplify—eternally positioning and repositioning themselves for the maximization of profit.

A Level Playing Field

Gary Vaynerchuk believes that the market is a neutral, fair force, one that will elevate the worthy and dissuade the unworthy. It's not a new opinion—Adam Smith introduced the concept of the “invisible hand” in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and the idea of the market as an impartial mediator has persisted ever since.⁵³ Those who believe in the fair market believe that, no matter the character of the individual or idea, the market will sort out what is and isn't of worth. This kind of economic thinking leads commentators like Vaynerchuk to espouse the value of the market as a level playing field for ideas and people. As Vaynerchuk himself writes, “The market isn't decided by the marketers or the media, it's decided by the consumer and the spam artists are just reacting to it. It's cool if you think the Kardashians are shit, but millions of other people find value in them. It's a fair game and that's why I love it, period.”⁵⁴

For Vaynerchuk, the individual surrenders his judgment to the market. There are no definitive moral or ethical determinations of value, merely what the market will and will not tolerate. Free-market capitalists have been taking this opinion for many years, but recently the development of personal branding has created an environment in which motivation discourse can flourish, suggesting that the self, not a product, can be judged worthy by the market itself. Indeed, many proponents of gig-economy products like Uber maintain that ride-sharing apps and other similar endeavors actually bring about economic equality by providing employment opportunities and by increasing access to

services. Megan McArdle, writing for *Bloomberg Digital*, maintained that “Uber serves the poor by going where taxis don’t.”⁵⁵

In another piece for *Bloomberg Digital*’s regular column “Bloomberg View,” McArdle expressed hesitation toward fears that the gig economy would drive temporary employment up and marginalize workers. Gig economy employment, she suggests, is not far removed from other temporary employment, which isn’t particularly negative: “Those jobs weren’t the greatest back when I was young and carefree, and I imagine they aren’t the greatest now. But they were not harbingers of the destruction of a once-great national economy. They were just jobs that some people had.”⁵⁶ So goes one of the dominant narratives of temporary employment and the minimum wage—temporary employment and low-paying jobs aren’t the end of the economic world, because they were never (and will never be) the main measure by which the economy functions. They will continue to exist, as McArdle maintains, for those unfortunate enough to require them—but Uber’s “disruption” of the transportation market is nothing but another fluctuation in labor.⁵⁷ After all, the policies of Uber (and other gig economy services) aren’t that important to those workers themselves—as Justin Fox points out in another edition of “Bloomberg View,” “your Uber driver probably has another job” from which they draw such benefits as healthcare and income security.⁵⁸

The gig economy is largely profitable for the kind of people for whom labor has always been largely profitable. While the language of hustle and motivation purports to create an active and engaged public, it ends up engaging the same public that the rhetoric of success always has—educated and unobligated twenty-somethings with college degrees. Airbnb engages homeowners with few obligations and those who own a second

home, and Uber engages those with new, attractive, reliable cars. As Eric Morath has noted, while many participate in the gig economy, very few make a living at it.⁵⁹ He writes recently that most current studies have indicated that “the gig economy is paying off for workers who are already among America’s highest earners.”⁶⁰ Almost one year after publishing her defense of Uber, Megan McArdle noted that gig economy services “look a lot more like high-end services for affluent consumers willing to pay a premium for convenience.”⁶¹ Arun Sundararajan, writing for *The Guardian*, noted that the system of temporary employment offered by services like Uber and Airbnb made one wonder if “we are returning to the economy of the 18th Century,” expressing concerns that the concentration of capital produced by temporary employment (free of obligations like providing health care and retirement benefits) could serve the few instead of the many.⁶²

Most of the workers flocking to the west coast to compete in the Silicon Valley hustle are hoping for a chance at that concentrated capital, betting that their ideas and work ethic will qualify them to become the next Mark Zuckerberg or Travis Kalanick. Central to their dream is the narrative of motivation discourse, which posits that the quality of your work and dedication determines the likelihood of success. This narrative relies on the existence of the fair and balanced market, which will give all ideas (and workers) a chance, no matter their gender, race, class, sexuality, appearance, or ability. This narrative contradicts what many scholars have identified as the reality of the market: a complex and shifting web of structural imbalance and power dynamics.

Colette Shade, in “What ‘The Hustle’ Looks Like on Etsy in 2015,” notes that hustle rhetoric positions the market as impartial, and encourages workers to look past structural inequality and rely on their own self-worth. “Beneath their odd-fitting

associative ties to a different sociopolitical sector and decade,” she writes, “these pretty objects exist to soothe workers—specifically, female workers—into accepting this new reality as cute, fun, and, most of all, a self-empowering personal choice.” In exploring the connection between the new reality of hustle rhetoric and issues of structural inequality, she makes the case for motivation discourse as a distraction from issues that actually impact workers:

The idea that undergirds the hustle economy is similar to the ideas Sheryl Sandberg espouses in her book *Lean In: Women Work, and the Will to Lead*. Female workers are encouraged to see their struggles as individual, not structural. If you’re not making enough money, or if you’re stuck in a dead-end job that you’re overqualified for, it’s because you just aren’t hustling hard enough. It most certainly is not because there aren’t enough jobs, or the minimum wage isn’t high enough, or because women aren’t guaranteed equal pay under the law. Even if those things may be true, hustling makes them irrelevant.⁶³

This concept of trusting the system was exemplified by Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella, who said when prompted on issues of gender inequality in pay that “It’s not really about asking for the raise, but knowing and having faith that the system will actually give you the right raises as you go along. That’s good karma. It will come back. That’s the kind of person that I want to trust, that I want to give more responsibility to.”⁶⁴ In a popular video on YouTube, Gary Vaynerchuk illustrates the ability of hustle to eliminate inequality. Instead of working for recognition as discrete, worthy individuals, hustle rhetoric argues that the way for minorities and other systematically oppressed groups to achieve greatness is to simply work hard enough for it. “They feel like it’s a young man’s sport,” he says in his video “6 Mins for the Next 60 Years of Your Life—A Rant,” “and it’s just not...if you’ve got the right DNA and you’re a 72-year-old female, you have just as good of a bat as a 27-year-old dude.” Later in the video, he emphasizes the impartiality of the market: “Nobody cares if you’re 40, 70, 90, alien, female, male,

minority... the market will accept your victories if you're good enough to have a victory. ...do not allow just the 18 and 14 and 22-year-olds to grab at this pie that is available to all of us.”⁶⁵

Motivation discourse maintains that structural inequality such as gender or racial bias—when it does exist—is eliminated by hard work and dedication. The market, in Vaynerchuk's estimation, will accept anyone—it is immune to power dynamics or mechanisms of structural oppression. In “Extraordinary Acts and Ordinary Pleasures: Rhetorics of Inequality in Young People's Talk About Celebrity,” Laura Harvey, Kim Allen, and Heather Mendick reinforce this point, writing that some discourses “work to position problems of poverty and economic inequality as individualized issues of ‘welfare dependence’ and ‘irresponsibility.’ Such comparisons circulate in the context of neoliberal discourses of meritocracy, which present inequality as resulting from differences in skill and work, rather than structural inequalities.”⁶⁶ In his article “The Undeserving Professor: Neoliberalism and the Reinvention of Higher Education,” Luke Winslow writes that the traditional reliance on education as a pathway to success is “predicated on the widespread perception that our economic arrangements are fair.”⁶⁷

In order to maintain stability, motivation discourse maintains that those conditions are in fact perfectly fair, and that the only variable to success is your own character. In this way, motivation discourse reveals itself to be quite conservative, as its main critique is of the moral or ethical character of the worker himself, and not of the structures that house those workers. As Russell Kirk wrote in *The Conservative Mind*, conservatism regards political and economic problems as, “at bottom ...moral and religious problems.”⁶⁸ The emphasis on acceptance of personal responsibility as the defining

factor in one's economy success links motivation discourse to ideas as old as the Protestant work ethic itself.

Citizenship, Belonging, and Motivation Discourse

While motivation discourse and the hustle economy have impacted much of the conversation surrounding work and citizenship in the digital age, perhaps just as interesting are motivation discourse's implications for notions of citizenship. Discourse that places the motivation and dedication of the self above all aspects of economic success have no use for worker unification, labor unions, or comradeship. There is no need for the construction of division between workers that motivation discourse espouses. Recently, scholars of politics and economists have been investigating the idea that, contrary to what most traditional economists believed, an economy constructed of endless competition might not be the best way to constitute a society.

Aune made the case for a new conception of economics—one not predicated on such a strict interpretation and trust of the free market. “A new political program for a global, democratic left must emphasize the importance of the welfare state, strong unions, and regulation of the financial markets for the preservation of traditional communities.”⁶⁹ He also noted that ideas based in trust of the free market would not ultimately persist: “Although libertarianism has captured many minds among the technical intelligentsia and has established beachheads in the universities, it is inherently incapable of motivating the public, which may explain the hostility of free-marketeers to majoritarian democracy.”⁷⁰

In order for those majoritarian democracies and other democratic ideals to succeed, economic connection and citizenship must be founded on concepts of cooperation and community, not competition and motivation. Carter Maness, writing for

The Awl, commented on the rise of worker termination applications and “deactivations” in “The Deactivation of the American Worker.” “Like email or the office door before it,” he writes, “the worker opens their platform when they want to make money. Their profile seamlessly connects to other apps, the Slack channel which allows collaboration with other profiles, the Zenefits dashboard which ensures their health insurance is valid if they crash their Uber car.”⁷¹

The temptation to regard work through the same lens as technological advancement must be resisted. Above all else, the dignity of work must be maintained. While motivation discourse promises dignity in the form of a personal brand, it returns no dignity as the worker chases promise after promise of economic stability. We owe ourselves more than an eternal suspension in restless motion. As Maness writes, “Layoffs are now the denial of access rather than a person’s severance from a traditional job. So it goes. Jobs have long been the stand-in which workers used as a shorthand for personal identity rather than what they really are: a thankless compromise necessary to participate in capitalism.”⁷² If, as Maness insists, work is a “thankless compromise,” then it falls to conversations of citizenship and belonging to provide viable alternatives to the structural appeals of motivation discourse.

NOTES

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CHAPTER FIVE

The Rulers and the Ruled: Discourse, Work, and Social Capital

“A friend, older than I, who had been educated in the 1980s and 1990s, once usefully clarified for me that he believed the intellectual tragedy of his generation had been a division between equally attractive camps. On one side, human rights and humanitarianism defended the human individual. On the other, the critique of the subject and the discovery of difference exposed the all-too-human coercions that kept the individual from true liberation. Each camp thought the other naïve.”¹

Mark Greif,

The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973

“In the ideal republic the virtuous citizen would be constantly and directly involved in ruling as well as being ruled.”²

Judith Shklar, *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion*

Herbert Marcuse wrote in *Eros and Civilization* that “Civilization is first of all progress in *work*—that is, work for the procurement and augmentation of the necessities of life.”³ Work has undergone monumental shifts since the dawn of civilizations on earth. The digital age has brought about and will continue to usher in seismic changes in the way that we contextualize and perform labor. Simply put, the internet has been the biggest disruption to work since the industrial revolution. Our words cross oceans and mountains in an instant, rendering the boundaries once thought to demark the limits of our power frighteningly and thrillingly protean. Our work has become more malleable, less limited, and less restricted by time and space—the same time and space that have historically limited and defined the extent of our labor.

This could be thought of—and John Perry Barlow certainly did—as the coming of a new age. In the digital future, early cyberculture theory told, our selves were going to shed their physical forms, our minds traveling neural networks in the same way that cars

passed each other on the highway. Moreover, advancements from automation and artificial intelligence would bring us together in ways never before conceived as the need for labor diminished.

That time has not yet come. The future John Perry Barlow foretold may lie in the future, but the digital landscape in front of us today bears striking similarity to our own fractured political landscape. The dawn of digital news has brought us endless specialization and division, social media has made the advancement of fake news stories frighteningly easy, and the rise of hustle discourse has proven that the world of work is still very much with us.

Mark Greif writes in *The Age of the Crisis of Man* that philosopher Hannah Arendt “believed that the permanent human condition includes only three types of activity in the world: *action*, *work*, and *labor*.”⁴ Greif clarifies that Arendt made a specific distinction between labor and work in relation to action. While Arendt contextualized work as “the action of creating permanent objects...in the manner of an artisan’s work,” that process created worldly material—the worker “has made part of the world.” Labor, rather, is the grueling, day-in-day-out business of subsistence. It is the brutal economy within which “bodily necessity, set by mortal nature and not by reason” must operate. Labor simply “betokens the effort that has to be invested to keep the body happy: fed, clothed, maintained. It keeps the body ‘not dead,’ essentially, rather than vividly alive.”⁵ According to Greif,

This maintenance of function is a far cry from what Arendt notes as action: the interaction that goes on among free men in speech and politics, deciding in common what their life and world will be like. It does nothing tangible, makes no permanent product, and does nothing to sustain daily bodily life—yet it is the highest form of human activity, because it created a shared world.⁶

Arendt believes that “the antihuman effect of modern societies is to have made this labor the *central* category of human activity.”⁷ Marcuse wrote in 1964 that the advancement of technological progress had not redeemed much of humankind—rather, it had worked in tandem with capitalist instincts to create illusory “necessities.” “The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed, and social control is anchored in the new needs which it has produced.”⁸ In the absence of Arendt’s *action*, labor becomes our central category and our most fulfilling mission—and nowhere is this more evident than in the workings of John Perry Barlow, Paul Graham, and Gary Vaynerchuk. Their arguments, while different, share and develop common themes that can be critiqued to form a more complete understanding of our lives in the digital future.

The Production of the Economic Self

John Perry Barlow conceived of the internet as the next realm of human expansion—the ultimate frontier. It was the world within which we would all live, all work, and it would be unlike anything we had previously experienced. He writes:

We are forming our own Social Contract. This governance will arise according to the conditions of our world, not yours. Our world is different. Cyberspace consists of transactions, relationships, and thought itself, arrayed like a standing wave in the web of our communications. Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live..⁹

Barlow’s text encouraged the abandonment of concrete political action in the current political sphere in favor of a performance of digital liberty. Governments of the world, he argued, had no right to rule over those on the new frontier, because they were creating a new kind of citizenship entirely. That citizenship was created through digital inhabitation and the upkeep of the digital realm, which encouraged a specifically transactional idea of political engagement. Moreover, the use of the frontier as Barlow’s

working metaphor allowed for the establishment of a creation myth that necessarily invoked ideas of radical freedom and direct democracy.

Debates surrounding work ethic, work/life balance, and the moral imperative of the digital economic self were impacted by that creation myth. The frontier became the realm in which the self could be reconstituted, a rupture at which identity could be made anew. Digital borderlands created a liminal space within which economic selfhood could be negotiated and challenged.

Paul Graham's work emerged years after the publication of Barlow's declaration, but his commitment to the preservation of economic liberty on the digital frontier contains many of the same themes. Graham's two essays, "You Weren't Meant to Have a Boss" and "Economic Inequality" share a commitment to the economic self as the sole factor of success. In "You Weren't Meant to Have a Boss," Graham spends a great deal of time working through ideas of moral and physical purity as they relate to work ethic. To work for yourself, Graham writes, is to work in your highest capacity, because the economic self should resemble a predator rather than a grazing animal. The economic self should be able to make choices for itself, without the limitations of a corporate structure, because the enabling of that self allows the true talents of the digital worker to emerge.

In "Economic Inequality," Graham applies that idea to the nature of global and national economics. To limit great disparity in wealth, he argues, societies would have to limit startups. He disagrees with that proposal for two reasons—first, those who were driven enough to start startups would simply go into other fields to make their money. Secondly, he argues that technological advancement is inevitable, and that to maintain a

global advantage, societies should allow any mechanism that harnesses that technological advantage.

The argument that Graham articulates is predicated on the primacy of the individual in economic narratives. It is the *singular individual* that can act, that can harness the coming changes of technology and bring about a better future. That conception of the market or technology as an omnipotent and ever-advancing force bears similarity to religious impulses to regulate and monitor the body. The regulation of the self is essential to the idea of the market as a fair and gracious arbiter, because the individual must prove her worth to it—she must become clean in its estimation. This is why Graham’s appeals to purity in food and work align so clearly. Just as the regulation of the body assures that the machinery of the self will continue to run, so the regulation of the economic self allows the machinery of the economy to flourish.

Gary Vaynerchuk takes up those same points, but pivots into actual discussion regarding those choices. He commends and condemns his followers for their habits, calling them out for quitting work early or for watching television when they could be “hustling.” Vaynerchuk’s arguments seem radical, but they’re the natural evolution of a neoliberal understanding of the self as a value-producing commodity. The one who is, produces, and the one who produces is valued. The self, therefore, must be policed and monitored in order to ensure that its value doesn’t diminish.

Judith Shklar wrote that “in the ideal republic the virtuous citizen would be constantly and directly involved in ruling as well as being ruled.”¹⁰ Vaynerchuk’s calls for citizens to be eternally on their “grind” is indicative of the kind of total rule to which Shklar refers. Neoliberalism, by encouraging the self to view its existence as a production

of value, doesn't just require the self to consent to rule, it requires the self to inculcate the drive to self-monitor within itself. The self then becomes part of the machinery of the world, something to be maintained. Workers are drawn together into the vast tapestry that is the economic landscape, but they are further removed than ever from each other.

Studying economic and political discourse on the internet is essential to the future of our field because it allows us to critique arguments on the digital borderland between identities. The internet is a site of political and social discourse unlike any that we have ever seen. Fragmentation should not prevent us from identifying the internet as the current site of what Andrew King termed “the discourse of the powerful.”¹¹ Indeed, the ideologies that manifest themselves on the internet often have discursive footprints that are difficult to map and critique. Still, it is the role of rhetorical studies to investigate the ways in which those conversations shift and mutate over time. Rhetorical critics can investigate the ways in which discourses circulate, empower, disempower, and disperse.

Choices concerning work are some of the most personal choices that we make as human beings. It's also one of the most fraught with tension—our public discourse surrounding employment often neglects the many people who labor without a choice of career or occupation every single day. Our words about work can unite us, and they can divide us—as can our use of technology. At its best, the global internet can disrupt inequality, give voice to the voiceless, and repair the division between us. At its worst, it opens new fault lines, exposing new divisions between us every day.

If power structures embed themselves in the world of language around us, then we would be naïve to assume that a change of medium presented an entirely new outlook on our culture and its preconceived arrangements. To that end, I offer an extension to King's

assertion that “the challenge” of helping “ordinary citizens take hold of their own fate” in the modern era was “the sheer volume, the pomposity, and the willful ignorance of much of our political and corporate rhetoric.” King adds that “exposing the glib and shallow verbal smokescreen of many of our so-called social issues may aid the public to focus on the many decisions of governance that are transacted below the waterline.”¹² King is right—those “shallow smokescreens” often represent great challenges to our endeavors in civic education. We would be remiss, however, if we didn’t continue to focus our attention in rhetorical theory and criticism on the evolution of discourse in digital space. Digital discourse is important. In twenty years, it’s evolved from being the “next thing” to influencing the elections of Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump.

Rhetorical scholarship functions best when it responds to texts and social contexts “on the ground.” Our work as critics involves growing a body of civic and intellectual knowledge from time-honored theories of discourse, persuasion, and argumentation. If we retain, as King and I believe, an obligation to utilize our scholarship for the benefit of free and democratic society, then it follows suit that we investigate conversations influencing those conditions wherever they occur. The distinction between the internet and the public sphere is quickly disappearing, and the structures and systems of influence that have held sway over democratic and public discourse are present in the ever-expanding discursive environment of the digital frontier.

This project sheds light on the ways in which we might endeavor to theorize and elucidate the rhetorical conditions of internet discourse. Most importantly, it provides a heuristic through which we can discuss labor, and the ways in which we consider ourselves to be economic creatures. Coming years will surely bring change to the world

of work, as changing times always have. Without ways to conceptualize digital discourse concerning labor, we run the risk of ignoring some of the most influential conversations shaping ideas of citizenship today. The Industrial Revolution did more than change the ways in which we labored—it changed our fundamental assumptions about time. It changed the ways in which we thought about food, money, production, war, and our own selves. A change of similar magnitude is taking place in the world of the internet, and rhetorical critics are uniquely equipped to understand and assess the ways in which power, social relationships, and ideological commitments will evolve into the digital future.

Most importantly, rhetorical criticism allows us to investigate the underlying arguments and assumptions that structure our social commitments. John Perry Barlow's argument was misguided—the internet hasn't revealed to us a world free of ideological or physical obligation. As the arguments of Paul Graham and Gary Vaynerchuk demonstrate to us, the internet has created a space in which appeals to technological inevitability, the primacy of personal merit, and the narrative of the market as an impartial and nonpartisan deity are far from obsolete

NOTES

¹ Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 2015), 316.

² Judith N. Shklar, *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 11.

³ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (London: Routledge, 1998), 81.

⁴ Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man*, 257.

⁵ Greif, *Crisis*, 257.

⁶ Greif, *Crisis*, 257.

⁷ Greif, *Crisis*, 258.

⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 9.

⁹ John Perry Barlow, "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace," *Electronic Frontier Foundation*, January 20, 2016, <https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence>.

¹⁰ Shklar, *American Citizenship*, 11.

¹¹ Andrew King, "Scholarship Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 101 (2015): 131.

¹² King, "Scholarship," 131.

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