

ITERATION OF OR ESCAPE FROM NEOLIBERALISM:
SELF-EMPLOYMENT IN THE SOUTHEASTERN U.S.

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ABSTRACT

Dawn R. Rivers: Iteration of or Escape from Neoliberalism:
Self-Employment in the Southeastern U.S.
(Under the direction of Rudolph Colloredo-Mansfeld)

In this article, I examine self-employment, or nonemployer businesses, in the United States, in an attempt to understand the subjective experience of a way of working that operates both within and outside of typical neoliberal labor force norms. In doing so, I engage with Ilana Gershon's discussions (2011, 2016) of the way neoliberal political economy has impinged on capitalist personhood to examine the degree to which nonemployer business operation has or has not become a productive iteration of the neoliberal self. To explore this question, I conducted extensive interviews with 10 self-employed white-collar service providers in the Raleigh-Durham metropolitan area of North Carolina. My ethnographic data shows that these self-employed interlocutors are not typical of Gershon's neoliberal selves. They expressed their investment in such values as control, autonomy, empowerment, relational obligations and other non-market rationalities rather than in such neoliberal values as flexibility, continual transformativity, entrepreneurialism, and market rationality.

To Ken, for an idea that became a goal.

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INTRODUCTION

Neoliberal flexibility for companies can translate into instability and precarity for workers (Gershon 2016; Freeman 2014) and most white-collar service providers have responded to this changed labor market by adapting themselves to the requirements of these neoliberal economic climates (Lane 2011). These are young professionals who have come into the workplace trained in the idea that the company that hires them owes them nothing other than a paycheck for work performed (Ho 2009; Lane 2011). The social contract that existed between employer and employee in the middle of the last century has been dismantled and these young professionals have been taught to regard this as a good thing (Lane 2011; Ho 2009). Dependence and patriarchy, they say, has fallen by the wayside, to be replaced by independence, self-sufficiency, and the primacy of the free market (Gershon 2011; Lane 2011). The company men of the 1950s have been replaced by “career managers” who view today’s leftover company men as unbearably naïve (Lane 2011).

This is the U.S. version of the global erosion of work. For the purposes of this article, I will use the term “neoliberal” to refer to a political economy that includes “the erosion of social welfare programs, divestment from public services, privatization of state entities, deregulation, and the casualization of work as part of a ‘post-Fordist’ and globally integrated economy” (Pearson 2015: 52). Every part of this neoliberal political economy – from the narrowing of social safety nets, to the reworking of social contracts into market transactions, to the negation of

mutual commitments between employer and employee, to the death of meritocracy in the workplace – translates into increased insecurity and precarity for the worker (Sennett 2006).

In this paper, I examine nonemployer businesses in the United States – defined as firms with no paid employees other than the firm owner(s) – in an attempt to understand the subjective experience of a specific type of self-selected precarity that operates both within and outside of typical neoliberal labor force norms. In doing so, I engage with Ilana Gershon’s articles “Neoliberal agency” (2011) and “‘I’m not a businessman, I’m a business, man’” (2016) to examine the degree to which nonemployer business operation has or has not become a productive iteration of the neoliberal self. Ilana Gershon (2011) argues that the successful economic and societal transformation that has been wrought by the neoliberal perspective has consisted of broad societal acceptance of market rationality (i.e., a cost/benefit outlook) as the basis for every interaction in business, personal and all other contexts. “A neoliberal perspective presumes that every social analyst on the ground should ideally use market rationality to interpret their social relationships and social strategies. This concept of agency requires a reflexive stance in which people are subjects for themselves – a collection of processes to be managed” (Gershon 2011: 539). The neoliberal self is an economically oriented entity that assembles skills, traits, and characteristics into a marketable whole in order to enter into various sorts of transactions with other collections of skills and traits, to their presumed mutual benefit (Gershon 2011; Gershon 2016).

This different way of viewing oneself and one’s interactions leads to this question: is this neoliberal self as universal in post-industrial capitalist economies as Gershon implies? For example, is the neoliberal perspective and its offspring, the neoliberal self, the engine behind the unprecedented growth, as I will demonstrate below, in nonemployer businesses in the United

States since the turn of the century? If the ideal of neoliberalism is that an individual person is a collection of marketable assets to be managed as if it were a business, one might expect that self-employed individuals operating single-person businesses would be the poster-children of this neoliberal vision of personhood. In order to ascertain if that is so, I will inquire into the lived values that give meaning and structure to the work-lives of nonemployer business operators, and whether they are different from the values expressed by the neoliberal perspective?

NEOLIBERAL WORK

In the capitalist context best described by Karl Marx in *Capital*, the fundamental relationship between capitalist and worker is the transaction through which the worker agrees to perform labor during a certain period of time per day in exchange for a monetary wage. During the hours the worker sells his or her labor power to the capitalist, he or she does the “work” of production of commodities. The capitalist acquires the transformed labor power of the worker, which can be used to gain profits that enhance the wealth of the capitalist. The worker acquires the means to purchase their commodified material needs such as food, clothing, and shelter.

Work is a foundational aspect of adult life in post-industrial capitalist societies, involving as it does social relations, status, identity, and life satisfaction as well as livelihood, material production, and subsistence. At a fundamental level, however, work has to do with control (Wallman 1979). Capitalists control the means of production and they dictate the value of the labor they buy. Traditional jobs in capitalist economies involve a boss or manager or supervisor who decrees when, how, how much, and with whom their staff works, employing a variety of management strategies to effectively implement that control.

The plethora of ways in which employers exert control in the workplace speaks to an obvious power dynamic existing between capitalist management and labor, a dynamic that has evolved over the last half century in the United States to the further detriment of workers. Technological advances prompted improved capital equipment to the point that employers no longer needed skilled craftsmen for commodity production (Warner 1947, in Baba 2009).

Untrained, unskilled laborers, who are much easier and cheaper to replace than craftsmen and experts, became the strategic choice where feasible. Neoliberal fiscal policies such as flexible labor regulation and “right to work” legislation, as well as stagnant minimum wage requirements, have further weakened collective labor power (Roca and Rodriguez 2014). Political fashion in recent years has turned poverty into the vice of the poor, a meme that has been accepted by a large swathe of the U.S. voting public. In the globalized labor market of the early 21st century United States, these shifts in public policy, labor organization, and public ideologies have resulted in an extreme realignment in the power relationship between companies and their workforces, entirely in favor of the companies (Kasmir and Carbonella 2014; Roca and Rodriguez 2014).

From the earliest days of a youthful United States, a job was not simply a matter of responsible adult self-sufficiency. It was also a matter of being an upstanding, worthwhile person who stood on their own two feet and did not use or need the charity of strangers. From the sayings attributed to Benjamin Franklin to the Weberian analysis of capitalism in the context of the Protestant work ethic to the Catholic teachings set forth by Pope John Paul II (1982, in Applebaum 1992) to the old saying that “idle hands are the Devil’s workshop,” there has been a religious and moral sensibility in the United States that idleness leads to wickedness and that industriousness leads to godliness. In addition to changes in the power dynamic of economic production, champions of the neoliberal perspective have consciously sought to alter the cultural meanings assigned to work, which has transformed the experience of work for workers (Wallman 1979; Sennett 2006; Ho 2009; Lane 2011). Most relevant is the shift that attempts to move work from a moral imperative to merely an activity to acquire the means to consume.

Some argue that the values that underlay the American work ethic have been under assault since the second half of the 20th century as leisure became increasingly commodified and as consumerism replaced dignity and virtue as incentives for work (Wallman 1979; Applebaum 1992). However, there is also evidence that many workers struggle against the loss of such affective benefits to work as the sense of social belonging and morally upright citizenship (Muehlebach 2011). These sensibilities, along with the promise of improved standards of living due to mass production, once invested the worker in the production processes of their employers and possibly helped them to either not recognize or to tolerate the alienation inherent in their working lives (Applebaum 1992). Applebaum (1992) argues that workers have learned to dissociate themselves from their jobs and to profess to keep those jobs only so that they can pay for the leisure-commodities and the lifestyle-commodities they crave; at the very least, there is ambivalence among workers about which social values their participation in the labor force supports (Muehlebach 2011).

Another relevant development of the late 20th century has been the decline of meritocratic workplace values (Sennett 2006). In the middle of the last century, when the social contract between employer and employee was still strong, the worker felt secure in their employment for as long as they did their job consistently and well. That basis for job security has fallen by the wayside as businesses have increasingly eschewed the once-common workplace community bound by mutual social obligations within the work (Sennett 2006; Ho 2009; Lane 2011). Workers have had to scramble to adapt to the additional precarity this development has added to their lives, and the sense of having no performative control over whether and when they lose their jobs additionally increases their ongoing financial stress (Lane 2011).

It is interesting that a significant increase in self-employment in the United States has coincided with these trends. The United States government refers to self-employed individuals without paid employees as nonemployer businesses and it has been counting them annually since 1997. Interestingly, nonemployer businesses have increased in number by about 58% over the past eighteen years (the latest year for which there are data is 2015). The data for employer firms is only available up to 2014 but, over that seventeen-year period, their numbers grew by a relatively miniscule 5.1%. In 2014, there were close to 30 million U.S. firms in total. Almost 24 million of them – 80% of them, in fact – were nonemployer businesses (U.S. Census Bureau 2018).

What accounts for this spectacular growth in nonemployers? The labor market trends that have introduced middle-class Americans to job insecurity and precarity have been in place for decades (Lane 2011, Sennett 2006), but the increase in nonemployer numbers has been much more abrupt. The largest portion of the increase occurred around the turn of the 21st century and shortly thereafter; there was a 41% surge in the number of these single-person businesses between 1997 and 2007. Certainly, Western capitalist economies have seen structural shifts that started in the 1970s and became finalized in the late 1990s and early 2000s. For example, from the mid-1980s and into the 1990s, there was a massive growth in profits. This growth was helped by U.S. monetary policies such as low interest rates (resulting in reduced net interest payments) and fiscal policies such as deregulation and lower taxes. In addition, the period saw increased investment in high tech capital equipment and simultaneous decline in the prices of such equipment (Leiva 2007, in Kallenburg *et. al* 2017).

Microeconomic theory predicts that reduced capital equipment costs will prompt increased investment in capital and decreased investment in labor. This seems to be what

happened, as another structural shift that occurred during this period was a reduction in routine manual labor. The workers involved in this kind of labor began to be replaced by computers and robotics (Kallenburg *et. al* 2017). The United States also experienced its largest increase in labor productivity in thirty years during the business cycle that lasted from 2001 until 2007. Increases in productivity would have the additional impact of allowing businesses to reach scale at a much smaller size (to the advantage of nonemployers). Acemoglu *et. al* (2014) argue that those productivity increases may have occurred not because of automation and other high-tech capital, but because of employment declines that forced remaining workers to do the work of those who had been let go.

An even more fundamental shift has occurred in terms of the ways in which corporate profits have been accruing, thanks to the financialization of corporate growth (Sennett 2006; Ho 2009). Many corporations have saturated their markets and thus can no longer pursue growth by developing new products or increasing market share or expanding into new markets. For those companies, corporate strategy has centered on increasing shareholder value by acquiring valuable assets, liquidating costly liabilities, and playing other similar fiscal shell games for the purpose of increasing corporate stock prices (Sennett 2006; Ho 2009). In this climate, flexibility is the prized corporate quality (Sennett 2006; Freeman 2014; Gershon 2016) and Wall Street rewards companies that demonstrate a flexibility that promises transformative practices (often involving a reduced labor force) with increased stock prices (Sennett 2006; Ho 2009; Gershon 2016).

NEOLIBERAL SELVES

One would naturally expect self-employed individuals to embody what Carla Freeman (2014) calls the signature elements of neoliberalism: “*flexibility, entrepreneurship, and entrepreneurialism*” (18). Surely, the nonemployer business owner would have no trouble envisioning themselves as a business when their business consists of no one but themselves. As a business, the nonemployer would be the epitome of flexibility because this sort of business is so very light on infrastructure that they have no trouble at all turning on a dime. All of this points to a neoliberal way of operating a nonemployer business, which is a personified enactment of the quintessential neoliberal value: market rationality (Gershon 2011).

On the other hand, there is the converse question of whether and to what degree operating a nonemployer business might be a reaction against neoliberalism rather than a way of submerging oneself even further into it. After all, there is quite a lot of non-capitalist value production and transactional activity in any capitalist economy (Gibson-Graham 2006) and the entwining of sociality and transactionality in any economy is difficult to ignore (Gudeman 2016). As Millar (2014) describes it, the experience of transitioning from Fordism to neoliberalism for middle-class workers in strongly post-industrial capitalist economies like the U.S., where “work provided not only an income but also social belonging, a public identity, a sense of well-being, and future aspirations,” has had the effect of “disintegrating social ties and eroding the sense of having a place in the world” (35). In short, one does not have far to search to find reasons why some people might look to self-employment as a means of escaping the lack of community and

the objectification of self (i.e., self as business) that Gershon (2016) argues are major side-effects of neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism is more than a new perspective on the traditional capitalist economy. Gershon (2011) portrays neoliberalism as an ontological and epistemological orientation in which market rationality is the ideal achieved state. From this perspective, individuals view themselves as collections of skills and traits that serve them as marketable assets (Gershon 2011, 2016). They examine every prospective relationship, whether with a potential employer, friend or lover, from a cost-benefit perspective to decide whether the formation of an alliance will serve their interests (Gershon 2011). At the same time, individuals are expected to engage in the ongoing task of self-construction, continuously acquiring additional skills (e.g., software proficiencies, management practices, etc.) which they can then market to prospective partners as their enhanced ability to help the partners reach their ever-shifting goals (Gershon 2016). This makes the individual into the classic *homo economicus*, the rational maximizer of basic economics textbooks, with minimal capacity to act independently due to the wildly unequal power dynamic existing between the worker and the company.

In this iteration of the worker, he or she is a business concern that persuades another business concern – the company – to enter into a contract with them whereby they provide certain skills to the company in exchange for pay (Gershon 2016). The company engages in ongoing transformative practices because the market demands that companies continually demonstrate their ability to change (Sennett 1998, in Gershon 2016). “When the product matters far less than the stock price, companies must be able to shift direction rapidly” (Gershon 2016: 228). Workers trying to survive in this chaotic and unpredictable atmosphere must also be able to shift direction with the company for which they work (Gershon 2016) and they must be

continually enhancing their skill sets to demonstrate both their flexibility and their ability to constantly develop their assets as needed (Lane 2011; Gershon 2016).

What, then, is the purpose of self-employment for those who do it? To what degree does self-employment allow its practitioners to internalize or to escape the exigencies of the neoliberal self, in work and in life? To explore this question, I conducted extensive interviews with 10 self-employed white-collar service providers in the Raleigh-Durham metropolitan area of North Carolina, in the southeastern region of the United States. I chose these individuals as representatives of “successful” self-employment – that is, they had been operating their nonemployer businesses for a minimum of five years and were earning enough to support themselves or to contribute significantly to their household incomes. In the next few sections of this article, I will present ethnographic data that explores the subjective experience of self-employment. Firstly, I will illustrate how self-employment allows for a resumption of control that unalienates workers from their work. In addition, I will show that self-employment can address the power imbalances inherent in capitalist employment relationships, a state that has become exacerbated under neoliberalism, and replace them with valued degrees of greater autonomy. I will illustrate how self-employment can give workers the capacity to adjust their time-sense to their own working rhythms, allowing them to make their work fit into the rest of their lives. Finally, I will discuss how these characteristic behaviors and attitudes among self-employed individuals challenge the notion of the neoliberal self.

“MY BUSINESS IS ME”

“Nancy” opened her front door to me with a wide, welcoming smile. As she guided me upstairs to her office, I looked around at one of the most spotless homes I had ever seen. There were bright, strong colors in the foyer and hall, complemented by beautifully polished wood floors and banisters and set off perfectly by the bright sunshine outside. It looked ready for a photo shoot for some home décor magazine spread.

Nancy is an attractive, middle-aged white woman offering her services as a life and career coach from her home in Cary, NC. Before she started her own business, she had been a career counselor for a university in another part of the country. One of the very first things she told me was that, while she had enjoyed her work, there were a number of ways in which she felt restricted by her *job*.

“What I noticed was, when I was at the job I had, I always had ideas of how I would do it and here’s what I would do and I would love to do more of this and less of that and, boy, wouldn’t it be nice if I had control over all that?” she recalled.

Even so, business ownership was not something Nancy had ever aspired to and she came to it as a result of a transition she and her husband were making at the time. They were moving to another city (she didn’t say why), and rather than looking for work in one of the many, many colleges and universities in the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill area, she decided to explore the possibilities of self-employment. Nancy told me that she had no background in business

management when she got her venture off the ground but by the time we talked, she had been comfortably successful at what she had decided to do for the last twelve years.

Nancy is not what one might typically think of when one speaks of entrepreneurs. She is extremely risk-averse. Somewhat sheepishly, she described the cautious number-crunching she and her husband did to decide how much she would need to earn on a monthly basis in order for them to be able to cover their expenses, and whether they had enough savings to make up for it if she didn't. She even researched different cities before she and her husband moved to ensure they were entering a market where coaching would be a viable service.

Talking to Nancy, it is not immediately obvious what sort of life problem she was attempting to solve when she started her business. "You could go back and do what you were doing before ..." I said.

"Mm-hmm," she agreed.

"You could find some other application of your skills and go to work for somebody else," I continued. "And there are a variety of things that make being self-employed more difficult than being employed by somebody."

"Mm-hmm," she agreed again, a knowing smile blossoming on her face.

"So, my question to you is: why do you do this?"

"Good question," she said, still grinning. "I *love* the autonomy. I *love* full control. I'm very self-disciplined, so I don't need someone else telling me, 'Here's what you need to do today.' I jump right to it. So, I knew that part was gonna be fine for me, I knew that I would be able to manage my time. I work very hard three days a week, and then I'm off four days a week."

"Oh, that's nice," I interjected.

“That’s a *big* incentive and that evolved over time,” Nancy went on. “I didn’t start out that way, but that’s what it’s been the last few years. And so, I get to do my work the way I want to do it, so the structure is all created by me, I can make changes without anyone else’s permission, I get to serve my clients in however I see fit, there’s no one governing how I work with my clients.”

During the course of our conversation, Nancy found a number of different ways to say that to me; for her, business ownership seemed to be primarily about autonomy and control. This was consistent with her personality as it presented itself during my visit. Her body language was very controlled, with minimal gesticulation, and her speech was also careful, precise and controlled. Nancy clearly likes to be in command and she particularly likes to feel that she is in command of herself, something that self-employment is particularly well-equipped to facilitate (Feltault 2005; Wallman 1979).

She contributes earnings of about \$90,000 annually to her dual-income household. However, Nancy is not the stereotypical business owner, in that she is only marginally interested in money.

“Of course, I would love to have more money,” she acknowledges when asked. “However, I’m not willing to expand to the point where I have to work more to make more money. My values are: work as much as I need to and play. A lot.”

“That sounds great,” I said.

“As long as we’re making enough money to keep doing what we like doing, that’s great,” she concluded.

Interestingly, Nancy did not talk about money when she talked about her work and her decision to operate a nonemployer business. The subject did not come up until I asked about it.

Yet, according to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018), the 2016 median salary for a career counselor employed full-time by a college or university was \$54,560, approximately 61% of what Nancy earns annually working part-time. Perhaps the reluctance of many self-employed individuals to discuss their earnings explains the relative silence on the subject in the social sciences literature. Once scholars and analysts agreed that individuals worked for many reasons that had nothing to do with their wages (Wallman 1979), income fell by the wayside as a topic of inquiry. As a business owner, one might expect Nancy to strive toward growth because that is the U.S. mantra for business ownership. Nancy, who has also taken control of her earnings, decided that she is happy to earn “enough.” Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that she was not willing to give up the leisure time she earns, with everything that entails, to pursue higher earnings. Rather than working as much as she can to earn as much as she can, Nancy chooses to work “as much as she needs to” until she has “enough” – another limit she is able to set for herself and, for her, having the choice matters as much as having the work.

Marxist interpretations of work in capitalist systems argue that it is inherently exploitative in that it alienates the worker from his/her work. In the early 21st century, technological advances and lowered capital costs in post-industrial capitalist systems such as that in the United States (Leiva 2007, in Kallenburg *et. Al* 2017) have created opportunities for individual workers to assemble the means of production for their own use, freeing them from the need to seek traditional capitalist employment. For example, Nancy was able to start her own practice with simply a desktop personal computer (which she already owned), access to the internet via an internet service provider (another service that pre-dated her business in her household), server space with a web hosting company to house her web site, and a telephone headset to free her hands for taking notes while she talks to clients – all of which have fallen

drastically in price over the last 25 years. Rather than having to save or borrow thousands of dollars for her startup capital costs, she was able to launch her practice with less than \$500, which is a much more viable proposition for large swathes of people across demographic groups. Nancy's dissatisfaction with her former job had its roots in the way she was not permitted to exercise her professional judgment and how that experience alienated her from the work she did. Thanks to those lower capital costs (particularly for telecommunications technology), the supreme satisfaction she feels in being able to operate her own practice, in which she could construct her own time constraints (or lack thereof), her own service areas of emphasis, her own client base, and her own compensation standards, came about because of the way resumption of control of her means of production was able to reconcile her with her work.

As we talked, it became very clear that professionalism and everything it entails – ethics, standards, client relationships, personal presentation – are also extremely important to Nancy. For her, the professional freedom she enjoyed by operating her own practice made up for the downsides that she identified to me, such as the collegiality she missed from the workplace and the reduced earnings (particularly at the beginning), because that freedom allowed her to be the best coach she knew how to be and the quality of her work was, for her, a direct reflection of herself as a person. “My business is me,” Nancy told me emphatically. For her, and for several others of my interlocutors, their business gives them that public identity that evaporated for most U.S. workers in the grip of the neoliberal regime (Millar 2014; Muehlebach 2011). Unlike Gershon's neoliberal self (2016), Nancy's statement illustrates a view of her business as herself instead of seeing herself as a business, a view that harkens back to the self-as-property perceptions of the economic liberalism of an earlier time (Gershon 2011). The self is not an outside object to be endlessly improved for an ever-shifting market. Rather, the self-employed

person approaches their market as master of their singular skill set, which they package within the human uniqueness that is them.

“TO MAKE MY WORK FIT AROUND MY PERSONAL LIFE”

The first and primary way employers control workers is through a *job*. In Nancy’s conversation as well as that of others of my interlocutors, the *job* describes the role played within the organization by the worker, and it is wholly determined by the employer. The task of the individual human being who wants a job is to be to the organization whatever the company-defined description of that job may be. It is a position conferred by the company and accepted (or not) by the worker. The company acquires the labor of the worker and the worker receives monetary remuneration from the company.

This relationship between employer and employee that is called a job is often distinguished by the self-employed from something called *work*. Nancy is not the first self-employed individual with whom I have spoken who makes the distinction between a job and their work. The difference can best be understood in the context of E.P. Thompson (1967) and his observations on the difference between task-orientation and timed labor. In timed labor, the time a worker spends at work belongs to the company that employs him. “And the employer must *use* the time of his labor and see that it is not wasted” (Thompson 1967:61). Task-orientation, on the other hand, places emphasis on getting things done rather than on the amount of work that can be done within a certain amount of time (Thompson 1967). It is an orientation that lends itself to the “least demarcation between ‘work’ and ‘life’” (Thompson 1967:60).

Nonemployer business owners have often complained to me that the one element of traditional employment they disliked most was the way their job interfered with their work. In

this context (and unlike a job), they describe one's work is a task or activity, or a series of tasks or activities that one is qualified to do by reason of the skills, education and/or experience one has acquired. It is not defined by a company or an employer; rather, work can be envisioned as a craft over which one has achieved mastery in accordance with the standards of that craft. It is defined in part by a market and in greater part by the practitioners of that craft. Most importantly, a job belongs to a company; it is something the company gives to someone. On the other hand, a person's work belongs to them – even if the products of their work belong to the company that hires them.

One symptom of the power struggle over control between employees and employers, as in Nancy's case, can be seen in the tension that often exists between a *job* and one's *work*. This is particularly important because of the degree to which a *job* provides – or does not provide – the flexibility to accommodate the other types of work required for livelihood (Wallman 1979; Gibson-Graham 2006). Wallman (1979) argues that “work is the performance of necessary tasks, and the production of necessary values – moral as well as economic” (7). When a job makes it more difficult for an individual to produce necessary moral values or relational values because market rationality preferences economic ones, it might even more accurately be said that the job interferes with life.

I met “Brenda” at the home of a mutual friend during a holiday season dinner party. During the course of the conversation, I learned that Brenda was self-employed and, seizing the opportunity, I told her about my research and asked if she would be willing to talk to me about her work. She agreed and we arranged to connect after the holidays to chat.

Brenda is a heavy-set African American woman in her late 40s, who speaks in an animated, frank and engaging fashion. She graduated from law school but has never practiced

law. In fact, it would be difficult to give her a generic professional label. Her last job, before she established her business, was with a nonprofit organization that worked to place newly qualified lawyers in positions in which they could work for social justice advocacy organizations. Almost everything about her current work situation was an accident.

She looked for a position in which she could work with women and promote women's leadership but she could not find such a position. That caused her to create the position for herself rather than walking away from that ambition and doing something else. But when she got started, her first contracts all involved corporate diversity assessments and diversity training and that remains the bulk of the work she does.

"I didn't want to do that because I thought it was cliché," she told me.

"Cliché?" I repeated. "You mean because you're black?"

"Well, yeah," she answered, as if she expected me to know that without needing to ask.

Like most of the self-employed individuals with whom I converse, Brenda is neither a critic of late capitalism nor a crusader advocating for the downtrodden worker. She is simply a professional who is looking for something satisfying to do.

"So, looking at the big picture," I posed the question, "why do you do what you do? And I don't mean why do you do diversity training, I mean why are you self-employed?"

Brenda thought about that for a minute and when she answered, she spoke slowly, as if she were still thinking as she talked. "I am self-employed because I like choosing work that means something to me and that I can be interested in and committed to and not be forced to do it because I'm an employee."

This response intrigued me. “So, let me explore that for a second. So, does that mean that if it was work that you’re interested in and willing to be committed to but somebody else was telling you to do it, it would take some of the shine off the work for you?” I asked.

“No!” she said to surprise me. “I have said if I could do everything I do now and work at an organization or something, I’d do it ... but I don’t think I can. I think that there would be that 25% of the assignments that come to me that I have no interest and don’t want to do.”

For Brenda, the choice of self-employment has its roots in the degree to which she cares about doing work that is meaningful and interesting to her and, conversely, the degree to which she detests being forced by the contingencies of a *job* to do work that is meaningless and uninteresting. Like Nancy, Brenda has found that the shackles of having a job interfere with her ability to do what she considered to be good and interesting work. Brenda says she does not like having a boss, she does not like being told what to do, and she particularly dislikes being forced to do things that she would not have chosen to do. Again, the issue is control but Brenda’s perspective is expressed in language that places more value on agency.

The value of agency, of the capacity to act, for Brenda, was evident as well when she added, “And then the last thing I’ll say about why I’m self-employed that I didn’t appreciate until last year, is being able to make my work fit around my personal life.”

She was referring to a situation in which she found herself over the last year because she had to arrange for the care of an ailing parent who lives some distance from her. She was required to make repeated trips to see her mother and make suitable arrangements with the mother’s doctors and other providers. Brenda appreciated the ease with which she was able to manage her time and her work projects – whether that involved postponing deadlines or subcontracting work – so that she could handle the personal issues that arose from her mother’s

illness. Brenda's obligation to do the work of caring for her parent was at least as greatly valuable to her as the work she performs to generate revenue. Self-employment gave her the option to do these various sorts of work in accordance with her own values rather than the values of an emotionally-distant employer organization or even the values of neoliberal capitalism.

Gershon (2011) defines neoliberal agency as "the freedom ... to be an autonomous agent negotiating for goods and services in a context where every other agent should ideally be also acting like a business partner and competitor" (540). The agency that Brenda exercises in the example above is a different kind of agency, one that involves an important element overlooked in the neoliberal model: the non-market rationality that demands that she be responsive to the people she cares about. There was no negotiation with either her sick parent or any siblings she may have (she did not mention any to me) or her clients. When she spoke with me about "managing" her time and work flows, Brenda was referring to her choice to either push back deadlines or subcontract work that could not be delayed rather than turn her back on her parent's needs. This example illustrates that Brenda is able to exercise more than simple freedom of choice between one commodity and another. For Brenda, there was no choice involved at all, there was duty; her mother was ill and needed her. The decisions she made did not involve weighing costs and benefits. When I asked if she had been worried about losing business because of the constraints imposed on her by her mother's illness, she merely shrugged, acknowledging to me that she might indeed have lost clients but that consideration did not occur to her at the time. That was not what mattered to her.

“IT’S REALLY EMPOWERING IN A LOT OF WAYS”

There are parts of Carrboro, NC that are green enough and sparsely enough settled to make one forget that one is not in a rural part of the state. It was a hot, sunny day in late June and the thickly wooded area around me almost made it difficult to believe I was only minutes away from the downtown haunts of thousands of college students. As I pulled into the dirt-road shared driveway, I thought how fortunate it was that this place was not located in northern climes where, between snow and mud, the road would be impassable for half the year.

I was in this scenic wooded area to visit with “Eric,” a self-employed artist who works in glass. A tall, slender young man in his mid-thirties, Eric has been working as an artist for the past 15 years. He lives alone in this peaceful, scenic area in a small house with an attached two-room shed that he uses for a workshop. The workshop is even hotter than the late spring day. After a brief tour of the facility, Eric sat me down in a rickety wooden chair and we talked.

Eric is one of the younger successful self-employed individuals I have interviewed. Because of that, he is in a different stage of life and career than most of my consultants. He started his venture when he was in his early twenties. While he has had the odd job now and then in his youth, he has never worked for a company in a traditional job in his adult life. So, when I asked him about his reasons for being self-employed, his answers were similar to other interlocutors but also subtly different.

He was significantly less comfortable talking about money than any of the other nonemployers with whom I had spoken. The others did not bring up the subject but they

answered my questions readily and with no visible anxiety. On the other hand, when I asked Eric how he made money as a glass artist, which I considered to be a relatively simple question, he held forth at some length about how and why the money was not important.

“I think it’s very much in the way that you’re looking at the long game and not so much the peaks and valleys of, you know, a year or a month or whatever, a few years. And like I always say, it’s more a lifestyle. It’s not so much a job as it is a lifestyle. So, personally, I like the idea of scraping by because that edge, to me, is where ... yeah, there’s a lot of anxiety but there’s a lot of magic that happens there, too. And, of course, I’m aware that that also comes from someone who is white male privileged and I’ve had a safety net throughout my life, a sense of abundance ... but regardless, yeah, it’s comfortable to have a lot of money I’m sure but that leads to other problems like perceived contentment or ‘oh, well, now I can just relax’ kind of thing. is also kind of good, I think, to just trying to maintain a continual practice of remaining balanced or calm or a sense of peace when it’s seems like everything around us is kind of falling apart.”

I was left with the impression that he had been required to address the issue of his income before and the experience had resulted in his defensiveness.

After this speech, Eric did eventually tell me that his revenue streams consisted of commissioned objects, gallery sales, glass repair work, subcontracting for other artists’ projects, sponsorships, and some teaching. But his clear discomfort was intriguing to me; as he talked, it seemed that he was conflicted in a number of different ways. On the one hand, as an artist he wanted to avoid leaving me with the impression that he was a sellout, who would do anything if the price was right. On the other hand, while he defended the benefits of the ‘starving artist’ trope he claimed to live, Eric was uncomfortable discussing his income even though he stated positively that he made enough to support himself.

After more than a decade of making glass art, Eric is not in a position in which he has to worry about money. “There’s things that I can make in five minutes that I can sell for \$25,” he told me. “Now, is that most of what I’m making? No, but I know that if I do need some money, I can pump that out and it’s easy.”

For Eric, the most important things about being self-employed are autonomy and self-determination. He confessed to me that he has what he calls “authority issues,” which he says would make it unlikely that he could be successful working for a company. Like Nancy, he likes having control over the work he does: when he works, with whom he works, and how he works. Like Brenda, he does not like having a boss and not only because he likes being able to turn down projects that don’t interest him. He says, “I think my point is just that [self-employment] was my ability to make these decisions and feel empowered and not feel a need to look to others for ‘what should I do?’ or ‘what do I want to do?’” Eric’s personal power matters to him.

Even though he has been making glass art for 15 years, Eric does not commit himself to a career as a glass artist or to an identity as a glass artist. He says such a commitment would close too many doors to him, that defining himself as just one thing is something of a trap that discounts the potential of all the other things he might be able to do. He also expressed some wariness about being “trapped” by the accoutrements of affluence. His liberty also seems very dear to him.

As mentioned above, one of the things Eric unintentionally conveyed to me was that he was somewhat self-conscious about the amount of money he makes. “I mean, yeah, I guess if I went out and really hustled more and found more work or something ... then that would be its own thing,” he says, “but what I’ve always done has always worked, so why change that unless I want a different result? And what would the end result be? Well, yes, I could make more money. Am I comfortable now with doing what I am, with how I’m doing? Yeah. And I think a lot of it comes down to, for me, that my idea of success is very different than many of the people I grew up with.”

“Can you talk to me a little bit about what your idea of success is?” I asked him.

“My idea of success is ... happiness is a little too broad but in the sense of ... how I spend my time. It really comes down to having an intention about what I do with my time and having control over that. Or when I do what,” he replied thoughtfully. “Also, being able to say no to things. You know, ‘that’s not really for me’ or ‘I don’t have to do that.’ Maybe my idea of success is like autonomy because it’s really empowering in a lot of ways.”

Eric is not the first man I have interviewed who operated a home-based nonemployer business but his circumstances are relatively unusual. More often, home-based business owners are men or women with families, and members of both genders frequently express a desire to be more involved with their children and to allow their children to be more involved with them. On the other hand, older men have explained to me that, since their children are grown and gone, and their homes and cars are paid for, they have the luxury of doing what work they like without needing to count the cost. But Eric is unmarried, without children, and still young enough to feel the pressure of masculinized notions of career success (Lane 2011; Ho 2009). In addition, he works out of his home in a socioeconomic context in which home-based work is chronically undervalued simply by virtue of being home-based (Wallman 1979).

Eric’s ambivalence about his work is an illustration of the way self-employment remains entrenched in the highly gendered world of capitalist work, particularly in the context of workspaces and earnings. What to me was one of the more outstanding observations I was able to make was that, whether among rideshare drivers at the local airport or among self-employed white-collar service providers in co-working spaces, self-employed men and women occupy public spaces differently. Specifically, the men I watched seemed much more comfortable in public, where they display a collegial sociality that they rarely discuss unprompted but that appears to be an important part of their work lives. In general, the women were usually more

comfortable with a home-based enterprise than men (especially young men), except in those instances in which they decline to provide their services from a home office out of concern for their personal safety. These women were much more likely to introduce the subject of the isolation they felt in home-based self-employment and the steps they took to address that issue for themselves. However, those solutions usually happen behind closed doors, in less public spaces, involving business or professional groups (often groups specifically for women business owners) that meet privately. My observation has been that women who do occupy public spaces as self-employed service providers display less sociality and are much more self-contained. An investigation into the particulars of these behaviors and attitudes is beyond the scope of this paper but it does serve as an illustration of the fact that self-employment in public spaces still displays the same gendered contexts as more traditional capitalist work spaces and practices.

SELF-EMPLOYMENT AS CRITIQUE OF NEOLIBERAL WORK

From these ethnographic examples, it is possible to get a sense of the subjective experience of self-employment and to develop a portrait of the values that propel self-employment among those who engage in it. For Nancy, self-employment was a way for her to reclaim her professional integrity and her control over her professional life. Her practice was also a means of self-expression (“My business is me”), in which her work could articulate not only what she knows but who she is. Most importantly, like all the self-employed individuals I interviewed, Nancy was able to own her means of production, such that she is no longer alienated from her work.

Brenda found self-employment to be an enriching way to work because it allowed her to do work that she found interesting and that helped her to feel that what she does makes a difference – to the world, to her community, and to herself. Operating her nonemployer business expanded Brenda’s capacity to act in ways that were true to her own goals, without needing to consider the goals of an employer. Self-employment also allowed Brenda to manage her time and her work so that she was able to apply a non-market rationality, in human ways, to her relational obligations and to respond to those obligations accordingly.

Eric found that the agency he was able to exercise as a self-employed glass artist was empowering and, to the extent that he sought not to label himself or to accept anybody else’s labels, he also found it freeing. At the same time, he seemed to still feel constrained by societal expectations for male career success and professional status. These constraints have not stopped

him from pursuing the work he enjoys and wants to do but they are an illustration of the degree to which self-employment remains a part of the overall capitalist context.

Autonomy, control, non-alienation, intellectual challenge, meaning, relationality, empowerment, agency – these are the motivating values reported by self-employed individuals to explain why they have forsaken traditional capitalist work. So far from embodying Gershon’s notion of the neoliberal self, these nonemployer business operators could be described as pursuing the antithesis of the self-objectification, the entrepreneuriality, and the market rationality Gershon (2011; 2016) presents as characteristic of individual working actors in the neoliberal capitalist economy.

These self-employed individuals do not see themselves as businesses that can be managed in order to accumulate and enhance a continually expanding set of marketable assets. They do not treat clients or potential clients as if they were businesses, either, often even when they are. My nonemployer interlocutors say they choose the work they will do based not on a “means-ends calculus” (Gershon 2011:540) but on whether the work is interesting or meaningful to them, or whether they are able to establish a satisfactorily *human* rapport with the potential client. Rather than epitomizing the neoliberal perspective as single-person businesses, these nonemployer business owners use the autonomy bestowed by their enterprises to escape from neoliberal market rationality.

Nonemployers have no need of making such a virtue of the sort of flexibility that makes their working lives chaotic with insistently continual efforts to expand their skill sets and enhance marketable traits. For example, Nancy has infused her professional life with stability and eschews risk where possible. In this way, she is neither entrepreneur nor entrepreneurial. She and other nonemployers have stepped outside of the temporality of innovation and the constant

shedding of the old and taking on the perceived new, retaining the values of “the stability and solidity that were prized under earlier capitalist expansions” (Freeman 2014:18). At the same time, nonemployers like Brenda value a different sort of flexibility that allows them to weave their work into the various contexts of the rest of their lives.

So far from being emblematic of neoliberal selves doing neoliberal work, then, the self-employed service providers I interviewed have implemented a specific, if unconscious, rejection of the commoditization and objectification of the self that has overtaken neoliberal capitalist labor markets (Gershon 2016; Lane 2011; Ho 2009). It is a deliberate assumption of control by the worker over their own livelihood: what work they do, how they work, when they work, and with whom. Perhaps most significantly, it is a refutation of the capitalist paradigm that makes “work” into something separate from “life” (Lefebvre 1991).

And yet, self-employed people do not operate outside of capitalism. Some scholars write about the self-employed as if they are brave resisters on the fringes of capitalism (Kasimir and Carbonella 2014) or innovators operating outside of capitalism (Gibson-Graham 2006), who are showing the rest of us how we can all take our lives back from the greedy capitalists. But the self-employed remain very much entrenched in the system, and so cannot be adequately described as somehow being a manifestation of noncapitalism or anti-capitalism. Nonemployers are not capitalist rebels, even though many of them are corporate refugees. They don’t preach self-employment to the multitudes in search of converts. Many, like Brenda, would happily return to a traditional job if they could find one that would allow them to find the same meaning and structure they have created for themselves in their nonemployer enterprises. They can in no way be viewed as the leading edge of some sort of movement for socioeconomic change.

It may be possible to engage in long-term observation of nonemployers in the United States and come to the conclusion that they do indeed typify the neoliberal self as described by Gershon (2011, 2016). If we view them, however, in their own terms and in the context of their self-reported experiences of being self-employed, it becomes clear that their perceptions of themselves, their work, and the environments in which they operate are as far outside traditional neoliberal capitalist labor markets as they could be while still being able to function within the capitalist system. The principle values that operate in those environments are control, autonomy, and a non-chaotic flexibility that allows for priorities that lay outside of market rationality.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have explored the question of why individuals elect to be self-employed without employees (nonemployer businesses) and whether doing so allows them to embody or to escape neoliberal labor market paradigms. In doing so, I engaged with Ilana Gershon's discussions of neoliberal agency and of the neoliberal self (Gershon 2011, 2016). After a review of my ethnographic data, some typical examples of which are presented here, I conclude that it is not reasonable to operate under an assumption that a neoliberal ethos has been successfully implanted into the U.S. labor market without resistance. This is not to suggest that Gershon's description of a neoliberal self should be discarded. It is a useful portrait but, in spite of various workforce training strategies that encourage young job seekers to drink the neoliberal Kool Aid, I believe the 'neoliberal self' is far from being a labor market universal in the U.S.

It seems to me that we ought to expect that some individuals will resist being commoditized and objectified. In the end, humans are social animals, after all. As neoliberal global markets continue to take hold, an interesting series of projects might investigate the various ways in which resistance to neoliberal selfhood takes shape and what that looks like in multiple social contexts around the world.

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