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The buzz around essential oils mobilizes two important keywords of today's mainstream alternative health practices. First and foremost, they are "natural"—"Goodbye Toxins, Hello Nature," advertises doTERRA, one of the largest essential oil companies currently operating in the US.[1] In the rhetorical universe of many alternative health practices today, nature is a keyword that easily slips into the other keyword: empowerment. Because it is natural, it is safe, and because it is safe, no special expertise is required to handle it. Because it is natural, it resonates with the nature within oneself—one's own body, one's own intuitions—and therefore induces curative effects that emanate from inside, rather than those that come from outside. Its rhetoric gently uplifts the self above the messy entanglements of the world, away from toxins, pollutions, and the ensnaring grip of Big Pharma. The political orientation of essential oils is thus toward self-sufficiency rather than social responsibility, a direction shared with many other popular alternative health methods today, such as meditation and dietary detox.

The essential oils trend, however, stands out more than any other practice for its remarkable capacity to match self-help in health and capitalist entrepreneurship. Two major vendors of essential oils, doTERRA and Young Living, both rely on individual distributors who are essential oil users themselves. In their multilevel marketing system that recruits amateur salespeople rather than professionals, the authenticity of one's own voice is a central asset for the business. So-called "mommy blogs" that promote essential oils, for example, mostly rely on the power of the first-person voice and the sincerity it is expected to vouchsafe. Many of them begin with a reasonable doubt they entertained in the beginning ("I was a skeptic first"), develop a conversion narrative that features personal experience and connections ("My friend didn't promise me any miracles," "My kids loved the oils as much as I did"), and then invite the reader to try it out on a very personal basis ("If you're like me").[2] This rhetoric of sincerity is all the more convincing because the body at stake here is not only one's own body, but also the bodies of one's children's: who wants to trifle

with their children's health? Advocating the medical agency of a lay person against cold and distant doctors and money-grabbing Big Pharma, especially in the case of women, is a common element in the rhetoric of alternative medicine; an appeal to what one might call a democratic desire for lay medical agency is a widespread strategy for vendors at large. The business model of the essential oils industry not only fully discloses this tactic, but also generates revenue by the very proliferation of such voices. As Rachel Monroe's *New Yorker* exposé points out, it is mostly through recruiting more membership, not through the sale of their products, that doTERRA and Young Living distributors make money.[3]

Needless to say, this entrepreneurship, which supposedly grants empowerment, stems from exploitation. As much as the small batch of higher-level distributors easily generate profit by gaining commission from their "downline" distributors, it is harder, or almost impossible, for new recruits to earn more money than they are obliged to spend. Among Young Living's two million active distributors, according to Monroe, more than ninety-percent made less than a dollar in 2016, while the "Royal Crown Diamonds" members, who make up 0.0005 per cent of the whole body, earn more than a million dollars. As Emilie Egger points out, the essential oils trend is interested in domestic self-improvement, rather than in collective empowerment.[4] These numbers only reveal that such self-help is rarely about oneself in reality: it is premised on the exploitation of others.

The essential oils phenomenon, then, by exhibiting the dangerous affinity between the first-person voice in medicine and exploitative entrepreneurship, offers an insight into one of the central questions in the field of health humanities today: overcoming the limited discourse of empathy it inherited from the more traditional field of medical humanities. In *Communicative Biocapitalism* (2017), Olivia Banner illustrates how the field of medical humanities has developed in close alignment with neoliberal frameworks. The field's general emphasis on the voice of the patient, Banner argues, was to produce physicians capable of empathetic listening, responding to the needs of the market that required a friendly face for medical professionalism rather than tackling the structural inequalities in health and medicine.[5] While assuming the guise of being "alternative" to the system, the essential oils industry exemplifies the same impasse of centering the patient voice: the figure of the individual, from whom this voice emanates, is already shaped by the system it claims to question.

*Special thanks to Alex O'Connell, Mary Kim, and Dylan Caskie for their help in writing this article.*

[1] doTERRA homepage, accessed August 21, 2021, <https://www.doterra.com/US/en>.

[2] Stacey Garska Rodriguez, "My 12 Favorite Everyday Essential Oil Uses," *The Soccer Mom Blog*, August 28, 2019, <https://thesoccermomblog.com/everyday-essential-oil-uses/>.

[3] Rachel Monroe, "How Essential Oils Became the Cure for Our Age of Anxiety," *New Yorker*, October 2, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/10/09/how-essential-oils-became-the-cure-for-our-age-of-anxiety>.

[4] Emilie Egger, "Seeking Purity: Essential Oils and White Motherhood," *SYNOPSIS*, October 12, 2018, <https://medicalhealthhumanities.com/2018/10/12/seeking-purity-essential-oils-and-white-motherhood/>.

[5] Olivia Banner, *Communicative Biocapitalism: The Voice of the Patient in Digital Health and the Health Humanities* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 14-18.

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