

Emilie Egger//

In September 2018, I wrote my first piece for *Synopsis*. My article was about essential oils and constructions of white motherhood, how essential oils are a multifaceted part of the post-feminist discourse that highlights sexual difference and the power of domesticity in producing a white, heterosexual future. I also briefly discussed companies' focus on individual empowerment through "boss-babe" narratives that actually contribute to widespread financial loss. Since that time, much of the messaging around essential oils has remained more or less the same with emphasis on purity, health, and empowerment, with extra focus on safety after many issues and disputed claims regarding the efficacy of essential oil use against COVID-19. Essential oils and the popular way of selling them — multi-level or network marketing, usually with the assistance of Instagram or other social media— remain indicative and constitutive of a rarefied brand of white motherhood.

I was proud of my piece and shared with friends, family, and colleagues, a few of whom passed it along to others. However, I was unprepared for a certain kind of interest—from a content manager interested in sharing a self-authored piece on the benefit of using essential oils in the home. *Synopsis* editor Arden Hegele contacted me late last year after the writer approached her asking for placement on our website. A few things went through our minds.

At first, Arden and I were disturbed to think that the title of my piece, titled "Essential Oils and White Motherhood," would prompt a writer's interest in posting about the benefits of essential oils. Perhaps they were misguided about what kind of website *Synopsis* is and did not look around too much. Or more alarmingly, associations with whiteness and a specific kind of motherhood were enticing, consciously or subconsciously.

Or maybe an algorithm alerted this promoter to my post. Again, the title strikes a certain, scholarly, social-justice aware audience as offensive—we know the piece will probably take a critical stance to this recent trend in oil use. But the set of algorithms curated by the writer's Internet activity did not take a critical approach to the terms "essential oils" and "white motherhood" placed side by side (or any of the other configurations of words and phrases in the article that elaborated on the dynamic of co-optation and exploitation through the guise of so-called natural parenting).

The simplest definition of an algorithm is a "set of instructions" and parameters. Computer programs utilize users' Internet searches, likes, and other web behaviors to "select and prioritize" what content they see. Some communication bots follow such instructions to tweet, initiate chats

with website visitors, or in this case, send an email when they identify a way to fulfill their task. Scholars and medical and public health practitioners (like Arden herself) have observed how algorithms are programmed to join normally disparate pieces of information to achieve certain ends. For example, recent anti-vaccination movements have paired information such as “vaccine hesitancy” with “natural parenting.”

Something similar could be happening here. After some research, I learned that the author of the piece is employed by a company that connects homeowners with contractors. Their website deals heavily with imagery of comfortable living spaces and contractors performing tasks from mounting art to installing Internet routers. Whether the connections between notions of “home” and “white motherhood” came straight from a human or from a human-programmed bot, the pathways that led the two pieces together are alarming. This would be strange enough had the writer not contacted *Synopsis* three times to push for the publication. This process might have been initiated by an algorithm but a human kept trying to make the connection happen.

It’s easier to accept the associations in online content than to think backward about how they came to be. Think about the contemporary vlogger tradwife trend that links homesteading with “traditional” whiteness and supposed anti-pedophilia movements that have been perpetuated by the far Right with human trafficking conspiracy theories. Because of how white supremacy and disinformation are manifesting online in 2021, media literacy will require a skill set for spotting assumptions in all content, online and off.

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