

WHAT YOU LOVE IS KILLING YOU:
STOPPING HUSTLE CULTURE IN THE PERFORMING ARTS

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis synthesizes existing studies of burnout in current corporate work culture for the purpose of drawing parallels to the actor-artist passion profession. Burnout is defined as a condition in which one has depleted her or his mental and physical resources by striving to reach unrealistic expectations imposed by oneself or society. Through a literature review of “workism”--the worship of one’s work--and “hustle culture” combined with ethnographic research in the form of anecdotal evidence acquired through audio recording of four populations: current undergraduate actors, newly graduated actors, mid-career actors, and actor-artists turned academics, it can be concluded that actor-artists experience burnout on a level equal to, if not greater than, nine-to-five professionals. Nevertheless, a solution confronting the root of the burnout issue is necessary for all professions, passionate and otherwise. This initial research suggests it is possible--once it is understood how workism in the performing arts creates vulnerability to burnout--to create a more mindful culture as a new default in opposition to hustle culture.

Introduction

The downfall of celebrities is a phenomenon society knows all too well. If one were to hear the names Lindsay Lohan, Britney Spears, Amanda Bynes, and Heath Ledger, images of tabloids pop into mind. At the height of their careers, all of these stars fell out of high regard, losing their reputation, their health, or their work. Debatably, Ledger lost most of all: his life. What do these stars have in common? The causes of their downfall could be personal, emotional, and complicated. There is no doubt, though, that their work played a role in stripping their capacity to handle what was being thrown at them.

Work has always been a staple of life. Some people work to live, some people live to work; inevitably, the lines get blurred. How one chooses his or her work varies, and how work shapes one's life can vary even more. The commonality in America's current work climate is this: we are told to do something we love. "Do something you love, and you'll never work a day in your life!" Because millennials and GenZs are adhering to this adage, many are choosing passion professions. A passion profession can be defined as one from which a worker expects joy, challenge, and ultimately, fulfillment (Khazan). One could surmise stars such as Britney Spears and Heath Ledger began their work because they enjoyed it. To study how passion professions shape our lives, one may look at passionate work in a plethora of fields.

One field in which passionate work is the *only* work is theatre. "Actor artists," or in other words, freelance storytellers who work jobs in theatre and film/TV, are among the most passionate people in America's workforce. Still, actor artists are having to

convince corporate offices of how much work “playing pretend,” as some may say, actually is. Actors sign contracts, work an excess of hours, and follow regulations even though they do not often sit behind desks and computer screens. Actor artists use themselves and their personhood as their technology or tool for completing their work, drawing upon personal experiences and emotions (Ohikuare). Passionate work--in any field--does not come without a cost. New terminology deems this trend in business as “hustle culture.” This term comes from the hashtag on social media posts, “#hustle” and its many accomplices, such as “#grindtime,” “#riseandgrind,” and “#grinddontstop.” Signs are lit up in millennial offices with phrases like “hustle harder” (Griffith). When one’s cubicle is a studio or blackbox theatre like it is for actor artists, it becomes harder and harder to peel away from work. The joy of creating with others and the pressure of the moment to “get it right,” expands the hours at work for many people in passion professions.

What happens when one cannot escape work? The importance of life/work balance is only beginning to be studied as productivity takes priority in America and countries that abide by similar productivity measures, such as Japan and China (Gregg, “The Productivity Obsession”). As work washes away all other aspects of life, one falls victim to what is identified by *The Atlantic* writer Derek Thompson as “workism.” Workism describes the act of worshipping one’s work with the dedication of a devout, religious believer in its ability to provide identity, community, and purpose (Thomson). Instead of merely putting food on the table, work is expected to provide a sense of transcendence into greater meaning, fulfillment, and emotional satisfaction. The danger in

workism is that work is then set up to check a box it never will. When work becomes the centerpiece of one's life, everything else is thrown off balance.

Those in passion professions are particularly susceptible to workism. Actor artists spend so much of themselves and their time producing; how are they *not* to make work the centerpiece of their life? Yes, there have been some studies on America's poor prioritization of work, but only in the corporate office. It is time that studies of workism are applied to actor artists, as well. The supreme vulnerability of a performing arts profession makes one susceptible to worshipping their work, resulting in burnout. Burnout is a crisis begging to be addressed all over America, but especially in passion professions. Here, I will address what workism is, how it appears in the performing arts, how the resulting burnout then presents itself in actor artists, and finally, the structure of society that would prevent workism and burnout's pervasiveness.

Chapter One:

Workism and The Burnout it Yields

Participating in the culture of Thompson's coined "workism" affects every aspect of one's life. How, then, do we recognize workism's occurrence? Like a disease of any sort, there are symptoms. Luckily for us--not for society--workism often takes the form of a "performative workaholism" (Griffith). Performative, as defined by Merriam-Webster, is "being or relating to an expression that serves to effect a transaction or that constitutes the performance of the specified act by virtue of its utterance." Using work, itself, as one's currency is creating a social media plague of hustle hashtags: "#grindtime,"

“#riseandgrind,” and the obvious, “#hustle,” “#cantstopwontstop” (Griffith). When did what earns us currency become a currency for earning status? Erin Griffith writes for *The New York Times* about work’s changing position in our lives, mentioning a company called WeWork more than once. WeWork, Griffith claims, is quickly becoming “the Starbucks of office culture,” meaning it is everywhere, corporatized, and yet still bought into by many. WeWork is a brand of performative workaholism that has moved far beyond being a start-up and invests in a corporate office’s aesthetic with the purpose of keeping workers going. Indifference towards one’s work is no longer trendy, and “toil glamour,” as Griffith calls it, is beginning to take a very real, offline toll on its victims.

When what begins as performative becomes a hustle one actually has to keep up with, burnout is on the horizon. Before true burnout manifests, physical and mental fatigue become evident in one’s work life. Like many aspects of workism, the physical and mental effects are indivisible. A popular article from clickbait site, *The Hearty Soul*, which claims to be for “educational purposes only,” has infested the Facebook feeds of many: “A Nap Desk is Exactly What You Need to Be Productive at Work.” Though it is clickbait, the article holds a sincere call for the implication of designer Nancy Leivaditou’s “multipurpose desk that can morph into a bed on activation” (Hearty Soul, 2019).

A bed built into one’s desk is not a solution that gets to the root of society’s burnout issue; it only points to the fatigue present in most employees today. Fatigue presents itself in a few ways, but to understand what results, one must first understand what “burnout” really means. In a book titled *Burnout, Fatigue, Exhaustion: An*

Interdisciplinary Perspective on a Modern Affliction, sociologist and cultural analyst authors Sighard Neckel, Anna Katharina Schaffner, and Greta Wagner work to define burnout as clearly and applicably as possible. The synthesis of authors provides a well-rounded definition, beginning with an explanation that the word “burnout” communicates an image. The label is an allegory. When one hears “burnout,” it is easy to picture a burnt-out match. The image is symbolic of something being used up, spent, and unable to renew. There is not a “refilling” to be done once a match is burnt down as there is when a phone battery has died. A much more drastic image than a dead battery, Neckel, Schnaffner, and Wagner note that once the match is burnt down, “the switch between exertion and regeneration has been thrown into crisis” (11). A match cannot relight itself.

The authors of *Burnout, Fatigue, Exhaustion* embrace a clear definition of “to burn out” from a psychoanalyst based in New York: “to deplete oneself; to exhaust one’s physical and mental resources; to wear oneself out by excessively striving to reach some unrealistic expectation imposed by oneself or by the values of society” (13). What does exhausting one’s physical and mental resources look like? What are the symptoms, then, of becoming a burnt-out match? To separate the somatic from the psychological is believed by many to be practically impossible, but doing so has proven to be useful for the sake of analysis.

Exhaustion of the physical body often presents itself in general “lethargy and weakness” (Neckel et al. 5). It may be temporary or chronic, but such lethargy creates mountains out of the molehills of everyday activity. For example, the campus of Texas State University is built into the hillsides of central Texas. When exhaustion begins

setting in, a five-minute walk to class becomes a seven-minute drag up and down the small hills. At its worst, the walk to class becomes a fifteen-minute drudge to include a stop at the nearest campus coffee shop. When an everyday activity such as walking to class is too much of a task, somatically, a student is more likely to stay in bed. Soon, the somatic affects the psychological and vice versa.

Current societal mental health trends are beginning to strongly present proof of burnout on a large scale. As more and more GenZs are entering the workforce, depression and anxiety rates are increasing (Markovits). While mental illness is part of burnout, one's mental state does not need to reach a state necessitating clinical diagnosis to be considered a symptom of great exhaustion. Neckel, Schaffner, and Wagner note that "weariness, disillusionment, apathy, hopelessness, and lack of motivation" are also burnout symptoms (5). From these states, restless behavior and a general avoidance of challenge and effort can result. Once all the mental and physical symptoms of burnout are mixed together in one big, exhaustion cocktail, someone suffering can actually be diagnosed with "Burnout Syndrome" (Neckel et al. 13). Burnout has become so large a phenomenon that it is now a legitimate diagnosis in psychological and general doctors' offices, alike.

The symptoms of burnout are particularly recognizable because they have reached a detrimental status through social media hashtags and workplace performativity. Burnout signifiers have become dangerously trendy, and possibly worse: fashionable. The fatigue threatening our generations' fullness of life comes from a place of a lack of self-esteem garnered by scrolling through endless prompts to compare oneself to Instagram

“influencers” (Griffith). Somewhere, somehow, being the busiest among one’s colleagues became something to brag about (Gregg, Neckel et al., 6). As a trendsetting illness, burnout becomes more difficult to beat. To do so, one must understand where its cause--workism--originated.

Chapter Two:

Where does Workism Come From for Actor-Artists?

An obsession with one’s work builds itself out of a presented culture--one that differs greatly from the work culture of twenty years ago, or even of manual labor, as described by Mike Rowe of TV Show *Dirty Jobs* in a TED Talk in 2009. When your work is your passion, it is harder to draw boundaries around it. If work remains merely your means of putting food on the table (and keeping the lights on, and heating your home, and paying for Netflix, and that farm-to-table coffee subscription), it is more easily contained such as the farm work Rowe mentions in his TED Talk. He speaks of having learned many “dirty” jobs, most of which result in manual labor, and tells a specific story of learning to neuter a sheep. To let neutering sheep in the graphic, up-close and personal manner he describes consume your personal life would require a very specific interest.

The decision to take on passionate work stems from culturally-encouraged core beliefs. To do what you love is best because one spends the majority of her adult life at the workplace, correct? What if she didn’t? There is a common vocabulary used for passion professions and the pursuit of them: “Follow your dreams,” “Do what you love, and you’ll never work a day in your life,” “Dream big, work hard,” and so on. According

to Olga Khazan, a writer with *The Atlantic*, “Find your passion” is awful advice. The phrase, “Follow your passion,” has apparently increased in use ninefold in students’ English books in the past thirty years. High school senior and college counselors are pulling upon career choice advice that hasn’t yet had much time to prove its usefulness.

Phrases encouraging passion professions in college and career counseling offices come from the pendulum having swung too far in the other direction. By leaving manual labor behind, society has also left boundaries to our workdays in the dust. Instead of neutering the sheep and going home for dinner, we work through dinnertime for tomorrow’s pitch, ignore our physical hunger to satiate the need to “just finish this one thing,” or commute through dinner time to attend an evening of rehearsal. What has made us love our work so much? Or--in some cases--pretend to love our work so much?

Workism in the performing arts goes beyond an economic drive, but to understand why, one must acknowledge the system in which performers are working: a system highly driven by economic gain. Max Weber’s definition of the “Spirit of Capitalism,” however, does remain in the profession as it does in every American worker. To define the spirit of capitalism is useful because doing so pinpoints the very beginning of worshipping one’s work. Weber states that the “impulse to acquisition, pursuit of gain, of money... has in itself nothing to do with capitalism” (Weber, xxxi). This means there is a drive more hairpin in a capitalistic enterprise, on top of the natural human urge to gain whatever has been deemed worthy: “in a wholly capitalistic order of society, an individual capitalistic enterprise which did not take advantage of its opportunities for profit-making would be doomed to extinction” (Weber, xxxii). Here, Weber absolves the

nature of humanity of blame for our endless need for income and places the blame on the system which would strike down anyone who does not use that inherent drive for profit-making: capitalism.

An actor's capital, what she uses to keep from extinction in the smaller scale of the performing arts, is not only monetary. Social currency is what is now bringing actors into audition rooms. The advent of social media has changed the game. Now, an actor's chance of booking a role relies largely on their online presence. Whether a casting director would like the production to have a large, built-in audience through Instagram or tote the trophy of discovering a "new face" determines one's "castability" (Gillespie, 162). Essentially, actors become their own enterprise within the structure of capitalism. Now acting, curating an online presence, booking an agent, working side hustles, and generating materials to obtain more work are all tasks that fall on the CEO of the company: oneself. Supported by burnout studies in other professions, "Modern working life in many sectors is no longer marked by small-scale controls, but instead by a high degree of flexibility and personal responsibility" (Neckel et al. 13).

Passion becomes part of an actor's economic currency. Who wants to employ an actor--someone who "plays pretend for a living"--who is not having fun? A love for one's work becomes part of the pursuit, leaving actors begging for capital other than that which is monetary. While appearing passionate to casting directors and agents may seem like a small task, it requires a plethora of personal work. Actors must establish a "brand," just as any other company would. Assembling one's brand as an actor draws upon how he is perceived by others, how he wants to be perceived, and how *profitable* those perceptions

can become. If a rustic dad who cracks jokes on a sitcom such as *Last Man Standing* appears on TV, the audience is perceiving a brand heavily curated--and taken all the way to the bank-- by actor Tim Allen. Though he has a team of people helping him now, Tim Allen chose a career for which he is the face and sole responsibility no matter how high he climbs within it. Thus, the work done to maintain such a presence is compelling, driven both by the economic gain and necessary passion of not going “extinct,” as Weber would say, within the system of show business.

Chapter Three: The Story of the Passionate Professional

Consider Lindsay Lohan again: she is working in the dream she chose as a young girl, and then boom, downfall in the form of DUIs, addiction, and criminal charges (Koul). Whether or not Lohan’s eventual rehab visits and arrests were due to responses to burnout cannot be known by the general public. That being said, her situation parallels that of many others in popular culture and sparks the question: how can someone have all they want in a career and still self-combust? This comes down to what we consider work, how passion professions fit into time-old schemas, and how they differ in risk of burnout from regular jobs.

Burnout research has thus far focused itself on the work content and manner of the nine-to-five job. For those who work in passion professions--artists, freelancers of any sort, paramedics, etc.--there is work still to be done in applying burnout research. *The Atlantic* writer Melissa Gregg writes frequently on the complexity of the way we work in

the twenty-first century. Her 2015 article, “The Doublespeak of the Gig Economy,” heralded this issue long before it was a crisis. Gregg uses the word “gig” to differentiate shakier, survival job types from the solid “job” hours associated with a nine-to-five. A gig might be driving for Uber, working at a restaurant, or walking dogs on apps such as Rover. To expand further, the word “gig” does not contribute to the idea of one building a career--traditionally a lauded, valiant goal. These gigs, often worked by those in passion professions to support themselves as they pursue a career they really want, must be treated with the same respect as nine-to-fives.

When working a gig instead of a traditional nine-to-five, benefits are out the window. There is a lack of respect for the money-making that happens in the hospitality industry, in restaurants, and in the remaining manual labor jobs. If society were to truly consider these gigs as *work*, something more than menial tasks, there would be benefits involved just as there are for young executives toting smart phones throughout the hotels being cleaned and at the tables being served (Gregg, “The Doublespeak of the Gig Economy”). Though there are positives to these gigs, such as creating your own schedule as an Uber driver, the downsides outweigh gig workers at large. Gregg notes the “ingenious” of making employment “less predictable, and thus less costly, in the name of independence and choice.” The control that comes with choosing one’s own hours leaves us at the mercy of the rest of the downsides. Unions have been attempted for the (often subcontracted) people who clean office spaces and have failed. Servers fight to be treated appropriately in every age and city, paid by the patrons in tips instead of the restaurants

“employing” them. Often working around the hours of those with nine-to-fives are those in the service industry.

Working non-traditional hours makes for a trying schedule. Freelancers forming start-ups, artists selling their pieces via social media, and small town jewelry makers alike must get creative with their time. The worst part of this phenomenon is that it is dubbed as the American Dream: entrepreneurship. Gig workers are compensated with a “badge of honor” for having a fantastic work ethic instead of health insurance and, well, actual monetary compensation (Gregg, “The Doublespeak of the Gig Economy”). While being congratulated for overworking oneself, burnout begins to creep in.

Gig work provides a perfect set up that leads to burnout; it is the very definition of “burning the candle at both ends.” A server who is also an actor will often wake up, attend auditions and rehearsal during the day, then work the night shift at a restaurant. In Texas, this shift will be worked for \$2.13 an hour plus tips with no benefits to be found (The Free Online Labor Resource). In Chicago, the acting industry is built around the understanding that everyone has nine-to-fives in addition to their pursuit of an acting career. This results in auditions and rehearsals in the evenings and on weekends, leaving actors without time to take care of themselves by cooking meals, doing laundry, and--a far reach--getting their hair done.

The physical and mental energy required to work a nine-to-five, pursue one’s artistic career, perhaps work a second job, *and* sufficiently care for oneself takes its toll. To compound the challenge of finding work/life balance as an actor in Chicago specifically, much of the work is paid with stipends--enough to pay for transportation to

and from rehearsals and maybe a meal along the way. To strengthen the idea that actors are particularly susceptible to burnout even beyond the mention of the hours artists often keep, alone, I have assembled anecdotal evidence to support my claims. These stories serve as firm support in a business that is built upon storytelling itself.

Case Studies

The stories of actor-artists below are personal testimonies of actors within the community of Texas State University and beyond. These actor-artists essentially self-selected to speak on burnout. I have chosen to include subjects from three places in an acting career, noting that they may speak on any part of their career: in undergraduate training, out of undergraduate training, and transitioning or working as an actor alongside a second career. Names have been changed for anonymity as determined by the interviewee. Where permission for the use of one's name was granted, the true names of these artists remain.

Hunter

Hunter is a junior in the BFA Acting Program at Texas State University. He had much to say about burnout. The junior year in Texas State's program is particularly heavy--so much so that Hunter has resorted to taking all other general education courses in an online format. He spoke about the fifteen to twenty minute walk to a classroom other than the theatre center simply being impractical in his schedule.

Speaking on sleep, Hunter stated, "I try to get six to seven and half hours, but that's hard to do with all the homework we have... it's not necessarily healthy, but when

we need to get work done we need to get work done.” On food, a lot of he and his classmates meal prep because they “have to.” Hunter ends up eating out at least once a day because it’s “easier and faster” instead of having to rush home to “stress-eat.” Rushing between home and classes in the little time he has takes energy, and the lack of which contributes to his burnout level. As far as relationships with others goes, Hunter confessed he’s only really close with fellow actor-artists. “It’s hard to make an effort with people who won’t understand why you’re drained all the time,” he states, first noting that he makes a special effort to maintain friendships despite the fatigue that a production and class schedule brings him.

“A lot of my downtime is dedicated to being a better person so I can handle my work better,” Hunter explains as he mentions meditating every day and working out “to take care of my mind, not even my body.” “We try to benefit ourselves so we can benefit our craft.” Daily rituals are beginning to make him feel less like he is spending all of his time in “crisis-management mode,” such as fully preparing a scene in an afternoon for a surprise mock, or practice, audition. Much of his burnt out periods are in production, most recently Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*. He added up rehearsal hours and says people are baffled by the time he spends at work on his craft: “A lot of people expect actors to not work as hard as we do. We are constantly on the grind.” He tells a story of often coming home from rehearsal around ten thirty or eleven in the evening and literally falling to the ground of exhaustion because he “needed to lay on the ground for a second.”

On the work culture surrounding him as a collegiate actor, Hunter said: “Getting cast is like the best thing for you because you get to work on your craft, and you get to get better... We experience stress in a way that not a lot of other people do because we have this constant rejection happening.” He even mentions having experienced putting in hours of work for a callback, a second audition, and not even getting to read for the part. No explanation was given. In gearing towards lessening the hard feelings of an actor’s training, Hunter states that “Part of the work we do is self-care.” This lends to him feeling like if he is not working at his craft in a callback, he is working to keep himself ready for the next one. “It sounds like I never stop working,” he observed. “Not ideal, but the life that we live--it’s something that we love and we have a message and a story... we just get burnt out a lot.”

Aubrey

Another student in the Texas State Acting program and soon-to-be graduate, Aubrey speaks of burnout a little differently. Her recount was full of discoveries, and the source of her burnout seemed not only to be the schedule of an actor in training but also the resulting pressure she repeatedly puts on herself. “The harder I work, the more it feels like I’m not working hard enough.” She suspects that the resulting stress is what allows negative thoughts and self-image to come into mind. Aubrey often feels like there’s more she can be doing to further herself as an actor, and it exhausts her. Even so, “I always kind of love feeling physical burnout as an artist, ‘cause it’s like ‘Ah, yes, this is the life, this is the artist’s life, this is what it means to suffer for your craft.’” She goes as far to

say burnout often feels noble. “Diving so hard into the grind... something about that feels correct.” On the timing of her burnout, Aubrey ponders: “I feel like I get a little burnt out every time I’m in a show, which is not healthy, but that’s ok,” then immediately questioning her statement: “Is it?”

Aubrey is not sure where her idea that burnout is noble came from: “I don’t know if that comes from the culture that we have at Texas State or just the culture of artists in general... I feel like it’s more general than Texas State. We at least make an effort not to glorify burnout.” She continues to speak on a time she was put into a show, *Tempest*, two weeks before opening. “All of a sudden I had four, five, six hours of rehearsal every night,” and she had already filled those hours with other tasks, not thinking she would be performing that semester. Aubrey notes that during that time, she frequently did not have time to eat and was not sleeping enough. On relationships, Aubrey considered them something that often goes onto the back-burner:

When in process everything goes out the window except what I have to be doing, which is kind of sad because sometimes I’m in the middle of, you know, intense, draining work and emotionally draining work and that’s when you need your people around you, but you get home at eleven o’clock and you need to go to bed.

Even still, Aubrey feels like the practices keeping her burnt out are what she is “supposed to be doing.” She closed with the following: “I’m not giving myself the compassion that I so clearly need, and if you’re not getting it from yourself and you’re not getting it from your friends because you don’t have time, then it’s a situation for sure.”

Jordan

Jordan, a Texas State BFA Acting alumni, lives in the legal-marijuana state of Chicago. She is living her dream of working as a freelance actor-artist in the city in her twenties while living with the love of her life, but burnout has begun to consume her. Jordan recently obtained a nine-to-five, and with the excitement of this came the fatigue of working forty hour weeks in an admin job and pursuing an entirely different career at the same time. She comes home, “smokes weed out the window to destress,” and goes to sleep. On the days she has an audition to prepare, her destressing ritual is abandoned and she closes the door to her bedroom in her studio apartment to get to work. The work she is in Chicago to do, acting, happens after her eight hour workday. She is left with little energy to complete the creative work that feeds her soul and her fiancé picks up the tasks she does not have the time to complete in a double-worked day, such as preparing dinner. Her most recent work as an artist actor was a play of hers being put up for a reading. For the month of that work, she was given a \$350 stipend. The money was enough to keep up with her hairstyle, she said. A seemingly superficial cost is important as an auditioning actor; acting, as an industry, is a visual and heavily appearance-based business.

Jada

A graduate of Texas State’s Acting BFA, Jada is furthering her career by pursuing an MFA in Acting from the University of California, San Diego. Her account of burnout felt much like a testimony of a mindset that has learned to prevent it. Jada has found what

works for her and feeds a full life that she then pulls upon freely as an actor-artist. She spoke of her most burnt-out time with gratitude for the lessons it taught her.

Jada has just gotten over the hump of burnout caused by trying to fulfill others' (professors', mentors', and peers') expectations of her. The issue is that these expectations were often perceived pressures she was putting on herself to create "correct" work rather than the true pressure of authentic expression. "I was so worried that if I get it wrong, then I'm this terrible person and that I will never be offered an opportunity again, which ultimately took away my happiness of why I love acting, why I think it's so enjoyable, and why I think it challenges me in so many ways," Jada says of the moments that most made her lose her passion. Once she learned to release the need to please others with her work, her passion for the profession quickly returned: "I started to actually get exhausted from my imagination and not from people."

Trusting herself and allowing her artistry to develop with the tool of her imagination reoriented Jada's motivation to work as an actor, protecting her from burnout as a busy MFA student. She also speaks of the world she has carefully curated outside of acting that helps her to avoid "exhaustion or burnt-out phases." Jada loves sleep, speaking fondly of naps due to her tendency to create late in the evening and stay up filling her well with time with friends on FaceTime. Eating healthy and eating poorly are important to Jada: "a balance of both really fuels me--hate me if you must, go for it." Having mentors who are not involved in her acting career helps her as well as she gets to talk about the human experience without the pressure to consciously put what she learns into her craft. Church, yoga, and social settings keep Jada from being burnt out and tired

beyond her own expectations of fatigue. A full life helps her to be “a better artist and a better human.” “Better than being a worn-out actor who is often worried about people or getting it wrong... it’s a productive me,” free from burnout, “and I’d rather be that than anything else.”

Natalie

A professor at Texas State and certified by the National Council for Behavioral Health as a Mental Health First Aid Instructor, Natalie believes burnout to be a deeply relevant topic and has “absolutely” experienced it, herself. Speaking mostly on the patterns leading to burnout she was taught as a young actor, Natalie observed: “To this day, I’m still working out a lot of habits that I created as a young actor trying to live up to a completely unrealistic expectation of one-hundred percent productivity all the time.”

Growing up as a young actor, a lot of Natalie’s teachers and communities celebrated burnout; “Burnout was kind of something that was par for the course, and it was almost something that people admired.” Again, burnout’s perceived nobility creeps in. Early on, Natalie created a “pattern of anxiety” for herself and learned to have an “extreme, unrealistic expectation” about productivity as a young actor. For five years, she could not sit down and watch a thirty-minute television show because she felt that it was “just an unacceptable waste of time” even though “you have to watch TV shows if you want to be an actor!”

While Natalie noted she is excited for the shift towards “taking care of yourself” in a theatre career, the fact that the shift is still necessary and still “beginning” today was

slightly morose for her to realize. Now aligning a new career as an educator with her continued career as an actor, Natalie still feels as if she's battling burnout. Instead of the belief that "there's a thousand people in line behind me, and they've all worked harder than me, so I'm gonna have to work harder than anyone else if I'm gonna get anywhere in this business" steering the ship as it did for young Natalie, she is now orienting towards sustainability. "No one really talked about how part of success is not just working hard, it's working smart as well as joy and play or else there's no sustainability," Natalie speaks of balance. "Having so many ambitions and lining up life in a way that's sustainable" is now what is most important to her. In her now dual-passion profession, Natalie noted that it has been really easy to devalue her "you-time." If she does not find the ways to destress and give herself a break, she finds, giggling with familiarity to the feeling: "If you don't do it, your body will shut itself down."

Looking towards her students as the next generation of actors, Natalie recalled a story early in her career supporting her belief that "sleep is the number one indicator of college success." On her first equity contract, or acting job within the union titled Actor's Equity Association, she was doing a run longer than she ever had before and was worried about losing her voice, as she often had during runs of shows. Playing the role of an opera singer for five weeks put Natalie's ability to take care of herself to the test. While "scared to death," she committed to sleeping eight hours every night of the contract and never lost her voice. Now, she teaches her students that "part of productivity is stopping;" without sleep literally giving her her voice, she would not have been able to do her job. Natalie left off with a call to action:

Part of the new values of the next generation of actors need to include sleep, and food, and self-compassion as crucial parts of how you be an artist because they are. They are just as crucial as rehearsing and doing voice warm-ups and working out. All these things: you can't be an actor without them. But when I was growing up, no one talked about that.

Neil

Soon to be Head of the Acting BFA training program at Texas State University, Neil Patrick Stewart has had his own experiences with burnout as a student, actor-artist, and now professor of the arts. Knowing he did not want to work in a cubicle, Neil has found ways around traditional work hours. The ways around, though, as for many other artists, have resulted in working around the clock. Both he and his wife, the viral “Scary Time for Boys” songwriter Lynzy Lab, are working artists now as well as professors. He speaks of their relationship:

Lynzy and I have a fantasy where we imagine going to work for a small private high school somewhere in a vacation destination. Our days end at six p.m., except for the six weeks that we're doing [a] play. We'll joke about how great it would be to be the entertainment coordinators in a resort somewhere.

He also spoke of he and Lynzy asking themselves, “What if, on purpose, we dialed down,” meaning took on fewer and fewer projects to invest more in rest, as a practice.

In speaking with him, a general guilt for doing something unproductive also came up. “I don’t always feel unguilty, but I feel less guilty,” he says of having worked at lessening that feeling. The work Neil does is the definition of a passion profession. The feeling that comes with earning money through the work he loves whole-heartedly attracts him. He says he escaped the corporate drive to overwork for a different reason to overwork: a sort of calling to theatre. He considers this reason “nobler” than doing it merely to make money. In considering burnout, he says he’s approached it many times. His reason for allowing this lies in the following: “What a lot of people think they want is happiness--really, what I was interested in was fulfillment.” Fulfillment, for Neil, is worth risking burnout.

Chapter Four:

A World Without Workism

If society is full of burnt-out matches, how does it become lit again? Current practices to fend off burnout include the trendy “self-care” method. Self-care, itself, has proven meritorious; self-care as a trend, however, may do more harm than good (Gregg, “The Limits of Self-Help Productivity Lit”). Gregg claims that the perceived responsibility to help oneself overcome burnout when, by definition, depleted of resources to do so in fact brings about more anxiety than healing. According to Wagner in *Burnout, Fatigue, Exhaustion*, some may even begin self-medicating with harmful habits such as amphetamine use (Neckel et al 195). Clearly, there is a need for preventative measures of burnout on a large scale. Thinking largely, a call for a seemingly utopian

restructuring of societal priorities implies an understanding of practical actions to be taken on a smaller scale in the present time. Preventative measures enacted as a whole society, and burnout therapy rather than trophetizing, must become the priority for not only passion professionals but all professionals in America.

There are practical, preventative measures to be taken in the effort to reroute society toward life without overwhelming cases of burnout. Physical fitness has been proven to prevent burnout and the intensity of burnout when it does occur (Moraes et al 945). The more America moves, the more the negligence of a burnt-out workforce will lessen. Part of allowing more movement into workers' days could be done at the workplace: standing desks, walking some spans of commutes in smaller cities as well as large, and cutting down on hours worked to allow more sleep and time for exercise. Companies that are doing this now are still considered "new age" and "part of the movement" when practicalities such as these must fundamentally become the norm. There is an inherent need for an adjustment in pay, as well, to better compensate for hours worked in many cities. The federal minimum wage on *Minimum-Wage.Org* is a mere \$7.25/hour.

Accurate pay for hours worked on any job, including those that actor-artists most often work to support themselves while building their careers, will hopefully lessen the number of hours worked. Overall, there needs to be a move from the traditional nine-to-five in countries where it is still the norm. One should be able to work alongside life, to support a full life, rather than be stuck in the "live to work" cycle so many Americans find themselves in--actors included.

Society's mental and spiritual tendency to worship work can be adjusted with widespread, large-scale therapy. If therapy for burnout and mindfulness practices can become a trend rather than the overwhelming trophetizing and "nobility" of burnout, society will be better off. There is a phrase used in cognitive behavioral reframing: "I do because I am,' not 'I am because I do'" (Andrews). Such a phrase is used to reorient one's motivation for completing tasks, working hard, and being productive. When approaching work from a place of identity instead of receiving identity from work, there is less pressure on the results one is able to produce. Soon, phrases such as this can assist one's ability to feel inherently worthy of life's most basic joys: good food, good relationships, good sleep, and overall feelings of wellness. Art is riddled with conversation, and as long as the conversation continues towards wellness, artists can spearhead new hashtags to replace #thegrind.

While trending mental wellness would be more beneficial than a false love for work being carefully curated in GenZ's online profiles, the trend must run true and deep to actually make a difference. Young people are rerouting their work hours by being firm about time off, petitioning for time to build families, and renewing society's sense of the need to live life now instead of saving up for later (Miller, Yar). Some believe this is the generation to save us all from day-to-day office life. Making one's own schedule may be society's way out, after all. Self-care has the potential to be more than fleeting calls for meditation in GenZ's hands, according to essays such as Leanna Fuller's "In Defense of Self-Care." Fuller disputes the idea that self-care is the shallow self-indulgence often posted on Instagram feeds and champions a truer, deeper self-care. While her argument

for a self-care practice still hopes to increase productivity, society can one day move towards practices for preventing burnout that are for oneself and one's fullness of life rather than one's ability to better produce that which work calls upon.

Self-care for the purpose of making a full life must result from widespread, continual conversation. Actor-artists work to investigate the human condition and bring about conversation on the daily. Tweets, Instagram live sessions, and stories on Facebook become creative outlets when in the hands of those in this passion profession. Once actor-artists reach a certain pinnacle in their career, they have an audience to send a message to--however large or small that audience may be. Those largely recognizing the need for media making society turn inward are often artists: podcasts such as *UnF*ck Your Brain* with Faith G. Harper, prevention-based wellness programs such as Kaitlin Hopkins's company *Living Mental Wellness*, and TV shows such as *Shine On* with Reese Witherspoon, to name a few.

Hearing the stories of actor-artists, I am convinced that we are the workers to lead society's charge away from burnout. Actor-artists are attentive to the practices that make themselves and their craft better, are usually quite familiar with burnout, and are often unafraid of progression. With a built-in platform to lead, those "suffering for the craft" may just be those with the power to steer society in a more mindful direction. Channeling their familiarity with burnout into motivation for reprioritizing society, actor-artists are the catalysts for newfound energy in ever-busy times. Now is the time to seize the day: a day of rest.

Moving Forward

The work I have done in assembling the narratives of artists has been necessary to point out workism in our passion profession. The journey to taking the work of actor-artists seriously continues. Next, I would make my work quantifiable and statistical to add solid numbers to the anecdotal evidence I have acquired. To continue my research, I would create a full-blown, categorized and quantified study of burnout in actor-artists. I would go through IRB certification to present my case studies with surveys with Likert scales and the like, curating a Self-Report Measure of Burnout specifically for actor-artists. Instead of my case studies self-selecting, I would like to randomize those selected to answer the surveys as well as expand my sample size.

The physical manifestation of this work will culminate in a fully produced, live podcast titled *The Burnout Series*. Here, actor-artists will gather to tell stories of their experiences with burnout. Audience members of all careers will be invited to a recurring evening of catharsis, hopefully to travel the United States a la *The Moth Radiohour* by NPR. *The Burnout Series* is the artistic, tangible way to engage with our burnout in a profession. While it will by no means consist of “fixed it” stories, it will bring hope and a sense of validation to those in the actor-artist profession while expanding the audience of my thesis and research done to support the action of the evenings.

Addendum: Work in a Pandemic

Today, we are most productive by not driving to work. Today, we are asked to stay home from work to keep our vulnerable--the immunocompromised, the elderly--safe. Today, working from home is the norm. Today, work is halted, even. The work becomes

maintaining our sanity by watching cat videos, baking with our roommates, nursing our babies, writing out our feelings, and taking daily walks. “Essential” workers continue on: doctors, nurses, grocery clerks, pharmacists, and even my father. My father is a loan officer, and has been told he is essential; “People will need money soon” is the reason. Today, work does not take priority.

Life’s priorities are put into perspective when tragedy strikes. The loss of work has many scrambling. Being told we will be taken care of by the government has many in disbelief. Today, COVID-19 prevents us from looking at our work with googly eyes open far too long. There are no rooms to audition in, there is no audience seating being filled; there are only websites to post songs and hope onto, slathering our feeds until something sticks. Shelter-in-place orders alter how we approach our days. The bustle is forced to a stop, a screeching halt, and our wellness is largely put before it. Even so, #hustleculture continues to ask people to produce while confined in their apartments: “Work on all the things you haven’t had time for,” “Now’s your chance to clean and organize your home,” and “Newton invented Calculus while *he* was quarantined.” Though work culture tries to push through the silence falling on the world in a time of great need and caution, a pandemic is taking place. A pandemic is what it took to quell the noise.

The necessity of evaluating our work culture has been made even clearer to me in the past few weeks. The guilt many feel for not producing as much as they would in a day out and about is apparent on the platforms that keep us connected in quarantine such as Facebook and Twitter. The urge and itch to get back to work is driven by fear that the economy will not bounce back, with 45 tweeting out “THE CURE CANNOT BE

WORSE (by far) THAN THE PROBLEM!” and “We will come back strong!” Largely, we are staying home. But still, the need to work is knocking at our door, threatening our ability to heal and “flatten the curve.” Our inability to comply with work’s orders is leaving us unable to make rent, unable to purchase the bread that’s left on the shelf and the toilet paper that is laughably nowhere to be found. In collecting stories via voice memo during quarantine, I feel I received deeper observations from my case studies. With time surrounding them, they were able to reflect and swim in their thoughts unlike any other time. I am grateful for the realizations quarantine has brought me and my case studies for *What You Love is Killing You: Stopping Hustle Culture in the Performing Arts*. I am driven to change the culture. I am ready to get back to work.

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