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‘Glow From the Inside Out’: Deliciously Ella and the Politics of ‘Healthy Eating’

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the branded persona of Ella Mills, founder of the multiplatform, multi-product and multi-million pound food brand Deliciously Ella. It begins from the premise that Mills represents a new kind of cultural intermediary: that of the wellness entrepreneur. Through a discourse analysis of Mills’ own media productions alongside news and magazine features about the entrepreneur, I consider how ‘healthy eating’ is being sold to young women as a means to realise physical and financial empowerment. Commercial entrepreneurship is made to function in tandem with health entrepreneurship, as Mills makes it her business to model a healthy lifestyle and enjoins others to follow this example. The article further examines how the Deliciously Ella narrative perpetuates already dominant understandings of health as a private good and personal responsibility through its emphasis on healing and recovery through food. Relating this analysis to recent debates about the shifting terrain of postfeminism in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, I argue that the spotlighting of Mills elevates self-care as a gendered imperative while obfuscating the classed and racialised privileges that attend this.

KEYWORDS

Clean eating, cultural politics, entrepreneurship, health, lifestyle, self-care, wellness

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Over the last few years, Ella Mills (née Woodward) has achieved extraordinary levels of cultural visibility and commercial reach in the UK under the brand name Deliciously Ella. As well as being the author of several best-selling books, Mills commands large and highly engaged audiences on social media, including 1.6 million followers on Instagram. She is routinely profiled for news and lifestyle outlets, recently featuring on the cover of *Women's Health*, and has appeared in high-profile advertising campaigns alongside bona fide celebrities such as Sarah Jessica Parker. Deliciously Ella products — including energy balls, breakfast cereals and frozen meals — are stocked in major supermarkets as well as smaller stores across the UK. A Deliciously Ella deli in West London serves plant-based meals, bakes and cakes, alongside hot drinks, juices and smoothies.¹

The general contours of the Deliciously Ella story are well-established, having been told and re-told by Mills herself and further rehearsed by journalists. While in her second year at university Mills became seriously unwell, suffering heart palpitations, blackouts and chronic pain, such that she was “bedridden ninety-five percent of the time” (Woodward, 2015: 7). Extensive medical investigation proved inconclusive until eventually a diagnosis of the autonomic condition postural tachycardia syndrome (PoTS) was made. Mills was put on medication but found little relief from her symptoms, and so resolved to take charge of her condition: “I could no longer rely on my doctors and I had to find a way to get my life back” (Woodward, 2015: 8). She began researching “holistic, natural approaches to healing” and embarked overnight on a diet free from “all meat, dairy, sugar, gluten, anything processed and all chemicals and additives” (Woodward, 2015: 8).

With little in the way of cooking skills, Mills started a blog — the titular Deliciously Ella — in an effort to expand her culinary repertoire. Much to her surprise, she recounts, this quickly attracted tens and then hundreds of thousands of followers. Mills began running cookery classes, hosting supper clubs, and selling branded merchandise including t-shirts and tote-bags featuring the slogan ‘Peace, Love & Kale’. She went on to launch a recipe app, which went straight to number one on iTunes. A publishing contract soon followed, and in January 2015 Mills released her first cookbook: *Deliciously Ella: Awesome Ingredients and Incredible Food That Your Body Will Love*. As multiple news outlets reported at the time, this became the fastest-selling debut cookbook in Britain since records began, outpacing predecessors including Nigella Lawson’s *How to Eat* (1998) and Jamie Oliver’s *The Naked Chef* (2001). Since then, Mills has continued to expand the business, now run in conjunction with her husband and business partner Matthew Mills.

Though Ella Mills occupies an especially prominent position on the cultural stage, hers is not a singular success story. Indeed, she is very often positioned as part of a wider cohort of young women entrepreneurs said to have brought about dramatic shifts in British food culture. Often referred to under the banner of ‘clean eating’ and ‘wellness’, this grouping includes Amelia Freer (Nourish and Glow), sisters Jasmine and Melissa Hemsley (Hemsley + Hemsley), Madeleine Shaw (Get the Glow), and Natasha Corrett (Honestly Healthy). While the actual content of their diets vary — Mills for example follows a largely vegan diet, while the Hemsleys extol the virtues of raw milk and bone broth — all advocate a plant-based lifestyle centred on ‘real’ and ‘whole’ foods. Notions of dieting and restriction are expressly disavowed, in favour of what is presented as a more intuitive and enjoyable approach to ‘healthy eating’. Though all of these women have achieved considerable success,

¹ Details of the company’s early development and current operations can be found at: <https://deliciouslyella.com/about/>.

Mills is undoubtedly the break-out star, billed as the “queen of wellness” (Salter, 2017) and credited with having “changed the way a generation eats” (Curtis, 2016a).

This article examines how Deliciously Ella circulates as a new kind of ‘cultural intermediary’ (Bourdieu, 1984): that of the wellness entrepreneur. This figure is related to but nevertheless distinct from the more familiar archetypes of the mumpreneur and beauty vlogger, who similarly seek to capitalise on conventionally feminine pursuits via new media productions. What makes the wellness entrepreneur distinctive is her focus on health-enhancement, a project to which food and nutrition are central. For this figure and her followers – predominantly comprising young women² – health is understood not simply as freedom from disease, but a kind of preternatural exuberance and luminous vitality, often denoted through references to ‘glow’.³ Using Deliciously Ella as an example, I consider what the figure of the wellness entrepreneur is doing at a cultural level, both in terms of the anxieties she is made to manage as well as the ideals she is held to embody. I locate this analysis within the shifting landscape of postfeminism in the UK, characterised by renewed interest in and attention to certain kinds of feminism (Gill, 2016).

Part of what makes Deliciously Ella especially compelling as a case study is the manner in which she exemplifies the entry of what Angela McRobbie terms ‘the perfect’ into “the common currency of contemporary femininity” (2015b: 4). Media profiles routinely position Mills as basically sublime, “smashing life in her signature perfect way”, as a *Women’s Health* writer puts it (Salter, 2017). Yet in order for Mills to function as an aspirational figure – for her perfection to be worth emulating rather than disparaging – she must be made relatable. As Alison Winch (2014: 234) notes: “what is rewarded and acclaimed is striving for perfection ... those who are effortlessly perfect are bitchily vilified in the mainstream media as they do not evidence the success and necessity of the neoliberal work ethic”. By assessing how the spotlighting of Mills within commercial and cultural ‘spaces of attention’ (McRobbie, 2009) marks out new ‘horizons of expectation’ (McRobbie, 2015b) for women and girls, I examine how the imperative to self-care is being incorporated into normative ideals of femininity. This discussion is based on a discourse analysis of Mills’ own media productions – including her books, blog and social media – as well as a cache of over a hundred news and magazine articles, largely from the UK’s national press.⁴

I begin by setting out how the success of Deliciously Ella is held up both by Mills herself and the wider media as an example for other women to follow. Wellness work is proffered as a route to financial as well as physical empowerment, with culinary labour recast as creative labour through new media technologies. At the same time, the very real risks that attend entrepreneurship are elided, as Mills’ tremendous privilege is backgrounded. In a second section, I consider how the Deliciously Ella story bolsters a moral

² Influencer-ranking platform Deep Social (2018) indicates that Deliciously Ella’s online audience is almost entirely composed of women (93%), the majority of whom are aged 18-24 (47%) and based predominantly in the UK (28%) and US (16%). Her audience is also overwhelmingly white (89%). Importantly, however, this is not to say that the appeal of wellness is limited to young white women, as I discuss elsewhere (O’Neill, forthcoming).

³ ‘Glow’ is very much the *sin qua non* wellness aesthetic, if not its *raison d’être*. While this is in many respects a racialised aesthetic, it is worth stating outright that ‘glow’ is not and cannot be the property of any particular skin tone. Rather, ‘glow’ is bestowed through media technologies – lighting, filters, and so on – and structured by racialised regimes of spectatorship. Within British mass media, it is most often afforded to white women, who are accorded “illuminated desirability” (Dyer, 1997: 142). Again however this does not mean that the desire for ‘glow’ is somehow particular to white women, nor is its achievement restricted to this cohort.

⁴ News material was collected via Nexis using the search term ‘Deliciously Ella’, with the majority of results coming from digital editions of national newspapers including *The Daily Mail*, *The Telegraph* and *The Times*. The regional source *London Evening Standard* also featured heavily. Additional online and print material was sourced using a Google alert for the same term.

economy in which health is understood as a private good and personal responsibility. I conclude by arguing that the rise of wellness in the UK must be related to the decline of welfare, as precarity threatens collective conceptions of and commitments to well-being. Before proceeding, I must underline that my concern throughout is not Ella Mills as an individual, but rather the visibility she achieves via the Deliciously Ella brand – a distinction Mills herself is keen to maintain – though inevitably there is some slippage between the two.

A RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

Mills is positioned differently to many other ‘food celebrities’ (Johnston and Goodman, 2015) and ‘culinary personas’ (Johnston et al., 2014) in the contemporary UK context. While household names such as Lawson and Oliver have considerable business dealings, these are generally backgrounded so as not to distract from their identities as cook and chef respectively. By contrast, Mills’ status as a businesswoman is continually highlighted in articles chronicling her entrepreneurial endeavours. A ‘day in the life’ piece for *Business Insider* is typical in this regard, promising insight into the daily habits of “the 25-year-old Instagram star who runs a food empire” (Millington, 2016). Across the wider press, Mills is credited with having transformed herself “from typical student to the head of a health food empire” (Osman, 2016) while at the same time positioned as “just a normal girl who stumbled on a way to help herself recover from serious illness and wants to share her secrets” (Parker, 2015). In this way, she is accorded the “dynamic of exceptionalism and typicality that undergirds every star persona” (Negra, 2009: 147).

The mode of entrepreneurship Mills crafts is assuredly feminine and resolutely domestic: centred around culinary pursuits, conducted from the kitchen table, compatible with but not dependent on or subservient to family life. Her celebrity partakes in a more general tendency to frame women’s entrepreneurship as tapping into “innate female skills, qualities and personality traits” (Eikhof et al., 2013: 558). Mills actively aligns herself to this vision, declaring her admiration for “strong women who manage to stay wonderfully feminine while conquering the world” in an interview with *Red* magazine (Rogalska, 2016). At the same time, this kind of entrepreneurship is outward-looking and fashion-forward. Media technologies – most especially the photo-sharing platform Instagram – enable food work to be amalgamated into the wider realm of “socially mediated cultures of creative production” organised around “traditionally feminine domains” (Duffy and Hund, 2015: 1). Any lingering association with drudgery or obligation is dispelled as cooking is framed as a creative endeavour, such that “reproductive labour [becomes] a site for potential investment ... in a creative self” (Taylor, 2016: 115, cited in Littler, 2018: 199).

One of the most striking aspects of the Deliciously Ella story, as relayed by Mills and reproduced by the wider media, is the concerted downplaying of any kind of calculated commercial ambition. There is a routine insistence that commercial success was never something Mills set out to achieve but, rather, something that accrued to her through a combination of good luck and hard work. In interviews with the press, Mills positions herself as a kind of accidental entrepreneur, describing her business as “such a personal journey. I’m literally just sharing what I like” (Godwin, 2016) and claiming “I didn’t think anyone would read [the blog]. They weren’t really meant to” (Rumbelow, 2017). Having won the ‘Rising Star’ category at the Ernst and Young Entrepreneur of the Year Awards, Mills (2017b) details her former lack of business acumen at length on her blog:

I didn't know what a P&L (profit and loss) was, I'd never heard of a balance sheet, the only maths I could do was counting on my fingers and I had no idea how to create a spreadsheet, calculate a margin or conduct an interview ... it would be fair to say that I was missing pretty much all practical business know-how.

Such statements contribute to more widely circulating discourses which frame individuality and creativity as key to the success of women entrepreneurs, rather than any particular aptitude for business (Eikhof et al., 2013: 555). The Deliciously Ella story thus serves to “reaffirm the post-feminist ideal of individual success obtained through inner self-discovery” (Duffy and Hund, 2015: 4), and at the same time ensures that women's work is coded as “an extension of innate femininity rather than an active response to the market structures of capitalism” (Negra, 2009: 140).

Yet while Mills' achievements as an entrepreneur are routinely framed as the unintended byproduct of innate talent, emphasis is routinely placed on her capacity for hard work. Mills regularly refers to the ‘always on’ nature of running a business and the singular responsibility this brings. In a profile for *Well To Do* (Hill, 2017), an online magazine for people who want to “build incredible businesses and careers in wellness”, she explains:

The reality of building a business is that it's hard. It's amazing, I wouldn't have it any other way but it's really hard. It's a 24/7 thing, but if you want to do it properly you've got to do it properly. Ultimately, you are probably the only person that's going to be able to deal with your business issues 24/7. So, just understanding and recognising the reality of it and that there is no such thing as a weekend or an evening off is one thing I've had to learn.

Statements such as this attest to the purportedly fixed realities of entrepreneurship, with the “24/7” nature of the job presented as inevitable – something to be negotiated because it cannot be avoided. There is a normalisation and even valorisation of punitive working conditions, on the basis that these are more or less self-directed.

At the same time, entrepreneurship is portrayed as deeply pleasurable and immensely gratifying. In this regard Deliciously Ella taps into broader discourses of ‘passionate work’ (McRobbie, 2015a), encapsulated by the modern mantra of ‘do what you love’ (Tokumitsu, 2014). Though Mills works hard, this is not stultifying in the way work generally is presumed to be. Instead, labour and leisure blend together, to “create a notion of work that *doesn't seem like work*” (Duffy and Hund, 2015: 9). As Mills goes on to describe in the same piece:

Luckily it works because I am so passionate about it, but I do think you really have to have that. You have to love what you do and really want to do it – if you don't I think that's when it gets really, really hard. If you're not passionate about what you do it's going to get really difficult because you have to prioritise it over a lot of other things in your life.

At work here is what Jo Littler terms ‘magical femininity’ centred on ‘affective passion’ (2018), as love for the job is made to offset and inoculate against the sacrifice it demands. Even as the necessity of hard work is underlined, its potentially detrimental impacts and enervating effects are downplayed. Entrepreneurial endeavour is instead made to seem eminently attainable, provided “the individual simply puts her energies in the right direction” (Littler, 2018: 197).

Notions of ‘passionate work’ are further embellished by the collaborative nature of Deliciously Ella as a joint venture between wife and husband. Each stress the hard work they

undertake as a couple, with Ella contending: “Matt and I have worked seven days a week for the last year and a half – this is our lives” (Norton, 2017), while Matthew describes “18 hours a day serving food, cleaning loos” (Millington, 2016). Where the demands of running a business together might seem to impinge on their relationship, such travails are made bearable and even pleasurable because they are shared. In an extended *Mail Online* feature about their first wedding anniversary, the couple recounts how plans for a weekend away were scuppered by supply problems, such that they ended up “in a Portakabin, finalising spreadsheets, eating about 30 kilos of granola” (Blake, 2017). Such moments are made to seem that much less onerous because they are weathered together, ultimately providing fodder for humorous anecdotes. The ‘romance of work’ (Duffy, 2015) is thus enhanced through its convergence with romance in the more conventional sense. Insofar as entrepreneurship can be socialised, this is only through a heterosexual partnership underpinned by a strongly gendered division of labour, as Ella handles “the brand side of it – everything you look, see, eat, feel and connect to and engage with” while Matthew manages “the business development and the finance and the operations – actually making it work” (Millington, 2016). The objective is not so much work-life *balance*, but work-life *integration*, characterised by the “overlap, if not amalgamation, of domestic and business spheres and professional and personal lives” (Eikhof et al., 2013: 557).

As her star has risen Mills has become a prominent proponent of women’s entrepreneurship, speaking at events such as the *Cosmopolitan* ‘Self Made Summit’ and a WeWork series dedicated to ‘Fierce, Female Founders’. In 2018, she participated in the *Telegraph’s* ‘Women Mean Business’ campaign (Cohen and Johnson, 2018) alongside well-known entrepreneurs including Mary Portas (Broadcaster and Retail Consultant) and Justine Roberts (CEO of Mumsnet). Mills is frank in acknowledging the difficulties women in business face, stating in an interview for the *Times*: “I never realised I was a feminist until I started working ... People take Matt much more seriously than they take me” (Godwin, 2016). Yet in diagnosing the source of the problem, her commentary entails a familiar turning inwards. In an Instagram post (@deliciouslyella, 2018) featuring Mills in a bright pink jacket with boxes of Deliciously Ella products balanced on her hip, she writes:

Only girl in the room for a massive meeting today so thought I’d wear fushia [sic]. The first time I walked into a meeting like this I was terrified, I was so young when I started Deliciously Ella and my own fear of everyone else’s judgements meant I undervalued my abilities [...] finding a way to push past fear is something I had to learn to embrace (and am still working on, I think it’s a constant work in progress). I think that’s the thing that holds a lot of us back too much of the time. Today I was finally proud and genuinely confident to walk in as our founder, wear bright pink and be the only girl in the room.

Extrapolating from her own experience, Mills frames the underrepresentation of women in business as stemming from a lack of confidence, such that the proposed curative is primarily psychological. Though she declares herself confident at long last, she simultaneously contends that confidence remains ultimately unattainable – a continual “work in progress”. Elsewhere, Mills cites “endless optimism” (2017b) as a key criterion for success, advising would-be entrepreneurs: “you just have to have blind faith that you can make it work, even when it seems impossible” (Woodward, 2017).

Such pronouncements find ready parallel in exhortations for women to be confident in the face of and as a remedy for continued gender inequality. As Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad argue, confidence has become an imperative for women and girls, who are enjoined to

realise this psychological disposition as a means to secure their place in the world and absorb the injuries that accompany it. There is a looking away from structural dynamics, as women are cajoled to look “inwards to solve external problems” (Gill and Orgad, 2016: 330). One of the foremost proponents of such wisdom is Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook COO and author of the phenomenally popular *Lean In* (2013). Enjoining women to close the ‘ambition gap’, *Lean In* presents confidence as “the key to women’s personal career-related success and, more broadly, to realising the project of gender inequality at work and in public life” (Gill and Orgad, 2016: 329). Yet while Sandberg is clearly an influential figure, there is reason to believe she may not be widely relatable, particularly to young women. As Dawn Foster (2015: 11) notes, although *Lean In* sold well, it was not necessarily read well; indeed, it featured on an Amazon Kindle list of books least likely to be finished. Elsewhere, Nicole Aschoff (2015: 27) contends that while Sandberg’s ideas evidently resonated with large numbers of women, the book’s popularity cannot be divorced from the fact that Sandberg has untrammelled access to “a massive media machine”. To that end, figures such as Mills – who has a comparatively smaller but much more engaged following – may serve as effective conduits for the kinds of ideas and ideals espoused by Sandberg.⁵

While confidence is no doubt a useful attribute in business and other domains, the rendering of the problem in this way converts gender inequality from “a structural problem into an individual affair” (Rottenberg, 2014: 3). Women’s lack of confidence is always already assumed as a barrier to career success, an assumption that is at best misjudged in the context of entrepreneurship, as evidence suggests that women who become entrepreneurs do so precisely because they *are* confident in their skills and abilities.⁶ Moreover, this presumed lack of confidence is made to appear unconnected to wider social patterns, as though springing from within women rather than emanating from a “culture that produces self-doubt, lack of confidence, shame, and insecurity” (Gill and Orgad, 2016: 339). Obscured from view are the broader structural conditions that limit women’s involvement in business, and little if any consideration is paid to the myriad ways in which entrepreneurship can perpetuate and indeed exacerbate gender inequality (Eikhof et al., 2013; Martinez Dy et al., 2018). Instead, women are encouraged to have “blind faith” in their endeavours, despite the fact that entrepreneurship by definition involves risk, bringing with it the very real possibilities of depreciated earnings, irregular income, unsustainable debt and bankruptcy.⁷

On the face of it, the Deliciously Ella story seamlessly perpetuates the logic of meritocracy, wherein success is said to result from a combination of innate talent and applied effort (Littler, 2018). Though financial reward was not something Mills set out to achieve, it is at the same time something she works hard for and therefore deserves. Her example fits with current governmental interests seeking to promote entrepreneurship amidst ongoing economic instability (Ahl and Marlow, 2017), especially among young people. Very much in the background of this narrative is the fact that, as the daughter of

⁵ Indeed, Mills is a professed admirer of Sandberg, writing about *Lean In* on her blog (Mills, 2017a) and citing this as recommended reading when asked what ‘3 Things Every Girl Boss Should Read’ (Editorial, 2016).

⁶ Research from the Federation of Small Businesses (2016) finds that confidence in one’s skills is the second most common reason women start their own businesses (37%), second only to experience in the relevant sector or industry (40%). Though lack of confidence is an inhibiting factor for some would-be entrepreneurs (22%), this is not a specifically ‘feminised deficit’, but instead “generic to all who seek to create a new venture” (Ahl and Marlow, 2017: 15).

⁷ Mills herself is presumably aware of such possibilities, having closed two delis in March 2018 after posting losses of over £720,000 (Starkey, 2018). That her business was able to withstand such losses is testament to the insulating effects of class privilege in commerce as elsewhere.

politician Shaun Woodward and supermarket heiress Camilla Sainsbury – whose combined wealth has been estimated at £40 million – Mills hails from an exceptionally privileged family with ready access to huge reserves of social, cultural, and economic capital.⁸ Her experience of entrepreneurship – resulting in a six-figure income and multi-million pound brand⁹ – contrasts sharply with the legions of young women bloggers who undertake extraordinary amounts of ‘aspirational labour’ (Duffy, 2015) without achieving anything like the success Mills has realised in just a few short years. In the process, extant hierarchies of class and ‘race’ are reinforced, as those with unparalleled advantage seek “to justify their position and success and to prescribe this route for others” (Littler, 2018: 92), while at the same time “success is repeatedly celebrated and taken for granted as a preserve of whiteness, an unspoken entitlement to privilege” (Wilkes, 2015: 24).

In a landscape marked by new feminist visibilities (Gill, 2016), large numbers of women are expressing an appetite for feminism, a taste for feminist ideas and a craving for feminist solidarities. The spotlighting of Deliciously Ella seems geared towards placating and appeasing such appetites, as notions of empowerment are yoked to logics of enterprise, rendering feminism compatible with if not subordinate to capital and commerce. The figure of the empowered and empowering wellness entrepreneur partakes in a ‘domestication’ of feminism, “securing ... a legitimate space for a ‘moderate’ feminism to be affirmed via a repudiation of an ‘excessive’ feminism” (Dean, 2010: 393). This vision of female success is distinctly non-threatening, as traditional modes of femininity are claimed, centred, celebrated. The ultimate effect is to sustain what Sara Ahmed terms the ‘fantasy of feminist digestion’, “as if feminism has already been taken in and assimilated into [the social] body and is thus no longer required” (2017: 112).

FOOD AS MEDICINE

At the heart of the Deliciously Ella narrative is a remarkable story of healing and recovery through food. Mills describes her return to health as “like a miracle” and recounts the decision to change her diet as “single-handedly the best thing I’ve ever done” (Woodward, 2015: 9). Having recovered from a debilitating illness that left her “bedridden ninety-five percent of the time” (Woodward, 2015: 7), Mills proffers her own example as a model for others, declaring: “Healthy living has totally transformed my life and I think it will transform yours, too” (2016). Media headlines rehearse this narrative, heralding Mills as “the healthy-eating blogger who healed herself with superfoods” (Slater, 2015) and describing the entrepreneur as “a picture of health” (Parker, 2015) and “her own best advert” (Rosseinsky, 2016). Any distinction between outer good-looks and inner well-being is collapsed, on the basis that the formerly “bedridden” Mills now “glows with good health” (Editorial, 2015). Through such hyperbole, the Hippocratic conception of ‘food as medicine’ comes to function not so much as proverbial wisdom but as a literal statement of fact. Self-care is elevated to the status of an imperative that women in particular must realise so as to ensure their own health as well as that of society at large.

⁸ While Mills’ privileged background is mentioned in some media reporting, this is often in a passing and jocular manner that downplays its significance, for example through the common quip that while in government her father was “the only Labour MP with a butler” (Edwardes, 2016).

⁹ As early as January 2015, just over two years after Mills started her blog, *You* magazine reported that she had a six-figure income (Slater, 2015). Deliciously Ella is now regularly referred to in the press as a multi-million pound brand.

Mills' success as an entrepreneur depends upon her ability to convince others to take responsibility for diet and nutrition in the manner she herself has done. Commercial entrepreneurship is made to function in tandem with health entrepreneurship, as Mills makes it her business to model a healthy lifestyle and enjoins others to do the same. Recounted from the perspective of a healthful present, her history of illness is recast as an opportunity not only for personal growth but also for potential profit, with Mills stating in an interview: "I do wonder whether my illness hasn't been a blessing. It helps people relate to my diet. They think if I can do it, anyone can" (Slater, 2015). Triumphant headlines further reinforce this framing of illness as opportunity, exhorting readers to discover "how a rare illness led to a health food empire" (Cavendish, 2015) and commending Mills for making the "transition from invalid to deli-owning businesswoman and media mogul" (Curtis, 2016b). Such narratives extend the more familiar idea of illness as something to be 'beaten', 'defeated' or 'overcome', intensifying ableist logics to realise heightened demands of 'bodily capacity' (Puar, 2012, 149, cited in McRobbie, 2015b: 6).

In promoting her message of health-enhancement, Mills very often strains to elucidate just how bad her diet used to be, referring to herself as a "former sugar junkie" and "total addict" (Woodward, 2015: 7–8). In a feature for *Mail Online*, she itemises this saccharine excess, claiming to have "lived off a delicious mixture of Ben and Jerry's Cookie Dough ice cream; mountains of Cadbury's caramel chocolate, lots of fizzy pick-n-mix and millions of jars of peanut butter and strawberry jam eaten with a spoon" (London, 2014). With these statements Mills invokes the most reviled of contemporary foodstuffs, sugar having recently displaced fat to become an "overdetermined node for social and medical anxieties about 21st century health, bodies and consumption" (Throsby, 2018: 954–955). Indeed, Mills' 'addiction' is more or less explicitly claimed to have precipitated her illness — despite the fact that PoTS is not a dietary condition — as it is stated that she "fully recovered ever since overhauling her sugar-filled lifestyle" (London, 2015). The ultimate effect is to strongly imply if not outright attest that her return to health resulted from the elimination of supposedly polluting foodstuffs; that is, it was simply a matter of making the 'right' food choices. In this regard it is notable that journalists often struggle to reconcile the professed deficiencies of Mills' former diet with her privileged upbringing, resulting in continual references to Mills having had a bad diet *despite* her background: "Her childhood was extraordinarily privileged but her diet, by her own account, was appalling and she blames it for her poor health" (Blake, 2017). Implicit in such statements is the assumption that wealthy people know how to feed themselves and their families 'properly', such that any deviation from this needs to be accounted for and explained.

One of Mills' most consistent talking points is that "eating well isn't a diet" (Fillis, 2016). The inside jacket of her first cookbook declares: "Deliciously Ella is not about being hungry or deprived. It's about counting goodness not calories. It's about nourishing your body with real, whole foods so that you are consistently happy and energised, and can live life to the fullest. After all isn't that what life's all about?" (Woodward, 2015). This vision fits with and feeds into wider shifts in dieting discourse, whereby a preoccupation with weight is being supplanted — at least rhetorically — by an overwhelming concern with health. As Kate Cairns and Josée Johnston argue, the language of healthy eating "reframes dietary restrictions as positive choices, while maintaining an emphasis on body discipline, expert knowledge, and self-control" (2015: 154). Where efforts to shape and shrink the body have long been regarded as normative components of femininity in the UK as elsewhere (Bartky,

1990; Bordo, 1993; Orbach, 1978), in many contexts lifestyle advice increasingly seeks distance from the “pathologised subject of a dieting femininity” (Cairns and Johnston, 2015: 161). In order to be understood as positive and agentic, healthy eating must be framed as a matter of choice rather than imposition, with restriction and restraint recast as license and liberation.

Those who aspire to the Deliciously Ella lifestyle are exhorted to take pleasure in and enjoy food, as Mills calls on readers to “fall in love” with plant-based eating (Woodward, 2016: np). In a list of “ten commandments for living a healthy, happy life”, the very first directive instructs: “Enjoy your food — no matter what you’re eating, whether it’s kale or pizza, love every bite and savour each flavour. Food should always be fun” (Woodward, 2016: np). Such injunctions mimic a dominant motif in contemporary media culture, which Rosalind Gill and Ana Sofia Elias refer to as ‘love your body’ or ‘LYB’ discourse (2014: 185). As with LYB discourse, where only certain kinds of bodies are deemed worthy of acceptance, only certain kinds of foods are appropriate for the Deliciously Ella diet. A list of “basics” in the first cookbook includes apple cider vinegar, coconut milk, medjool dates, gluten-free flours, raw cacao powder, tamari and miso paste, all of which Mills claims “played a huge role in my healing process and really helped me enjoy clean, natural food, so once you’re using all of them you’ll see amazing things happen too!” (Woodward, 2015: 13). Certain foodstuffs — notably avocados, to which Mills professes to be “totally addicted” — are ascribed extraordinary properties, as they will “nourish your body, give you glowing skin, and make you feel happy” (Woodward, 2015: 245). Thus while telling readers to love what they eat, Mills simultaneously asserts boundaries over what can and should be enjoyed.

For all the emphasis on pleasure, the injunction to ‘love your food’ (LYF) is ultimately pragmatic, as Mills declares: “enjoyment is the key to sustainability when it comes to healthy eating” (Woodward, 2016: np). ‘LYF’ is thus less about gustatory delight in and of itself, and more about the health benefits that are supposed to — and *supposed* to — accrue from adhering to this lifestyle. Alongside the pleasure imperative is an anti-guilt directive. Further down her “ten commandments” list, Mills stipulates: “Don’t feel guilty — if all you want is chocolate cake, then eat a slice and enjoy it [...] Remember, no one is perfect!” (Woodward, 2016: np). The clear implication is that eating cake amounts to a kind of downfall, a departure from the Deliciously Ella path. Again, parallels can be seen with ‘LYB’ discourses, which re-inscribe body hatred as part of the normative condition of femininity, as advertisements replete with body hatred urge women to love their bodies (Gill and Elias, 2014). In a similar manner, by continually telling women to love their food, Deliciously Ella reinforces the idea that there are some foods women really *should* feel guilty about eating. This point is evidenced when Mills claims that by adhering to this regime, certain foodstuffs will lose their allure: “It takes a few months for your taste buds to adjust ... but once [they do] you just won’t think of ‘cheat’ foods, they’ll start to seem kind of gross actually, and you’ll feel so truly amazing that they’ll have no appeal at all” (Woodward, 2015: 246).

The diet Mills promotes requires significant investments of time and money. Cataloguing the various utensils and appliances needed, she explains: “There are a couple of pieces of equipment that are totally essential to this lifestyle. You’ll need a food processor, a blender and a juicer to make the vast majority of these recipes, but I promise that’s it” (2015: 22). Mills recommends specific makes and models of each — all top of the line and costing several hundred pounds — admitting these “are expensive” but contending they are “worth the investment” (Woodward, 2015: 22). Similar claims are made about investments of time,

as Mills insists: “No matter how busy your life is, I promise you really do have two hours or so twice a week to cook foods that will make you look and feel your best” (Woodward, 2016: np). She goes on to explain that healthy eating is simply a matter of priority management: “It may mean that you have to reschedule something else to prioritise your health, but investing in wellness is really the best commitment you can make” (Woodward, 2016: np). Participating in a wider pattern of ‘domestic aggrandizement’ (Negra, 2009: 118), Mills claims that culinary labour is “a great way to switch off from the world and have some me-time”, and enjoins her readers “not to see it as a chore, [but] instead view it as a chance to explore new recipes and relax” (Woodward, 2016: np). Though there are continual assurances of ease and enjoyment, nutrition is nevertheless an imperative that must be carefully managed and constantly planned for.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Deliciously Ella’s messaging is the emphasis on effortful change, as healthy eating is presented as something Mills had to *choose* to commit to and *learn* to enjoy. In this way, her transformation – from debilitating ill-health to luminous well-being – is made available to others. Mills acknowledges that it takes work to embrace the lifestyle she has chosen, admitting in the introduction to a collection of juice and smoothie recipes: “it’s normal not to enjoy sipping on broccoli and coriander straight away!” (2016: np). Such humility enables Mills to seem all the more proximate and relatable: even she must strive to embody her brand. In this regard it is worth noting the comparisons often made between Ella Mills and Gwyneth Paltrow, the actress-turned-wellness-guru and head of the lifestyle brand Goop. These comparisons almost always favour Mills, who is praised for providing a less sanctimonious and more realistic approach to healthy eating. The *Times* describes her as “like a younger Gwyneth Paltrow without all the irritating ‘I’d rather die than feed my children a Cup-of-Soup’ baggage” (Cavendish, 2015), while the *Telegraph* contends: “Ella is no Gwyneth Paltrow, proclaiming that we must drink dandelion juice because it’s today’s detox fashion” (Parker, 2015). Through this kind of upward comparison, Mills is made more approachable. As a Hollywood actress Paltrow occupies an entirely different level of celebrity; her wealth and status symbolically outstrip that of Mills. In the process, the very real material inequalities that separate Mills from the vast majority of people in Britain are again displaced and removed from view.

That Mills has found a way to manage her illness is undoubtedly positive for her personally, not least as by her own account conventional treatment failed to relieve her symptoms. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge the real tensions that exist between medical authority and embodied knowledge, particularly when it comes to women’s health. It has been suggested that the failure of conventional medicine to take women’s experiences seriously is one of the major factors behind the rise of wellness culture (Griffin, 2017), a claim that would seem to be at least partially borne out by research on gender disparities in alternative medicine (Keshet and Simchai, 2014). Mills herself describes being dismissed by a GP who suggested her illness was psychosomatic and advised she seek therapy (Slater, 2015). However, Deliciously Ella is not simply a personal project or even a solely professional enterprise. Over the last few years Mills has become increasingly vocal about her desire to cultivate wider change by fostering good health habits in the population at large. She frequently aligns herself with Department of Health dietary advice – specifically the guideline to eat five portions of fruit and vegetables per day – stating that she wants to get “people to be excited about healthy food” so that they can “incorporate their five-a-day in a way that they’ll actually want to eat it” (Norton, 2017). She routinely cites research which

finds that “only 1 in 4 of us reach that 5 a day aim” and contends that “with everything we’re doing [at Deliciously Ella], I hope to contribute to changing this statistic” (Woodward, 2017). In an interview with *The Cut*, Mills further declares: “We need wellness because we have serious health issues, from childhood obesity to diabetes. We need to get people changing the way they eat and that’s become my mission and my passion” (Spellings, 2017).

Such comments expose the biopolitical edge of Deliciously Ella, as Mills fashions herself as a ‘moral entrepreneur’ (Hollows and Jones, 2010) and ‘conscious capitalist’ (Aschoff, 2015) whose commercial pursuits are poised to provide profitable solutions to complex social problems. Yet in making such pronouncements Mills seems to assume that it is primarily a lack of *inspiration* and *creativity* that prevent large numbers of people in the UK from complying with the five-a-day directive. What does not appear to have occurred to her is the possibility that it is instead the fundamental *unaffordability* of this way of eating that prevents many people from meeting the five-a-day mandate, as public health research attests (Schrecker, 2016). To this extent, the Deliciously Ella ethos dovetails neatly with the project of lifestyle reform initiated in the UK under the New Labour government – of which her father was a part – which aimed to wean people off a perceived over-reliance on public services (Fitzpatrick, 2001). This still-dominant ‘new paradigm’ (Nettleton, 2006) is organised by logics of health promotion and characterised by a language of risk and responsibility, agency and empowerment. There is a strong focus on changing the everyday habits of individuals – such as the consumption of fruits and vegetables, the pursuit of exercise, and so on – in a policy trend that has come to be known as ‘lifestyle drift’ (Popay et al., 2010; Williams and Fullagar, 2019). Such logics have only intensified in the context of austerity, a political project accelerated by the 2008 financial crash and marked by the prolonged starvation of public services under successive coalition and Conservative governments. The UK’s National Health Service (NHS) is now straining under the weight of market reforms, the effects of which are demonstrably “detrimental to both health and healthcare” (Benbow, 2017; cf. Basu et al., 2017; BMA, 2016).

THE PROMISE OF WELLNESS

Writing about the genre of ‘poverty porn’, Tracey Jensen (2014) argues that the stigmatisation of poverty in the media represents a key mechanism through which consent for austerity is being won. In her work on the dramatic expansion of charitable food provision – popularly dubbed ‘food banks’ – in the UK in recent years, Kayleigh Garthwaite (2016) makes similar points. While operating in a different register, the valorisation of figures such as Mills represents the other side of this same coin. In their spectacular visibility, Mills and other wellness entrepreneurs not only distract from wider economies of power through which welfare systems are being undone, but feed a logic of personal responsibility to actively plan for and ensure health, so as not to burden already-overstretched public services. Discussing the popularity of the Deliciously Ella cookbooks, Mills’ publisher Liz Gough states this explicitly: “The public are waking up to this idea that there are simple things that you can do that will change your life. You don’t have to go to a therapist or see a doctor; you can simply add in a little mindfulness, a little more fruit and vegetables” (Taylor-Hayhurst, 2015).¹⁰ The rise of wellness thus coincides – temporally but

¹⁰ Mills herself does not need to rely on public health services. She describes spending 2 weeks at the private Cromwell Hospital in South Kensington undergoing ‘every test you can think of’ (Parker, 2015) during the worst

also ideologically — with the decline of welfare. Where the figure of the mumpreneur has emerged in this context as an attempt to reconcile the problem of gender, work and childcare (Littler, 2018: 182), the figure of the wellness entrepreneur attempts to reconcile the problem of gender, work and *self-care*. Women are enjoined to cultivate individual fortitude — to actively plan for and ensure their own well-being — rather than to invest in collective conceptions of health as a public good and civic right. There are clear political stakes here, as the decline of social health under austerity is managed ideologically “by emphasizing the importance of personal (physical and emotional) health in an individualized, isolated context” (Negra, 2009: 118). But there are also ontological stakes, as wellness culture asks us to buy into the idea that health is something we *can* be in control of, despite the fact that health “cannot be *ensured*, regardless of suggestions that we have the power (and, of course, the responsibility) to *choose* health” (Moore, 2010: 109).

Demonstrating the “vastly increased speed of the adulation/abjection cycle” (Cross and Littler, 2010: 396), shortly after arriving onto the cultural stage Mills and other wellness entrepreneurs became objects of ‘popular hostility’. Among their many detractors are (mostly male) celebrity chefs (Paskett, 2016), food writers (Tandoh, 2016; Wilson, 2017), feminist commentators (Freeman, 2017), doctors (McCartney, 2016), dietitians (Medlin, 2016), and food industry insiders (Warner, 2017). Documentaries have set out to expose the nefarious underpinnings of their fame, with titles such as *Clean Eating’s Dirty Secrets* (Rice, 2016) and *Clean Eating: The Dirty Truth* (Quinn, 2017). Of particular concern is the propensity of wellness trends to cover for or give rise to disorders such as orthorexia (McGregor, 2017). Comedian Bella Younger — creator of the parody character Deliciously Stella, who waxes lyrical over the nutritional properties of coconut water while clutching a bottle of Malibu white rum — criticises Mills and other wellness entrepreneurs for propagating “this absolutely unrealistic ideal that [women] have to constantly be perfect and lovely”, though softens the admonishment by adding that they have “done so much for female entrepreneurship — and that’s brilliant” (Blair, 2016). Arguably, Mills has navigated this melee better than her counterparts, and has been commended for forging “a New Labour of food” that attracts criticism but still manages to occupy “a very sellable middle ground” (Rumbelow, 2017).

Despite the ridicule and rancor these entrepreneurs face, wellness culture has gained a firm foothold in Britain, concentrated in but not limited to its urban centres. This can be seen, for example, in escalating rates of veganism and alcohol abstention, both of which are especially pronounced among young people. More anecdotal but conspicuous markers of change include Nigella Lawson premiering her new show with a recipe for avocado toast; high-street chain Pret a Manger selling turmeric lattes and charcoal shots; and famed nightclub Ministry of Sound launching a fitness studio complete with non-alcoholic shakes and smoothies. While criticism is not hard to come by, in order to understand this cultural formation it is necessary to examine its glamorous trappings as well as the more mundane entanglements these generate in day-to-day-life. For while its most brightly illuminated exemplars are white and exceptionally class-privileged young women, and the regimes of rarefied consumption they promote are plainly inaccessible to large swathes of people in the UK, wellness culture has demonstrably widespread appeal. By moving beyond tired tropes of

period of her illness, after which she began frequenting the Hale Clinic, an institution made famous through its association with Princess Diana and the wider royal family. Notably, Diana was an early wellness exponent in the UK (for discussion see Shome, 2014).

female vanity or faddism, it becomes possible to ask how the impetus to cultivate bodily capacity informs women's food choices and culinary practices, and may function as part of a more general effort to bolster the self against the strains of contemporary life. To pursue this line of enquiry means evaluating how programmes of health-enhancement come to seem all the more compelling under conditions of precarity — “an everyday sense of threat, vulnerability, and uncertainty” (Wilson and Yochim, 2017: 20) — which increasingly extend across socio-economic lines while sharpening intergenerational divisions. For however elusive its achievement, the promise of wellness is one that speaks to deep-seated desires and real material needs.

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