Leaning in and Bouncing Back: Neoliberal Feminism and the Work of Self-Transformation in Ottessa Moshfegh’s My Year of Rest and Relaxation (2018) and Halle Butler’s The New Me (2019)

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Leaning in and Bouncing Back: Neoliberal Feminism and the Work of Self-Transformation in Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) and Halle Butler’s *The New Me* (2019)

By Isabel Sykes

Abstract

This article is concerned with the capacity of contemporary fiction to reveal and oppose the ubiquity of work in Western culture. I conduct a comparative literary analysis of two contemporary novels that expose how neoliberal rationality has transformed work into an all-encompassing project, endorsed by a corresponding manifestation of feminism. Rather than challenging gendered labor relations through collective action, this “neoliberal feminism” incites women to turn their critical gaze within and transform themselves into resilient citizens and workers. Its sensibility is disseminated through popular literature, from “chick-lit” to self-help books, via narratives of physical and psychological self-transformation. This article builds on feminist scholarship which has critiqued the popular cultural domination of neoliberal feminism, offering a new contribution by identifying a nascent genre of anti-neoliberal feminist fictional writing. I argue that Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) and Halle Butler’s *The New Me* (2019) constitute a literary resistance to neoliberal feminism where the trope of self-transformation is employed to expose and reject an endorsement of oppressive work culture. Depicting characters who obsessively work on themselves to survive the precarious neoliberal labor market, they reveal the hypocrisy of a feminism subdued by incessant labor and pressed into the service of neoliberalism, positioning literature as a potential site for resistance.

*Keywords*: Neoliberalism, Feminism, Work, Self-transformation, Resilience, Ottessa Moshfegh, Halle Butler

Introduction

Ottessa Moshfegh’s darkly comedic novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) (hereafter referred to as *My Year*) follows a young, wealthy woman living in New York in the late-1990s who enters a narcotic-induced sleep for a year in search of respite from the world. A self-identified “spoiled WASP,” the unnamed narrator is disenchanted by work (and in no need of it due to a large inheritance), has no hobbies besides sleep, and only one friend with whom she has a toxic relationship (Moshfegh, 2018). Bored by her life, she embarks on a journey of self-transformation through sleep, waking only occasionally to eat and use the toilet, in the hopes that, after a year, she will wake up with a different outlook. As one reviewer notes, the unnamed narrator has been labeled both a “savage satire of privileged white women” and “a feminist hero who decides it is better to sleep away than lean in,” concluding that “perhaps she is both” (Michel, 2018). The reviewer’s choice of the phrase “lean in,” evoking Sheryl Sandberg’s bestselling self-help book *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead* (2013), highlights the crux around which...
my analysis of *My Year* unfolds. I argue that Moshfegh’s narrator offers a commentary on a particular brand of feminism that encourages women to “lean in” to incessant labor through an endless process of self-improvement. Far from being a “feminist hero,” my essay demonstrates how the protagonist embodies a neoliberal feminist sensibility, but her self-transformation exposes the hypocrisy of neoliberal feminism and condemns the oppressive work culture that neoliberal feminism endorses.

Halle Butler’s *The New Me* (2019) has likewise been praised for its satirical humor, hailed as a “deliciously dark satire of office life” (Cosslett, 2019). Set in 2019, it follows Butler’s millennial protagonist, Millie, as she navigates the precarious labor market as a temporary office receptionist. Resolved to escape precarity by transforming herself into a “better” worker (and thus, by her logic, a better person) she embarks on a project to change her appearance, lifestyle, and mentality in pursuit of a promotion. Like Moshfegh, Butler’s subject matter is the endless drudgery of working life, a “scream” into the void of “meaningless” labor and the attempts people make to either make the best of it or escape it altogether (Etter, 2019). Crucially, as one reviewer identifies, *The New Me* is not just a criticism of “the gig-economy hellscape;” it is also an attack on the “corporate feminism” that endorses it (Trimboli, 2019). I argue that this corporate feminism, encompassed in this essay by the term neoliberal feminism, is the main subject of Butler’s critique. Millie’s subjection to the mental and physical tyranny of self-improvement obliterates any distinction between work and personal life. Like Moshfegh, therefore, Butler utilizes the neoliberal feminist trope of self-transformation to execute a razor-sharp dissection of its hypocrisies and the toxic work culture it perpetuates.

In the following section, I lay out the origins and nature of the neoliberal overwork culture critiqued by Moshfegh and Butler and how recent feminist sensibilities have endorsed it. Next, I detail how these twinned offensives have been disseminated through a proliferating body of literature, which has received rigorous critical attention from feminist cultural studies academics. Building on the work of these scholars, this essay offers a new perspective: I contend that *My Year and The New Me* posit the novel as a nascent form of resistance to the abundant cultural production of neoliberal feminism. In subsequent sections, I conduct a comparative literary analysis of these texts, demonstrating how, by adopting the trope of self-transformation to critique contemporary overwork culture, these writers explicitly respond to and reject a neoliberal feminist sensibility.

**Neoliberalism and Overwork Culture**

Moshfegh and Butler’s novels respond to a landscape of work in which the meaning of waged labor has transformed. Work, in its paid form, is commonly understood as “activities carried out for a wage” (Gorz, 1997, p. 1). Since the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s, however, it has transcended this definition to become intertwined with personal identity and self-worth, particularly in Western cultures (Weeks, 2011; Frayne, 2015; Frayne, 2019; Fleming, 2015; Fleming, 2014). Broadly defined as a series of economic policies which prioritize personal advancement and free market competition over state intervention, neoliberalism has its origins in the regimes of Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990) and Ronald Reagan (1981-1989). During this period and under subsequent governments, neoliberal policies have been associated with a rise in precarious and casualized labor, attacks on trade unions, widening social inequalities, and the dismantling of the welfare state, all of which have transformed labor relations (Brown, 2015). Beyond this, as Wendy Brown argues, neoliberalism has transformed our personal relationship with work; operating as a “governing rationality,” it has “transmogrifie[d] every human domain and endeavor […] according to a specific image of the economic,” reducing people to “bit[s] of
human capital” whose sole purpose is to enhance their economic value (Brown, 2015, p.10). Brown’s definition encapsulates the way in which neoliberalism’s goals of economic expansion and competition have been disseminated on an individual level, to become the “rationality” through which humans relate to one another and themselves.

Neoliberalism’s economizing rationality encompasses all spheres of existence within and outside the workplace, subsuming all leisure, self-care, and social activities. Even the mind and body must be worked on, collapsing “the distinction between one’s ‘private’ self and one’s ‘public’ enterprise as the self itself becomes an enterprise” (Rottenberg, 2018, p. 139). Within neoliberal work culture, therefore, people must labor unceasingly to increase their economic value, but they must also consistently work on the marketable value of themselves as an object of “enterprise.” Under these paradigms, waged work transcends activities carried out for a wage to become the source of our value as citizens and as humans.3

The ability of literature to represent the fictional neoliberal psyche at work has made it a potent and increasingly popular tool with which to critique overwork culture. Published in the same year as My Year, Ling Ma’s Severance (2018) depicts an American office worker living through a near-future apocalypse in which a virus compels people to “work themselves to death” (Day, 2018). Kikuko Tsumura’s 2015 novel There’s No Such Thing as an Easy Job (translated into English in 2021), portrays a woman working a series of strange temp-jobs in Tokyo while recovering from burnout and is often compared to Sayaka Murata’s Convenience Store Woman (2016, and 2019 in English). Both writers comment on the Japanese labor market, but their depictions of a global work culture in which our jobs “spill messily into our personal lives” have propelled their popularity in the West (Shiota, 2022). Moshfegh’s and Butler’s satirical narratives of young women navigating the tedium of relentless labor can be located within this genre. As I now explain, what sets them apart is their employment of the trope of self-transformation, which enables them to portray a particular gendered codification of the enterprising neoliberal self.

From Postfeminism to Neoliberal Feminism: Transformations

Just as neoliberal overwork culture has dissolved the boundaries between public and private life, so has feminism developed alongside its economizing paradigms. Since the dominance of the “separate spheres” ideology in the nineteenth century, work has been both a site of subjugation and a locus of resistance for feminist movements (Fraser, 2017). Recent scholarship, however, has traced the erosion of feminism as an oppositional movement in place of a series of new depoliticized forms coinciding with the entrenchment of neoliberalism (Eisenstein, 2015; Adamson, 2017; Orgad & Gill, 2022; Gill & Orgad, 2018; Gill, 2017; Gill & Orgad, 2017; McRobbie, 2009; McRobbie, 2020; McRobbie, 2015; Wilson, 2017; Orgad, 2019). Rather than opposing unequal gendered labor relations, these new feminist movements have perpetuated them.

One such form, emerging after the waning of second-wave feminism and reaching its peak between the 1990s and early 2000s, is postfeminism, “a sensibility that suggests that the goals of feminism have been achieved and that women are now free to make a life of their own” (Wilson, 2017, p. 139). Defined by an “emphasis upon choice and autonomy,” postfeminism encourages women, now supposedly freed from gendered discrimination, to embrace neoliberalism’s enterprising rationality by crafting a “positive, confident and glowing” self (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020, p. 5). The work of physical and psychological self-transformation is central to this narrative.

3 As Marxist feminist scholars have identified, unpaid work, such as reproductive and domestic labor, is devalued within this paradigm (Weeks, 2011; Fraser, 2017; Fraser, 2016; Bhattacharya & Vogel, 2017; Federici, 2004; Federici, 2020).
Embracing the body as women’s main site of value in the neoliberal labor market, cultural depictions of fashion, beauty, diet, and lifestyle makeovers proliferated throughout the 1990s and early 2000s (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Elias et al., 2017). Reality television shows incited female participants and audiences to change their appearances, relationships, and careers, in accordance with narrow ideals of middle-class femininity (Skeggs & Wood, 2012; Wood et al., 2011). So-called “self-help” literature encouraged women to work on their “flaws” using self-reflexive “tools” and “expert advice” (Riley et al., 2018; Riley et al., 2019, p. 4). The “chick-lit” genre exploded with bildungsroman-style novels such as Helen Fielding’s Bridget Jones’s Diary (1996) and Laura Weisberger’s The Devil Wears Prada (2003), presenting female protagonists undergoing aesthetic and lifestyle transformations to embrace their “positive, confident, and glowing” feminine identities (McRobbie, 2009; Harzewski, 2011). From losing weight to getting a new job to enticing a partner, postfeminism pushed the agenda of self-transformation, promoting the neoliberal rationality of continuous and all-encompassing labor under the guise of feminist (and feminine) “freedom.”

Around 2012, a different form of feminist consciousness arose. Catherine Rottenberg coined the term “neoliberal feminism” to describe a sensibility which, in contrast to postfeminism, acknowledges that structural gender inequalities persist but “converts” these “from a structural problem into an individual affair” (Rottenberg, 2018, p. 55). While the neoliberal feminist acknowledges the inequality of the labor market, she accepts personal responsibility for navigating its terrain through the practices of “self-care” and “resilience” (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Gill & Orgad, 2018; McRobbie, 2020). This is channeled in a middle-class ideal of professional advancement balanced with an acutely managed domestic life (Rottenberg, 2018). Though distinct from postfeminism, an emphasis on self-improvement, an acceptance of personal responsibility for success and happiness, and, crucially, a sanctioning of neoliberal overwork culture, all feed into neoliberal feminism (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). Under both sensibilities, individual entrepreneurial advancement is pursued at the expense of structural change, as career, family life, lifestyle, and physicality are all scrutinized and worked upon in the pursuit of capital accumulation.

Neoliberal feminism is also disseminated through popular culture. Sheryl Sandberg’s Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead (2013) is the perfect neoliberal feminist manifesto, exhorting women to “internaliz[e] the revolution” by “focusing on what [they] can change themselves” in order to advance their careers (Sandberg & Scovell, 2013, p. 11). Ivanka Trump’s Women Who Work (2017) likewise extols an extremely privileged vision whereby women “craft” their desired lifestyle through “continuous labour and perseverance” (Rottenberg, 2019, p. 1074). The ideal neoliberal feminist subject, as revealed through these texts, is professionally successful and aesthetically pleasing, has a fulfilling family life, and is hardworking in all pursuits. The pervasive cultural production of neoliberal feminism thus works in tandem with neoliberal overwork culture to subjugate women under the pressure to transform themselves in line with a lauded ideal of professional femininity, but this time from the position of a purportedly feminist struggle for personal success.

While critiques of neoliberal feminist cultural production have focused on popular non-fiction, I contribute a new perspective through the analysis of novels. Moshfegh and Butler, both writing within a distinctly neoliberal feminist moment, reveal the fictional psyche of neoliberal subjects in ways that expose, manipulate, and ridicule neoliberal feminist sensibilities. While both protagonists engage in the postfeminist trope of self-transformation, their motivation is their discontentment with overwork culture and the casualized labor market. The protagonists are thus aligned with a neoliberal feminist consciousness because they recognize structural inequality but
take personal responsibility for transforming themselves in order to endure it. The next sections of this essay detail the trajectories of the two protagonists as they embark on journeys of mental and physical self-transformation which eviscerate the boundaries between work, leisure, and self, exposing the damaging impacts of the neoliberal feminist project of self-work. Ultimately, then, these texts exist in dialogue with and in opposition to Sandberg and Trump by exposing and critiquing a feminism which has been pressed into the service of the dominant ideological system. In doing so, they posit the novel as a possible site for resistance to the pervasiveness of neoliberal feminist discourse in popular culture.

**Escaping Precarity in The New Me (2019)**

My analysis begins with Butler’s representation of the casualized neoliberal workplace and its impact on her female protagonist. One of the most significant impacts of neoliberal economics has been the rise of “precarity” — a condition of work defined by insecurity, an increase in short and/or fixed-duration work contracts, and inconsistent and/or unreliable working hours (M. Harris, 2017). Women dominate this casualised labor force, existing more often than men “on the fringes of the formal economy, in part-time, casual, insecure, and unprotected labour” (A. Harris, 2004, p. 40). Neoliberal feminism teaches that women must embrace the “flexibility” of this unstable labor market as an opportunity for personal “innovation,” presenting precarity as an ideal opportunity for women workers to enhance their economic value (Rottenberg, 2019). As a temporary receptionist in a design studio, Millie is a precarious worker in this position. She attempts to embrace the “flexibility” of temp work, narrating that she is “drawn to [it] for the slight atmospheric changes” between offices (Butler, 2019, p. 22). She concludes, however, that it is only good for providing “a nice illusion of variety,” comparing frequently changing jobs to “how people switch out their cats’ wet food from Chicken and Liver to Sea Bass” when “in the end, it’s all just flavored anus” (22). The fact that Millie cynically dismisses her work options as “flavored anus,” and the “variety” as an “illusion,” reveals her recognition that the so-called choice the precarious labor market affords her amounts only to choosing the options that will depress her the least. The unsavory reality of the “flexible” neoliberal labor market is thus exposed at the outset of the novel.

Even a possible escape from precarity does not fill Millie with hope. When her agency representative tells her that her job has “possibility for temp to perm,” Millie fears losing the limited freedom she has to the “endless abyss” of permanent, full-time employment and is conscious of having to “change” the way she “behave[s]” in order to make this transition, underscoring the collapse between private and public self in overwork culture (pp. 2-3). Despite these reservations, Millie feels compelled to work towards the promotion to escape precarity, embarking on a transformation into the titular “new me” which both echoes the postfeminist makeover narrative and exemplifies the neoliberal feminist rationality of liberation through self-work. Emphasizing the collapse of work and leisure under neoliberal rationality, Millie’s non-working time is reduced to what McRobbie calls a “neoliberal spreadsheet”— a plethora of activities designed to advance one’s economic standing, monitored by “constant benchmarking of the self” against expectations of productivity (McRobbie, 2004, p. 10). Millie’s “spreadsheet” comprises activities that she feels she “should” do to become a “better person” with “money” and “stability,” including getting a hobby, reading, taking a yoga class, and going to a museum (p. 77). Though these activities might conventionally be understood as pleasurable and relaxing, within the “neoliberal spreadsheet” they become obligations. As Maria-Daniella Dick and Robbie McLaughlan argue, under neoliberal overwork culture, all conventionally restful and/or restorative
activities such as “cooking,” “sleeping,” and “speaking to friends” become “part of a regime [...] to further enable production,” the result being that leisure “goes beyond a response to work and itself becomes a kind of work” in itself (2020, p. 116). This is what happens to Millie as she desperately fills her diminishing spare time with “productive” leisure activities to further her career prospects. Echoing Sandberg’s call to “internaliz[e] the revolution,” she tells herself that “change is possible” if she modifies her “behaviour,” even while the decision of whether she makes the “temp to perm” promotion remains outside her control (p. 81). As well as emphasizing the collapse of the work-life balance, her neoliberal spreadsheet thus exposes the feminist illusion that each woman is entirely responsible for her own success or failure. As in the workplace, therefore, Butler’s representation of overwork culture within the sphere of so-called leisure exposes the myths of freedom and choice underpinning neoliberal rationality.

Beauty labor forms a pivotal part of Millie’s neoliberal spreadsheet, revealing both the “embodied nature” of the work of leisure and its gendered dimensions (Adamson & Salmenniemi, 2017, p. 303). She embarks on an extensive beauty regime after work, “work[ing]” coconut oil into her body, hair, teeth, and nails, leaving not even the “hairs sprouting from [her] neck and chin” unscrutinized (pp. 95-96). This new attention to her physical appearance echoes the postfeminist makeover and reflects the inherent connection between work on the body and work on the value of the self as “human capital” (Lazar, 2011; Elias et al., 2017). The language of labor that Millie uses highlights the irony of the beauty industry in presenting such activities as “inherently pleasurable,” when they are explicitly revealed to be additional work (Fahs, 2017, p. 94). When Millie looks in the mirror and says, “this is the face people want to see” (p. 95), she acknowledges that she is carrying out this beauty labor not for herself, as an “inherently pleasurable” leisure activity, but for the advancement of her work prospects—to appease those who have the power to facilitate her transition from “temp to perm.” The body is thus incorporated within the neoliberal spreadsheet of leisure. Butler’s depiction of the labor of leisure and beauty work reveals how neoliberal feminism has turned its critical gaze away from the patriarchal structures that subjugate women and onto the bodies and minds of individual women themselves, perpetuating neoliberal overwork culture across all areas of life.

Self-Improvement through Sleep in My Year of Rest and Relaxation (2018)

Moshfegh’s unnamed protagonist also finds herself disenchanted with the supposedly flexible neoliberal labor market. The novel is set in the early 2000s, when the rise of information technologies and flexible employment encouraged women to move out of female-dominated careers such as nursing and care work and into office-based work, embracing the new so-called freedoms gained by second-wave feminism (A. Harris, 2004). Moshfegh’s protagonist, being in a more financially prosperous position than Millie, is therefore well-placed to embrace a new career as an identity-affirming choice rather than a financial necessity. This reflects the classed nature of the casualized labor market, and of feminism in this period, in that the so-called freedoms offered by the new, flexible economy were only truly open to those women whose families had the necessary capital to support them (A. Harris, 2004).

It is because of this privilege, too, that Moshfegh’s protagonist feels free to reject the opportunity to “lean in” to professional advancement. Easily landing a job as a receptionist in a high-end art gallery, she commits herself to doing the bare minimum at work. While the events of the novel take place much earlier, the narrator’s attitude appears to pre-empt the recent stance taken against overwork culture by the US-based “quiet quitting” movement (Tapper, 2022). As she becomes increasingly disillusioned with her job role, which is ostensibly to be a “pouty knockout” for gallery visitors, the narrator begins sleeping at work, neglecting her duties, and
refusing to dress as the “fashion candy” she is employed to be (Moshfegh, 2018, pp. 36-37). Instead of embracing the freedoms of the flexible labor market available to her as a privileged young woman, the narrator thus finds herself bored by a workplace which exploits her for her appearances. Protected by her financial privilege, she therefore chooses to reject neoliberal work culture and sleep away her career, a choice that Millie literally cannot afford. Her experience of casualized office labor echoes the tedium and frustration evoked in The New Me and exposes the hypocrisy and inherent class bias of neoliberal feminist “choice.”

Outside the workplace, the narrator’s apparent resistance to work is equally overt. In contrast to the neoliberal spreadsheet that rules Millie’s leisure time, Moshfegh’s narrator spends her entire non-working (and some working) hours sleeping. She rejects all of the “productive” habits that Millie aspires to, such as exercising, socializing, and conducting beauty labor. Her renunciation of all “tweezing,” “bleaching,” “waxing,” “brushing,” “moisturizing,” “exfoliating,” and “shaving” comedically echoes Millie’s extensive grooming regime and reiterates the laborious and invasive nature of beauty labor (p. 2). The narrator’s renunciation of this labor is comedically contrasted with the lifestyle of her friend, Reva, who serves as an object of pity and ridicule for both narrator and reader in her obsession with self-transformation, aided by self-help books with overtly neoliberal feminist titles such as Get the Most Out of Your Day, Ladies (p. 15). The narrator mockingly observes Reva’s kitchen filled with “sugar-free” and “reduced fat” foods, a “daily log of numbers, mathematical sums and subtractions,” (which are presumed to be her daily calorie intake), “stacks and stacks of Cosmo and Marie Claire and Us Weekly,” and pictures of famous models hung up in the bathroom, which smells of “the bitter tang of vomit” (pp. 248-251). Moshfegh’s picture of neoliberal self-transformation through the characterization of Reva is a shocking inversion of the narratives of makeover in postfeminist fiction. Here is the desperate, ill, and obsessive underside of a glossy Bridget Jones-esque ascension to self-actualization. The disconcerting window into Reva’s psyche, unraveling under intense self-judgment, disordered eating, and mental illness in her endless pursuit of self-improvement, brings home the physically and psychologically damaging consequences of the postfeminist and neoliberal feminist project of self-transformation (Elias et al., 2017).

Rather than challenging these rigid aesthetic standards, however, the narrator’s sanctimonious refusal to engage with the neoliberal spreadsheet, and her ridiculing of Reva for doing so, reinforces its legitimizing discourse. The narrator boasts that, even without working on her physical appearance, she still “looked like an off-duty model,” a fact which she knows “hurt” Reva (p. 35, 10). Her renunciation of beauty labor, safe in the knowledge that she will remain more beautiful than her friend, reflects a postfeminist sensibility of the “imperfect,” where stringent feminine beauty and lifestyle standards are resisted through the embracing of certain palatable, and highly regulated “flaws” (McRobbie, 2020). Reva and the narrator’s toxic dynamic, where the imperfect yet effortlessly beautiful is pitted against the grievously insecure, reveals the fact that the discourse of self-transformation not only redirects feminist critique from systemic inequality onto the self, but also onto other women, in line with the neoliberal values of competition and personal advancement (McRobbie, 2020; McRobbie, 2015). The narrator’s self-righteous rejection of self-work is thus revealed to legitimize its rationality, reinforcing the ideals of neoliberal feminism and overwork culture.

What’s more, the protagonist’s project of sleep reveals that she too is engaged in a process of self-transformation. After being fired from her job, she dedicates herself to sleep as a full-time project. Her decision to self-enforce rest in such an extreme form emphasizes the colonization of leisure time by neoliberal work culture, in that leaving work is not enough to escape it. Only in
sleep, according to Jonathan Crary, can we temporarily cease the “theft of time” from us by capitalism (2013, p. 10). The narrator’s dedication to sleep has thus been read as an act of resistance against the ubiquity of work, the protagonist cast as a “hero” who chooses to “sleep away” rather than “lean in.” A closer look, however, reveals the protagonist’s project to be the ultimate self-transformation narrative. She narrates that “sleep felt productive” and expresses a desire to be “reborn” as “a whole new person” following her “year of rest and relaxation” (p. 51). Moshfegh’s privileged narrator thus embraces unemployment as the opportunity to work on herself, to the extent that self-transformation becomes her full-time occupation. Contrary to Crary’s observation, she finds that her sleep project is not in fact immune to the drives of capital accumulation as she purchases “lingerie and designer jeans,” makes “appointments to get waxed,” and books “infrared treatments and colonics and facials” in her sleep (p. 86). Despite her conscious refusal to engage in the neoliberal spreadsheet of leisure, therefore, the postfeminist technologies of beauty labor colonize her subconscious mind, emphasizing the connection between neoliberal rationality and the psyche. Consequently, the narrator’s efforts to “sleep away” rather than “lean in,” far from rendering her an anti-neoliberal feminist “hero,” expose her as its most committed subject, dedicating herself to self-transformation as a full-time occupation across both her sleeping and waking hours.

**Becoming Resilient Neoliberal Subjects**

The culmination of Millie and the *My Year* protagonist’s journeys of self-transformation are the attainment of an essential weapon within the neoliberal feminist arsenal—resilience. “Resilience” is “the capacity […] to return to a previous state, to recover from a shock, or to bounce back after a crisis or trauma” (Neocleous, 2013, p. 3). The term has been embraced by neoliberal feminism, epitomized by the trope of the “bounce-backable woman,” who “springs through” hard times with “a positive mental attitude” and a drive to “adapt and recover” (Gill & Orgad, 2018, p. 478). McRobbie connects the idea of “bounc[ing] back” to the neoliberal spreadsheet by identifying that it “acknowledges the damage done” by overwork but “looks to repair and recovery through the idea of resilience” (McRobbie, 2020, p. 45). When Butler’s and Moshfegh’s protagonists achieve their transformations and become “new” people, a central tenet of this self-work is to develop the resilience to continue working on themselves forever. The endings of these novels reveal most clearly that the point of the neoliberal project of self-transformation is that it is continuous; the self must be continuously worked on in order to survive the relentless onslaught of work and to keep going.

Moshfegh’s protagonist transforms herself into a “resilient” neoliberal subject by the end of her narrative, emerging from her “year of rest and relaxation” as a new and newly productive person. Rather than sleeping all day, she wakes up early to go on walks, sits in nature, reads, finds a “touchstone for growth” in donating her clothes to Goodwill, and feeds the local wildlife, declaring “this was my life now” (pp. 287-288). The jarring shift in the protagonist’s tone, from darkly sarcastic to earnest and pious, evokes a sense of unease at her transformation. The apparent ease with which she has transformed her life by renouncing work and dedicating herself to rest emphasizes the privilege underpinning the “bounce-backable woman” trope and reinforces the middle-class identity of the wider neoliberal feminist ideal (Gill & Orgad, 2018). As one reviewer writes, in the end “she’s still just a rich girl who has downsized, detoxed, reset” (Diebel, 2018). The narrator’s new regime, therefore, rather than a rejection of neoliberal work culture, amounts only to her developing new ways to cope within the existing system, facilitated by her privileged background. This is reinforced by the disquieting final scene which depicts the narrator “record[ing] the news coverage of the planes crashing into the Twin Towers” and “watch[ing] the
videotape over and over to soothe [her]self” (p. 289). The repetitive nature of her actions echoes the inevitability of the cycle of labor. While the narrator can “reset” and begin again, just as she replays the footage “over and over,” the video reveals Reva falling from the World Trade Center, her place of work, implying the tragic consequences for those unable to develop “resilience.” The narrator’s new life, then, while seemingly subversive, merely allows her to “bounce back,” “reset,” and adapt to the system to avoid the fate that Reva suffers. Her self-transformation thus emphasizes the extreme privilege required to both survive within and detox from the contemporary neoliberal workplace and exposes the function of neoliberal feminism to perpetuate rather than challenge its toxic overwork culture.

At the end of The New Me, Millie has similarly transformed herself into a “resilient” neoliberal subject. Reiterating the privilege underlying the self-transformation ideal, Millie seeks financial assistance from her middle-class parents in order to rest, recover, and develop the resilience she needs to re-enter the workplace. Her mother completes Millie’s physical transformation, buying her new clothes, and paying for a new haircut. She is the one to “fix [Millie] up” and “set [her] back on track,” reinforcing the notion that it is she who must change herself to survive the unstable labor market rather than question the dominant ideology that governs it (p. 163). Millie subsequently declares, “I’m new,” denoting her readiness to return optimistically to work and rendering her transformation into a resilient “new me” complete (p. 167). She even secures a promotion to the role of office manager, achieving the elusive “temp to perm” transition (p. 189). The closing lines of the novel depict her leaving the office one Friday, “blissfully free” and looking ahead to the “vast expanse of hours laid out in front of her” before Monday, themselves a fraction of “the countless hours between now and the end” (p. 191). Now living in the “endless abyss of perm” she once dreaded and seeing the “vast” and “countless hours” of working life laid out before her, her words “blissfully free” strike a painfully ironic tone. A reviewer writes that, in this conclusion, “Butler manages […] to seem scornful of the idea that we can improve our lives” (Tadepalli, 2020). However, Millie has succeeded in “improv[ing]” her life, by getting a promotion, changing her appearance, and developing “resilience,” and this is precisely the problem. Where Butler’s text is scornful, it is of the fact that improving one’s own life prospects, rather than critiquing the system that curtails them, is the only path presented to women under the individualizing rationality of neoliberal feminism. Butler herself says of this ending: “everyone’s depressed […] and the only way to make yourself feel better is to do the transformation thing—make yourself in shape, and really healthy, and sanctimonious, and try to be in charge, and try to be the one who is making other people feel bad” (Katz, 2019). Butler’s comment reinforces the fact that neoliberal feminism’s insistence on “the transformation thing” only applies to each person and does nothing to change the system that is making everyone “depressed.” The best that “human capital” can hope for under the individualizing rationality of neoliberalism is to improve oneself enough to survive, transforming oneself into a “resilient” subject who can endure the precarious and depressing world of work, “lean in” to meager opportunities, and “bounce back” from failure. Within this landscape of work, both Butler’s and Moshfegh’s novels distill the fact that to “do the transformation thing,” if one has the means to do so, is the best that a depoliticized and neoliberalized feminism can offer.

**Conclusion**

Work under neoliberal rationality is an all-consuming conduct that reduces every facet of life to the garnering of economic capital, rendering the work-life balance an illusion. Feminism, a movement which has historically sought to liberate women from oppressive labor relations, has
perpetuated this work culture since the 1980s. Within the increasingly precarious workplace, neoliberal feminism compels women workers to turn their critical gaze upon themselves as objects to be worked upon in order to enhance their “capital.” Under the guise of leisure, non-working time is rendered a “spreadsheet” of self-criticism and self-measurement against paradigms of ultimate perfection and productivity. As these novels demonstrate, the only way to survive this cycle of repressive labor is to temporarily “rest” and “reset” yourself, if you have the privilege to do so, in search of the “resilience” necessary to survive.

Analysis of neoliberal feminism’s cultural pervasiveness has focused primarily on popular non-fiction. Through the examination of two contemporary novels, this essay has brought a new perspective. These authors are distinct in their desire to expose, dissect, and ridicule the discourses of self-transformation and self-work popularized by postfeminist and neoliberal feminist cultural production. Amidst a burgeoning body of fiction aimed at criticizing overwork culture from various angles, these novels respond specifically to the corresponding rise of neoliberal feminism. Their protagonists, painfully aware of their workplace subjugation, heed Sandberg’s call to “internaliz[e] the revolution,” viewing injustice as something which, while it cannot be overcome on a structural level, can be acutely managed and endured on a personal level—through hard work.

While Moshfegh’s and Butler’s texts indicate a literary backlash to neoliberal feminism, their critique covers limited ground. These novels depict single, child-free, middle-class women around the age of 30. Thus, they cannot help us to critique the impact of neoliberal work culture and its feminisms on other groups of women, for example older women, mothers, and women who engage primarily or entirely in unpaid labor. Likewise, the fact that these protagonists are white and middle class emphasizes the inherent privilege within the neoliberal feminist sensibility, and their transformations into successful, resilient neoliberal subjects (depressing as the outcomes may be) thus belie the experiences of those for whom this trajectory is not realistic. We must therefore look elsewhere for literature that provides insights into subjective experiences of the neoliberal workplace through the prisms of class and race, for example. Thus, while my examination of Moshfegh’s and Butler’s works has shown how the dominant feminist consciousness of their contemporary moments has been appropriated and muted by neoliberalism, these texts provide only one specific window into this phenomenon, and they do not, in themselves, present a roadmap to resisting it. It is possible, however, that these texts indicate the potential for contemporary literature to present itself as a site for the vocalization of an anti-hegemonic feminism focused on steering away from “resilience” and towards resistance.

References
Banet-Weiser, S., Gill, R., & Rottenberg, C. (2020). Postfeminism, popular feminism and

4 Significant work is being done in these areas, for example, feminist research into postfeminism and media representations of stay-at-home mothers and studies on lived experiences of middle-class stay-at-home mothers (De Benedictis & Orgad, 2017; Orgad, 2019).


