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PURIFICATION MEDIA: SELF-BRANDING, GENTRIFICATION, SMOOTHNESS

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Self-branding, entrepreneurship, and gentrification form a constellation of practices foundational to neoliberal capitalism. What is the aesthetic and affective logic of this set of related practices? What spaces for resistant critique can be found in this logic? Through its multi-media method of painting and writing, this article attempts to both answer this question and experiment with a resistant aesthetic practice. Beginning with the case study of the contradictory Vancouver billionaire Chip Wilson, this article argues that self-branding functions by treating the body as an abjection that must be disciplined or erased. Parts of the body that do not meet the brand must be affectively "unstuck," to use the language of Sara Ahmed. Following Katherine Hayles, this positions self-branding in a lineage of technologies that seek to transcend the body. The branding of gentrification follows the same logic. Ultimately, self-branding, entrepreneurship, and gentrification all participate in the logic of what Byung-Chul Han calls "smoothness": a repressive affective and aesthetic practice that seeks to deny everything except for an effusive positivity. However, the smooth is also vulnerable: the affective logic of neoliberalism requires its repressed other for its identity, even as it attempts to erase it. As a potentially resistant practice, this paper experiments with bringing forth the abjection that self-branding and gentrification can never entirely do away with.

KEYWORDS
self-branding, entrepreneurship, gentrification, smoothness, neoliberalism

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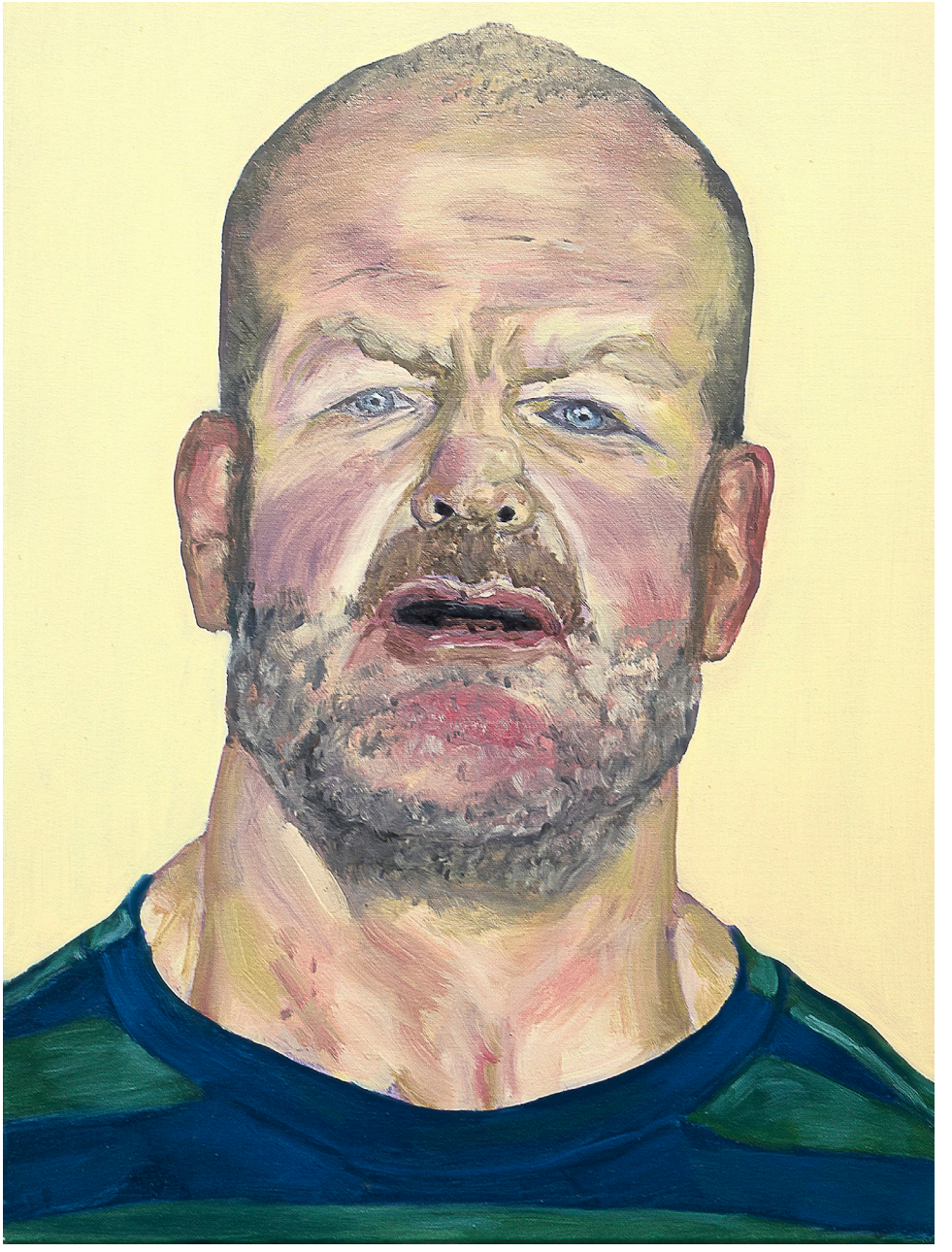

Figure 1. Chip Wilson (Lululemon, Low Tide Properties, Hold It All)

Introduction

Contemporary spaces of gentrification, in cities across the global north, share a strangely homogenous aesthetic. I step into the same, minimal, off-white coffee shop with its re-finished wrap-around counter in my neighborhood in Vancouver, in Leipzig, San Francisco … even in some forgotten ex-steel town, like Cambridge, Ontario. The new condo buildings are smooth with minimal colours and lots of glass, perhaps an angular "landscaped" space with sparse plants, all encapsulated by a clean one-word moniker like "Pinnacle" or "Habitat." (There is even a condo development in Berlin with the emblematic name of "Pure.") It's no surprise that most theorists of gentrification now follow Neil Smith's (2002) argument that neoliberal gentrification has become a "generalized" "global urban strategy" (430, 437). Some even point out its "increasing urban homogeneity of services and 'feel'" (Atkinson and Bridge 2005, 8), albeit with important local variations.

This "feel" of neoliberal spaces is the focus of this paper. However, the affects attached to neoliberal minimalism are not just limited to architecture and design. They seem to creep through neoliberal society as a general principle: from the tasteful self-branding of the Instagram Influencer to the glassy technologies that enable it, to the dominant idea of the contemporary entrepreneur as a sleek, un-attached individual freed from the complexities of an entangled, social existence. This affective modality adds something to Wendy Brown's (2015) definition of neoliberalism as an economized "form of reason" (17). Here, I want to explore neoliberalism as an affective structure, an almost inescapable set of beliefs and feelings stuck to a certain aesthetic. This essay attempts to name and connect the shared affects and aesthetics attached to the neoliberal values of entrepreneurship, self-branding, and gentrification, with the goal of mounting an aesthetic critique of neoliberalism.

Drawing on Sara Ahmed's theorization of affect being "sticky" (2010), I argue that each of these aspects of neoliberalism is made possible by a shared technique of what I call "brand-affect," or the intentional gluing of various affect to bodies, selves, and neighborhoods towards profitable ends. This form of financialized self-creation functions by ensuring that only the most unobjectionable affects circulate between branded bodies. Ultimately, I argue that these neoliberal aesthetics are what Byung-Chul Han calls "smoothness" in his book *Saving Beauty* (2018). For Han (2018), smoothness is, of course, a tactile quality, but it also extends ideologically as "a general social imperative" to affordances of easy consumption,

frictionless communication, etc. (1). Examples include things like smart phones and Brazilian waxing, but also the forced positivity of the Facebook "Like," or the contemporary obsession with absolute health. The smooth is "an *optimized* surface *without* negativity" (Han 2018, 16, emphasis in original), "a world of pure positivity" (Han 2018, 5). To me, this concept of smoothness as a broader ideological category helps to explain the shared "feel" of self-branding, entrepreneurship, and gentrification. However, in my view, neoliberalism's insistence on smoothness renders its aesthetics unstable. Leaks, aberrations, and disturbances can never be fully scrubbed out; they always threaten to return and fragment the coherency of the brand.

Bringing out such leaks, discharges, blemishes, and cracks in the smooth aesthetics of neoliberalism is my mode of critique. In such cracks, I undertake an exploration of neoliberal affective logic; in widening them, I hope to offer practices of resistance. Part of my argument, as I elaborate below, is that brand-affect inaugurates a new layer onto Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject. Whereas Kristeva (1982) argues that the concept of the body relies on demarcating as abject that which threatens its coherency, I argue that the brand functions similarly, and must repress or excise any qualities intolerable to neoliberalism. Ultimately, the body itself is an impossible problem that neoliberalism is constantly trying to repress: whether this is the body that cannot help but differ from the idealized self-brand or the bodies that go un-sheltered in the gentrifying neighborhood. In drawing out this uncanniness that is always already lurking in the apparent smoothness of gentrifying aesthetics and entrepreneurial selves, I hope to turn this neoliberal aesthetics against itself.

The form of this critique is multi-medial. This text is interspersed with portraits of entrepreneurs involved in gentrification in Vancouver, British Columbia, that I painted from promotional photographs as part of an exhibition series.[1] Some of these entrepreneurs are directly involved in property development, others in lifestyle creation, others in the art world, many in a mix of these things. This text, however, is not about interpreting my paintings. Instead, I include them as an experiment in an un-smooth media format. Neoliberal smoothness is about seamless media transitions: one might think of "scrolling" on Instagram, swiping on Tinder, or "contactless payment." In contrast, I'm attempting a different aesthetic logic by creating edges between media that might require creative

reading to connect. My intention is that this multi-media, multi-sensorial format will allow an unfolding of ideas and connections in a lateral rather than linear way, that the painting and writing will provide mutual context for critical ideas around neoliberal affect and aesthetics to emerge. I am experimenting here with creating a space of sensory in-betweenness as a hopeful site of resistance to the smooth monadism of contemporary branding.

Part of my original intention, but beyond the scope here, was a kind of sensory ethnography of these movements between media. Drawing on thinkers such as David Howes (2003), who argues that sensory experience is contingent and historical, and Sarah Pink (2007), who advocates for multi-sensorial research formats, I am interested in techniques for producing varied sensory experiences of neoliberal aesthetics, and media that can provide critical distance. I find painting to be one such method. I hope to further develop this idea of media translation and in-betweenness as a critical sensory method in a future paper. For now, I can only gesture to these ideas in the form of this project.

Through the critical method of aesthetic experience I employ here, I am experimenting with destabilizing what Imre Szeman (2015) calls "the unquestioned social value and legitimacy of entrepreneurship" in his essay "Entrepreneurship as the New Common Sense" (472). To me, this "common sense" is another word for the broader affective structure of neoliberalism that draws together gentrification, branding, and business-as-ethos. Why is such social value ascribed to entrepreneurs, imagined as disembodied superheroes "innovating" a utopian future, when we know this isn't really true? What is this affective structure that tediously glosses their business practices, even when these actively displace more and more people? This project is trying to crack whatever brand-patina covers these entrepreneurs, which acts as a kind of life-support system for their moribund ideas of business. It builds on a plethora of critiques of entrepreneurship that tend to focus on situating the rising cult(ure) of entrepreneurship in a changing political economy (Dardot and Laval 2014; Karim 2008; Szeman 2015; Flisfeder 2015), as well as work in gentrification scholarship that has just recently started investigating it aesthetically (Lindner and Sandoval 2021). My work tries to dispel the purifying work of branding selves and places by offering sensory experiences that may be able to move beyond these slick surfaces and smooth affects.

Figure 2. Miriam Alden (Brunette the Label)

Rupturing the Smooth: Chip Wilson, Abject Gentrifier

Vancouver billionaire Chip Wilson offers a telling window into the world of entrepreneurship, branding, and gentrification. Though most famous for founding the athleisure company Lululemon Athletica Inc., his current business activities are entrenched in real estate. With this double envelopment, Chip Wilson appears as the gentrifying entrepreneur *par excellence*, involved both in producing a gentrifying culture of middle-class wellness and in developing properties. His work as CEO of Lululemon from 1998-2005 and subsequent involvement in the company until 2019 (Coudriet 2019), created a lifestyle whose aesthetic code helped to re-signify neighborhoods as open and safe for the upwardly mobile. In the words of his personal website, "the little yoga company founded in Vancouver would go on to redefine how generations of people dressed and lived" (Wilson 2021). His current work in property development is less well-known, but equally influential in shaping Vancouver. Wilson is the founder of Low Tide Properties, a Vancouver development company that has been criticized for buying and shutting down artist and music spaces across the city for redevelopment as condominiums, particularly in the new frontier of gentrification, East Vancouver (Klassen 2019). Meanwhile, the company aims to hold $1.5 billion in Vancouver real estate by 2025 (Korstrom 2016). Chip Wilson seems to have perfected a business model of gentrification: one branch of business injects value into neighborhoods through cultural disruption, while the other harvests this value through property acquisition and sale. This financial encirclement lends an aptness to the name of his personal investment company, Hold It All Inc.

Yet, in many ways, Chip Wilson fails to live up to the cultural promise of wellness and tasteful self-betterment that he helped create, to embody the unblemished smoothness promised by his form-fitting yoga pants. His business is sound, but *he* is leaky; Wilson has a long and continuing history of spasmodically disrupting what could be a smooth Vancouverite persona of success and wellness with objectionable comments, screeds, and appearances. His most famous blunder came when he mansplained to interviewer Trish Regan on Bloomberg TV, that "frankly, some women's bodies just don't actually work [for Lululemon pants]" (CBC News 2013), and there is a well-documented list of his racist, misogynistic, exploitative, and conspiratorial discharges over many years (Peterson 2013; Deveau 2005). These ultimately seem to have played a role in his ejection from the board of Lululemon (Peterson 2013; Coudriet 2019), following which he has

kept a lower profile, with his appearances in the news largely limited to curated puff-pieces (Woodin 2020; BC Business 2020). Perhaps the name of his personal investment company was a reminder for Wilson to just 'Hold It All In.'

Chip Wilson's strangest outburst was an essay he published on his blog in 2019, titled "Are Erections Important?" The post was taken down almost immediately, but captured and preserved on other websites. To summarize: the essay essentially argues that male arousal depends on rigid, traditional gender roles and, as such, the spread of feminism is preventing men from getting erections. Therefore, there is grave cause for fear of "the end of humanity." This Spenglarian call to arms against cultural decline suggests military warfare as a solution to male "feminization" and threatens extinction if we do not take "the world of erections" seriously (Wilson 2019). My fascination with this essay is its meta-ejaculatory axis: its immediate deletion reveals the essay itself as an uncontrolled emission of misogyny. Meanwhile, the author argues that his physiological emissions depend precisely on his right to such misogynistic discharges. This is out of step with Vancouver's other entrepreneurial superstars. Contrast it to someone like Westbank CEO Ian Gillespie, whose bad-boy image is properly curated, helping him rebrand massive condo developments as bohemian art projects. His Fight for Beauty campaign in 2017 presented his development company as a high art outfit, rescuing Vancouver from aesthetic backwardness. Or consider someone like Brunette the Label CEO Miriam Alden, who became one of the faces of the Assembly condo development in Vancouver, just before it broke ground and bulldozed one of the last artist-run spaces in the neighborhood, Liquidation World. Her seamless brand of girl boss feminism and business slogan of "babes uplifting babes" are just the kinds of positive messages that help us imagine that these condos are "uplifting," rather than displacing the community (Assembly Strathcona 2021). These are "smooth" entrepreneurial agents of gentrification, with a brand coherency unruptured by off-colour outbursts.

In contrast to these figures, Chip Wilson lacks smoothness and coherency. His athleisure company lends him the appearance of merging with the smooth wellness of West Coast capitalism, but he cannot restrain his distasteful ejaculations that break with this brand. Indeed, he threatens perilous consequences if he is forced to. Chip Wilson offers a crack in the branded surfaces that neoliberalism relies on. By peering into this chasm as a method, I hope to offer a glimpse into this neoliberal affective structure.

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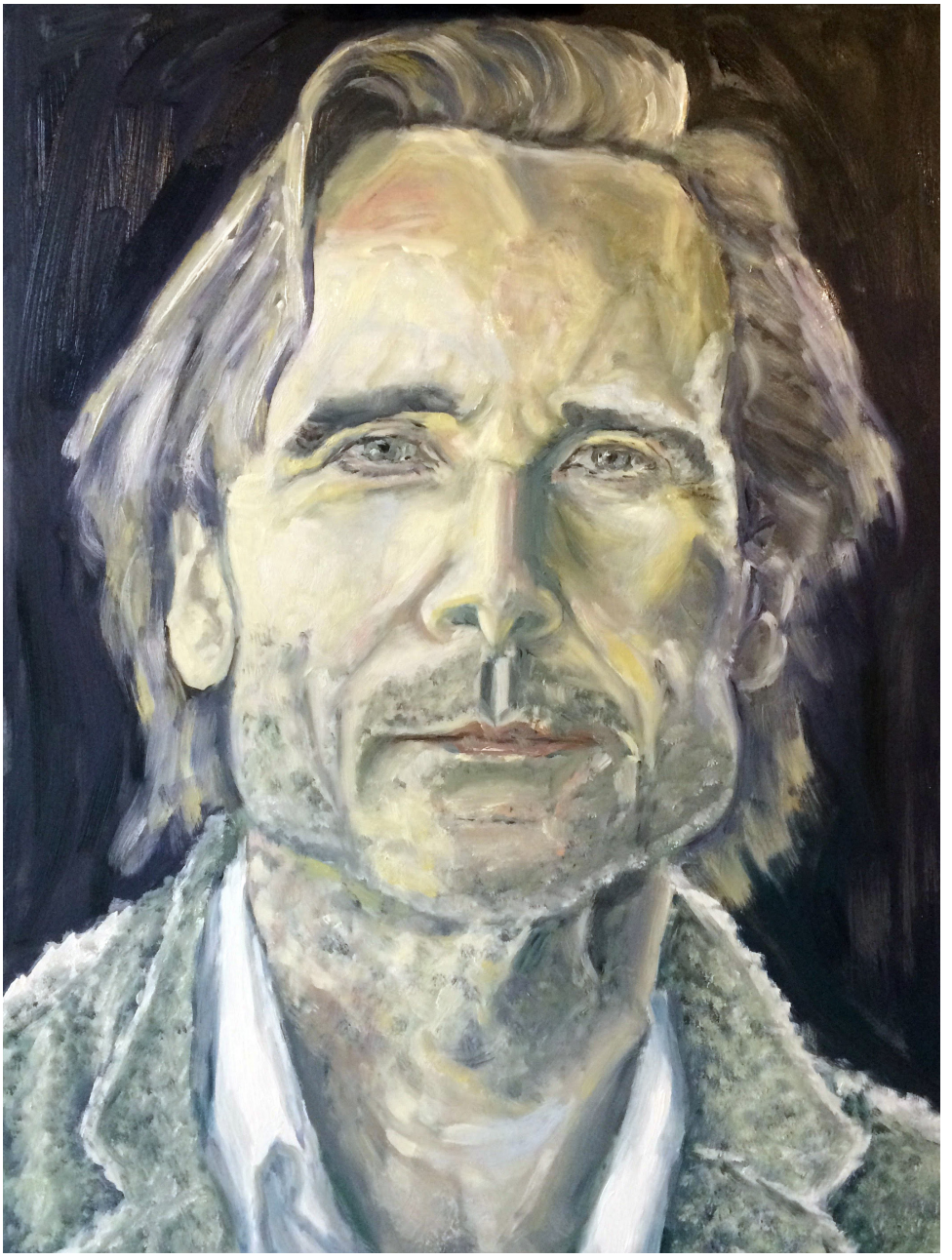

Figure 3. Ian Gillespie (Westbank)

Bathing in Vancouver-Affect: Sticky Promises Articulated Nowhere

One way to conceive of Chip Wilson's outbursts is as a rupturing of the self-brand by the self, or as a lack of coherency between the two. Chip Wilson's comments that feminism will lead to human extinction, and that women's bodies are the problem (not his yoga pants), fall far from the brand-slogan of his personal "Code" on his website that "gender means nothing, love means everything" (Wilson 2021). Likewise his enthusiastic promotion of 'third-world' child labour (Deveau 2005) renders article 51 of "the Code" somewhat perverse: "feeling uninspired? Surround yourself with children" (Wilson 2021). Based on Sarah Banet-Weiser's (2012) discussion of self-branding and authenticity in *AuthenticTM*, such honest disclosures of inner sentiment are the stuff self-branding is made of. Yet, Chip Wilson's eruptions of "authenticity" have not actually served to enhance his brand. Instead, they ended his career at Lululemon. Answering what is going on here clearly requires exploring Chip Wilson's self-brand more deeply. What is it exactly, and what is a self-brand more generally?

Alison Hearn's (2008) ground-breaking essay on the topic of self-branding, "Meat, Mask, Burden," shows how self-branding goes beyond the direct semiotics of logo advertising (i.e.—the Nike swoosh). Instead, it becomes a total crafting of the self that both commodifies and actualizes the individual. The injunction to brand oneself is not cynical, rather it "celebrates the freedom and radical individual empowerment involved in creating the personal brand" (Hearn 2008, 206). Within neoliberal logics, valorizing the self into a commodity also reconstitutes the self as agential and liberated. This is not just image-crafting, but a kind of self-actualization, a sentiment echoed by Imre Szeman (2015), who writes that "for the entrepreneur…creating an enterprise and creating a self is the same activity" (482). Self-branding is the response to a world in which a subject must increasingly be an "entrepreneur of himself" (Foucault 2018, 226). This means going beyond the external logo and embodying the brand. Banet-Weiser (2012) describes the era of self-branding as defined by "the replacement of things with affective practices" (71). It is not the body itself that matters, but rather the affective aura generated around it or the ideas that can be linked to it. As a form of self-actualization, self-branding allows these externalized affects to be appropriated back into the self, to become identity.

Perhaps this means that contemporary branding has taken seriously Sara Ahmed's (2010) idea of affect being "sticky" (29). Ahmed (2010) argues that objects become charged with affect in our relation to them, defining affect as "what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects" (29). This is not to say that an affect exists as part of the object in the material world; it remains social and relational. This affective glue pulling objects and values together forms social bonds which makes it bigger than an atomized, subjective experience. As a social process, this sticking has real power to shape identity: "feelings can get stuck to certain bodies…and bodies can get stuck depending on what feelings they get associated with" (Ahmed 2010, 39). In Ahmed's view, affective glue is often a tool for disciplining bodies through social pressure, a way of dismissing the political critiques of (queer, racialized) people by casting them as angry or against joy. Ahmed sees this as a site for resistance, a place to re-think these affects. Perversely, self-branding has a similar ethos sans political critique. It tries to recalibrate the attachment of certain ideas, values, and identities to certain bodies towards profitable, rather than (collectively) liberatory ends. I'd like to call this profitable marshaling of social affects around products and selves (and ultimately around lifestyles, neighborhoods, and cities) "brand-affect."

What kind of brand-affect does Chip Wilson have? This gets tricky. Ahmed points out how affect is always operating somewhere between the individual and the social, and is always somewhat shifty, depending on the time, the angle, the perspective. Sticking is relational, not absolute. However, these relations are real and recognizable. What kind of affect sticks to Chip Wilson when he describes himself on his personal website as being "recognized as a global thought leader" (Wilson 2021); when his investment profile features a picture of him doing some kind of snow sport and begins with the nonchalant, chill line "This is Chip" (Our Team 2021); and when he writes "on the West Coast, close bonds with nature, a spirit of experimentation and deep human connection have translated to a distinctly west coast way of living, thinking and doing business" to introduce his investment company (Hold It All 2021)? To me, he is calling on a familiar affective assemblage that seems to drench Vancouver: it includes the Lululemon lifestyle "Chip" participates in, as well as the broader culture of the post-hippie West Coast. I would describe key features of this assemblage as the life of fitness, health, and wellness; connection with nature; a promise of perfect love and success; muted colours; hot bodies; coffee; the legacy of hippie free-thinking translated into business innovation; juiced vegetables; frictionless (consumable) multiculturalism; fitness merging with spirituality on the mountain or in the yoga studio. This might best be described as a West Coast brand-affect of "wellness." It was perfectly illustrated by Genicca Whitney's now defunct company

Manifest Like a Boss, which made an entire business of coaching entrepreneurs on merging spiritual, physical, and financial health. Living in Vancouver, I feel as if I'm constantly wading through this sticky assemblage; I readily participate in it, without thinking. I am not able to point to it, or locate its source, yet it is an integral part of the weave of social relations and understandings in this place.

Chip Wilson's self-branding signifies him as being a part of and a producer of this affect that glues so much of Vancouver together. And, because it is a kind of social glue, because it is so familiar, it is a jarring break with this brand-affect when he hopes a war will cure erectile dysfunction or when he laughs at how Japanese people pronounce "Lululemon" (Deveau 2005). Perhaps what people find so horrifying about Chip Wilson's outbursts is that they fly so in the face of this wider Vancouver brand-affect, which is stuck to Lululemon and stuck to him, too. Though Vancouver, of course, is no stranger to racism, misogyny, and classism, its brand as a city relies on these distasteful qualities remaining plugged up beneath its smooth surface. It is this surface that Wilson ruptures, threatening to stick the wrong affects to the Westcoast brand of wellness. Despite these leakages, Vancouver's brand-affect remains strong; Chip Wilson (and other Vancouver entrepreneurs) continue to both tap into and create it, which in turn charges their own self-brands with vitality.

Another reading of Chip Wilson is possible here however, as embodying the contemporary entrepreneurial value of "disruption." Disruption is a major buzzword in the business world, having become a fundamental value of entrepreneurship, with investors more likely to give money to a "disruptive vision" (van Balen et al. 2019, 303, 328), and business scholars describing entrepreneurship as "a process of generative disruption" (Vedres and Stark 2010, 1150). Chip Wilson does tap into this value. He is an avid Ayn Randian individualist (Wilson 2020a), an ethos that articulates a fantasy of self-fashioned business people doing what herd-like masses don't dare to. And he deploys the language of the disruptive creative class in his essay on local politics "MEC or NDP: Is There a Difference?" (2020b). Here, he argues that lefty political parties and co-op stores are mutual failures because of their wimpy social justice politics, which prevents them from taking the creative risks necessary for greatness (perhaps things like child labor?). He contrasts this position with that of "creative entrepreneurs who enjoy working 24/7" (Wilson 2020b). Chip Wilson clearly *sees himself* as a kind of Randian, creative disruptor.

Figure 4. Genicca Whitney (Manifest Like a Boss)

Yet, I would argue that Chip Wilson also fails to properly embody this subject position. His disruptions are too real; they don't congeal into a successful image of creative disruption. Soaring to the heights of Trump-level derangement, Chip Wilson is dragged down by the Vancouver wellness brand-affect that he relies on. He is fundamentally an in-between character, whose Vancouver wellness affect is dissolved by his libertarian outbursts, but whose disruptions cannot quite be re-mediated by self-identifying as a creative entrepreneur. Chip Wilson's clumsy (non-) apologies, retracted statements, and erased blog posts gesture to this failure, as does his ejection from Lululemon. He wants to self-identify as the disruptive entrepreneur, but can't quite smooth out the edges. In the end, we are just left horrified that the founder of Lululemon hates women, and unimpressed by his effort to break the mold.

In this way, even entrepreneurial disruption depends on a kind of coherence: tensions that reduce value must be repressed, disruptions cannot be too real. Chip Wilson's failure to successfully embody the self-brand of the gentrifying entrepreneur throws this ideal figure into clearer relief. This subject position relies on an interplay between disruption and being self-identical; but this interplay cannot itself be disrupted, it must flow smoothly. As in Banet-Weiser's (2012) analysis, "authenticity *itself* is a brand" (11, emphasis in original), meaning that the disclosure of inner-truth must itself be branded to be successful. The creative entrepreneur must cultivate a self-brand of disruption, not a disruption of self-brand.

Transcendent Entrepreneurial Brand-Bodies: Self-Branding as Purification

If a self-brand is ruptured by the intrusion of certain affects, as my reading of Chip Wilson suggests, then branding is not just about sticking. It is also about un-sticking. Whatever ruptures it must have been affectively unstuck from the self-brand or barred from entry by the act of branding. Alice Marwick (2013) explores the importance of this kind of entrepreneurial self-editing in her book *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age*. Marwick (2013) defines self-branding as "the strategic creation of an identity to be promoted and sold to others" (166) and highlights how it has become "firmly instilled in modern business culture" (164). This rise is partly technological as,

Figure 5. Lisa Chan (Lanaca Properties, Suite Living, TrufElle)

in the age of social media and Web 2.0, there is an increased need for people to "keep their brand image 'pure'" (192). The disciplinary mechanism for this purity, in Marwick's account, is neoliberalism. People can lose their jobs if their actions do not fit a "'businesslike' image" (199). Examples of such reprobate behaviour from her ethnographic work are "drinking alcohol, doing drugs, talking about politics, or having sex" (199). Rosalind Gill (2014) identifies similar phenomena in her essay "Unspeakable Inequalities," which focuses more on how the political enters the logic of branding. Businesses, in her argument, want to go through the motions of performing their egalitarianism and then move on: raising politics as an ongoing structural issue is a no-no. As such, someone's "intelligibility as an entrepreneurial subject/cultural worker" depends on "the unspeakability of sexism (and of racism and perhaps other structural patterns of discrimination too)" (523). Any invested, political discussion of inequality must not enter the brand. Marwick (2013) refers to the erasure of such behaviors and traits as the "edited self" (195), which ostracizes activities that are not "business-friendly" (195). In Gill's language, the not-business-friendly becomes literally "unspeakable" and is excluded from the self-brand.

The affective un-sticking of these qualities is a form of smoothing. Following Han's (2018) concept, this smoothing removes any contradictions that could trouble the positive coherency of its brand. Han writes that "the smooth is something one just likes. It lacks the negativity of opposition" (10). Likewise, brand-affect demands that it be smoothed of any contradictions that could make one dislike it, even if one wanted to. Eve Sedgwick's (2003) reading of smoothness, in her book *Touching Feeling,* helps show the relation between smoothing and un-sticking. Drawing on the work of Renu Bora, Sedgwick explores how highly textured items reveal a history, written into the object, which invites an orientation towards it. Coarse surfaces invite the questions "How did it get that way? and What could I do with it?" (Sedgwick 2003, 13). In contrast, she argues that a smooth texture is one that "defiantly or even invisibly blocks or refuses such information…that insists instead on the polarity between substance and surface, texture that signifies the willed erasure of its history" (14-15). It is no wonder, then, that brand-affect must be smooth. Following Sedgwick, un-smooth objects are affectively unpredictable. Texture invites a questioning. It calls out for a subjective orientation towards itself ("what could I do with it?"), as well as an interpretation of its history ("how did it get that way?"). Since these readings necessarily vary between people and across time, so do the affects that get stuck to such objects. When only "business-friendly" affects are welcome, texture becomes a threat that must be smoothed over.

This means that the body itself becomes a problem for the self-brand, given its potential for textured betrayal. Indeed, Marwick's (2013) and Gill's (2014) examples of self-brand-failure are all embodied, impassioned experiences of desire, whether political or sensual, in which the body and feeling are out of rational (patriarchal) control. They constitute ruptures because they reveal the situated presence of the physical body and its desires not properly mediated through the symbolic order of self-branding. The body is denied in favor of the brand. Indeed, Marwick speaks of mental health struggles in the self-branding subjects of her ethnography, "including anxiety, information overload, lack of time, and hurt feelings" (197). These struggles must of course also be smoothed out or rendered positive. In this way, self-branding can be seen as a kind of purification of the physical body, a rejection of parts of its embodiment and a mediation of its functions into a clean, "neatly packaged" self (Marwick 2013, 195).

Vancouver property developer Lisa Chan offers an interesting iteration of this problem, given that one of her businesses sells a kind of embodiment. While one branch of her business empire involves the eviction of long-term tenants for profitable redevelopment (Vancouver Tenants Union 2019), her other business, TrufElle, markets aphrodisiac cannabis chocolates to bored, upwardly-mobile, heterosexual wives. The TrufElle website offers a testimonial about Chan turning to weed chocolates "to find ways to keep the passion exciting in her marriage" (TrufElle 2021). At first glance, the presence of sex and intoxication in the self-branding work of this testimonial seems to contradict Marwick's findings about what is tolerable to neoliberalism. Yet, this (quintessentially Vancouver) product is less a re-assertion of the body than a re-mediation of it into an acceptable form. What is intolerable to neoliberalism here is not sex per se, but the idea that the entrepreneur might actually lead a life of tedium that her body has rebelled against. Desire must be smoothly mediated to be in line with the image-concept: either too much or too little betrays the body's revolt against the idealism of the self-brand. With TrufElle, the textured signs of embodied desire (or lack of it) can be easily smoothed over into a positive, affectively-predictable surface. It prevents the body from interrupting the self-brand. TrufElle acts as a chemical supplement to aid in maintaining the "edited self" (Marwick 195). It helps fulfill the mandates of what parts of the body can be included in the self-brand and what must be excised.

This reading of self-branding comes close to Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject. For Kristeva (1982), the abject is what "lies outside" (2), "a border" (9) that delimits what must be excluded from the body; it also requires a ritualistic purification. In

this reading, self-branding can be seen as a way of "*purifying* the abject" (Kristeva 1982, 17), the abject in this case being those qualities which are of "intolerable significance" (11) to neoliberalism, what the [neoliberal] "superego…has flatly driven away" (2). The abject, for Kristeva, is focused not just on body horror (rotting corpses, shit, vomit), but also on "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). In this way, it is a response to a profound break-down in meaning and identity. What could be more destructive to a brand than being un-self-identical, in-between? Deviation from the brand is a kind of deviancy; and deviancy is an admission of what is intolerable to neoliberalism. Rosalind Gill's language is very telling here: such deviations literally become "unspeakable," what Kristeva might refer to as "a 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing" (2). They are unspeakable literally because the language is not legible, the thing referred to cannot be recognized: admitting it would be too destructive. Gill (2014) argues that certain admissions about neoliberalism become unspeakable, specifically its evident discrimination, even as these become increasingly obvious. It is the bad smell no one will voice, the rotting flesh that collective fantasies must deny: a kind of abjection.

There are also apparent differences here. For Kristeva, the abject causes a visceral horror, a bodily rejection; it is "intrinsically corporeal" (11). Self-branding, I would argue, needs to repress the body as such: it is, in a way, intrinsically *anti*-corporeal, yet is still an identity structured against abjection. The abject delimits identity, but the coherent identity of the self-brand is outsourced to a virtual body. What happens when the meaning of this branded image-body is threatened? Where does the uncontrollable convulsion take place? In a way, the very existence of the fleshy body becomes a kind of abjection for the self-brand: self-branding sets up an identity that is not firmly situated in a single corpus, but is rather "in-between" two (Kristeva 1982, 4). In the context of abjection, this is a fundamentally unstable situation where meaning is constantly under threat; the abject as identity-breakdown is always looming. In order to preserve self-identity, the undisciplined parts of the flesh body that are not identical with the brand must be constantly articulated as outside, as not-belonging to identity. The self-brand is the site of the exclusionary 'spasm.'

In other words, there is always the threat of a textured seam arising between the body and the self-brand, betraying how these two entities are stitched together as well as the very history of that stitching. This would present a dangerous

Figure 6. Michael Audain (Polygon Homes)

in-betweenness. To smooth over such a seam, the brand-affects must appear as qualities of the entrepreneur rather than things that have been stuck on. There can be no residues of glue. Chris Ingraham (2020) suggests how this erasure of sticking takes place in his book *Gestures of Concern*. In his interpretation of Sara Ahmed's concept of stickiness, he writes that "once we adapt an orientation toward objects and people that presumes certain 'affects' reside in them, we lose sight of the history by which that orientation came to the fore" (76). In other words, the essentializing of affects is also a process of smoothing, of erasing the texture that, following Sedgwick, betrays a history. Smoothing obscures the stickiness of affects. Affect here takes on an ideological valence: as history is smoothed out, what is actually transient and relational comes to appear as essential. In other words, brand-affect is an essentializing work. As Alison Hearn (2008) argues, it is treated as a form of self-actualization, the empowered creation of an actual identity. The smoothed body has to give way to a new essence: the essence of the brand.

In this way, I would argue that self-branding participates in a broader set of post-human technologies for purifying the body. In her essay "Flesh and Metal," Katherine Hayles (2002) critiques precisely such narratives of technological transcendence, which see the body as clearly boundaried, controllable, and editable. Drawing on Donna Haraway, Hayles (2002) sees such narratives as participating in a "masculinist fantasy of second birthing, transcendent union of the human with the technological that will enable us to download our consciousness into computers and live as disembodied information patterns, thereby escaping the frailties of the human body, especially mortality" (299). Technology promises to purify the abject, once and for all. This process relies, in Hayles' critique, on a view of the body that stops at the flesh, that is not involved in the environment, in-between: it cannot be leaking out into the environment interpenetrating and co-creating itself with others. The self-brand is clearly on a different level than downloading consciousness, but it is structured on the same fantasy of body purification. Aspiring to this ideal, self-branding emerges as a strange and ritualistic practice, marked by a fundamental uncanniness; since the body can never really be scrubbed clean, it is a constant, uncanny "return of what has been repressed" that threatens the coherency of the self-brand (Freud 2003, 155).

Hayles seeks to counter this practice with the alternate narrative of the "mind-body," an entity that tries to overcome the traditional Western dualism and its destructive fantasies of body transcendence. Where is the mind, though, when

there is more than one body attached to it? The self-brand functions as a bizarre, self-fashioned Doppelgänger that actually seems to have more claim to the mind than the flesh-body does. This Doppelgänger is prioritized and acts to discipline the now secondary flesh-(mind)body into a profitable self-identity. Reconstituted as the abject in relation to the self-brand, the flesh-body becomes strange to itself in its eruptions of unbranded abjection. From the perspective of the self-brand, the flesh-body is a "massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome" (Kristeva 1982, 2). In this way, the self-brand renders the flesh-body uncanny, *unheimlich*, no longer at home in itself.

As a project of self-actualization that transcends the limitations of the body, the self-brand relocates the "home" of the mindbody into the brand, and leaves the flesh-body homeless. The self-brand renders the flesh aberrant, in need of discipline. Capitalism comes full circle here. As Marx points out, "branding" was an important technique of subjectivization for workers in the earliest stages of capital: he cites early English laws that state (to use just one example) "if it happens that a vagabond has been idling about for three days he is to be taken to his birthplace, branded [*gebrandmarkt*] with a red hot iron with the letter V on the breast, and set to work" (*Capital* 1990, 897). What could be more uncanny than this violent history returning in the form of self-branding? Any admission of uncanniness, though, is itself intolerable to the self-brand: its evictionary operations must be secretive in order to preserve the neat package Marwick describes. Self-branding masquerades as a Foucauldian technology of the self, of autonomy and fulfillment, but remains a disciplinary technology. Whatever un-homeliness occurs, the self-brand must remain at home, editing out the aberrations of the flesh, leaving them outside the door, on the other side of the threshold, in the cold. To reveal the uncanniness of self-branding, then, means voicing the eviction of the flesh-body.

Blemishless Spaces of Pure Positivity(!): Smoothness and the Aesthetics of Gentrification

The television series *Black Mirror* draws a direct connection between self-branding and gentrification in the episode "Nosedive" (2016). The main character, Lacie Pound, attempts to buy a home in an upscale neighborhood, in which an aesthetic of smooth surfaces in various shades of off-white reigns un-blemished. The ability to buy into the neighborhood is premised on one's "rating," a dystopian validation system by which everyone is constantly ranked out of 5 stars by their peers. Lacie needs to increase her 4.2 rating to a 4.5 in order to receive the

Figure 7. Bob Rennie (Rennie Marketing Systems)

elite discount on the apartment. Things that rank well are participation in other minimalist, off-white spaces, taking perfect bites out of perfect cookies, and being effusively positive. "Nosedive" illustrates how self-branding and gentrification merge under a common aesthetic. Self-branding is the promise of embodying this aesthetic; gentrification is the promise of dwelling in it. In order to keep its brand-affect coherent, the new neighborhood must excise those who do not embody this aesthetic. You can't be in the gentrified neighborhood without branding yourself as a purified body. In this way, the branded self becomes a gentrifying self. The spread of this disciplinary mechanism across space aesthetically reinforces how "the entrepreneur is abstracted and universalized into a model for all citizens" (Szeman 2015, 474).

This *Black Mirror* episode expresses how neoliberal aesthetics interpenetrates neighborhood and self and becomes a general affective structure. Though this aesthetics of gentrification is recognizable enough to be the basis of a popular TV show, it has only recently received scholarly attention. In their edited volume *Aesthetics of Gentrification*, Cristoph Lindner and Gerard Sandoval (2021) attempt to bring aesthetics into the study of gentrification which, as they point out, has primarily been confined to the social sciences (14). There is some earlier work on how conspicuous consumption aesthetically anchors class identity in the gentrifying neighborhood (Jager 2007), as well as an extensive literature on how the art world supports gentrification, which is later nuanced with appropriate ambiguity (Matthews 2010). In contrast, the works in Lindner and Sandoval's volume contextualize the aesthetics of gentrification as a transformation of space to serve the needs of neoliberal capital. Following this perspective, and the connections made by *Black Mirror*, I want to describe gentrification in the larger neoliberal aesthetic constellation of smoothness. In this way, I entangle gentrification with self-branding and entrepreneurship, and explore the ideological implications of the affects that come to stick to this broader aesthetics.

Though I frame my reading of gentrification through Han's theory of smoothness, I also want to contest some of his analysis. In particular, my desire to foster a resistant practice of de-smoothing makes me want to formulate a more open theory. The smooth in his work appears as a *fait accompli,* a complete dominance of the status quo. As such, the only way forward for Han is back—back to Hegel, Heidegger, Adorno, and friends, who he hopes can help re-instate a self-shattering experience of the beautiful. There is a kind of sweetness to this as the book becomes more of a lament for lost ways of thinking; it is melancholy, depressed. However, from this melancholic position, Han doesn't really see the potential for an immanent critique of the smooth.

Figure 8. Conceptual Site Rendering of Mariachi Square in Boyle Heights, LA (Source: Baginski and Malcolm)

To me, smoothness actually contains its own conditions of failure within it, in the same way that the fleshy body continually haunts the self-brand. Friction, texture, and history cannot be totally excised. Take, for instance, the smartphone Han identifies as a paragon of smoothness. In many ways, it is the most un-smooth of objects: we constantly rub it all over our bodies—hands, faces—spit on it with our mouths as we speak at it, paw at it with our dirty fingers, cover it in viruses; it accumulates skin, dust, oils and other filth. My swiping becomes hampered by the greasy surface these very swipes create. Perhaps others remember, in the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, frantically disinfecting its surface, which seemed to loom as an impossible to contain vector of disease, a site of negativity that threatened seamless use. The smooth is a fantasy, a media for purifying abjection, but always insufficiently. De-smoothing as a practice could be understood as drawing out the abjection that the smooth can never quite cover over, whether through research, art, or political action. From here, an analysis of gentrification's smoothness also opens up an immanent critique.

Anastasia Baginski and Chris Malcolm's (2019) essay "Gentrification and the Aesthetics of Displacement" describes gentrification as embodying a neoliberal aesthetics of smoothed down violence. In their reading, this aesthetics acts as a means to purify class/racial tensions and control admission to the neighborhood.

CAPACIOUS

Figure 9. Conceptual Site Rendering of "Passages" at Whalley Boulevard in Surrey, Vancouver (Source: Chan)

Using the Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles as a case study, they argue that gentrification operates through an aesthetic rhetoric of "improvement," often utilizing the language of environmental sustainability. As Baginski and Malcolm (2019) point out, this implies that the original community is/was unsustainable, "defined by an underlying failure or absence that the development process can supplement, remedy or improve in a benign manner" (para. 10). Their reading of "Conceptual Site Renderings," which are the digitally-generated images that depict the future "developed" neighborhood, are especially revealing: these show an environment in which "the resolution of all social and political tensions is imagined to be a *fait accompli*" (para. 14). Multi-racial families happily consume in a space of muted colours and clean lines, devoid of tension. These images are not confined to L.A. As Baginski and Malcolm argue, they participate in a broader gentrifying aesthetic that is also highly recognizable in Vancouver.

The aesthetic rhetoric of benign improvement promises only changes that "everyone can get behind" (Baginski and Malcolm 2019, para. 14), smoothing out the displacing violence of gentrification. Changes get re-branded as merely purifying the neighborhood of what has to go rather than motivated by profit or affecting long-term residents. As Baginski and Malcolm write, "gentrification succeeds not simply when a neighborhood is changed, but when existing spaces and infrastruc-

ture can be seen *only* as having been underutilized or inappropriate and, in that case, on their way to improvement" (para. 12, emphasis in original). Recall, for example, Westbank CEO Ian Gillespie recasting condos as avant-garde art projects in Vancouver. Daan Wesselman's case study of gentrification of Amsterdam reveals how this brand-affect of sustainable improvement is also weaponized in the early stages of gentrification. He describes how the founding of a "creative incubator" in the Bos en Lommer neighborhood imported an aesthetics, globally coded as 'good,' thereby establishing a contrast with the original look of the racialized neighborhood. This "aesthetic spearhead," without anyone saying anything, re-signifies the older aesthetics as 'bad' (Wesselman 2021, 193). From there, dispossession is easily smoothed into progress.

This massaging of displacement into improvement also sticks itself to certain subjectivities: "while universal access is promised to all future consumers, existing residents are not visually and rhetorically represented as proper users/beneficiaries of gentrification's modified and standardized urban space" (Baginski and Malcolm 2019, para. 13). Existing residents are literally taken out of the picture, disappeared, and replaced by those who will use the neighborhood in appropriate ways—"the good subject[s] of gentrification" (para. 24) who provide the correct brand-affect. Jonathan Jae-an Crisman (2021), also writing about Boyle Heights, describes this process as it takes place on the ground using the term "cultural gentrification." He defines this as "changes to a place's aesthetics which threaten existing inhabitants' sense of belonging" (141-142). In this account, the new aesthetics renders the long-time home of residents foreign to them. This is quite literally *unheimlich*: their home turns against them. Aesthetic changes have the aura of being insignificant or benign, yet they not only mask, but also perform a displacing violence. To me, these various recent studies on the aesthetics of gentrification all suggest that gentrification is a form of rendering a neighborhood smooth. In this aesthetic form, even displacement becomes smoothed over.

Indeed, Baginski and Malcolm (2019) illustrate how a gentrifying neighborhood must practice exclusion, but cannot let the violence of this exclusion become overt. Such violence, of course, could not be aestheticized as smooth, sustainable, an improvement. Instead, the locals must be re-mediated as they are smoothed out of the neighborhood. This takes place by making them consumable: "while many new housing development projects in and around Boyle Heights have failed to meet the needs of low-income community members, they have at the same

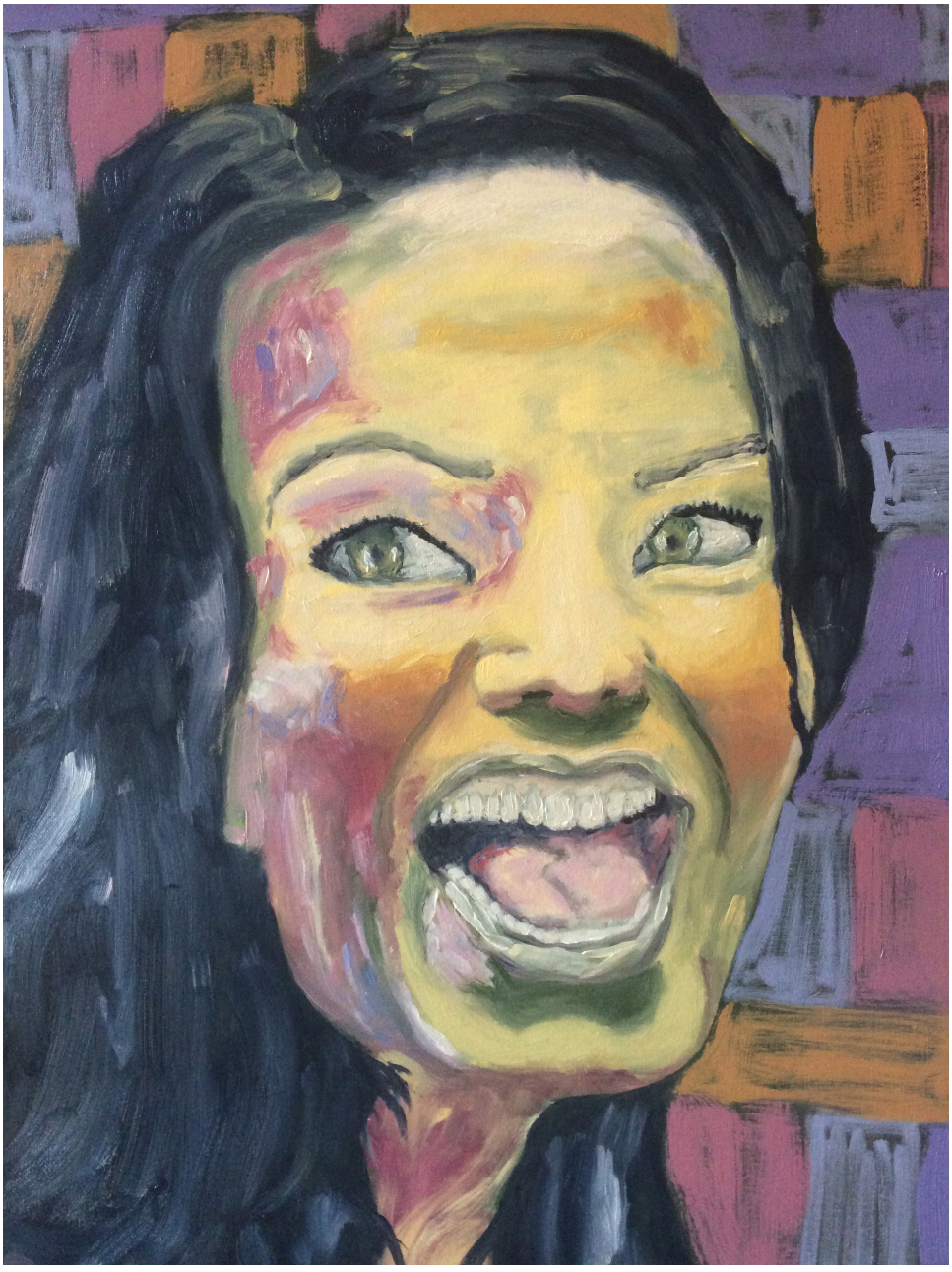

Figure 10. Beth Boyle (Reside Community Relations, TalkShop Media, LongGame Holdings)

Figure 11. John Ng (Jovi Realty)

time appeared to offer a kind of 'cultural adjacency,' a feeling of being 'linked to the spirit of a place without having to actually rub elbows with the locals'" (para. 2). The rendering of a consumable racial identity—in this case Latinx and Chicanx—allows a smooth displacement of that racial identity, a kind of contradictory inclusion. As the self-brand had to smooth over the seam connecting it to the body, so too does gentrification smooth over the bodies it displaces from its branded vision. People are not displaced in this aesthetic fantasy; they merely step into the role that was always waiting for them, of smooth, self-branded subjects in the frictionless, sustainable neighborhood.

Conclusion: Re-Mediating the Smooth

The aesthetic these scholars of gentrification illustrate is one of "pure positivity" (Han 2018, 5), in which any kind of negativity or friction has been excised. Everyone wants this! It is a resounding "yes!" that drowns out any notion of a "no," what Guy Debord (1977) would call "the omnipresent affirmation of the choice already made" (sect. 6). Participating in it requires a kind of self-branding, in which the subject itself becomes legible as sustainable in the rhetoric of gentrification. Much of the "common sense" Imre Szeman (2015) refers to in his essay "Entrepreneurship as the New Common Sense" is precisely this unquestionable injunction to believe in this self-branded subject. It becomes just a fact that "*everyone will have to become an entrepreneur*" (474, emphasis in original). Even this sentiment itself inhabits the ideology of the smooth; it is frictionless, unquestionable, pure positivity. The injunction to smoothness is itself smooth.

In my view, the abjection of the smooth is where resistance can take place. In Baginski and Malcolm's, as well as in Wesselman's, analysis gentrification requires and produces its own abject, 'unsustainable' other. It requires the abject for its own fantasy that it can purify, render it sustainable; it demarcates itself against the unsustainable exterior without ever really acknowledging its existence. And, in a much more material sense, gentrification produces its own abjection in the form of marginalized bodies, figures that appear as uncanny to the neoliberal order, who are literally alienated from their homes, *unheimlich*, increasing in number in the face of gentrification even as it tries to smooth them out of the picture. As self-branding displaces the flesh body from its home, gentrification displaces a multitude of bodies from theirs. Despite fantasies of neoliberal transcendence, these bodies cannot be done away with or fully smoothed out. Smoothness produces the abjection that it promises to purify. This gives abject eruption a kind of political power, and sharpens affective practice as a weapon against neoliberalism.

This project has tried to articulate an affective and aesthetic reading of neoliberalism, as it operates through branded subjects and spaces. In my view, the neoliberal aesthetic of smoothness is also its principle of interpellating subjects into entrepreneurial necessity. It is through this aesthetics that this subject position is normalized and taken on. Out of this analysis, I would promote an (experimental) technique of resistance, a re-mediating of the smooth that brings the abject (of neoliberalism) back into the picture. Art is one way this can occur. Another way is the "wrong" bodies entering the smooth scene, particularly *en masse.* A recent example of this from Vancouver is the Namegan Tent City, an encampment of hundreds of un-housed people, which moved from the impoverished Downtown Eastside Neighborhood into the much smoother Strathcona Neighborhood in July 2020. Suddenly, the city began scrambling to house them, despite the encampment having existed for years in other locations (Woo and Bula 2020).

Such a critique is strongest when it can counter the aesthetics against neoliberalism more generally. With this in mind, this project also seeks to dispel the delusions of transcendence that seem to inherent to neoliberalism. This is the promise of the self-brand to reach a higher level of self, to "promote both 'authenticity' and business-targeted self-presentation" (Marwick 2013, 166), the promise of entrepreneurship as a liberatory Romantic subject position that can be "simultaneously careerist and heroic" (Szeman 2015, 474), and the promise of gentrification to render space totally smooth, sustainable, and safe. These aesthetic fantasies ultimately rely on a massive denial of the uncanniness they produce, and function more as ideological justification for various mechanisms of discipline and displacement. Perhaps we can begin to see these aesthetic fantasies as themselves abject and uncanny, and confronting our Doppelgängers as disturbing others rather than ideal selves. We might begin to confront the smooth.

Unfortunately, the far-right currently owns the critique of smoothness in its politics of offense. Chip Wilson could be seen as adjacent to this political trend. A counter-politics that challenges both neoliberalism and the far-right needs to articulate its own critique of the smooth and unleash its own repressed abjection rather than doubling down on this aesthetics.

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Endnotes

1. These paintings, along with others, make up a series exhibited at CSA Space in Vancouver from November 5, 2021 to January 3, 2022 under the title "Boss Bodies."

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