

Eat, Pray, Love: Producing the Female Neoliberal Spiritual Subject

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ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN 2006, ELIZABETH GILBERT'S MEMOIR *EAT, Pray, Love*, has garnered an enormous popularity that shows no sign of ceasing. With over seven million copies currently in print, the book has spent, as of December 3, 2010, 199 weeks on the *New York Times* paperback nonfiction bestseller list (*New York Times*), with conservative estimates projecting at least US\$15 million in earnings for the book's publisher, Penguin (Trachtenberg). Book sales received a bump in August 2010, with the release of a long-awaited film adaptation of *Eat, Pray, Love* starring Julia Roberts. Currently, box office sales for the film total more than US\$180 million, with additional dollars expected from showings in international venues as well as DVD sales (Paul).¹ This is not to mention the revenue generated by the over four hundred *Eat, Pray, Love* product tie-ins which the Home Shopping Network showcased after the movie's premier via "three days of on-air branded content and an interactive Web site" (Boorstin). Products that bear the *Eat, Pray, Love* (EPL) brand (both officially and unofficially) range from perfume, tea, yoga gear, prayer beads, and jewelry to EPL-themed travel tours that include spa treatments, visits to temples, and copious amounts of yoga and meditation—all activities Gilbert herself partook in as she wrote her book. As CNBC correspondent Julia Boorstin notes, these products represent "breaking ground for how content and merchandise [can] work together" to generate increasing flows of revenue.

From the outset, *Eat, Pray, Love* and the attendant EPL brand have been explicitly targeted at a female audience. Though such surface

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elements of marketing like the use of flowers and pastel color schemes mark *EPL* as gendered, the story of the memoir itself has been tagged as specifically appealing to women. As Jeffrey Trachtenberg explains in the *Wall Street Journal*, the book's "transformation from respectable-selling hardcover to paperback sensation was no accident" as Penguin executives employed marketing research to better target the book to the female audience who account for "60 to 70% of US book sales." Penguin "create[d] a marketing blitz to attract individual readers as well as book clubs" hoping to generate a "word of mouth buzz" that would propel the sale of books (Trachtenberg). Reflecting on the success of this tactic, Patrick Nolan, director of trade paperback sales for Penguin, explains that books like *EPL*, "connect with readers because they are about lives that are being transformed, or lives that are being saved" (Trachtenberg).

In the case of *EPL*, it is Elizabeth Gilbert's life that is presented as both transformed and seemingly saved. At the age of thirty-one, despite a fairly successful career as a writer, Gilbert found herself stuck in an unhappy marriage, struggling with acute depression. Much to her chagrin, she cannot stop thinking, "I don't want to be married anymore. I don't want to live in this big house. I don't want to have a baby" (Gilbert 10). After suffering through a nasty divorce and a subsequent love affair that ended badly, Gilbert sells a book idea to her publishers: she will spend a year travelling around the globe with the intent to write a book about her experiences. She explains, "I wanted to explore the art of pleasure in Italy, the art of devotion in India and, in Indonesia, the art of balancing the two. It was only later, after admitting this dream, that I noticed the happy coincidence that all these countries begin with the letter *I*. A fairly auspicious sign, it seemed, on a voyage of self-discovery" (Gilbert 30). Thus, Gilbert begins "a yearlong quest to bridge the gulf between body, mind, and spirit" as she eats her way through Italy, prays and meditates in an ashram in India, and learns to love again in Bali, Indonesia (Penguin.com).

Oprah Winfrey, an early and ardent supporter of both the book and movie, casts Gilbert's journey in even more emancipatory terms, calling it the story of Gilbert's "quest to reclaim her life" (Oprah.com). Indeed, Oprah connects Gilbert's quest for happiness with that of her readers, stating that Gilbert's "spiritual journey has now been experienced by the millions who have read her book" (Oprah.com). During her interview on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Gilbert attests to the

inspirational impact of her own story, “Sometimes people come up and say, ‘I found this book at the right moment, and thank you so much for writing this for me’”(Oprah.com). Despite writing to “help *herself* heal,” Gilbert’s story has managed to profoundly impact countless readers who have connected to her tale of self-discovery (Oprah.com). Comments on Oprah’s web page for *Eat, Pray, Love* attest to the personal connection many women feel with Gilbert; one states, “Just started reading the book and I can totally relate! I guess it’s just the thing I need right now. Right before I turned 30 last October I began to question many aspects of my life and made some drastic changes. So this book is right up my alley” (Oprah.com).

Certainly, on the surface, such messages of liberation and self-rescue seem to support a feminist vision of women’s empowerment in which women resist patriarchal social norms—marriage, children, being selfless—by placing importance on their own spiritual development and happiness. It is difficult to argue against a book that purports to encourage women to ask questions such as those Gilbert describes herself asking at the start of her journey: “Whose life am I living in? Who am I married to? Whose values are these? Whose body is this?” (Oprah.com). Such questions suggest that Gilbert’s tale could lead readers to the development of a critical consciousness that would result in not only a greater awareness of their own desires, but also the larger social forces that seek to rob them of the capacity to live out those desires.

Problematically, however, the *EPL* marketing machine that has sprung up around Gilbert’s book equates sharing in Gilbert’s journey of self-discovery not with critical reflection on the self and society, but with “spiritual” consumption. Thus, the *EPL*-related Home Shopping Network site tells female consumers, “there is more than one way to let yourself go” (HSN.com). One need not travel the globe to achieve Gilbert’s enlightenment; indeed, the *EPL* brand purports to allow women to “buy” a piece of Gilbert’s spiritual journey, to achieve a sort of consumption-based shortcut to the empowerment Gilbert claims her travels and meditation afforded her. In this respect, *EPL* branding illustrates Interpal Grewal’s observation that “consumers are seldom available as a ready and willing market; rather the work of consumer culture has been to produce the desires and the conditions within which buying a product becomes meaningful” (Grewal 86). In developing the ground-breaking marketing approach which connects the inspirational content of Gilbert’s book with a variety of

products, *EPL* marketers have indeed made consumption meaningful for many women.

The first part of this paper explores how the *EPL* brand perpetuates a relationship between empowerment and consumption that produces women as neoliberal spiritual subjects. As Nancy Fraser has observed, one of the key gendered components of neoliberalism is that it harnesses “the dream of women’s emancipation” to “the engine of capitalist accumulation” (Fraser 110–11). The female neoliberal spiritual subject is not only situated as a consumer who expresses her spirituality through spending, she is also encouraged to adopt a depoliticized outlook that ignores oppressive social realities in favor of a therapeutically tinged focus on herself. In effect, *EPL* marketing perpetuates neoliberalism in that it encourages women to view their happiness as their sole responsibility, thus ignoring the social realities, such as unpaid household labor and gendered expectations of child care, which may negatively impact their happiness. Furthermore, by coupling consumption and political disengagement with spirituality, *EPL* branding manages to convince women that the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment via consumption is akin to exercising empowerment, thus encouraging the neoliberal spiritual subject to see her power to buy “spiritual” products as a sign of her essentially empowered state.

Unsurprisingly, one of the key products *EPL* marketing encourages women to consume is tourism, via the imitation of Gilbert’s travels to Italy, India, and Bali, Indonesia. Though Gilbert maintains that “You don’t need to go and do exactly the things that I did . . . The only thing you need to do is ask yourself the questions I was asking myself” (Oprah.com), it appears that many women are choosing to travel as a way of tapping into the spiritual growth Gilbert experiences during her own travels. While we may be able to chalk such copy-cat logic up to human nature, this paper will illustrate how *EPL* brand marketing produces a subject who feels the need to buy travel as a means for producing the spiritualized consciousness she believes will allow her to share in Gilbert’s enlightened happiness. To perpetuate this consumption, tour companies, again both officially and unofficially, use the *EPL* brand to encourage women to spend money on vacations that promise spiritual enlightenment through authentic encounters with native populations. Problematically, this marketing downplays the consumerist core at the heart of tourism by ignoring the impact the industry has on a country’s development while also obscuring the laboring

bodies upon which the tourist industry is built. Thus, the second part of this paper will interrogate how the *EPL* brand produces a female neoliberal spiritual subject who views travel as a way of accessing “authentic” encounters with native populations who serve as tools for her enlightenment. As Sanip Roy has charged, *EPL* brand spiritual tourism represents a “new colonialism” which is typified by “white people discovering themselves in brown places.”

In order to illustrate the deleterious effects of neoliberal spiritual tourism, the final section of this paper focuses on Bali, the last destination on Gilbert’s tour. Bali is an excellent case study since its economy is heavily dependent on tourist dollars; indeed, we will see not only how land and resources in Bali have been co-opted by the tourism industry, but also how Balinese culture itself has been turned into a tourist commodity via policy intervention by the state. Given that *EPL* brand marketing situates the female neoliberal spiritual tourist as needing to consume “authentic” spiritual culture in order to reach her own empowered enlightenment, such cultural simulacra productively reveals the depoliticized, colonial mindset at the heart of neoliberal tourist consumption while also bringing into question the empowering premise upon which *EPL* branding situates itself.

Creating the Female Neoliberal Spiritual Subject

In the first section of *Eat, Pray, Love* Elizabeth Gilbert reflects on why it is that she’s struggled so greatly to live a life defined by her own desires. She comes to realize a large impediment has been her relationships with men: “I barely had an adolescence before I had my first boyfriend, and I have consistently had a boy or a man (or sometimes both) in my life ever since I was fifteen years old . . . That’s almost two solid decades I have been entwined in some kind of drama with some kind of guy” (65). Gilbert reflects on her pattern of self-abnegation in romantic relationships: “I will give you all this and more, until I get so exhausted and depleted that the only way I can recover my energy is by becoming infatuated with someone else” (65). She declares: “I could use a little break from this cycle, to give myself some space to discover what I look like and talk like when I’m not trying to merge with someone” (65–66).

Presenting this tendency to ignore her own needs as the core problem in her life, it is clear why Gilbert’s journey comes to represent that

of a woman re-claiming the “right” to be selfish. Within this context, Gilbert’s trip is a direct rebellion against patriarchal social norms that encourage women to cultivate a personality of selflessness. In her memoir, Gilbert vividly depicts her struggle against a “guilt alarm” that goes off whenever she feels herself “selfishly” experiencing happiness during her trip (64). Though she does not name them as such, Gilbert is clear that her actions—going abroad for a year, generally following her own desires—are acts of female empowerment.

While in fact Gilbert’s trip was underwritten by her publisher’s advance, it is the rebellious nature of Gilbert’s travels that stands out to most fans, as a comment on Oprah.com illustrates: “I think that, as a culture, we are still not used to seeing women put themselves first. I seriously do not think that if a man had written a book like this, that he’d be called a narcissist. Sexism still exists—it exists within ‘us.’ We have to fight for ourselves—even if we get shamed and are called narcissistic or selfish” (Oprah.com). Certainly, this statement is true; patriarchal social norms do encourage women to sublimate their own needs to attend to the needs of others. Gilbert herself acknowledges the risks posed to a woman who refuses to follow the “universally recognized” paths for women—marriage and motherhood—but also illustrates the rewards in questioning this path, noting that it “may bring a far more interesting existence to a woman,” even if it will be “more perilous” (95). Indeed, though Gilbert begins *Eat, Pray, Love* fleeing divorce and a failed love affair, she ends the book by forging what we are led to believe is a healthier, more empowered relationship with Felipe, a Brazilian business owner she meets in Bali.

While many of the voices of *EPL* fans on Oprah.com speak to the personal sense of connection they feel with Gilbert, one commenter critiques what she views as the book’s essentially materialistic message:

Add me to the minority who did not find this book any good. It was sickeningly self-absorbed and incredibly self-indulgent. Everyone has the right to relate their story but the fact that this is seen as a profound book and has gathered such a huge following is disturbing. Gilbert is the poster child of spiritual materialism and is the very reincarnation of narcissism.

(Oprah.com)

Not only does this fan call out Gilbert for failing to critique the ways in which her story could be used to “sell” a certain troubling vision of women’s empowerment, by labeling this tale one of “spiritual mate-

rialism,” this fan astutely locates the consumerist message hiding within Gilbert’s “profound” story. If Gilbert is the model Oprah and others hold up as an empowered woman, where does that leave the average, middle-class woman who cannot afford to take a year off for “self-discovery”? Furthermore, what about the working class woman who, rather than spending time in meditation, must work several jobs to make ends meet?

In their article, “Eat, Pray, Spend,” Joshunda Saunders and Diana Barnes-Brown unravel how Gilbert’s book functions to support an ideological system that makes it seem as if empowerment is only available to those with the power to buy. They state, “*Eat, Pray, Love* and its positioning as an Everywoman’s guide to whole, empowered living embody a literature of privilege and typify the genre’s destructive cacophony of insecurity, spending, and false wellness” (Saunders and Barnes-Brown). They place *EPL* within a larger framework of the “enlightenment industry” which they note has taken “on a decidedly feminine sheen” thanks to figures like Elizabeth Gilbert and Oprah Winfrey (Saunders and Barnes-Brown). While the discourse in this community “pays regular lip service to empowerment” it “actually moves women away from political, economic, and emotional agency by promoting materialism and dependency masked as empowerment, with evangelical zeal” (Saunders and Barnes-Brown).

Though Saunders and Barnes-Brown do not invoke neoliberalism as a force behind this “selling” of spiritual enlightenment, they do begin to isolate the workings of free-market capital by naming *EPL* as an embodiment of the genre of “priv-lit” which they describe as “literature or media whose expressed goal is one of spiritual, existential, or philosophical enlightenment contingent upon women’s hard work, commitment, and patience, but whose actual barriers to entry are primarily financial” (Saunders and Barnes-Brown). This genre promotes spending not with the goal of accumulation, but spending with the goal of health or empowerment: “The spending itself is justified by its supposedly healthy goals—acceptance, self-love, the ability to heal past psychic wounds and break destructive patterns” (Saunders and Barnes-Brown). Saunders and Barnes-Brown explain that the genre of “priv-lit” essentially makes “work” out of enlightenment: “Should its consumers fail, the genre holds them accountable for not being ready to get serious, not ‘wanting it’ enough, or not putting themselves first, while offering no real solutions for the astronomically high tariffs—

both financial and social—that exclude all but the most fortunate among us from participating.”

In the case of *EPL*, women are encouraged to see consuming spiritualized products as a way of not only improving their lives, but also asserting their independence. Ironically, however, the brute summation of *EPL* and “priv-lit” marketing is to make women’s “empowerment” come to represent “the power to spend [our] own money” (Saunders and Barnes-Brown). While Saunders and Barnes-Brown note that “the pressure to obtain happiness by buying a certain book, attending a yoga retreat, or hiring a guru moves women further away from themselves,” I would assert that it also moves women further away from an awareness of the social factors that may contribute to their personal unhappiness. As such, it creates a situation in which the individual, rather than the social structure or state, is held responsible for putting in the “work” necessary to be happy and healthy. In this respect, we can see how *EPL* supports the production of the neoliberal subject in which the individual is “not a citizen with claims on the state but a self-enterprising citizen-subject who is obligated to become an ‘entrepreneur of himself or herself’” (Ong as qtd. in Marchand and Runyan 4).

In her study, *The Age of Oprah: Cultural Icon for the Neoliberal Era*, Janice Peck elaborates on the neoliberal vision of subjecthood that serves as a foundation for the empowerment projects proposed by Oprah, and by extension, the *EPL* brand, suggesting that the Oprah brand fuses “inner awakening with capitalist pragmatism” (Peck 222). Market logic hinges on perpetuating desires that can only be met via consumption; in the case of *EPL*, women are encouraged to express their commitment to themselves, here seen as their commitment to “living their best lives,” by buying products touted to assist them in this pursuit. Thus, the female neoliberal spiritual subject becomes solely responsible for “create[ing] her own circumstances by thinking positive thoughts and making good choices” regardless of the material conditions in which she lives (220). In this way, she is discouraged from asking questions about larger material realities, be it those that prevent her happiness or those that prevent the happiness of other women. Indeed, here consumerism that may otherwise be seen as crass and empty materialism takes on a “spiritual” sheen that obscures not only the way in which these female consumers are privileged, but also those troubling factors that may motivate them to seek this “spiritual” enlightenment in the first place.

While acting as an entrepreneur of self by consuming “spiritual” products may cause women, especially those who are already in privileged social positions, to feel empowered, as Peck points out, “it could plausibly be argued that such an empowered individual might feel more, rather than less, at home in the given social order” (38). The spiritually fulfilled subject represented in Gilbert’s happy ending is not ultimately positioned to ask critical questions regarding how the world works; instead, she is taught to ask questions about how she can work better within the world.

While the neoliberal rhetoric of spiritual empowerment presents itself as revolutionary in so much as it flies in the face of a traditional patriarchal vision of submissive femininity, it adopts “the notion of revolution to the most depoliticized possibilities: revolution is alive and well just as long as it’s a revolution from within that stays within” (222). Of course, as Peck points out, such revolution “epitomizes the neoliberal project, in that neoliberalism’s defining political practice is precisely that of depoliticization” (222). While individual women’s lives may change as a result of the consumption of *EPL* brand products or their encounter with Oprah-esque positive psychology, culture-at-large does not; instead, women simply adjust their psychic outlook to compensate for culture.

Unfortunately, what the neoliberal spiritual subject is most encouraged to do “for herself” is to pursue spiritual enlightenment via consumer practices. As Grewal points out, such “discourses of individuality” yoke “freedom to participation in consumer culture and associated political freedoms with self-improvement” (Grewal 17). Women are told that they can buy their way into self-improvement, provided they work hard to maintain the level of income and privilege necessary to participate. In light of this reality, it becomes hard to see how the spiritual consumption encouraged by the *EPL* brand can continue to present itself as motivated by a pure desire for women to live their “best lives.”

The Female Neoliberal Spiritual Subject Goes on Vacation

Perhaps, with the international flavor of Gilbert’s memoir, it is no surprise that the tourism industry has wholeheartedly embraced *Eat, Pray, Love*, using it to promote a gendered travel experience that purports to allow women to access Gilbert’s spiritual enlightenment by

following her footsteps through Italy, India, and Bali, Indonesia. A brief examination of the marketing surrounding these tours, and others that employ the *EPL* brand, demonstrates how this discourse situates tourism not as consumption, but as a path to enlightenment, presented here as available via the recreation of Gilbert's travels for oneself. Consequently, much of *EPL*-related tourism emphasizes the authenticity of the experience along two trajectories: not only can one authentically experience Gilbert's journey for oneself, it can be done via encounters with local culture that are modeled after Gilbert's travel experiences. From cooking classes in Bologna, Italy, that allow one to "take home a piece of *Italia!*," to visiting the Ganges ghats in Varanasi, India in order to "feel the beating heart of the Hindu universe," to experiencing dinner at a restaurant in Bali that features "dreamy tables overlooking a rice field," *EPL* tourism is typified by an emphasis on authentic encounters that present local culture as a product to be consumed ("*Eat, Pray, Love*," Lonely Planet).

The underlying message of this advertising is that via travel women "partake—however briefly—in [Gilbert's] progress" (Brenhouse). As the Lonely Planet *Eat, Pray, Love* website declares, "See the movie, *then* experience the journey" (Lonely Planet, emphasis mine). The homepage of Spirit Quest Tours, who offer an "Eat, Pray, Love Bali" trip, goes a step further to situate travel as the logical next step for fans of the book: "You read '*Eat, Pray, Love*.' And you loved it. And you wanted to change your life, too. But who can take a year off to travel? How about a week to experience some of the marvelous changes author Elizabeth Gilbert enthralled us with in her memoir?" (Spirit Quest Tours). By invoking the idea of "changes," *EPL* marketers are able to situate tourism as a tool for women's personal growth. In a profile of Denise Nieman, a woman who purchased a Spirit Quest tour to Bali, the author observes how Nieman's personal motivation for travel dovetails with the new "spiritual" approach of the travel industry: "Like other fans of the book, Nieman yearned for some of Gilbert's hard-won equilibrium. That same desire is fueling the travel industry's newest niche: spiritual tourism, aimed primarily at women" (Marshall).

While it is not necessarily bad that the travel industry is encouraging women to embrace travel as a way of experiencing other cultures, it is troubling that these trips allow travelers to experience a sanitized version of travel that deemphasizes the financial realities of the tourism industry. Rather than being made aware of the differential impacts

their travel has on the populations in the countries they visit, the neoliberal spiritual tourist is encouraged to adopt a romanticized view of her experience with native cultures. As a consumer, the female neoliberal spiritual tourist is encouraged to view her activities as pure in intent (after all, she is simply attempting to better herself) rather than rooted in a system of consumption and production. As Michelle Rowley points out, this disconnection between consumption and production is one of the negative byproducts of globalization under the influence of neoliberalism: “one of the contradictions of our supposed ‘global village’ is a persistent and rigid separation between the spheres of consumption and production. Integral to the pleasure of consumption is that we not see the laboring or ailing bodies that make consumption possible” (88). In the case of *EPL* tourism, the product is culture itself; and, while the laboring bodies may be present, the sheen of spirituality allows the neoliberal spiritual subject to view her encounters with natives not through the lens of consumption, but through the lens of an authentic experience that carries the potential to radically change her life.

If we take a step back from *EPL*-related tourism, to examine tourism itself, we see that the tourism industry as a whole works on a model that downplays the monetary exchange that sits at its heart. In this way, the “spiritual” and “authentic” emphasis in much of *EPL*-related tourism marketing is understandable as it misdirects the gaze of tourists from monetary matters to elements of the tourist experience that seem more wholesome, and in the case of *EPL*, more spiritually enlightening. David MacCannell, who studies the phenomenon of tourism explains, “Tourist destinations may be treated as classic commodities up to a point . . . But they cannot be sold to tourists, at least not literally” (MacCannell 147). When tourists travel to engage with a culture that is not their own, often authenticity comes to represent the purchase value of the “product” tourists consume, here represented by the “authentic” culture of the destination. In his study of tourists’ perceptions of money, Luke Deforges explains how money is deemphasized in tourists’ discourses of “authenticity,” “A desire to encounter an imagined geography of authenticity is an important component of tourism consumption. Money appears as the antithesis of authenticity because it is seen as an homogenizing force that overcomes local difference” (358). Money must be downplayed since it is in fact this difference that is the product which tourists consume; a central part of

the “[tourist] experience is to gaze upon or view a set of difference scenes, of landscapes or townscapes which are out of the ordinary” (Urry at qtd. in Yamashita 15). In effect, tourists “buy” the experience of difference; yet, when they recognize the financial exchange between themselves and those who produce this difference, that is, “natives,” the tourist experience is sullied. Accordingly, it is no surprise that we see *EPL* brand tourism emphasizing the tourist’s ability to gain access to authentic “traveler” experiences with taglines such as “enjoy Bali the way [Gilbert] did, like a native” (Spirit Quest Tours), “Travel like a local on your full day Eco Cycling tour through towns, villages to rice fields with a invitation to a traditional house compound and temple included” (Atlas Travel), or “If you want to see the ‘real Bali,’ go with Susan!” (Bali Arts and Tours).

In the pages of *Eat, Pray, Love* Gilbert herself perpetuates a model of tourism in which local culture is presented as the spiritual product that, once consumed, allows for her spiritual enlightenment. Her entire purpose for traveling to Italy, India, and Indonesia is to more or less learn about herself via her encounters with native culture: “It wasn’t so much that I wanted to thoroughly explore the countries themselves . . . It was more that I wanted to thoroughly explore one aspect of myself . . . in a place that has traditionally done that one thing very well. I wanted to explore the art of pleasure in Italy, the art of devotion in India and, in Indonesia, the art of balancing the two” (Gilbert 30). Thus, her interactions with the “natives,” especially those in India and Bali, are generally framed within the context of Gilbert’s spiritual search.

For example, in India, at an ashram which Gilbert describes as sitting inside a walled compound, outside of which “it is all dust and poverty,” she meets an Indian boy whose “aura” she finds “incredibly compelling” (126–27). Although he wears the same clothes every day, a fact that marks him as obviously poor in Gilbert’s eyes, he seems to possess a “face drenched with luminescence” that moves Gilbert every time she sees it. The suggestion, of course, is that part of his beauty is in the way in which he appears to transcend his own poverty. Later, Gilbert admires “women doing road work, busting up rocks under the sweltering sun . . . looking so strangely beautiful in their jewel-colored saris and their necklaces and bracelets” (160). She wonders, “How can they be happy doing this rough work under such terrible conditions?” (160). While Gilbert does note the poverty around her, it seems merely to inspire her to consider how she too can take up a more austere

emotional life, rather than, say, consider what forces have caused this poverty or how her presence in this community participates in the local economy.

In light of the relationship between Gilbert and those natives she encounters, Sanip Roy argues that *EPL* depicts a new type of colonialism: “The new breed is more sensitive, less overt. They want to spend a year in a faraway place on a ‘journey.’ But the journey is all about what they can get . . . They want food, the spiritual wisdom, the romance” (Roy). While Gilbert may intend to provide her readers with lovingly drawn portraits of those natives who she befriends, Roy counters: “The natives mostly have clearly assigned roles. Language teacher. Hangover healer. Dispenser of fortune cookie-style wisdom (knowledge is never so meaningful as when it comes in broken English, served up with puckish grins) . . . [the natives] are there as a means for her self-discovery. After that is done, it’s time to book the next flight” (Roy).

Indonesian professor and dancer R. D. Larasati describes the relationship suggested by Gilbert’s book in blunt terms: “From an economic point of view, the travel trajectories of the Euro-American devalue the Asian body” (Larasati 94). These relationships construct the “discovery of the self against the other” (91). Of course, in the context of such relationships, it is easy for the economic exchange between tourist and “native” to be obscured by the former’s search for spiritual enlightenment. Indeed if we return to Diane Nieman’s story of her trip to Bali we see how Gilbert’s romanticized view of the various people she encounters is reproduced by Nieman: “Once in Bali, Nieman realized that even Gilbert’s flamboyant descriptions didn’t adequately describe the exoticism of the temple-strewn island or the beatific Balinese people. ‘They are genuinely happy. I didn’t feel that they were happy to see me because I was a tourist with money, they’re just happy. And I wanted to understand that,’ said Nieman” (Marshall).

By calling the labor provided “friendliness” rather than work, the system of consumption and production at the heart of the tourist industry is rendered invisible, and, as Larasati points out, “this invisibility makes possible . . . a privileged and glamorous spiritualized loneliness” (94). This loneliness undergirds the neoliberal vision of the individual as entrepreneur of the self, the maker of his or her own happiness rather than an individual who interacts and reacts in community, while also positioning native populations as simply one more spiritual product to be consumed on a woman’s path to an empowered

spiritual self. Given that the neoliberal spiritual subject, before she even leaves home, is predisposed to view her own transformation as central, rather than cultivating an awareness of the material or political realities that surround her, it seems unsurprising that she would be unable to fully deal with the ramifications of the role she plays in the tourist economy. Accordingly, Larasati calls for an unveiling of the labor these spiritual tourists consume in order to illustrate that these “authentic” encounters have effects that are not simply unidirectional; rather, the experiences the neoliberal spiritual tourist consume are tied to actual material realities for local populations. In a sense, Larasati’s native voice makes visible what Gilbert’s voice and *EPL* marketing render invisible, forcing the neoliberal spiritual subject to see how her spiritual enlightenment is tangled up in circuits of consumption that make it possible to “buy” empowerment from “friendly” natives.

Consuming Bali

In the spirit of Larasati’s call to make the production of native populations visible, I would like to turn in the last section of my paper to Bali as a case study of the impact of neoliberal spiritual tourism on local populations. Though it is difficult to measure empirically the effects of *EPL* tourism in Bali, “the number of visitors more than doubled in the four years since the book was published” (Marshall). Ngurah Wijaya, the head of the Bali Tourism Board, admits that the book has had a “great impact” on “making people understand that Bali is safe” after the terrorist bombings that hit the island in 2002 and 2005 (Harpaz). In examining the impact of tourism on Balinese culture, I hope to illustrate how the product being offered for consumption, here Balinese culture and spirituality, has been commodified to such an extent that the authenticity of such encounters are brought into question. Given that this authentic, demonetized experience is situated at the heart of *EPL* brand tourism, revealing the cultural simulacra of Bali can bring into question the premise upon which *EPL* brand tourism sits.

In their study, *Tourism, Development, and Terrorism in Bali*, Michael Hitchcock and I Nyoman Darma Putra summarize the current state of Bali in regards to the tourism industry: “Viewed from the perspective of marketing, ‘Bali’ is an easily recognized, remarkably successful and

enduring brand” (2). Initially, it was not the Balinese or Indonesian state that constructed the brand of Bali; rather, the Dutch “created” Bali as a tourist paradise in part “to atone for massacres that accompanied the imposition of colonial rule” (15). Hitchcock and Putra note that “preparations to develop tourism began a few weeks before the demise of the last independent Balinese kingdom” (4). Of course, economic factors played a part in tourist development; in 1908, numerous Dutch businesses formed a “government-subsidized conglomerate” and opened an Official Tourist Bureau in Indonesia that began marketing Bali as the “Gem of the Lesser Sunda Isles” (15). Dutch colonialists’ activities could be read as promoting the preservation of Balinese culture as they implemented a policy known as “Balinization” in the 1920s designed to “make Balinese youth conscious of their rich heritage;” however, Hitchcock and Putra point out that “the Dutch were not so much interested in preserving the culture of Bali as they found it, but in restoring it to what they thought was its original integrity” (15). In *Bali and Beyond: Explorations in the Anthropology of Tourism*, Shinji Yamashita puts this creation of Balinese culture in more explicitly Foucauldian terms: “Just as ‘madness,’ ‘children,’ and ‘women’ have been created during the course of history, so the tourist gaze of the Western ‘other’ gave birth to the ‘Balinese’ under Dutch colonial rule” (28). What came to be known as Balinese culture under Dutch rule was in fact a simulacra of native traditions.

The legacy of the Dutch’s emphasis on the exotic uniqueness of Balinese culture is seen in the positioning of Bali in *EPL* tourism as not only a paradise with sandy beaches, but a land in which the neoliberal spiritual tourist can experience a “deep peaceful spirituality” (Spirit Quest Tours) and have a “meaningful experience . . . whether it is for relaxation, exploration, and/or cultural exchange” by “participate[ing] in as many spiritual and healing ceremonies as you would like” (Bali Arts and Tours). These descriptions make it clear that it is not simply the landscape of Bali that is offered as a commodity to be purchased by *EPL* tourists, the experience of Balinese culture, especially spiritual culture, is also seemingly for sale. In “Bali: the discourse of Cultural Tourism,” Michel Picard outlines the consequence of the tourism industry’s emphasis on the consumption of Balinese culture: “[culture] has become for the Balinese a ‘capital’—indeed their one and only capital—and as such, it must be considered as a value to exploit, commercialize and promote on the international tourist

market”(Picard). Picard’s article explains how the Indonesian state, in order to foster tourism, has perpetuated the “Balinization” of culture under the guise of a program called “Cultural Tourism” which “has come to blend the ‘fostering of culture’ with the ‘development of tourism,’ to the extent of entrusting the fate of Balinese culture to the care of the tourism industry”(Picard).

The policy of Cultural Tourism arose in the 1970s out of concerns regarding the growth of the tourism industry and its effects on the island. Instigated via the island’s government in 1974, the policy, known as the “Cultural Tourism Regulation,” provided legal endorsement to the idea of selling local culture as a product for tourist consumption (Hitchcock and Putra 167). The rallying cry for this policy was “tourism for Bali, not Bali for tourism” (167). On the surface, this motto emphasizes the protective aspects of the policy; however, Picard’s observations indicate that Cultural Tourism serves a darker purpose:

On the one hand, the very fact of qualifying tourism as “cultural” bestows it with the attributes of culture, thereby exorcising the threat of destruction that it carries and legitimizing its penetration of Bali. But this is not enough: while it is stressed that tourism must become “cultural” in order to be acceptable to the Balinese, it is just as necessary that their culture be marketable as a tourist product. This implies that culture must bear the attributes of tourism. (Picard)

Hitchcock and Putra place this commodification of culture in a context more familiar to Western readers: “In other words, what is called ‘traditional performance’ on Bali could well be called a ‘Creole’ or hybrid culture, newly created by the encounter between Bali and the West in the first half of the twentieth century under colonial conditions” (37). Picard goes even further by suggesting that the core cultural principles by which the Balinese define themselves were created in response to tourism:

If this interpretation is correct, one may suspect that the indivisible and harmonious unity between agama [law], adat [religion], and seni [art] by which the Balinese define their culture—rather than expressing the primeval essence of their identity, as they claim—is the product of the semantic borrowings and conceptual recasting that the Balinese intellectuals were forced to carry out in response to the colonization, Indonesianization and touristification of their island. (Picard)

This description is especially striking because the Balinese cultural principles of “agama, adat, and seni” are exactly those Gilbert herself claims to have come to the island to learn, though she groups these principles under the simple idea of “balance.”

In her discussion of Bali, Gilbert comes close to engaging in a critical analysis of the impact of tourism on Bali, noting: “The Balinese quite literally live off their image of being the world’s most peaceful and devotional and artistically expressive people, but how much of that is intrinsic and how much of that is economically calculated? And how much can an outsider like me ever learn of the hidden stresses that might loiter behind those ‘shining faces?’” (238). Yet, rather than musing on the connection between Bali’s colonial history (which Gilbert mentions in the background she provides on Bali) and the tourism industry, Gilbert literally lets her critical gaze go blurry: “It’s the same here as anywhere else—you look at the picture too closely and all the firm lines start to melt away into an indistinct mass of blurry brushstrokes and blended pixels” (238). The evacuating move Gilbert makes is a perfect model for neoliberal spiritual tourism.² For the neoliberal spiritual tourist, seeking out the answer to such questions involves a realization that, rather than an enlightened spiritual seeker, the subject is simply another consumer buying a piece of cultural simulacra.

Furthermore, learning about the hidden stresses behind the “shining faces” of the Balinese requires the neoliberal spiritual tourist to realize how her consumption situates her within a matrix of negative impacts tourism has brought to this “island paradise.” For not only have the Balinese “come to search for confirmation of their ‘Balinese-ness’ in the mirror held to them by tourists” (Picard), they have encountered many of the common problems the tourism industry brings such as environmental degradation, sex trafficking, drug dealing, and general increases in crime. Consequently, many Balinese saw the terrorist bombings of 2002 and 2005 as a result of their involvement in a tourist industry that primarily caters to Western tourists (Hitchcock and Putra 9).³ While many Balinese have benefited from the small economies that spring up in areas popular with tourists, in many respects the tourism industry has pushed local Balinese out, as “the local people only appear to be involved in the lower and middle strata of economic opportunities and seem to be excluded from the upper levels where decisions are taken [sic]” (Hitchcock and Putra 52).

This exclusion also extends to land, as some estimates suggest that “nine-tenths of the coast is owned by non-Balinese” (Picard) with

“20% of the area of Bali . . . allocated for tourism” (Knight, Mitchell, and Wall 95).⁴ Currently, the Balinese economy is primarily supported by the tourism industry, a shift from a previously agricultural focus: “The contribution of agriculture to the regional income in 1971 was 59.1%, but had slumped to a mere 19.81% by 2000. By the same token the contribution made by hospitality over the same period had increased from 33.4% to 62.35% (171). It is undeniable that the tourism industry has benefited many in Bali; however, it is also clear that the industry has caused fundamental changes not only to the landscape of the island itself, but also to its people and their culture.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the discourse of *EPL* brand marketing produces a subject who views consumption of spiritual products as a way of expressing her empowered state. While she may not actually be living in a world in which gender justice prevails, through consumption of spiritual products this subject believes herself to be combating those social forces that would rather she find her happiness by more traditional patriarchal means such as marriage and children. Of course, bucking this kind of oppression in one’s personal life is to be applauded; however, this mindset moves the neoliberal subject further away from a critical engagement with the material and political realities in which she lives. When she finds herself travelling to other countries, the neoliberal spiritual subject takes this depoliticized viewpoint with her, allowing her to consume without regard for how her consumption perpetuates negative local economies. In the case of countries in the Global South, such as Bali, we see that this consumption does not come without consequences for the local population; however, the neoliberal spiritual subject fails to see these realities as her gaze is distracted by her pursuit of self-discovery. As such, in places like Bali, her tourism mimics colonialism’s blatant use of native populations. While the labor produced for the neoliberal spiritual subject appears to be simply an extension of culture or an expression of friendliness, it marks both the neoliberal spiritual subject and the natives who labor for her as existing in a system of consumption and production.

Given that the vision of reality the neoliberal spiritual subject is encouraged to cultivate contains so many gaps, so many willful blurrings of vision, and so many miscategorizations of experience, it seems

re-visioning becomes the crucial resistant move. Agreeing with Nancy Fraser's observation that personal oppression must be linked to the material effects of capitalism on women's lives, in *Feminism Seduced*, Hester Eisenstein suggests that a start to resisting neoliberalism can be found in the "spread of what we might call *economic literacy*" (202). Such literacy would allow the neoliberal spiritual subject to begin to uncover the ways in which her personal consumption perpetuates not only her own oppression, but also that of the countries she may choose to visit and the natives she may choose to serve as her spiritual inspiration. In this case, how could a best-selling, popular memoir like *Eat, Pray, Love* be used to foster economic literacy? What gaps in Gilbert's vision, as well as her ardent fans', need to be filled to stimulate this reflection? And, how can our work—both critical and creative—go about filling them?

Notes

1. This paper does not take the movie version of *Eat, Pray, Love* into account; however, a similar analysis of the film would undoubtedly be fruitful for examining how Gilbert's story, as translated to the "big screen," visualizes the female neoliberal spiritual subject engaging in spiritual tourism.
2. It is also, perhaps, a model for what sells in the market of contemporary popular memoirs. Gilbert's decision to shy away from a critical analysis of the role of tourism cannot necessarily be considered a personal failing, but may indeed be the calculated move of a professional writer who understands what the market calls for.
3. Hitchcock and Putra indicate that the 2002 and 2005 bombings led to widespread discussion of the role of tourism in Bali: "Many Balinese interpreted these bombings as a sign that they had forsaken God and huge purification ceremonies were held to ask for God's protection" (9). While some called for the Balinese to "return to their religion and traditions" which Hitchcock and Putra suggest "in this context explicitly meant agriculture" (9), it is unclear if tourism has actually been tamed whatsoever on the island. Indeed, given that the Balinese economy depends so heavily on tourism, it is unclear if the tide can be turned back. Initial research seems to anecdotally suggest that tourism, especially *EPL* related tourism is alive and well in Bali; however, additional empirical studies are needed to verify this finding.
4. Interestingly, part of Gilbert's experience in Bali includes befriending a local single mother, Wayan, who runs a traditional medicine shop. Wayan has left her abusive husband and is about to be evicted from her current home, so Gilbert takes up a collection from her friends back in the US to purchase a house for Wayan. This gesture is certainly kind, however, Gilbert does not connect the high land prices in Bali to the influence of the tourism industry nor does she question what role she is playing as a white savior to this native woman. This episode reminds one of Gayatri Spivak's formulation in "Can the Subaltern Speak?": "White men are saving brown women from brown men." In this case, of course, it is a white woman, but the construction otherwise stands. Gilbert's gesture presents a picture of philanthropy that may appeal to the neoliberal spiritual subject in so much as it makes the subject feel good while still allowing her to sidestep difficult questions about her own role in the perpetuation of negative local economies.

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