

A stylized graphic of a web browser window with a dark blue header bar containing three colored circles (red, yellow, green) and a white address bar. The main content area of the browser is a vibrant gradient of blue, pink, and green.

a tumblr book

platform and cultures

Allison McCracken

Alexander Cho

Louisa Stein

Indira Neill Hoch

editors

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University of Michigan Press
Ann Arbor

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CHAPTER 1

You Must Be New Here

An Introduction

*Allison McCracken, Alexander Cho,
Louisa Stein, and Indira Neill Hoch*



Fig. 1.1. Willy Wonka
meme

This meme of Gene Wilder as Willy Wonka in the 1971 film *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* became popular on Tumblr in the early 2010s. Tumblr users employed it to point out when new users were clearly not familiar with Tumblr spaces and language, at once acknowledging the difficulty of navigating the platform and using Wonka's knowing look to gently prod the newbies to acquaint themselves with their environment before attempting to participate. The meme reflects our assumption that Tumblr has always been a unique space that merits analysis in terms of its specificity as a platform

and a cultural agent. Like Wonka's chocolate factory, Tumblr is an alternative world, where disparate people come together over mutual passions and desires in a queer, carnival-like atmosphere that distinctly dispenses with normalcy. Tumblr's pleasures have been likewise vast and unpredictable; its heightened drama has given users life and inspiration and at times has turned ugly and left people wounded in its wake, even as, like Wonka, the Tumblr Dashboard has always moved inexorably forward.

This collection approaches Tumblr as a digital platform and as a cultural forum. Tumblr was created by then-twenty-one-year-old David Karp in 2007, who originally designed it as an easy-to-use multimedia microblogging social media platform; many Tumblr users still refer to their and other tumblrs as "blogs." Tumblr gave users the capability to circulate and recontextualize a broad array of media easily and quickly: image-based memes, GIF animations, videos, short- or long-format text, and more. Unlike other social media platforms at the time, Tumblr also afforded a great deal of flexibility in allowing users to personalize the design of their blog. At the same time, Tumblr's nonintuitive, or even sometimes faulty navigation, search, and index features created a barrier to entry for uninvested outsiders.

This platform opacity, in combination with Tumblr's liberal/progressive branding and its reliance on pseudonymity (anonymity by way of pseudonyms), facilitated the development of "counterpublics" on the platform, those groups who are marginalized in the public sphere and/or who are in conflict with it ideologically.¹ From 2007 to 2018, Tumblr thus became a home and hub for many who were socially and politically disenfranchised: youth, LGBTQ+ and nonbinary persons, people of color, progressives and activists, feminist and queer fans, queer and alternative porn consumers, sex workers, the disabled, and those with mental illness, chronic pain, or bodies that didn't reflect social ideals. The marginalization of these groups by most mainstream commentators and media producers in society obscured the cultural and social significance of their presence on Tumblr, despite the platform's 450 million blogs (as of early December 2018), even as they created the foundation for broader cultural shifts.

Yet Tumblr was also a deeply flawed "blue hellscape" to many of its users, a technologically frustrating, often unsafe platform that did not always serve all its users well. As our authors testify, its most vulnerable groups faced the same challenges on Tumblr as they did in real life. Nonetheless, these subcultures persisted on the platform because it offered participants the best option and tools for alternative networking among very limited choices. Tumblr was, for many, a deinstitutionalized, underfunded, unauthorized,

constantly on-the-run think tank–cum–chocolate factory, a subcultural, countercultural place where alternative pleasures, education and resource-sharing, creative and critical work happened. During its first decade, Tumblr became the space for the development of, for example, Black feminist theory, LGBTQ+/nonbinary identity formation, disability and chronic pain collectivities, critical media culture, and alternative body erotics and porn. The increasing calls for social justice that marked the 2010s, especially among young people, prompted *The New York Times* in 2014 to acknowledge the platform’s youth subcultures as heralding “the age of Tumblr activism.”²

Given Tumblr’s uniqueness as a platform and the ephemerality of the internet, we began this book in early 2016 with the goal of representing and preserving evidence of Tumblr’s creative forms and critical voices, and we structured this book accordingly. The experience of Tumblr is the experience of multiplicity. Our intention has always been to make this volume as polyvocal as possible, which means we have included a wide variety of voices, some of which clash with each other, in an attempt to mirror the experience of encountering the variety of perspectives on Tumblr. Our sixty-four contributors bridge the categories of scholar, public intellectual, industry professional, activist, creator, and fan. We have elected to present our book’s title in lowercase to suggest our foregrounding of Tumblr users (“tumblrs”) in our work, which is likewise reflected in the “user-first” ethos of Tumblr’s own official lowercase branding.³

Our project became increasingly urgent in the wake of the 2016 election, as both the larger political climate dramatically shifted and Tumblr changed ownership to become part of the telecom conglomerate Verizon. Verizon’s decision to ban adult content in December 2018 provides a definitive endpoint for this volume.⁴ The ban was widely covered and uniformly condemned by the popular press and various publics; as many argued, such a ban would disrupt Tumblr’s integrated systems of expressive freedom, both disenfranchising a significant chunk of its user base and disproportionately censoring LGBTQ+ and other socially marginalized users. This sentiment was reinforced through countless testimonials from users past and present regarding Tumblr’s importance in shaping their identities and politics, making the platform’s influence on a generation broadly visible for the first time.⁵ We feel this outpouring is only the beginning of the story of Tumblr’s cultural impact. As *a* (as opposed to *the*) Tumblr book, we provide a glimpse into a vibrant, fascinating, culturally influential forum we, like many of these writers, experienced in the 2010s. But it is our hope and belief that our record here will be only one of many in the years to come.

A TUMBLR STARTER KIT IN THREE PARTS

1. *Design and Structure*

Tumblr's design and aesthetics broadly impacted social media and popular culture in the 2010s. Founder David Karp and lead developer Marco Arment envisioned Tumblr as a platform for “creators” that was both less work than traditional long-format blog platforms such as Blogger and less “insanely restrictive” and rigid than other social media platforms, specifically Facebook, which had just gone global at the time.⁶ Karp developed Tumblr as an open-ended, easy-to-use, and even beautiful publishing platform that lets users upload and merge all forms of digital media, saying, “The magic of Tumblr is we let you put anything in and get it out any way you want.”⁷ Tumblr offers users the ability to share still images and GIF sets, often combined with short text—as inspired by prior platforms Projectionst and Anarchia—but can also be text-only or embed audio or video. When Tumblr was first introduced, this combination of multimedia flexibility and emphasis on the visual marked a clear distinction from other popular platforms of the time, including Blogger, WordPress, Facebook, Twitter, and LiveJournal.

Tumblr has two basic user interfaces: (1) the user's “Dash,” a real-time reverse chronological feed of the posts from the users they follow; (2) the public-facing web page of a user's individual blog (also referred to as a “tumblr” with a small “t”), comprising the collection of the user's own posts and available via a unique and publicly accessible URL, [username].tumblr.com. As users scroll through the posts from the blogs they follow, they can “like” or “reblog” them to their own tumblr, adding content, commentary, or hashtags (indicated by the “#” symbol, also referred to simply as “tags”). Reblogging a post not only immediately republishes that post on the user's tumblr but on their followers' Dashes as well. When a user likes or reblogs a post, this also creates a “note” on the post that includes their username, which together become a living, traceable archive of all that post's activity.

Tumblr's one-button reblog function is perhaps its most influential design innovation, allowing users to reproduce content—especially previously cumbersome image and video content—with as few as two clicks, with no downloading, screencapping, or copy/paste required. Tumblr introduced the reblog two years before Twitter launched its own streamlined and automated “retweet via @username” function,⁸ and Tumblr's reblogs are considerably more flexible and content-heavy than Twitter “retweets.” They enable users to post them on their Dashes with any amount of added commentary, visual

material, or hashtags, creating potentially countless threads of constantly transforming, multimodal, multiauthored texts. One user may post a piece of art, another might reblog that post to the user's own tumblr with added commentary, and another might reblog and add poetry in the hashtags. The combination of posts and reblogs function as a digital public scrapbook that users collectively create and curate.

Even as the reblog is central to users' engagement with each other on Tumblr, it is also a key aspect of Tumblr's "approval-only architecture," to adopt contributor Lesley Willard's description. Users who want to make comments on another's post must reblog the post to their own blog first, ensuring that their comments, especially if negative, will not interrupt the visual flow and emotional tenor of the first user's Dash and blog. While users can "like" a post by clicking on the "heart" icon and adding a few words, which become part of the post's "notes," these notes are not visible unless the user clicks on them. Karp intended this aspect of the design to allow users more control over their own spaces as well as help make the experience more "positive" for them by facilitating their affective immersion in the content they valued.⁹

From its outset, Tumblr's multimedia ease of use, degree of creative control, and potential for user absorption were key factors in the development and pleasure of Tumblr users' scrapbook-like engagement. Tumblr's users originated visual art forms such as the GIF set, broadened and developed meme culture in new ways, and allowed for collective trains of visual responses to posts, all innovations that quickly spread beyond Tumblr in the 2010s. The platform's impact on internet linguistics has been just as profound; Tumblr's visual plasticity and linguistic play allow for different kinds of call and response in reblogs, as well as language and letter presentations that connote different attitudes and moods. Tumblr also helped popularize the minimalist typography (lack of capitalization and other punctuation) that became commonplace on the internet in the early 2010s (such as this widely reblogged, self-reflexive 2012 post, "when did tumblr collectively decide not to use punctuation like when did this happen why is this a thing").¹⁰

Tumblr's interface and affordances attracted users who wanted more creative agency and a more egalitarian, nonhierarchical, uncensored media environment, as well as those who did not want to be easily surveilled or identified. Tumblr's design has distinct advantages for such users. In addition to significant control over the design and appearance of their public-facing blogs, Tumblr users adopt a pseudonym that the platform allows them to change at will. Tumblr blogs are not necessarily linked to "real life" identities and can be hard to track over long periods of time, allowing a protective

opacity for users wishing to separate their online life from their work and personal lives. Moreover, Tumblr's content pool has also been notably broader than that of other platforms; for most of its history, Tumblr permitted adult sexual content, and its users have largely ignored commercial copyrights. Tumblr thus offered users a sense of control over what they were able to post on their blog, the look of their blog, its connection to their real life, and their online persona's ongoing presence and identity.

In addition, for most of Tumblr's history, the Dashboard was (and still largely remains) organized by reverse chronology, rather than algorithmic hierarchy.¹¹ This has a democratizing function: posts with ten thousand notes (even "promoted" posts) appear equally weighted to posts that only have five notes. Tumblr's feed structure, in combination with its pseudonymity, means that individual users' voices are not automatically marginalized or dismissed for being less popular or more radical.¹² Others cannot see the identity or number of a user's followers nor who they follow. As a result, although "star" posters do develop on Tumblr (since the number of "notes" is visible on a post), they rarely reflect cultural hierarchies or power brokers in real life.

Tumblr's structure thus emphasizes ever-shifting collective authorship and diverse creative communities over individual originality and idea ownership. Tumblr's reblogging convention decenters singular authorship of any one piece of content; a creative work, once posted, can circulate through multiple clusters of users and communities via reblogging, conveying a sense of expansive yet elusive community. This sense of an ever-present imagined collectivity also manifests in Tumblr users' performative authorship through hashtags. Tags were particularly vital as early collective tools because, before 2015, there was no private direct messaging function between users. Rather than using tags as more traditional indexing tools, users add tags to posts as a form of performative signaling on many collective Tumblr networks.¹³ Over time, hashtags also became ways to block content and curate community engagement, as widely employed user modifications allowed users to block content by tag.

Taken together, this mix of design features affords an experience and environment that both maximizes user creative agency and, as Cho has described, evades the "default publicness" of other social media.¹⁴ Although users frequently decried the platform's functionality problems and interface changes, as our @Staff Gallery demonstrates, Tumblr's structural advantages and pleasures resulted, by the early 2010s, in exceptionally high rates of user engagement (that is, user "time spent" on the platform per visit) that were second only to Facebook. By 2013, Tumblr had surpassed Facebook in this

metric; its marketing team and CEO Karp reported the highest amount of user engagement out of all social media platforms.¹⁵

2. *History and Timeline, 2007–19*

Tumblr's industrial brand reflected the same countercultural, youthful ethos as that cultivated by its design and designer. The company was decidedly un-Silicon Valley and noncorporate in culture. Tumblr has always been based in New York City, and CEO David Karp embraced other New York-based start-ups such as Etsy, Kickstarter, and Squarespace as fellow “outsiders.” Tumblr's liberal/progressive policies not only excluded censorship regarding sexual material, but Karp famously resisted advertising in Tumblr's early years. Tumblr was also a tiny shop compared to other firms of similar reach, boasting only twelve employees in 2010 and fewer than twenty in 2011.¹⁶ As our interviews with Tumblr staff members in this volume suggest, Tumblr was small enough that its liberal work culture mattered. Staffers were committed to the brand's nonconformity and its users; new employees were hired with the job title of “evangelist” (e.g., “the Fashion Evangelist”), reflecting both the playfulness of the youthful brand and the affective intensities the platform promoted.

Tumblr quickly gained equally passionate, liberal young users, surpassing the leading blogging platform WordPress in 2011 when it exploded from seven to twenty-one million blogs between January and June.¹⁷ ComScore, a media analytics firm, reported in August 2011 that at least half of Tumblr's users were under twenty-five, and *Billboard* noted that they were also unusually loyal, with a “whopping retention rate of 85%.”¹⁸ In order to accommodate its rapid growth, Tumblr hired ninety new employees in 2012 and made its first tentative forays into advertising.¹⁹ While Tumblr never had difficulties with user growth, generating revenue proved to be much more challenging. Karp opposed hypertargeted display ads (such as banners) that interfered directly with the interface.²⁰ Instead, Tumblr developed ad experiences that were as unobtrusive as possible, curating content to reflect the platform's creative ethos and user interests as opposed to targeting users by their demographics (information Tumblr doesn't collect). Tumblr's lack of transparent structure, unusual interface, and pseudonymity made industry insiders skeptical about the platform's profit potential, but its one hundred million blogs made Tumblr an attractive property when Yahoo purchased it in May 2013 for \$1.1 billion.²¹

Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer famously promised not to “screw up” Tumblr

and agreed that it would be “independently operated as a separate business” with Karp as CEO.²² Though many users had worried that Yahoo’s purchase by a big tech company would spell the end of its unique culture(s), the Yahoo era (2013–2017) saw relatively few changes. Tumblr grew as a company, expanding and significantly diversifying its workforce, and it developed more sophisticated data-collection systems regarding user interests. Tumblr also raised its public profile as a brand, forming several public partnerships for both marketing and social good. In 2014, Tumblr formed an advertising partnership with the media company Viacom, whose networks (such as MTV) appealed to its young users. Tumblr also established itself as a “socially conscious” brand by forming partnerships with NGOs such as Planned Parenthood (Karp is a member of the board) and the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD). Major news outlets such as the *New York Times* and *The Guardian* began to acknowledge the platform as a space for youth activism, alternative sexual and gender identity, and mental health concerns.²³ The Obama administration helped to raise the profile of the platform (Obama’s teenage daughters were users); the Obama 2012 re-election campaign created its own tumblr in 2011, the White House established its own separate tumblr in 2013, and Karp and staff met with President Obama and staffers in 2014.²⁴ Less successful, however, were Yahoo’s various efforts to monetize the platform, and Yahoo ultimately devalued the brand by \$712 million for failing to reach its advertising goals.²⁵ Indeed, the random nature of Tumblr ads and their inability to effectively target users was a regular source of humor to users:

Fig. 1.2. Post by thefemaleofspecies, reblogged and tagged by a tumblr book contributor The-Cimmerians

thefemaleofspecies:

Facebook ads : Here is an advertisement about 15% sale on fancy boots which ou were JUST thinking of buying yesterday and HERE is an advertisement about fancy curtains bc you were talking to your friend on your phone about you you need to replace your old ones :)

Tumblr Ads : INVEST TODAY IN IGLOOS IN ANTRACTICA AND GET A PARKA FREE !! THESE Slugs ARE for you !! Buy them !! AMAZING ideas about things you can do with your old contact lenses after retirement !! Do you have an itch on your left nipple ?? HERE are some rare herbs available in russia which can INSTANTLY cure it !!

Reblogged 1 week ago from take-a-hike-ya-hippie
(originally from thefemaleofspecies)

59,293 notes

Tagged: [well you're not wrong](#), [social media shenanigans](#). Source: thefemaleofspecies

When a faltering Yahoo was purchased by telecom company Verizon in 2017, Tumblr became part of “Oath,” its umbrella for digital content. Verizon’s acquisition truly signaled the end of an era for Tumblr. When the take-over was finalized in the summer of 2017, a considerable portion of Tumblr’s staff quit or was fired. Karp resigned in November, and a more traditional

corporate culture increasingly took hold.²⁶ CEO Jeff D'Onofrio's decision to ban adult content entirely on the platform in December 2018 was reported as primarily financially motivated: Verizon "couldn't sell ads next to porn," especially in foreign markets.²⁷ But profit concerns were considered to be of a piece with the accelerating, repressive censorship of sexual expression and sex work within the culture generally, both in the United States and abroad. Verizon dissolved Oath and reorganized its media properties, creating the Verizon Media Group in 2019; in August of that year, Verizon sold Tumblr to Automattic, the parent company of the web publishing platform WordPress. Though the sale price was not disclosed, reports suggested it was comparable to what "modest homes in Silicon Valley" might fetch, a far cry from the \$1.1 billion Yahoo paid in 2013.²⁸ This drastic devaluation underscored for many observers the extreme difficulty of turning a profit from Tumblr via targeted ad placement and further highlighted its subcultural identity as a platform; many users, in true Tumblr fashion, celebrated the inability of corporations to monetize the platform and immediately began circulating memes congratulating themselves for its immense devaluation with a "party till the grave" brand of gleeful cynicism.²⁹

3. *The Cultures of Tumblr*

Our book's foregrounding of Tumblr's cultural aspects reflects its unique status as the digital platform most associated in the 2010s with harboring counterpublics.³⁰ Tumblr has long been defined by many of its users and the media as the "social justice" platform and its users as "social justice warriors" or "SJW." How did this happen? The most publicized demographic information on Tumblr continually reaffirmed the platform's popularity with "youth" (especially eighteen-to-twenty-four-year-olds), people of color, the poor, and "urban" residents.³¹ Tumblr created conditions, however temporary or fraught, that allowed vulnerable people to connect and support one another. Tumblr's porosity, pseudonymity, nonhierarchical structure, lack of censorship, social good branding and user-oriented staff, general unintelligibility to outsiders, structural impediments to trolling, and opportunities for self-design all contributed to its adoption by liberal/progressive subcultures. During its early years, Tumblr's facility for sharing visual and audio material attracted creative communities—artists, musicians, writers, fashion bloggers, indie hipsters, zine makers—but also quickly began to draw queer users and sex workers because it permitted sexually explicit content (both in terms of language and porn). Its opacity also reduced (although did not eliminate)

trolling, making it possible for activist groups, social justice advocates, and vulnerable populations (such as Black women) to form working communities for acculturation, commiseration, education, resource sharing, and engagement in political and cultural action.

Media fandom and fan practices were always a part of Tumblr; GIFs and memes, which relied heavily on popular culture, are foundational to Tumblr's structure. But fan cultures on the platform were significantly impacted when LiveJournal's progressive social justice groups and feminist/queer fandom communities slowly migrated to Tumblr during the early 2010s. LiveJournal's blogs had integrated these communities in many ways, but Tumblr's porous structure synthesized them. A Tumblr user's Dash inevitably juxtaposes different kinds of content; a photo of a favorite celebrity's lovely collarbone, for example, might be followed by a media report about racial inequality or a discussion of lived experience of transphobia. In this way, fannish passions and social justice concerns continually informed and reinforced each other for users throughout the 2010s, a convergence that came to define the platform for many, especially young people coming of age on Tumblr.³²

In concert with other platforms like Twitter and YouTube, Tumblr was, from its beginnings, a crucial site for LGBTQ+ community resources, support, education, acculturation, fandom, and networking. Access to sexually explicit materials (#nsfw) on Tumblr—such as sex education and queer and alternative pornography—was especially important to this community at a time when other major platforms did not permit it, and Tumblr in particular facilitated the development and popularization of new identity formations for sexual and gender minorities. In a similar way, Tumblr also became a foundational space for group support, validation, and identity development around experiences of mental illness, chronic pain, disability, and non-normative bodies.

Cumulatively, these subcultural activities established Tumblr as offering an alternative worldview during this decade and it became a model for assessing activism in the culture generally. As our authors demonstrate, Tumblr became a space—often precarious or temporary—for community affirmation and what our contributor Kendra Calhoun calls “everyday online activism.” User support for progressive social movements in the 2010s involved intergenerational connections that shaped the generation of youth activists we are seeing as we write this in 2019. Tumblr functioned as a tuition-free classroom for some users who didn't have access to or were underserved by educational systems; as our teenage contributor Lee Brown, moderator of a transgender resource site asserts, “[Tumblr] is the thing that gets people to

learn about activism so they can then go out and join movements or start something.” Young users continually demanded inclusive media representation and created it for themselves; they were central in popularizing activist slogans such as “WeArethe 99Percent,” “Occupy,” “Black Lives Matter,” and “MarchforOurLives,” and terminology such as “nonbinary,” “misogynoir,” “neurotypical/neurodivergent,” and “intersectional feminism.”³³ Even “The Notorious RBG” originated as a tumblr blog. For years, youth have been constructing their identities and their alternative institutions on Tumblr through the art they create, the critiques they develop, the networks they run, the support they give, and the resources they share.

This volume provides a range of Tumblr user experiences to demonstrate the ways in which users’ opinions of the platform vary and are dependent on their specific activities, expectations, and perceived social identities. Although Tumblr’s speed and pseudonymity has permitted an exceptional level of subcultural activity and affective pleasure, it has also allowed for misunderstanding, misrepresentation, harassment, plagiarism, trolling, and threats to users from within and without. Many contributors here identify the limitations of the “social justice” platform, and others view it as more of a network, a “contact zone” or even a “landmine” than a “community.” Some subcultures on Tumblr have been far from progressive or empowering; as our contributors discuss, some groups condone self-harm, some promote racism and transphobia, and some turn in on themselves in ways that are devastating. The same “call out culture” and social justice rhetoric (often called “the Discourse”) that has served to check privilege and critique social hierarchies on Tumblr can be and often is weaponized to hurt, ridicule, and dehumanize others. Those most targeted on Tumblr have been and remain people of color, especially Black people and transgender/nonbinary people. Our book highlights the voices and experiences of these two groups of users in particular to provide insight into how they managed to achieve meaningful connections within a challenging, often traumatic terrain.

OUR APPROACH

As editors of a book about a digital space that is famously difficult to understand from the outside and also as devoted Tumblr users ourselves, we asked ourselves countless questions about how best to approach this project: How do we give readers unfamiliar with Tumblr a sense of the variety of voices and publics that have existed in this space? How do we demonstrate respect for

the privacy of Tumblr users? How do we preserve or translate a vernacular style of communication? How do we ensure that this book speaks to and of a range of audiences: general readers, users, fans, and scholars? How do we convey the specific ways Tumblr staff and users interact? To this end, we have cultivated a number of careful strategies and guiding principles as editors for this volume.

Working from and between digital media studies and cultural studies, we are calling our method “culturally-located platform studies.” In so doing, we are drawing from media historians’ work on the social construction of technology as well as similar contemporary approaches to platform studies.³⁴ Therefore, we use the term “platform” holistically, resisting strict definitions of the term as merely a programmable technology in order to also think about it as a cultural product that should be evaluated and understood in terms of how it is designed, shaped, and used by *people*. Building on Tarleton Gillespie’s work, our conception of the “platform” is as a complicated intermediary, not only between media creators and consumers, but also as a cultural fabric that mediates various kinds of connections among real, embodied users, many of whom, in Tumblr’s case, are particularly vulnerable people.³⁵ Since Tumblr’s brand changes of 2017–18, we have also developed a more active understanding of our book as a bounded media history of Tumblr as it was during its first decade.

As our questions above suggest, we thought a great deal about our ethical approach to users. As user-scholars of Tumblr, we are aware of the degree to which posts can be decontextualized and recirculated in harmful ways or can allow users to be easily targeted through search engines. We therefore developed procedures and principles for this project that were broad enough to allow for flexibility and sensitivity according to our specific relationship to users (some users were part of our personal networks, for example, while some were not) and their particular wishes and circumstances. Tumblr has not been widely studied in this area, so we have a specific section in this book devoted to its ethical study. We drew primarily on the Association of Internet Researchers’ guidelines for ethical decision making and Internet research (2012 version) and our own contributors’ practices when developing our own approach; one guiding principle was our contributor Crystal Abidin’s assertion that “just because something is publicly accessible does not mean it is public property.”³⁶

As a result, we asked our contributors to obtain written permission from users for the reproduction of *any* material for this volume, whether that be text or image. Some of our scholar-authors had already gone through their

own university review board review regarding participant consent, which they indicate here. Users whose work is reproduced were given several options: declining entirely; being quoted with or without attribution; or, to more fully protect privacy, to both have their words be unattributed and slightly altered to prevent them from being searchable, employing Annette Markham's practice of "ethical fabrication."³⁷ Through permissions and options for reproduction, we hoped to reduce or eliminate harm to vulnerable people and to respect users' intellectual property. In addition, we chose not to reproduce hostile or offensive rhetoric that might deter potential readers. Instead, we asked our writers to discuss such experiences more generally, without the use of specific hate speech. We do not mean our approach to be prescriptive for anyone else's project, but we hope that this book will become part of a larger discussion of ethical practices within digital media studies.

Editing a book about Tumblr also meant recruiting a new generation of social media scholars whose ability to navigate Tumblr's interface came from being part of Tumblr communities before they began their research of them. Tumblr studies have come from the bottom up in the academic world, and our scholarly authors are generally younger scholar-practitioners from around the globe who represent a variety of different disciplinary and institutional affiliations.³⁸ The nascent surge of scholarship on Tumblr as we write this indicates the profound influence Tumblr's counterpublics have had on this next generation. However, as writers in this volume charge, not all of the intellectual labor—particularly by women of color—that has generated rich social commentary has been rightfully credited. While such intellectual theft has been historically common, social media has made it more visible because of the virality of public discourse.

As part of our response to such concerns, we developed a multimodal, multivocal structure for our book in order to represent the diversity of Tumblr's voices and styles and enable Tumblr's users to speak for themselves as much as possible. We also wanted our structure to reflect the experience of reading ("scrolling through") Tumblr, a platform that juxtaposes a variety of materials and voices in ways that enrich and inform each other and that allows for its users to have more agency in shaping it than do most social media platforms. Accordingly, our book offers a variety of modes of presentation that emphasize user-created images (black and white in the hard copy, full color in the Open Access version of our book) and first-person testimonial formats:

Essays, which resemble traditional chapters in academic anthologies but
with reduced length

Shorter pieces, in the tradition of #longposts, Tumblr vernacular for posts that carry substantial arguments and/or a first-person testimonial of lived experience

Interviews and conversations, in which we present a broad range of cultural influencers and Tumblr experts to discuss the platform

Galleries, which present Tumblr user posts and art with commentary

The @Staff Gallery foregrounds the particular personal, affective modes of address users employ to talk to and about Tumblr staff. The Fan Art and Original Art galleries both display artwork created by Tumblr users, accompanied by the artists' own commentary about a given work's development and meaning for them.

This structure has enabled us to gather and represent a greater number and broader diversity of voices (the “cultures of Tumblr”) than a standard scholarly collection, including people in industry, journalists, user-scholars, and, especially, the non-scholarly, devalued or socially marginalized users (activists, fans, queer and nonbinary/trans people, people of color) who have largely defined the platform. Having a range of sixty-plus contributors rather than the ten to fifteen authors of a standard academic collection means we have been able to develop substantial topic areas that offer multiple points of view.³⁹ To facilitate use and understanding, we have divided the book into thematic sections that span the Tumblr ecosystem and social networks, and rather than confining our essay descriptions to this introduction, we have made them part of the short introductions we offer for each of our sections.

By organizing our book in this way, we also have sought to both reflect and appeal to an audience that contains the academy but extends well beyond it. We believe that the short length, variety, readability, and thematic organization of these pieces will make the book accessible to scholars and students and also to a wider range of Tumblr users, some of whom might otherwise feel alienated by a typical scholarly anthology. Our desire to make the book available through Open Access reflects our commitment to accessibility, but it also represents our acknowledgment of the way our own complex understandings of Tumblr have depended on the critical and creative work of people outside of the academy. Many of the contributors to our book have the critical acuity of scholars but are not in positions of institutional power to make their voices heard within academia. By including a variety of user voices in this collection and assuring its availability to everyone, we are making a deliberate effort to position this collection to not only speak *to* or *of* non-scholarly audiences, but *with* them, and to use our institutional presence to

partner with these users to produce a work that is more culturally informed and nuanced than it would otherwise be.

Although Tumblr remains, as of this writing in 2019, a widely used platform—and we hope this book will provide a useful introduction and guide for newbies—we ultimately view this collection of work, *a tumblr book*, as a historical and anthropological document of a particular time, never attempting to be conclusive or total. This book demonstrates how Tumblr's users—especially its youth—were personally impacted and activated in particular ways because of the platform during its first decade. In seeking to preserve and share a sampling of voices from these remarkable communities, we hope that readers will feel as enlightened, affected, challenged, and inspired by them as we have been.

Allison McCracken is associate professor and director of the American studies program at DePaul University. She is the author of the award-winning book *Real Men Don't Sing: Crooners in American Culture* (Duke, 2015), and she has published widely on the intersections of gender, sexuality, media, and culture.

Alexander Cho is assistant professor in the Department of Asian American Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He researches digital media with a focus on race, gender, sexuality, and design, and he is the co-author of *The Digital Edge: How Black and Latino Youth Navigate Digital Inequality* (New York University Press, 2018).

Louisa Stein is associate professor of film and media culture at Middlebury College. Louisa is author of *Millennial Fandom: Television Audiences in the Transmedia Age* (University of Iowa Press, 2015) and co-editor of *Sherlock and Transmedia Fandom* (McFarland, 2012) and *Teen Television: Programming and Fandom* (McFarland, 2008). Louisa's work explores audience engagement in transmedia culture, with emphasis on questions of cultural and digital contexts, gender, and generation.

Indira Neill Hoch is assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies and Theater Arts at Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota. Her research interests include online boundary maintenance and social construction of technology, and her work has appeared in *Transformative Works and Cultures* and *Gamenvvironments*.

NOTES

1. Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies*, ed. Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren (New York: Routledge, 1994), 74–98.

2. Valeriya Safronova, “Millennials and the Age of Tumblr Activism,” *New York Times*, December 19, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/21/style/millennials-and-the-age-of-tumblr-activism.html?_r=0.

3. Although we are keeping our book’s title in lowercase, we have chosen to capitalize certain tumblr-specific terms throughout the book, both because our contributors and many Tumblr users do and because capitalization helps to distinguish important design aspects of tumblr, especially for the “newbies.” Hence, terms such as “Dash” (for dashboard) “Anon,” (as a noun meaning “an anonymous person”) and “Ask” (as a noun meaning “a request”) are capitalized throughout this book. We have not, however, chosen to capitalize “reblog” because neither our contributors nor Tumblr users generally do. We acknowledge that Tumblr corporate does not capitalize any of these terms.

4. All of the essays in this volume, with the exception of this Introduction, were written prior to December 2018; as a result, they do not cover the “adult content” ban nor Verizon’s sale of Tumblr to Automattic in 2019. Readers should be assured, however, that information about the technological and industrial workings of Tumblr are accurate through 2019, and we have made clear editorial interventions as necessary within individual essays to indicate otherwise.

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The New York Times Magazine, July 12 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/15/magazine/can-tumblrs-david-karp-embrace-ads-without-selling-out.html>. For a much more detailed examination of how Tumblr's user connections are created through reblogs as well as other aspects of design, see Proferes & Morrissey, "Lost in the Dash," Chapter 2 in this volume.

10. Gretchen McCullough, *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2019), 165, first cited in Grant (below). McCullough began a tumblr blog in 2012 as a linguistics graduate student, <https://allthingslinguistic.com/>, (which exists as of this writing) that became focused around tracing linguistic changes in internet culture. Her discussion of Tumblr in *Because Internet* draws in particular from two graduate theses that focus exclusively on Tumblr: Molly Ruhl, "Welcome to My Twisted Thesis: An Analysis of Orthographic Conventions on Tumblr" (MA thesis, San Francisco State University, 2016) and Harley Grant, "Tumblinguistics: Innovation and Variation in New Forms of Written CMC" (MA thesis, University of Glasgow, 2015).

11. In 2017, Verizon introduced features such as "Best Stuff First" that promoted posts deemed by algorithm to be relevant to the top of the feed, but only on the mobile app Dashboard, and users could reject them; "Best Stuff First" persists as an option on the mobile app after Verizon's sale of Tumblr to Automattic, but by and large the Dash feed remains reverse chronological.

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13. Louisa Stein, *Millennial Fandom: Television Audiences in the Transmedia Age* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015), 155.

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SECTION 1

#The Rules of Tumblr

Our first and largest section introduces readers to Tumblr by identifying and unpacking the relationships between function and use, technology and culture, that distinguish the platform. It is both a Tumblr overview and a sampler, exploring specific ways this often-inscrutable platform actually *works* and makes meaning, as well as how it is perceived in the wider world. In doing so, this section highlights the interdisciplinarity of our project through its integration of voices, including those of Tumblr users, staff members, and scholars, all of whom overlap in various ways.

In our opening essay, “Lost in the Dash,” Nicholas Proferes and Katherine Morrissey examine how the Tumblr interface fosters a sense of connection among users by providing a venue where they can create, consume content, and easily associate with others with similar interests. These authors also provide a detailed description of how exactly to “enter into” Tumblr for readers who may have no previous experience with the platform. Next, Tumblr’s Head of Content Insights and Social, Amanda Brennan, breaks down Tumblr’s user-data collection system, Fandometrics, and explains how Tumblr employs it to better understand and nurture the desires of its existing users. In her essay “Blackout, Black Excellence, Black Power,” linguistics scholar Kendra Calhoun demonstrates how Tumblr reframes our understanding of the political to include everyday digital practices such as pop culture critique and emotional support. In “Under the Radar,” journalists Aja Romano and Elizabeth Minkel examine the history of Tumblr’s reception within the public sphere, focusing on both the reasons for its marginalization and its largely unacknowledged impact during the 2010s. In their essay “Reblogs, Monsters, and Erotic Amphibians,” *a tumblr book* co-editor Indira Neill Hoch demonstrates how having an insider perspective allows them to interpret the rich cultural analysis offered by Tumblr users through the example of their community’s response to the trailer for Guillermo del Toro’s *The Shape of Water*. In “Divine Fools and Ridiculous Mystics,” Tumblr user The-Cimmerians draws on her many years of lived experience as a queer fan on various platforms in

order to identify and celebrate the singularity of Tumblr humor, which she finds is best symbolized in the perversity, non-conformity, disruption and defiance of the “holy fool.” Finally, in “Tumblr Time,” Milena Popova examines the particular way in which Tumblr’s interface insists upon an emphasis on the present, disrupting the formation of long-term community and institutional knowledge, social critique, and memory on the platform.

Lost in the “Dash”

How Tumblr Fosters Virtuous Cycles of Content and Community

Nicholas Proferes and Katherine E. Morrissey

Nicholas Proferes is an assistant professor of information science at the University of Kentucky, where he researches the relationship between users and social media platforms.

Katherine E. Morrissey is an assistant professor at San Francisco State University’s School of Cinema. Her research focuses on representations of female desire in popular culture and the impacts of digitization on creative communities.

Open your internet browser and go to tumblr.com. When the page loads, you will see one of two things: If you are a Tumblr user, you will see a Dashboard filled with new Tumblr posts or an invitation to log in and “get started.” If you are not a Tumblr user, you will see a simple splash page (figure 2.1). The

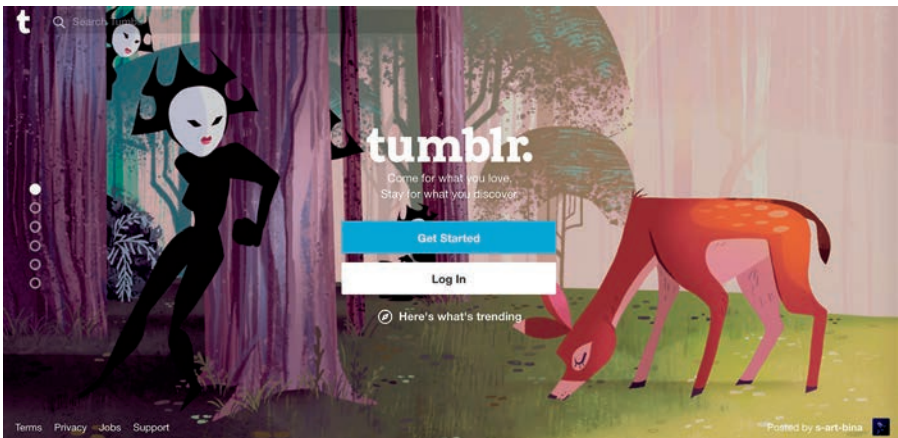


Fig. 2.1. Tumblr landing page (5/2017)

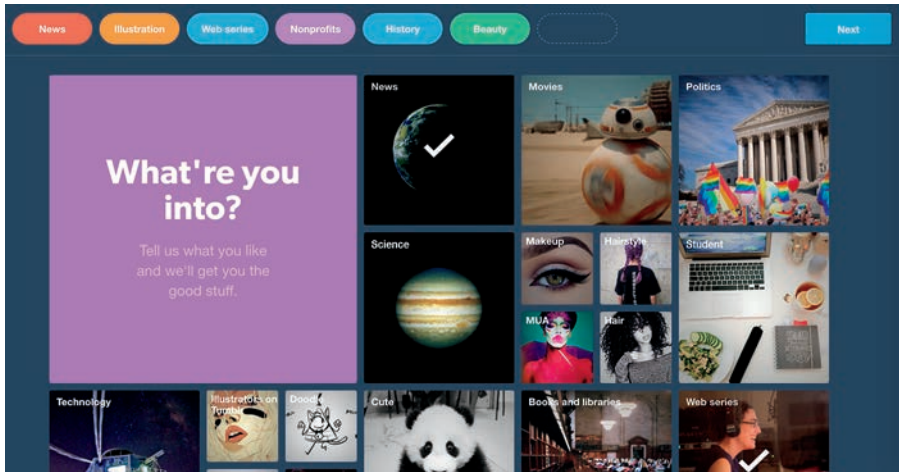


Fig. 2.2. Second stage of user registration process (5/2017)

text on this page greets you, stating, “Come for what you love. Stay for what you discover.” The page is a tease and an invitation. To access Tumblr and its many features, you need to be a registered user.

On other social media platforms, the registration process is a critical first step in connecting the new registrant to other users. On Tumblr, however, the process is designed to emphasize *content* and *topics*. After providing registration information, the interface asks “What’re you into? Tell us what you like and we’ll get you to the good stuff” (figure 2.2). In this way, the platform emphasizes content over particular individuals. Despite this, Tumblr users regularly report experiencing “community” on the site.¹ So is Tumblr a platform that provides content to individuals or one that supplies community and social interaction?

In short, Tumblr offers both. Tumblr fosters a sense of community among users by providing a venue where they can create and consume content and that simultaneously makes it easy to discover others who share their content interests. Importantly, Tumblr strategically shapes the ways people can interact on the site in order to promote affective experiences with both content and users. Galloway argues that social networks are constituted by their protocols, sets of rules dictating user behavior.² The design of Tumblr’s protocols and the platform’s related infrastructure is what enables Tumblr’s particular network properties to emerge. By examining Tumblr’s technical structure, we can see how Tumblr shapes user experiences of both content and community.

The variety of media Tumblr allows (text, images, GIFs, audio, video, and content embedded from across the web) fosters a platform rich in content. As we will see, Tumblr strives to keep users anchored to the Dashboard. The design of the “Dash” pushes users to immerse themselves in this boundless river of content. Tumblr has promoted studies showing that individual Tumblr users spend more time, in terms of minutes, on their visits to the platform than visitors to other platforms do.³ During their time on the Dash, Tumblr users experience each other in bouts of momentary visibility, as ephemeral fragments of content and personality that, over time, may or may not compile into something recognizable and familiar.

Tumblr has clear economic incentives to help make users love their interactions with content, and subsequently community. The deeper the affective engagement users have, the more likely they are to stay on the site for longer periods of time. Binding together the technology’s protocols for interaction, content, and community with user’s affective associations and experiences is a key way Tumblr generates revenue. As users immerse themselves in a seemingly unending stream of Tumblr content, they also experience more advertisements and generate greater revenue for Tumblr. Tumblr’s careful design encourages users to get “lost in the Dash” and, along the way, to also glance at a number of billboards.

TECHNICAL DESIGN OF TUMBLR

In her book, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, José van Dijck argues social media platforms have two sides: their technical components and their business practices.⁴ Building on Galloway’s discussion of protocols, van Dijck argues these two sides are intrinsically linked. Tumblr’s technical components are important because they shape the kinds of information users see and experience on Tumblr as well as the kinds of actions users can take.

So how can we understand what constitutes the technical side of Tumblr? Van Dijck argues that all social media are composed of specific components: data/metadata structures, algorithms, protocols, interfaces, defaults. Data is a type of signal suitable for use within a given system, and metadata are structured data used to help the system describe, explain, and locate other data. For example, on Tumblr, the content of a post can be considered data, and things such as tags or the “timestamp”—information about when a post was created—can be considered metadata. This metadata helps Tumblr contextualize and organize different posts.

Algorithms are the technical sets of rules that shape what users see and experience on a site. Tumblr's algorithms include things like the "Recommended Blogs" feature or the ranking and sorting mechanisms used to determine which content shows up as the "most popular" results for a given tag search. These algorithms impact how users discover other users and new sources of content.

While algorithms govern what users see, protocols govern their behavior. For example, Tumblr allows users to reblog content from other users. Initially, users could edit the initial post when they reblogged it, but in July 2015, Tumblr announced new protocols limiting users' abilities to edit the original post's caption or content.⁵

Interfaces are often closely tied to algorithms and protocols, as they are the objects that serve to link software, hardware, and users to data. Like many web platforms, Tumblr provides different kinds of interfaces for different kinds of users and devices (such as apps, mobile and tablet interfaces, etc.). For the purposes of this chapter, we will be focusing specifically on the interface a user would interact with when using Tumblr.com through a web browser.

Interface defaults play an important role in channeling user behavior and information creation.⁶ In the context of Tumblr, important default settings include public post settings (making user content visible to everyone by default), a default "Safe Mode" (which can be turned off) that filters sensitive content from the Dashboard and search results, and the Tumblr Dashboard being automatically set to "infinite" scrolling. With these technical components in mind, it becomes possible to deconstruct how Tumblr posts and the Dashboard shape the ways users interact with the platform and with other Tumblr users.

DECONSTRUCTING THE TUMBLR DASHBOARD

The Tumblr Dashboard is the heart of Tumblr's interface and a user's experiences. Tumblr's site design carefully positions users to focus on their Dashboards and on the stream of posts flowing into the body of this page (see area marked 3 to the left of the post, figure 2.3). By default, the Dashboard is "infinite"; as a user scrolls down the page it will continuously load additional content. While metadata about when a post was created is kept by Tumblr, by default there are no timestamps on posts visible to users. This means that posts simply appear as a wash of seemingly endless and new content.

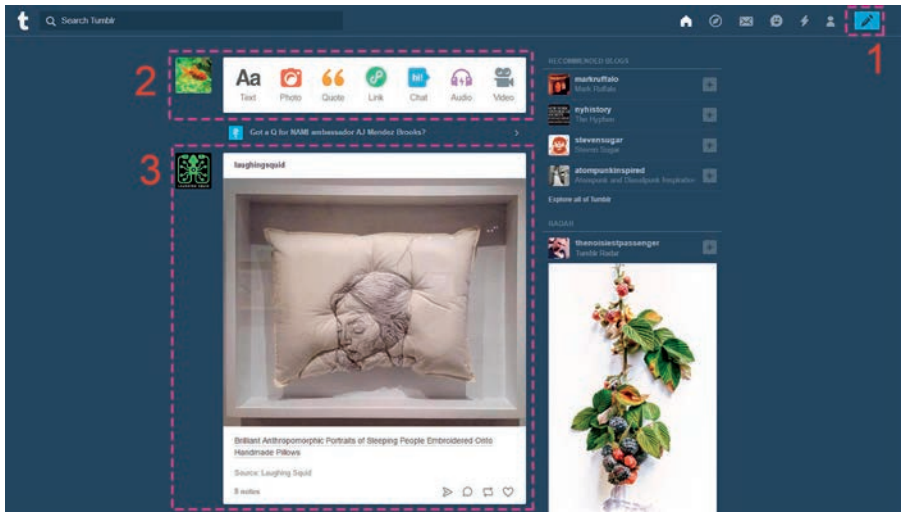


Fig. 2.3. Tumblr Dashboard (5/2017)

There are few reasons for users to leave their Dashboard and the site design discourages it. If users want to create a new post, track engagement with recent posts, or access their account settings, these options are available to them via menu options at the top of the page. If you want to look up another user and check out that user’s posts, there’s no need to leave the Dashboard interface. Any time you hover the mouse cursor over a user icon, a small roll-over menu appears showing the user’s icon, a header image, a one-sentence description, and a small preview of the user’s recent posts (see figure 2.4).

If a user tries to click on the link and load the user’s full blog, Tumblr prevents this. Instead of loading the blog on a new page, a larger preview of the user’s blog and recent posts appears on the right side of the screen. The Dashboard fades, but continues to show in the background (see figure 2.5). Through these mechanisms, the interface tries to keep the site’s design, protocols, branding, Dashboard, and advertising at the forefront of users’ experiences.

At the top of the screen, hovering above the Dashboard’s main content area, is the site’s primary navigation menu (see area 1, figure 2.3). The menu options appear as simple graphic icons. They remain in the background (literally and figuratively) until needed. For Tumblr users, “navigating” the site often means clicking on a menu icon and having the protocols for interaction unfold within the Dashboard. When one of these navigation links actually

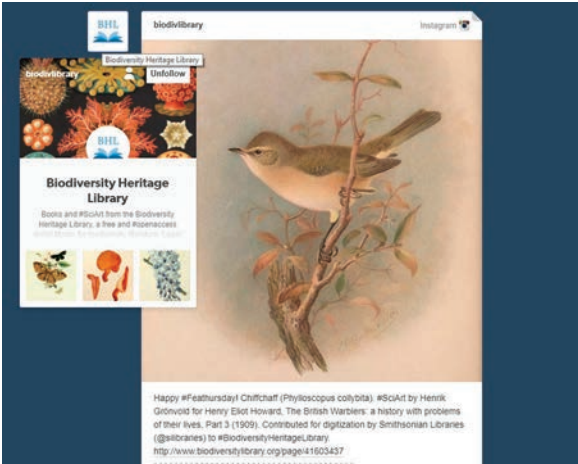


Fig. 2.4. Tumblr blog preview (7/2017)

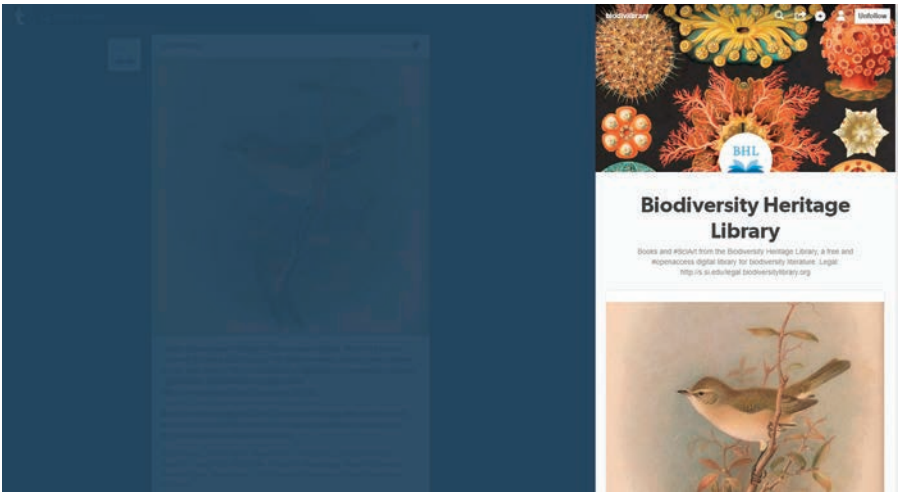


Fig. 2.5. Tumblr blog with faded dashboard (7/2017)

loads a new page, separate from the Dashboard, the new page is designed to look exactly like the Dashboard. This means that a Tumblr user rarely navigates far from the Dashboard, and when they do, the site design does little to call attention to that departure. These design decisions reinforce the Dashboard's primacy in Tumblr and minimize users' attempts at individuation. Instead, the individual posts appearing on the Dashboard become the primary means of self-individuation and interaction with other users.

Tumblr offers five primary protocols for interaction with other users: posting, following, messaging, liking, and reblogging. These options can be seen in different areas of the Dashboard, and some are clearly given more visual priority than others. In figure 2.3, the area of the interface labeled “2” indicates the content posting options available to users. Posts are coded according to their type (text, image, video, etc.). Although these are very different media forms, the upload protocol is nearly uniform for each. Users must label the content they want to post and are provided a limited number of ways to make this content discoverable to other users (for example, through the caption field or through the tags users assign to each post). Tumblr does *not* allow users granular control over the audiences to which their content appears as visible. Essentially, all Tumblr posts are public by default. While these posts remain accessible, however, the content users upload can still be obscure to other Tumblr users. Unless the uploading user chooses to tag his or her content and make it searchable, the post may never be seen by anyone beyond that user’s immediate followers. Also important, given the proliferation of content on a user’s Dash, the visibility of a post is contingent upon a number of factors. Are the user’s followers awake? Do they have the time to scroll through posts until they see this one piece of content? In the process of scrolling through their infinite Dash, will this one post capture their attention and make them linger? Will Tumblr’s “Safe Mode” feature screen the post from view? All Tumblr posts are public and (theoretically) visible, but it is easy for a post to be lost in the crowd.

This crowd can be seen in the area of the interface marked “3” in figure 2.3. This is where users see content posted by the people they follow. These following protocols are critical to the formation of loose social networks on Tumblr. Following someone on Tumblr means subscribing to see the content that user posts. Theoretically, anyone (even those without a Tumblr login) can access another user’s public posts by visiting that user’s specific page. As discussed earlier, however, these pages are not as readily accessible as the Dashboard. By following a user, that user’s original posts and reblogs are automatically inserted into the follower’s Dashboard.

On Tumblr, following does not require reciprocation. One user can follow another without any additional action. Users are notified, however, each time they have a new Tumblr follower. This notification process allows for a moment of connection and for assessment of the other user. This can lead to reciprocal following or to the discovery of additional users and blogs, or in the event of an unwanted follower, a user can choose to block the new follower. Ultimately, however, the ease by which users can follow or unfol-

low one another, coupled with the de-emphasis on user profiles and personal information, means that community boundaries can be quite porous and user-to-user interactions quite ephemeral. Following networks are sometimes reciprocal, but at other times, following operates more as a kind of content broadcasting network. As a result, communities on Tumblr may have asymmetric information flows, where “big names” in a community drive popular content, and connections between users are more parasocial than social.

The structure of the Tumblr Dashboard and its linked data and meta-data structures, algorithms, and protocols suggests that users are channeled toward constantly producing and consuming different media forms (text, images, video, audio) through a homogenizing funnel. The Dashboard’s content-funneling process limits the contexts and situations in which users can discover and experience other users. One might think these mechanisms would discourage community on Tumblr, but many users report intense feelings of connection and community. As we explore in our next sections, this is in part because Tumblr brings content and people together in ways fundamentally different from other platforms, allowing users to develop different expectations for interaction.

TUMBLR POSTS: REBLOGGING AND TAGGING

A post is a user’s primary means of interacting with other users on Tumblr, and the interface is designed to prioritize post content. Despite this, many of the “new” posts appearing on a Tumblr Dashboard are not original or new content. As Cho observes, authorship on Tumblr is less about creation and more about curation.⁷ Much of the content on a user’s Dashboard will be “reblogs” (the looping arrow icon, figure 2.6), a protocol that allows users to repost the content to their own followers. In the process of reblogging, users also have the option to add their own additional content below the original post, thereby tailoring the post for their own imagined audience.

Tumblr is generally credited with being the first major social media platform to offer a reblog function. From Tumblr’s beginnings in 2007, the feature was a fundamental part of the platform design. Twitter added “retweeting” to its protocol offerings two years later.⁸ In an interview with *Forbes* magazine, Tumblr founder David Karp describes how reblogging on Tumblr was both inspired by and a departure from blogging and blog platforms such as Blogger: “We realized we needed some mechanism for feedback. . . . To say something you had to have your own soapbox over here and take what I say

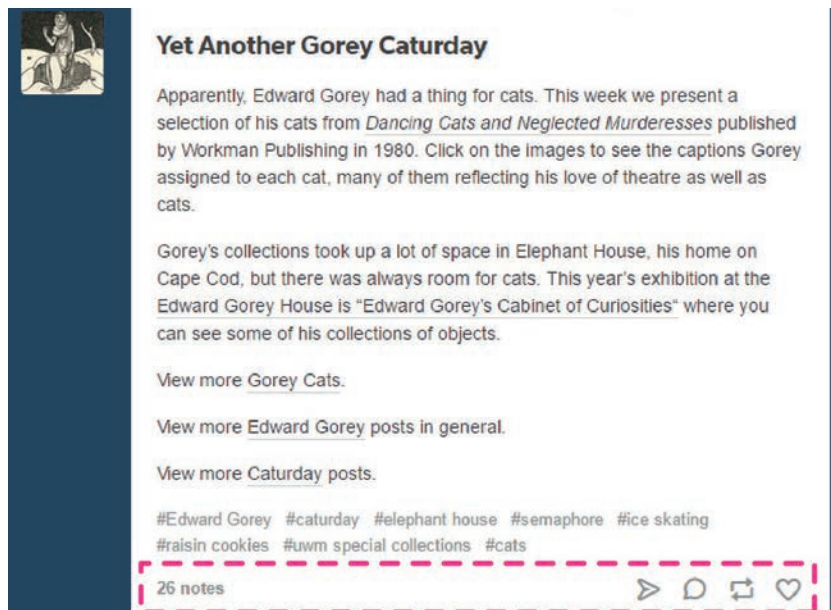


Fig. 2.6. Notes section on a Tumblr post (5/2017)

and you wrap your commentary around it. You're not allowed to just show up and say I'm a jerk. It's much harder to twist my words."⁹

Karp's statement reflects how Tumblr's technical design is meant to channel specific kinds of social interaction and behavior among users. By allowing certain actions and blocking others, the reblogging protocol shapes the ways interaction occurs and social ties form. For example, let's imagine that Person A creates a controversial post on a different blogging platform: Blogger. When Person B leaves a critical comment on Person A's blog, the comment stays contained within the context of Person A's blog. This is a single conversation thread, located on one user's blog. The comment only will be seen by individuals who visit Person A's blog and read the comments. The original poster (Person A) may even choose to delete the comment and hide it from other users. On Tumblr, however, when Person A creates a controversial post, the only option is for Person B to *reblog* it in their blog, adding in his or her own commentary. Now, Person B is performing the critique for his or her followers, not the visitors to Person A's blog. On Tumblr, the original poster and that poster's followers may never see the rejoinder. Furthermore, the original poster is unable to delete Person B's response. The rejoinder is a

separate post and a parallel conversation. Under these circumstances, Tumblr commentary and social interaction takes on a more performative, public facing nature.

On Tumblr, chains of reblogs create something similar to a comment thread. But this is less a conversation with the original poster and more a commentary being shared for different audiences. Users *can* “reply” to a post (the “speech bubble” icon in figure 2.6), adding up to 475 characters of commentary to the “notes” of a post, but these “replies” are not visible to the replier’s followers unless the followers happen to see the original post and subsequently purposefully click into the notes. As a result, most users tend toward reblogs when adding commentary. Posts with multiple reblogs and new commentary added tend to fragment into multiple branches as they are reblogged at different points in the conversation. Since the posts lack visible timestamps, reconstructing an entire conversation is difficult. Further, tracking or interjecting into this dialog can be cumbersome. Thus, depending on what point in the conversation the post was reblogged, and which commentary was or was not included, users may experience a wildly different “conversation” than what other users see.

As Karp explained, reblogging was designed to limit certain forms of user interaction. These dialogues, however, are also one of the primary ways users interact and develop affective connections. As a result, Tumblr’s users experience community in fragmented and intensive bursts. Tumblr’s protocols ensure that dialog is less about direct conversation/interaction between users and more about signaling shared affinities to other users. In a single day, the same post may appear dozens of times on a user’s Dashboard, as one person after another reblogs or comments on it. Each posting is emblematic of the dynamics of “cyclicity, repetition, and refrain” that, Cho argues, are key to understanding flows of affect on Tumblr.¹⁰ But Tumblr’s distinct process of repetition and refrain raises important questions about the ways individual Tumblr users experience, interpret, and respond to each other. Reblogged “conversations” are signals that help users experience affinity bonds with other users. As each post is recontextualized on an individual user’s Dashboard, however, the potential for both greater affective intensity within a specific community increases, as does the possibility of misinterpretation and conversational drift outside of that affinity circle. Each new reply initiates a new branch in the discussion, inevitably drifting further from the origin.

Tumblr users can also interact by “liking” or “sharing” a post (see figure 2.6). Liking has become a fairly ubiquitous feature across the web, a feature that Hayes, Carr, and Wohn refer to as a “paralinguistic” digital affordance.¹¹

The social logics associated with liking are by now well established. By relying on this protocol and the “heart” iconography, Tumblr creates a kind of referentiality to user interaction mechanisms on other platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook. By using iconography such as hearts, Tumblr also encourages a positive affective experience, thus prompting users to share more and contribute to the production of the never-ending stream of content on the site.

Sharing is also common across social media platforms. On Tumblr, clicking on the share icon opens up a small “message” window, which lets users send both a link and a message to other Tumblr users. When a user chooses to share content from another platform such as Facebook or Instagram, rather than being redirected to the other website, they are given a small pop-up window in which to post the material. By structuring the site this way, Tumblr tries to ensure that a user never leaves the Tumblr interface to participate with external communities, which creates a constantly immersive experience within the Dashboard. While users can reach out to the world outside of Tumblr, the site is structured to keep them anchored on Tumblr.

On the far left side of each post, there is a quantitative score “# notes” (see figure 2.6). Each reply, reblog, or like adds a count of one “note” to the post. If a user clicks on the “# notes” text, they will see a list of user names along with the actions that user took on the post (like, reblog, reply). Publicly visible notes allow users to see chains of content propagation, making it possible to quickly identify prominent users. This can foster a sense of immediacy with community as it makes it easier to conceptualize who could be counted as belonging to a particular community.

Finally, each time a post is created or reblogged, a user has the option of adding tags. Tagging is a crucial part of the way users organize content and make it discoverable. When uploading content, users have the ability to add tags to describe the content (for example, #cats). These tags are then linked so that if another user searches “cats” on Tumblr, they will be able to access content that has been given that tag (figure 2.7). On Tumblr, tags bind multiple forms of media and associated commentaries. Networks of users may develop specialized tags and taxonomies applied to specific forms of content. They also may block certain tags to avoid certain content. The ability to quickly discover content and experience the range of media associated with a given tag fosters the development of the kinds of media content associated with a community. In a study of trans Tumblr users, Dame found that users “express specific self and group identifications, as well as audience and social commentary, through their tagging practices.”¹² In her analysis of fandom

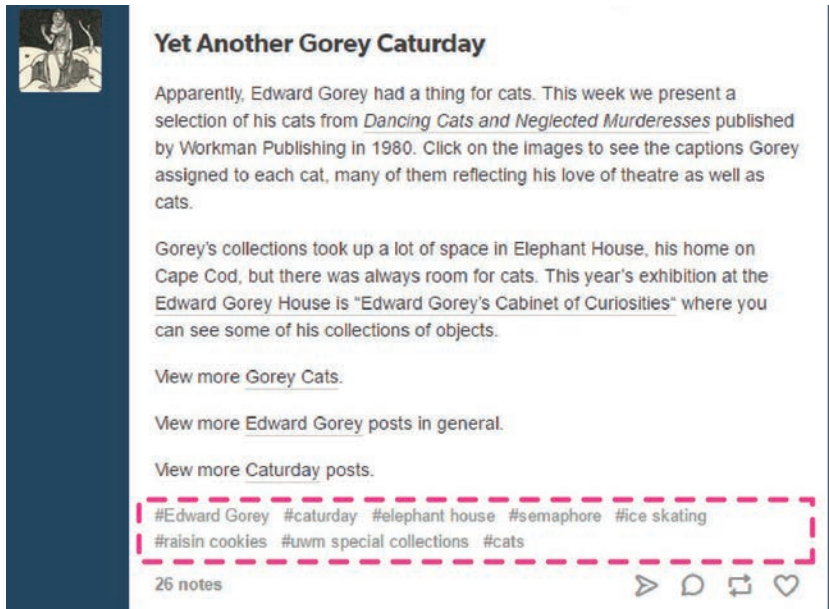


Fig. 2.7. Tags on a Tumblr post (5/2017)

tagging practices, Rose finds that many users use tags not just to identify content, but also to add in commentary and express affect in relation to content.¹³ Tags and tagging can also become highly contested territories, with users often debating about the kinds of content that should appear in one tag versus another. For example, fans of a television show may not want spoilers for a new episode to be tagged with the show's name. If a spoiler-filled post is tagged, fans might be inadvertently exposed to information they do not want. Similar debates occur regarding criticism of a show, with fans debating whether other fans can "tag their hate." This discourse can help define the "right" and "wrong" ways to contribute content to Tumblr's various community networks.

When browsing tags, users can sort posts and content by either popularity (as determined by number of notes) or descending chronological order. This allows users different modes of experiencing the content associated with particular affinity communities: one that focuses on what the community deems as the most like-worthy content, and one that focuses on the immediacy of content creation within the community. Tumblr additionally shapes the kinds of results that are returned in the search queries through

additional algorithmic processing, though because of the nontransparent nature of this intervention, we are unable to detail those methods here. Some of these interventions, however, are dependent on users having tagged content to begin with, as Amanda Brennan discusses in this volume. As a result, the metadata of tags are a critical part to the formation and discovery of communities on Tumblr. Tumblr users’ interaction with other users is thus shaped by both Tumblr’s algorithms and other users’ evolving social norms and taxonomic approaches to tagging content.

CONCLUSION

Tumblr initially presents itself as a platform that makes it possible for users to connect directly with content they will “discover” and “love.” Through content, tags, reblogging chains, and notes, though, Tumblr users also quickly discover each other. In the process, users may orient themselves more around Tumblr’s community than its content. Tumblr’s technical design provides mechanisms that promote positive affective experiences on the site and helps users experience a sense of fragmented community in the process. Through its seemingly unending stream of *content*, Tumblr fosters ephemeral, intense, and immediate experiences of *community*.

It is through providing access to an unending stream of content that fosters a sense of community that Tumblr works carefully to keep its users “lost in the Dash.” This is important for two reasons. First, the longer users stay on the site, consuming content in the Dash, the more advertising they view. Second, community begets content. When users reach out and connect with other users on Tumblr, they do so by generating posts, sharing their own fiction and art, or perhaps by simply reblogging and echoing the posts of others. These expressions flow back into the broader stream of content for other users to potentially interact with and have affective experiences with. In this way, Tumblr promotes a virtuous cycle of content and community, carefully shaped by the technical design of the platform.

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CHAPTER 3

Going Down the Rabbit Hole

An Interview with Amanda Brennan,
Head of Content Insights and Social, Tumblr

Interviewed by: Allison McCracken

Dates: February 22, 2017, and June 20, 2017

Amanda Brennan is Tumblr's internet librarian and currently leads its content and social teams. After graduating with her MLIS from Rutgers University, she began her career at Know Your Meme, researching the history of internet phenomena and niche subcultures. She has been at Tumblr since 2013, where she spearheads its Fandometrics, Tumblr's weekly ranking of entertainment fandoms on the platform. She has spoken about internet history at conferences across the United States, with topics ranging from Slender Man to cat videos, the latter of which she discussed in the BBC Four documentary *How To Go Viral*. She lives in New Jersey with her spouse and their three cats.

WHAT'S SO SPECIAL ABOUT TUMBLR?

McCracken: *How do you describe the Tumblr user vs. another platform's user?*

Brennan: Tumblr is where people go to share the things they are most passionate about. On Facebook, you connect to your friends, on Twitter you connect to the news. Here you connect over the thing you love the most and you don't need to be who you are on the outside. You can be more anonymous, you can really embrace your interests, you can connect over that. And everything is evenly placed because you don't see follower counts. We have official pages but there's no official blue checkmarks [used for identity verification on social media]. It's an even playing field for both brands and people. And your post gets put into the reblog ecosystem.

McCracken: *Do you consider Tumblr a “youth” platform?*

Brennan: I don’t have actual numbers about what percentage are considered millennials. Tumblr is talked about as a place for teenagers and twenty-somethings, but for me, the fiercest Tumblr users I know are in their thirties and that may be because I’m in my thirties, so a lot of people I know have been on Tumblr for ten years with me.

McCracken: *I wonder if the word “youth” is being used as a descriptive for the type of behavior associated with the people on Tumblr?*

Brennan: Yeah, I was just going to say that, because people connecting with their passions is considered a younger activity. But if you are a forty-five-year-old mom and you don’t want people to know how much you love *Supernatural*, you can be that person here and own your fangirlness as part of the community.

McCracken: *Tumblr gets talked about as a social justice platform. Do you also see it that way?*

Brennan: Tumblr has really empowered people whose voices are otherwise marginalized and given them a place to find their community and build their own kind of world. If you google “nonbinary,” for example, Tumblr is often one of the top results. Black Tumblr is another great example, and the Blackout is an amazing movement that started here.¹ Because people are coming here to discuss what they’re most passionate about, social justice is part of that conversation and people are celebrating this part of themselves: “Yes, we are here and we’re going to have these hard conversations along with these fun ones.” In multifandom blogs, when something really terrible in the news happens, you’re going to see it on a blog because fan activities and news conversations can just happen in the same breath and that’s totally normal.

McCracken: *How large a part of Tumblr usage do you feel is primarily fan-based?*

Brennan: It depends on your interpretation of fandom. If you would consider people who are really into fashion a fandom or food a fandom, then I would say all of Tumblr. It’s what makes Tumblr different from any other social platform. For example, you wouldn’t think about politics

as a fandom, but it kind of is. If you are passionate about something, I think, you are a fan of that thing. Like #AusPol (Australian Politics). And we did a Fandometrics “In Depth” about #feminism. We looked at how people talked about this movement and posted our findings during Women’s History Month. You can sometimes see a real change in how people are thinking. For example, #intersectionality spiked during the Women’s March in January 2017 and it never went down; the conversation has just continued.

TUMBLR FANS AND FAN PRACTICES

McCracken: *How would you describe community building for fans on Tumblr in relation to other platforms?*

Brennan: On Tumblr, it’s really focused around hashtags, so a lot of people will start by searching. Or you’ll be introduced to Tumblr by someone else in your fandom or a friend. You’ll end up finding a network of blogs, and you’ll start to see people who reblog the same usernames all the time and follow them. And because so many blogs are multifandom, you might follow someone because you like Marvel but then this person starts liking a new TV show so you end up “going down the rabbit hole”: you’ll start at point A and end up at Point C and three hours will have passed and you’re like “how did I even get here?” Also, with messaging you’re able to just reach out to someone and say, “Hey, I love your art” or “I love your GIFs, let’s talk about the show”; you’ll be able to talk about it in a very immediate kind of way.

Personally, when I started in 2008, it was so different. There were user-identified topics in directories where you could find all the blogs about pop punk, for example, and that’s where I made my earliest friends on Tumblr. Today, our recommendation algorithm is pretty good, so if you really like Harry Potter, the recommendations are on the nose. And then when you follow something from a recommendation, it flips over and says “here’s five more blogs,” so it’s a constant rabbit hole.

McCracken: *How has Tumblr changed fandom?*

Brennan: You can come to Tumblr and not feel weird because you like this anime that no one has ever heard of, and I think that’s really where it has changed. If you participated in a Listserv back in the day, it was some-

thing you had to hide from your family and friends and feel secretive and *private* about it, whereas on Tumblr you just let your fan flag fly and you can shout from the rooftops, “I love Harry Potter and I am here and I am going to talk about it for days.” I’ve also been thinking a lot about why people go to LiveJournal vs. Tumblr; on LiveJournal, you can exist only in this one fandom, only participating in one thing, whereas on Tumblr, you’re much less siloed and you’re exposed to new things a lot more. I think that is a key difference between the two. You can also dive deeper than you could before and really explore what it means to be a fan, what it means to participate in conversations about your fandom, with fandom as a *personality*, almost, it can take over your life in a way that other places did not allow.

Part of that is also the way the internet has developed: it doesn’t shut off. You’re always on your phone, you’re always around fandom. With old fandom spaces, there was usually only one space you had online to be a fan, but with Tumblr, everything can be your fan space.

It’s also much easier to find new fandoms. Tumblr really bleeds fandoms into each other with the multifandom blog. And my favorite example of this is when *Homestuck* [a web comic especially popular with young teens, 2009–2016.] went on hiatus in 2013 and people got really bored because there was only so much *Homestuck* content being created. That’s how the *Welcome to Night Vale* [podcast, 2012] fandom popped up, because someone in *Homestuck* fandom was looking for weird stuff on the internet and posted about it, “look at this cool podcast I found!” And because the content is kind of similar with spooky, weird stuff and it also has this gay couple at the center, it was a Tumblr perfect storm. People attached themselves to it and the fandom grew out of *Homestuck* being on hiatus.

McCracken: *Are there particular practices you associate with Tumblr fans that are platform-specific?*

Brennan: GIF sets, of course, are unique to Tumblr; you can really focus in on just one scene or moment and break it down. Your entire fandom can be looking at GIFs. With further GIF compression over the years, you can now have GIF sets that are bigger. It’s kind of like a sonnet to me because people get so creative. When it comes to “blue-space,” for example, people make those 3-D GIF sets that incorporate blue-space and make it look like it’s popping out of your Dashboard. It’s an experience that

doesn't work outside of the Dashboard. You can't post that to Twitter. By incorporating the color of the Dashboard into the GIF, it has a specific meaning that only works on Tumblr.

Also, the way people role-play has really evolved in an amazing way thanks to Tumblr's "Ask" and "reblog" functions. "Imagines," for example, are a very Tumblr thing (see figure 3.1). An Imagine is often just a one-sentence prompt, like "Imagine Sebastian Stan and Chris Evans go on a picnic." It's an entry point for fan fiction and deeper fandom. A more consistently personalized version of this is "x-reader." Instead of shipping [coupling] the characters from the text, it's "character-x-reader," so it's a Mary Sue [Ed.: inserting oneself directly into the story]. For example, "imagine all the crew waiting for you, after just having solved a case." That's a *Supernatural* Imagine, and it features a GIF of the characters Rowena, Sam,

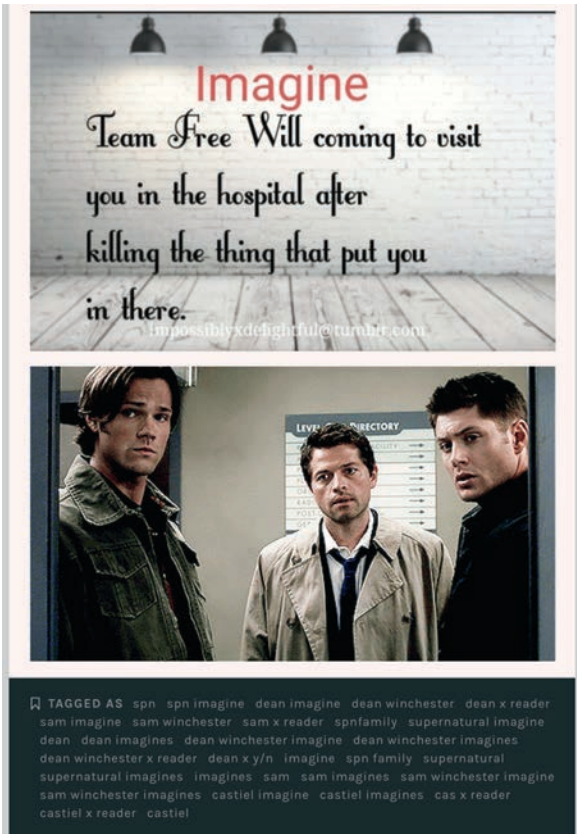


Fig. 3.1. *Supernatural* Imagine by Impossiblyxdelightful, with a full roster of tags

Castiel, and Crowley just waiting around for you. So it's putting yourself in the story, and a lightweight way to participate in fandom. People reblog and respond to these prompts and some write fic off of them.

McCracken: *Why do some content producers connect with Tumblr fans better than others?*

Brennan: The brands who succeed on Tumblr are those that understand the voice of the people that follow them and act as the connective tissue between the users. The *Doctor Who* brand is a great example. They're not just saying, "Here's the new *Doctor Who*" show. As it airs, they'll reblog content from users and comment "excellent post." If the user is watching their first episode, when the *Doctor Who* blog reblogs their post, they'll also comment, "here are a few more that you might like." They're blogging as a person with a voice rather than blogging as a brand behind a curtain, creating a community around the topic.

FANDOMETRICS: USER INSIGHTS THROUGH TAGGING DATA

McCracken: *What is Fandometrics?*

Brennan: The "pleasantly scientific rankings of fandom on Tumblr" is our tagline. We take nine different entertainment categories and gather up all the engagement across searches, original posts, reblogs, and "likes" that happen in a seven-day window, and we measure them and rank them. Fandometrics is the first data analysis system on Tumblr; I was actually hired specifically to work on tag data in 2013. Before that, there was no quantitative analysis. We had top blogs in user-assigned topics: you would tag your blog with whatever it was about and it would populate the directory. When I first started, I was just hand-reading spreadsheets and manually assigning topics, but I have a Javascript program I use now and it knows all the tags from doing it for so long. I just put the data in and every Monday it spits out lists.

McCracken: *Does Fandometrics measure all Tumblr users, or just fans?*

Brennan: The tagging that I work with is *all* of Tumblr. When it comes to those datasets, it's like here's a tag, here's a number. Which is good and

bad. I can't say, "20 percent of all Americans talk about this thing." It's more just, "here's the volume around one specific tag." It's challenging in the case of fandom, because some fandoms use a lot of tags and others don't. Fandometrics is more a measurement of one specific tag than the whole taxonomy of a show. In thinking about *Supernatural* for example, tags relating to the show appear in multiple categories across the taxonomy system (see figure 3.1). *Steven Universe* is another one. Some fandoms really know how to tag and some fandoms don't, whether it is because they don't want to or don't know how to tag properly. For example, people are constantly using GIFs from *Parks and Recreation* and *The Office* but not tagging them, so only once in a while they'll show up in the data.

When you look at the raw data set, and *Steven Universe* and *Blackout* are up there and in the context of each other, I think it says so much about the community. Tumblr data is going to look totally different than a Nielsen rating; it shows the multifaceted nature of Tumblr users. You can see this in what trends day to day in the app as well, which range from the standard entertainment fare to the latest K-Pop news to whatever is going on in politics that day. Tumblr really allows someone to lean into their fandom and the social issues they care about in the same breath, at similar volumes and with the same voracity.

McCracken: *What if the post for one show has a lot of different tags?*

Brennan: Most of what's in Fandometrics is just one specific tag for the show. So, if you tag something "Dean Winchester" [a *Supernatural* character], that doesn't get rolled up into the *Supernatural* tally, because when people tag *Supernatural*, they will tag "Supernatural," "SPN," "Dean Winchester," "Sam Winchester," "Castiel" (again, see figure 3.1). If we put all those tags into the *Supernatural* count, we would be counting that one post six times. So because we can't duplicate like that, we just pick the best tag. . . . Sometimes there isn't one definitive tag, so in the raw data, we'll have both "SPN" and "Supernatural" and whichever is used more that week will be counted and the other one will be taken out.

McCracken: *How does your team locate more obscure fandoms?*

Brennan: It's a lot of related tags, and a lot of it starts with the users tagging it accurately. You know when you search for something and the results show you five related tags? In our backend, we can see thirty. If some-

thing weird pops up, we'll say, "Let's explore this, let's see what people are saying." People sometimes use sentence tags as a way to express themselves. So if a post goes viral and the original post has a sentence tag on it, like "OMG this is the best post of all time," that tag will end up in our dataset and we'll find out what that tag goes back to. I'll just do a reverse search to find the post because it gives us more information about what is going viral in the community. You go down these rabbit holes and you'll find something, like the movie *Sausage Party* [a 2016 computer animated film about grocery store shelf food that talks starring Seth Rogen as a talking sausage]. There is a very small fandom of this movie and they do "foodsonas" (a play on "persona"), which are visuals of talking food in the style of the movie. When we found that, I couldn't believe it was real, but there are people who draw talking burgers.

There are also fan communities that I know are there because of tagging and I always want to find a way to put them out there. A good example of how we did this was with the WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) fandom, which is a huge fandom on Tumblr. We put a post up on Fandometrics about the community, and then it was reblogged as "Staff"—everyone follows Staff, Tumblr follows it for you—and then we tagged it. We put it up on a Tuesday, because wrestling airs Monday nights, so Tuesday people would be looking for wrestling content. A whole bunch of the wrestling blogs reblogged our post and that's how it grew. It received this wildly positive sentiment where fans were like, "Oh, Tumblr knows we're here!" There was a whole reblog train of our post on one of the most popular wrestling blogs. They were so happy to be appreciated that Staff then ended up reblogging the reblog train and there was this whole conversation.

McCracken: *So, since Fandometrics is tag data from all Tumblr users, how does a site such as, for example, a transgender advice blog get counted? How do you know they're there?*

Brennan: That all depends. All of my tag data is stripped of user information. So if there are five hundred posts tagged *Supernatural*, I can't tell you how many users made those posts. It could be five hundred users or it could be two users who like *Supernatural*. But we also have a blog search, which is different; that's all algorithmic (not tagging-based). If I do a blog search like "usage for cats," for example, it will find the blogs that it knows are about cats, so it's a lot about the engagement on the

blog. Our search, unlike our tag data, is full text. So, if we search “trans,” that blog has a chance of coming up if it’s using “trans” in the text, where it would get lost in the tagging end. If two thousand people search for “trans,” these two thousand searches get factored into the Fandometrics score, but we don’t count *what* shows up there, that is, how many posts result from these searches.

McCracken: *How do you figure out tags that may be intra-community specific?*

Brennan: We tried to build the main taxonomy around what the community is actually talking about, so we have robust categories for certain communities, like sexuality and gender or self-identifying community tags. Most of the time we rely on the context within the related tags to determine meaning. When something is trending in the system it will pull in the three related tags, so if I don’t know what it is I can easily glance at that. If it’s something that feels really, really insular, we have a lot of different people on staff where I’ll ask, “Hey, I know you’re into this thing or you’re a part of this community, we have this tag, what does it mean?” We don’t really ask users. We don’t have contact policies, but we’re not really actively contacting people. A lot of us are users ourselves so we can probably figure it out.

McCracken: *Have you had any criticism from communities regarding tagging or Fandometrics reporting of tag rankings?*

Brennan: We rank Tumblr communities at the end of this year based on engagement, which can get pushback. Because Black Tumblr was so low at year-end 2016 (#10), for example, we got a lot of critical reblogs saying, “Oh, of course, why didn’t they make Black Tumblr #1” and it’s literally just the numbers. It’s important to have the information there but that’s not to say that *this* community or social issue is not as important as *that* community or social issue. It’s not that it’s more important, it’s just there’s more engagement around that tag. It’s a very subtle line. When it comes to those, it’s more just watching the community and if something is trending, we make sure that it’s there in public and that people see it, so we’re lifting people up where we can. A great example is Black History Month, where we went through all the tags and we used tag data to choose what stickers we put in the app; so “blackgirlmagic” is a sticker in the app because it’s a tag that people use.

LOCATING TRENDS

McCracken: *Are there trends or interests that you see as very specific to Tumblr?*

Brennan: A good example is “stimming.” It’s supposed to be a calming GIF set where people touch slime or put paint down and then scrape the paint off. “Stimming” is the activity of making the slime and then touching and squishing it; it’s a repetitive, self-soothing practice most associated with autistic people. [Ed.: This practice went mainstream after it was popularized on Tumblr, with groups of primarily tween/teen girls involved in what became known as “making slime.”] It often manifests on Tumblr in the form of GIF sets or videos. I saw it coming up in Fandometrics and I told my team, “Hey, there’s this new thing happening, this is the tag, this is what the posts look like.” We look at the community and share a post on our social media and say, “This is what they’re talking about.” This practice overlaps with fandom in that people make stimulating posts for specific characters as well

Undertale was another huge trend. It’s one of Tumblr’s favorite video games, and it came out of the *Homestuck* fandom. It’s an RPG [role playing game] on Steam [game distribution/download platform] where you have to go through the whole thing without killing any of the monsters. The main character doesn’t have a gender, they’re just this humanoid person named “Frisk,” and you make friends with these skeleton bros—you don’t go out on a date with them *within* the game, as some erotic fan art surrounding the game suggests—and all the monsters are incredibly cute. On Tumblr there are so many AUs [fan-created “alternative universe” narratives] of *Undertale*, because after people play through it once, then they do the other versions of it. *Undertale* is interesting because it’s this very low-key indie game, but on Tumblr, the cult following is just overwhelming.

As I mentioned earlier, I’m formulating this idea of the “perfect storm” about why some things go viral on Tumblr. *Undertale* is a good example where it’s created by someone who’s affiliated with another Tumblr fandom, *Homestuck*. And it’s very subversive because it takes the idea of an RPG and just flips it on its head, where you have to be empathetic as a player, and the idea of being empathetic is very, very innate to Tumblr. Tumblr is very into positivity and mental health and exploring emotions; it’s a key piece of this puzzle. I have been trying to find a way

to apply these kind of insights as new properties comes up. *Riverdale* was an example of that too, where it had these three components: (1) an established property, (2) it was on the CW, and (3) it has Cole Sprouse in it, and Cole Sprouse is a Tumblr favorite who is playing a tall, dark, confused character. And Tumblr loves that kind of broken boy. So, *Riverdale* was a perfect storm and it ended up doing really well.

PROFESSIONAL FANDOM AND FAN SERVICE

McCracken: *How does being a fan yourself inform your professional practice and your approach to users?*

Brennan: It makes my job a little bit easier. I know the ways that people talk about the things they love, because I talk about things the same way. I feel like it gives me insight into why people are interested in the things they are. I also know what my coworkers need to know to understand why a particular fan activity is important. So I sometimes feel like a translator when it comes to this stuff.

I'm passionate about fandom and I want other people to appreciate fandom, for fans to see that I am genuine about it. Fandometrics is a labor of love and we want to use our work to show our community, "Hey, we see you, we're here with you and we're doing this for you." As fans ourselves, we want to acknowledge fandom and validate it. The Tumblr community is fandom and it's shouting and it's celebrating and we want to honor it. I like being a supporter of our users in real life where I can, and I do five or six public events a year, libraries and cons and fan events. The thing that keeps me going is when people tell me that Tumblr has saved their lives and Tumblr has led them to their partner or just that Tumblr has let them be who they need to be.

NOTES

1. For more discussion of Blackout, see Kendra Calhoun's essay "Blackout, Black Excellence, Black Power" Chapter Four in this volume.

Blackout, Black Excellence, Black Power

Strategies of Everyday Online Activism on Black Tumblr

Kendra Calhoun

Kendra Calhoun is a PhD candidate in linguistics at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her research analyzes the intersections of language and race in social media contexts with a focus on discourse-based forms of Black digital activism.

In this essay, I analyze the discursive practices of one network of Tumblr users—Black Tumblr—and the strategies that they use to engage in what I term “everyday online activism.” In contrast to the collective activism campaigns of Twitter, Black Tumblr users are not striving toward a single shared tangible goal (e.g., policy reform); rather, they utilize the affordances of the platform—such as combining image and text, reblogging, and commenting—to do the groundwork that makes collective activism possible. That is, Black Tumblr, by maintaining a visible online presence through everyday discourse practices, raises awareness of issues that must be acknowledged before policy can have any meaningful social change for Black people offline. Here, I discuss four primary ways that Black Tumblr engages in everyday online activism: (1) challenging hegemonic negative ideologies about Black people, (2) promoting dialogue about underdiscussed issues, (3) bringing attention to hypocritical or insensitive actions and beliefs that negatively affect Black individuals, and (4) promoting positive representations of Black people. These four strategies are Black Tumblr–specific forms of widespread Tumblr discourse and cultural practices, which I describe briefly below.

After a discussion of my experience as a Tumblr user and ethnographer, I provide a brief overview of general Tumblr features, followed by an elaboration on the concept of “everyday online activism.” I then describe the Black Tumblr user network and analyze examples of the four strategies stated above.

TUMBLR

My description and analysis of Black Tumblr activism is based on my experiences as a Black-identified Tumblr user and several years of focused research. I have been an observant participant in Tumblr's cultural practices since I joined the site in 2012.¹ My research interest in activism on the site began in 2014 when, in the wake of the shooting of Michael Brown and other cases of police violence, Tumblr was noticeably absent from most major news coverage of Black social media users' responses to these events. When Tumblr was mentioned it was generally cursory, describing the platform vaguely as similar to Twitter or mentioning only one specific blog.² Since joining the site I have followed more than 220 different blogs, including theme blogs dedicated to a single topic or theme (e.g., *everydayasia*), popular content blogs (e.g., *bestoftumblng*), and the blogs of everyday users. I also track several hashtags, which populate my Dashboard with posts from blogs that I do not necessarily follow but include a hashtag I'm interested in.

In my more than six years of participant-observation through posting on my own blog and following others' blogs, I have identified several key discursive practices across Tumblr, shaped heavily by the platform's technological affordances. Multimedia content (text, image, GIFs, video), reblogging, and commenting on posts are fundamental to the ways Tumblr users express their ideas and engage in dialogue with each other. These discursive and interactional practices are on blogs of all types, but because of the dominant progressive culture and demographics of users on Tumblr, these practices are often used to create activism-related content. More than half of Tumblr users are under the age of twenty-five.³ The site is used at a 50 percent higher rate in urban than suburban areas, and Black and Latinx youth use the site at a 60 percent higher rate than white youth.⁴ There is a prevalent queer culture, with non-cisheteronormative gender identities and sexualities readily visible,⁵ and many Tumblr users identify as members of other socially marginalized groups (e.g., immigrants, disabled people), or as allies. The popular sociopolitical content reflects their interests, experiences, and concerns, and the dialogic nature of the platform affords all users equal opportunities to use their voice and to respond to others in ways that people from marginalized communities—and people marginalized within their communities—are often barred from in their day-to-day lives. Although all content on the platform is publicly visible, sociopolitically oriented Tumblr interactions tend to resemble one-on-one or small group conversations: rather than making a comment for a general Tumblr audience, users who reblog and comment

on these types of posts often direct what they say specifically to the original poster or to someone else in the comment thread. The users who post original content often use linguistic structures that invite dialogue, such as questions. By using this conversational style of interaction to promote sociopolitical discussions, Tumblr users participate in the practice of *everyday activism*.

EVERYDAY ONLINE ACTIVISM

Rather than the swift large-scale social change that collective activism strives for, everyday activism aims to make changes on a smaller scale, in “the realm of daily life.”⁶ Everyday activism is a dialogic process through which ideologies are formed and subsequently revised based on continuous interaction with others, whether friends and family, colleagues, or acquaintances. As Vivienne describes it, everyday activism is:

[T]he sharing of personal stories [and perspectives] in public spaces with the aim of challenging the status quo through “erosive social change”: changes in attitude that take place slowly over an extended time frame, profoundly reshaping social norms as they diffuse among networked publics.⁷

Using everyday discursive practices such as conversation and storytelling, “everyday activists” exercise their political voices in intimate settings rather than as part of a publicly visible collective movement, and, as a result, everyday activism is often perceived as being outside of the public sphere. Even if it is not in the public sphere, however, everyday activism is still a political action: it gives everyone equal opportunity to be an activist, and engaging in dialogue has the potential to teach the people involved the “importance of voice, the consequences of silence, the pain of invisibility, and the political nature of oppression.”⁸ Everyday activism takes different forms depending on the context in which it occurs, and there are obvious differences between its face-to-face and online forms, such as the public nature of interactions on sites like Tumblr. Although the sense of intimacy one feels in a one-on-one interaction may not be present in a public Tumblr interaction, the conversational nature of the interaction is. Building on the idea of everyday activism and its emphasis on the sociopolitical power of dialogue, I’ve termed this practice in online contexts *everyday online activism*: taking the practices of everyday activism and adapting them to the interactional affordances of online contexts. This essay demonstrates the potential of everyday online

activism by analyzing how the network of users known as Black Tumblr utilizes the platform to address issues relevant to their community.

BLACK TUMBLR

The self-identified network of Black users who refer to themselves as Black Tumblr is analogous to the now well-known Black Twitter in both network structure and type of content produced. Black Tumblr is not a specific group of users; rather, it is an unofficial group within a public sphere, having no formal regulations for “membership” or group delineation and no separate online space. There are many popular theme blogs within Black Tumblr (e.g., *reverseracism*, *blackwomenconfessions*), but there are no designated leaders. Similar to how the use of “blacktags” and discussions of Black culture on Twitter allow the “members” of Black Twitter to make themselves visible and interact with each other,⁹ Black Tumblr users engage in distinct discursive practices that make them recognizable as members of the Black Tumblr community. In their posts and interactions, Black Tumblr users address issues that are present in Black communities and for Black individuals, including but not limited to institutional racism, education inequality, cultural appropriation, police brutality, mass incarceration, media representation, gentrification, and ideas of beauty.

Black Tumblr is made up of Black people from diverse geographic locations, ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Afro-Latinx, multiracial), gender and sexual identities, socioeconomic statuses, ages, and physical appearances, and as a result, many of the discourses that circulate within the network are intersectional and nuanced. But although the network is made up of Black users of heterogeneous identities, Black Tumblr is not immune from hegemonic cultural biases and network-internal forms of exclusion and discrimination, such as colorism, misogyny among Black men, and homo- and transphobia. Tumblr as a platform has a U.S.-centric bias, with 42 percent of site traffic coming from the United States (Tumblr.com), and this is reflected in Black Tumblr content: references to U.S. media, celebrities, current events, and racial politics dominate popular circulated content. Black Tumblr content is also identifiable by various hashtags that are used widely; some of the most popular include #blacktumblr, #melanin, #blackgirlmagic, #blackexcellence and #blackout. With hashtags such as these, Black users whose blogs aren’t dedicated to issues of race can make relevant posts more visible to other Black Tumblr users.

By following theme blogs dedicated to issues of race (generally) and Black identity (specifically), non-theme blogs of Black-identified users, and Black Tumblr-specific hashtags, I identified four primary ways that Black Tumblr uses the affordances of Tumblr to engage in everyday online activism. These strategies are not mutually exclusive, and in many cases a single post will accomplish more than one of these goals.

STRATEGY #1: CHALLENGING HEGEMONIC IDEOLOGIES ABOUT BLACK PEOPLE

Despite the dominant sociopolitically progressive culture of Tumblr, many negative stereotypes and inaccurate or incomplete information about Black people still circulate on the platform. One of the ways that Black Tumblr engages in everyday online activism is by calling out the inaccuracy of specific posts, along with critiquing ideologies that circulate across Tumblr, other media, and in face-to-face interactions. For example, in one post a user challenges the perception of “Black sounding” names as “ghetto” by explaining the African-language-derived meanings of several popular names. Although some users who reblogged and commented on the post questioned the accuracy of the etymologies, the post author emphasized that the point of the post was to show that all names, no matter their origin, deserve respect. Many users showed their alignment with and appreciation of the author’s message, including user *introvertedandblack*, who commented:

Lol word. Black names do not require meaning to be respected! No one questions a white kid named apple or coco cause “its different” but if a Black kids name isnt conventional it has to have meaning or even if it does its ghetto and therefore its ok to devalue them

introvertedandblack explicitly points out the racially-based difference in perceptions of “unconventional” names, highlighting the hypocritical denigration of Black children’s names for not adhering to expected (read: white) naming conventions when white children’s “different” names are perceived as unique for that very reason.

Another topic frequently addressed by Black Tumblr is the widespread perception that multiracial Black people, including children, are exceptionally attractive. Evidence of this belief is reflected in statements like “Blasian children are guaranteed to be cute,” and the frequency with which Black

people are asked “what they’re mixed with” when another person finds them attractive. This expressed preference for mixed-race children and assumptions that attractive Black adults are multiracial implies that Blackness is not cute or desirable on its own, that “a mixed black is an improved black.”¹⁰ Black Tumblr’s practices of calling out the perpetuation of the “biracial aesthetic”—especially light-skinned, curly haired, and/or light-eyed women—as a beauty ideal and asserting that Black people who are phenotypically monoracial are equally attractive are two tandem strategies used to challenge an ideology of Black inferiority.

Since the Black Lives Matter movement and the Movement for Black Lives have become prominent in the United States, conflicting ideologies about Black pride have become part of public consciousness on Tumblr and in U.S. society more broadly. Black people who are openly “pro-Black” and express pride in their racial heritage are often characterized as necessarily being “anti-white.” While it is true that some Black Americans consciously avoid interacting with whites as much as possible (and many have publicly proclaimed this on Tumblr), characterizing all proud Black people in this way is a gross generalization and mischaracterization. In one exchange, several users challenge this racial ideology that equates pro-blackness with anti-whiteness in their reactions to an excerpt from a Muhammad Ali speech in which he says, “We don’t hate you! We don’t hate those of you who are white. We just want to stay Black! We love my color. I just love myself.” Multiple users reiterate the key point of this message in their comments, stating “pro-Black does not mean anti-white.”

STRATEGY #2: PROMOTING DIALOGUE ABOUT UNDERDISCUSSED ISSUES

A second strategy of everyday online activism that Black Tumblr employs is ensuring that issues that are relevant to Black people but not widely discussed—by media or Black people themselves—do not go completely unaddressed. One such issue is the biased ways mainstream media cover Black men and their actions, disproportionately reporting their criminal behavior relative to white men. Without excusing any of the men for their crimes, Black Tumblr users have pointed out the numerous instances of white male celebrities having successful careers in sports and entertainment with little to no mention of their crimes, in contrast to Black male celebrities whose crimes become one of the defining characteristics of their celebrity. For example,



We know why.



Don't forget Charlie Sheen. He's been arrested for domestic violence at least six times and shot a woman. With a gun. And he's still got a career.

Fig. 4.1. Racial disparity in consequences for male celebrities' crimes

one user posed the question of why former NFL athlete Ray Rice and singer Chris Brown were, at the time, the public faces of domestic violence while white male celebrities such as actors Nicolas Cage and Christian Bale, who are guilty of the same crime, were not (figure 4.1).

the-goddamazon's response of "We know why" implies a shared understanding of racial bias at the societal level, and jean-luc-gohard displays their understanding by providing an additional example of a white man whose criminal actions are unknown to most people, a stark contrast to Black men whose crimes are widely publicized and frequently discussed years after they were committed.

Black Tumblr users also promote dialogue about underdiscussed issues by providing factual information that many Black people may not have access to. In one thread, users co-construct an educational post, discussing a health practice with specific benefits to Black people: getting sufficient exposure to sunlight. This is particularly important to discuss because it is something

My doctor "black female btw" told me that black people have the highest rate of Vitamin D deficiency. Vit. D is produced naturally when the skin is exposed to sunlight without sunscreen, so we should have the upperhand but we still struggle! We've got to get outside y'all.

Vitamin D:

- fights depression (which is already at extremely high rates for the black population)
- helps resist diabetes and heart disease (another health issue specifically prevalent in the black community)
- and overall keeps your bones and skin healthy! (if you want your skin to glow, fr go outside)

We already have the world against us, we have to take care of ourselves!

Fig. 4.2. Discussing health practices

that is unlikely to be a frequent topic of discussion for non-Black people or Black people without specific medical resources.

In response to a post that suggests Black people should get two hours of sunlight a day, one user (figure 4.2) describes the specific benefits of sunlight that they learned about from their Black doctor, such as fighting depression and diabetes. For Black people who do not have regular access to health care, do not see a Black doctor, or otherwise haven't received this type of information from a medical professional, this post gives them one way to take control of their well-being and become an advocate for their specific health needs.

STRATEGY #3: BRINGING ATTENTION TO HYPOCRITICAL OR INSENSITIVE ACTIONS AND/OR BELIEFS THAT NEGATIVELY AFFECT BLACK INDIVIDUALS

Overlapping often with the first strategy, Black Tumblr's third strategy of everyday online activism is to point out when another person's actions or expressed beliefs—whether that person is non-Black or Black—are hypocritical or insensitive to the struggles and values of Black people. Discourses that use this strategy are often centered around interracial interactions (particularly white Americans' attitudes about and actions toward Black Americans), but hypocritical actions of Black people are also addressed. In a text post, *fiercedeception* expresses her frustration with being dismissed by white people when she attempts to tell them they've done something offensive. She includes the “abc's of excuses,” and by presenting white people's responses as rote phrases (similar to “A is for apple”) she implies that white people have not only failed to take the time to listen to Black people's frustrations or acknowledge that they have done something that offended another person, but white people have also not taken the time to think of an honest response or reason for why they did it (figure 4.3).

The universality of these types of interactions for Black people is evidenced by the ease with which other users are able to complete the “abc's,” picking up at D (“Don't make everything about race”) and going all the way to Z (“Zoned out, head on the desk, are you coming into my class high?”). The phrases they include are ones that may be said by white friends (“OMG, I was just joking . . .”), white teachers or other authority figures (“Martin Luther King, Jr. didn't die for you to destroy your cities and sag your pants”), and white people of any age in any social context (“I never owned any slaves”; “Not all white people are racist”). For people who say these types of phrases



fiercedeception

Why when POC (im talking about black folks specifically right now)
tell white people that they are doing something offensive white
people go through the whole abc's of excuses?

ALL lives matter

But black people wear weaves

Cant we all just get along



cunt-lyfe

Don't make everything about race



fiercedeception

Everyone is human



photosbyjaye

Freedom of speech

Get over it

History can't be changed

I never owned any Slaves

Justice is for everyone

Fig. 4.3. Rote phrases used as excuses by whites (excerpt from longer post)

without realizing the effect that they may have on their Black interlocutor, this thread serves as a sort of wakeup call, a guide to “What Not to Say When a Black Person Points Out Your Racist Behavior.”

Among various contentious issues within Black communities, colorism is a frequent topic of discussion on Black Tumblr. Black women in particular highlight the ways Black men’s attitudes toward Black women—often fetishizing light-skinned women and sexually objectifying, insulting, or ignoring dark-skinned women altogether—feed into the racism and sexism that Black women already face from non-Black people (see Black feminist scholar Moya Bailey’s Tumblr, *moyazb*, for a discussion of this concept of “misogynoir,” as well as essays by Mahmud and Strugglingtobeheard in this volume). User loveleyarayyy highlights this phenomenon in figure 4.4, referring to the fact that representations of dark-skinned women in visual media (e.g., photos, music videos) are often limited to overtly sexualized images.

ALLOW ALL DARKSKIN WOMEN TO FLOURISH WITHOUT ONLY
SHOWING LOVE TO THE ONES THAT ARE OILY IN PHOTOSHOOTS
BUTT ASS NAKED W/ the glowy cheeks #2K17

Fig. 4.4. Sexual objectification of dark-skinned Black women



pocket-rocket-boy

When You're High Yellow grandmother Tells You to Find a Light Skin Boy so That You Dont Have Any "Tar Babies" 🙄🙄



blackice397

^When you're a dark skin and girls your age enforce this same mentality against you. 🙄🙄



heyblackrose

^ yes I didn't hear that dark skin light skin boy bullshit until I moved to Houston



heyblackrose

And don't you dare say anything about light skin people, she'll reprimand you for it while still making "black as tar" jokes.

Fig. 4.5. Colorism perpetuated by Black women

As the interaction between pocket-rocket-boy, blackice397, and hey-blackrose in figure 4.5 shows, colorism is also perpetuated by Black girls and women, including within their own families and social networks. Being told by one's grandmother or female peers to have children with a light-skinned partner for the explicit goal of not having dark-skinned children is a clear and harmful message of how society—Black and non-Black—values Blackness that is closer to whiteness.

These examples demonstrate how Black Tumblr users make the detrimental effects of colorism visible to non-Black people who are unfamiliar with them and Black people who may exhibit these types of behaviors toward others; it is also a way for them to find solidarity with others with similar experiences.

STRATEGY #4: PROMOTING POSITIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK PEOPLE

Black Tumblr's fourth major strategy of everyday online activism is promoting positive representations of Black people of diverse backgrounds, including celebrities, academics, public figures, and everyday people doing great things. Highlighting Black people's accomplishments and positive actions complements the first strategy: rather than only proving the (negative) things that Black people are not, Black Tumblr actively demonstrates the positive things that Black people are. Successes in athletics, academics, outreach, activism, the arts, business, politics, and everyday acts that demonstrate the range of Black people's skills and set good examples for other Black people are posted, reblogged, and celebrated across the Black Tumblr community, often tagged with the hashtag #blackexcellence.

In addition to celebrating Black people's accomplishments and actions, Black Tumblr highlights positive representations of Black people and culture in media and Black people who embrace and celebrate Black culture in high-profile settings. Television shows and films with Black protagonists or Black characters in a diversity of social roles (e.g., Issa Rae's HBO show *Insecure*, NBC's *This Is Us*, Marvel's *Black Panther* movie) and public figures like Miss Universe Jamaica 2017, who competed in the Miss Universe Pageant rocking her natural afro, have received much praise among Black Tumblr users. User brianatheloner illustrates the significance of this type of representation with a collage of GIFs of Black entertainers and characters, with captions that

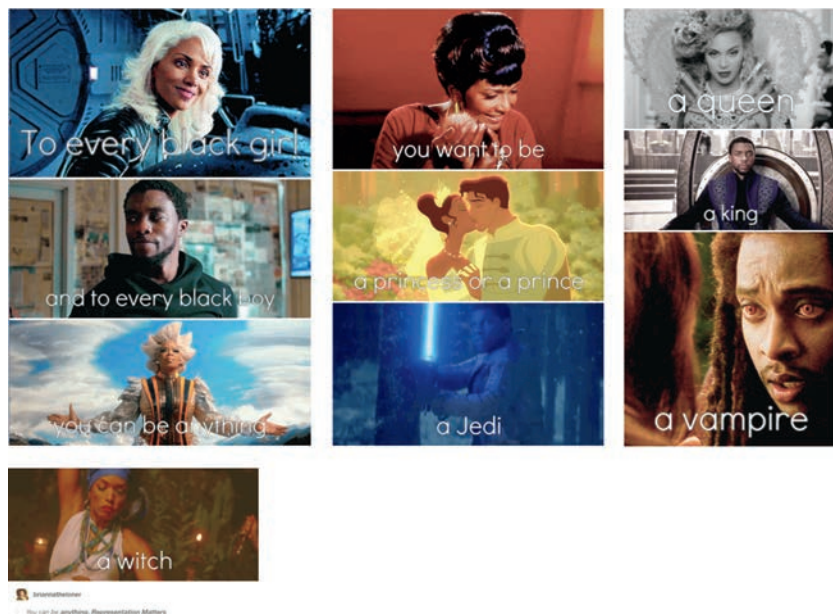


Fig. 4.6. Black representation in popular media

combine to say, “To every black girl and to every black boy, you can be anything you want to be: a princess or a prince, a Jedi, a queen, a king, a vampire, a witch” (figure 4.6). She concludes in her caption: “You can be anything. Representation Matters.”

The most widely visible effort to promote positive images of Black people and celebrate the diversity of Black Tumblr is the Blackout, or Blackout Day. Co-created by three Black Tumblr users—marsincharge, nukirk, and luka-brasi—and organized through *theblackout*, the event occurs four times a year. On these designated days, Black Tumblr users post images of themselves, often with brief captions, and use the tags such as #blackout. Black people’s diversity of body types, skin tones, hair color and textures, styles of dress, nationalities, and cultures are on full display and proudly celebrated as equally beautiful. Other users (Black and non-Black) like or reblog the images to show social support.

The Blackout has become so popular that it has been recognized by Tumblr staff, including having Blackout images on the Tumblr login screen (figure

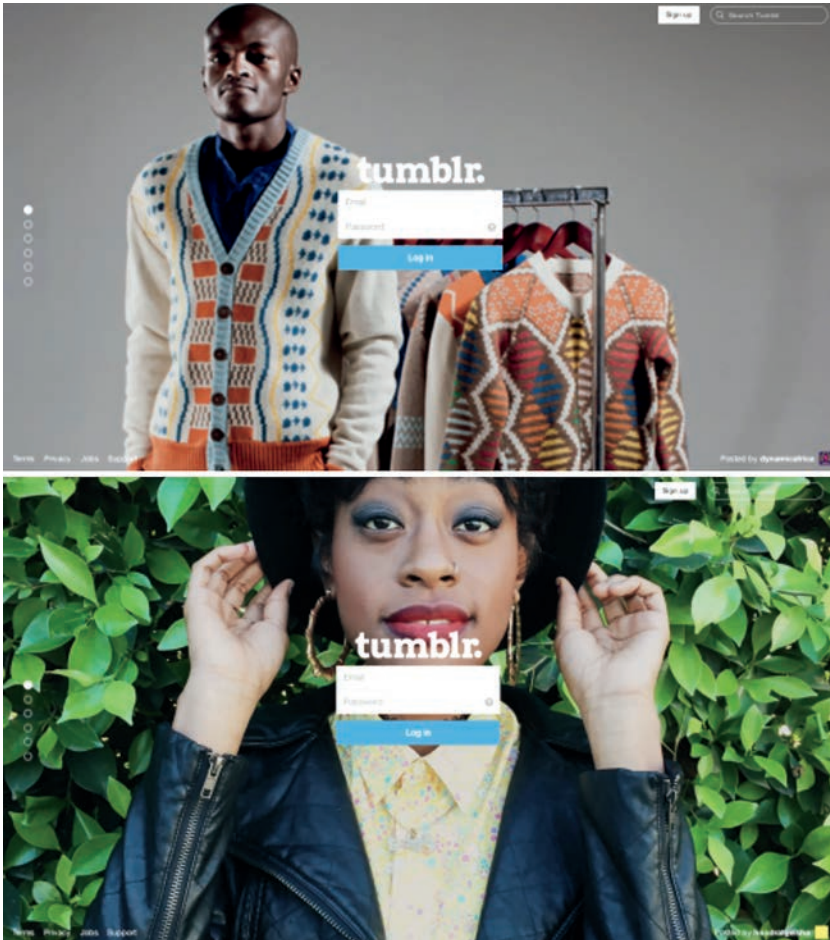


Fig. 4.7. Blackout photos on Tumblr login page

4.7) and the blog being featured in Tumblr's 2018 #WhatWillYouDo campaign for Black History Month. In the words of the creators, the Blackout was created in 2015 in response to "[t]he lack of representation and celebration of everyday black people in mainstream spaces such as movies and television, and the need to create a positive space in which black people could feel welcomed and beautiful" (theblackout.org). In 2018, co-creators marsincharge and nukirk described the mission of the movement as one "to create sustainable online spaces of positivity for Black people . . . all around the world."

CONCLUSION

Everyday online activism allows members of the Black Tumblr network to respond to and engage with people and institutions that marginalize them on a daily basis, including mainstream media, older generations, non-Black peers, and other Black people. Through its dialogic practices, people who are marginalized within Black communities (e.g., women, LGBTQ+ people) also have an opportunity to make their experiences of Blackness visible to a broader audience. The ability to (re)construct narratives and challenge ideologies through these four strategies is a form of agency that gives the Black youth and young adults who use Tumblr new opportunities to be agents for positive social change. Contrary to criticisms of youth preferring “slactivism” to “real” activism,¹¹ Black Tumblr is contributing to social change by maintaining a vocal presence online that contextualizes and provides evidence of the frustrations and struggles that Black people around the world face every day.

NOTES

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Under the Radar

A Conversation about Tumblr in the Public Sphere

Participants: Aja Romano and Elizabeth Minkel

Moderated by: Allison McCracken

Dates: July 6, 2017, and June 27, 2018

Aja Romano is a Brooklyn-based culture writer for *Vox* and a longtime member of fandom. Prior to *Vox*, they spent four years as a fandom reporter for the internet culture media outlet *The Daily Dot*.

Elizabeth Minkel is a writer and editor who focuses on fan culture and digital communities. She has written for the *New Statesman*, *The Guardian*, *The New Yorker*, *The Millions*, *The Verge*, and more. She co-hosts the Fansplaining podcast and co-curates The Rec Center, a weekly fandom newsletter.

McCracken: *What was your initial impression of Tumblr as a platform and as a cultural space?*

Romano: Tumblr started out as a fairly niche and isolated platform which gave it a lot of cultural freedom and a feeling of freewheeling anarchy, in a way that was profoundly different from what might be seen as its ideologically opposite analogues, 4chan and Reddit, because Tumblr's culture skewed young, female/feminine, queer, diverse, and progressive in ways that made it very resistant to/subversive of broader internet cultural trends. While much of the internet's culture from the early aughts on was essentially codified by Something Awful, 4chan, and memes coming from those types of male-dominated websites, Tumblr functioned as a storehouse for a different set of cultural ideas about what memes were, what and who the internet was for, and how online creation could be used to comment on/call out/resist dominant cultural paradigms.

Minkel: I think that David Karp set out to make something specific and then didn't and it just sort of evolved on its own.

Romano: Yeah that's definitely it. David Karp allowed the community to evolve itself, and that made Tumblr unique in the annals of social media. Tumblr is similar to Vine in a way because they were both very driven by community culture evolving itself around the specific uniqueness of the platform.

Minkel: From maybe 2009 or 2010 onwards, many writers in my sphere turned from blogging platforms like WordPress and Blogger to Tumblr, which offered a stripped-down, more multimedia approach to blogging. This reflected David Karp's initial ideas about what Tumblr would be: the various "post types," text, photo, audio, etc., were meant to be an antidote to the big blank text box of 2000s-era blogging platforms. In the end, this meant Tumblr wound up being a far more visual platform than Blogger or WordPress, for better or for worse. This was the same era that popular joke blogs were cashing in and Tumblr was digging into a sort of hyper-ironicness that would give way to aggressively earnest call-out culture, but in my world, following mostly essayists and novelists, it was a gentler, more sporadic, more interesting space than the blogs people had migrated from. Within a few years, most of these authors drifted from Tumblr; they were never there for the social networking elements, and if they were, the toxicity eventually pushed them away.

I eventually added a few fandom people to my feed after they posted on LiveJournal and Dreamwidth that they were migrating to Tumblr, but it wasn't until I joined a Tumblr-first fandom—*Sherlock*, in 2013—that I truly understood Tumblr as a fannish space. My initial impressions of Tumblr as a fannish space were overwhelmingly visual: For a year, I followed almost exclusively GIF- and image-heavy blogs. It wasn't until I dug into post-season-3 *Sherlock* meta in January of 2014 that I started to encounter "the Discourse." Many fans came to Tumblr from elsewhere, but *plenty* of fans were "Tumblr-first": I have encountered lots of people who have only ever participated in fandom on Tumblr (and Archive of Our Own, AO3, for fanfiction fans). I think that's part of the melding of "Tumblr Discourse"—hyper-social-justice focused, inclined to call-out culture, often well-meaning but sometimes not—and "fandom Discourse" that has grown so strong in recent years. For many fans, especially newer (and often younger) ones, the way you might talk about

politics or racism or homophobia on your feed isn't something separated out from the way you talk about fandom. And that leads to the jumble we see: people conflating shipping with activism, or the messy conversations around what gets dubbed "purity wank," or what should and shouldn't be addressed in fiction.

McCracken: *How do you feel Tumblr has been perceived in the public sphere, especially those spaces you are most familiar with as journalists?*

Romano: The biggest barrier to entry is that a lot of people just don't get the basic functionality of Tumblr, and without understanding what a reblog is, you can't really get how it functions in Tumblr society and how it's replacing a forum thread discussion, for example. And the myth that Tumblr is just for silly teens and fangirls is a pervasive stereotype that's hampered the company's growth for the entirety of the thirteen years since its founding. There's little understanding of how directly Tumblr culture feeds BuzzFeed culture and thus proliferates directly into the cultural mainstream (BuzzFeed used to pull easily 60 to 75 percent of its most popular content straight from Tumblr posts). There's zero understanding of the way Tumblr and transformative fandom culture feed one another, because both these spaces are female-dominated and transgressive of the dominant ideas about what internet culture and what fandom should be, which is largely that both should be iterative, curative, and reifying a straight white male's view of the world. Confusion about both what Tumblr is and about what transformative fandom is and does bleed into one another and result in both being dismissed.

Minkel: I agree with Aja that BuzzFeed remains a major disseminator of Tumblr culture without a *huge* portion of its audience realizing where that content originates. I constantly see Tumblr posts screenshotted and shared on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, but I regularly hear from a lot of my non-fandom contemporaries—of all genders—that they “just don't get” Tumblr and “are people still on there?” I think beyond it being dismissed in a gendered way, a lot of people in the media don't see it as a useful space to spend time because it genuinely doesn't generate significant traffic off the platform. I've heard this from multiple editors and seen this in my own traffic analyses. Part of this is the nature of the broad Tumblr community (which, in my experience, is both distrustful of the media and somewhat disdainful of it and is more likely to copy/paste

an entire article, which is *endlessly* frustrating to see as a journalist, than to link out to one) and part of it is the extreme dominance of Facebook across the entire media ecosystem.

Romano: I agree, but I feel media would get more traffic if they interacted with Tumblr differently. I ran *The Daily Dot's* Tumblr for two years and we gained 100k followers over those two years primarily from interacting and being present in the community and making very Tumblr-friendly content. When I stopped running it, the social media team struggled because they went back to not engaging and just posting content. Their numbers went down. People notice when you're an active participant in the community.

Minkel: Right, but I wouldn't recommend a publication investing any time in Tumblr at this point. I think the most important thing about Tumblr's diminished status as a social platform is the dismissal of it as a creative space. It doesn't need to be some great place for media organizations to invest resources in for building communities; it's already an organic space where fans, artists, etc. build their own communities and create things together, and I feel like the broader internet does *not* have any true sense of that. A few months ago there was an iterative word game thread making the rounds on Twitter, and I saw multiple people on my timeline saying it was one of the most creative things they had *ever seen*, and I'd seen this exact meme play out at least a dozen times on Tumblr in the several years prior. All platforms are lifting from each other, cross-posting with permission or without, but I don't think Tumblr is credited as an innovative space. Part of this is a broader distrust or disinterest in Tumblr. I find most people in my generation who aren't on the platform are aware of "the Discourse," and thus uninterested in engaging with the platform.

McCracken: *How have you seen other aspects of Tumblr impact the broader media over the 2010s, even if they have been unacknowledged or under the radar?*

Romano: Throughout 2017 and 2018 it's become kind of a running meme to say that Twitter and other parts of the "mainstream" internet are finally evolving into Tumblr circa 2012–2014, because so many outdated Tumblr memes are suddenly exploding on other platforms, like the "is

this a pigeon?” meme, memes involving putting captions on images to substitute different signifiers for those images, and viral fancastings of actors that result in those actors making movies together. The most obvious instance of Tumblr impacting broader culture is *The Dress*,¹ but in general Tumblr’s language of casual fandom and the way it expresses enthusiasm and strong emotions (trash, cinnamon rolls, dumpster fires, etc.) have proliferated outward to become common internet vernacular. Tumblr’s direct connection to BuzzFeed is singlehandedly responsible for a lot of this, but Tumblr continues to be invisible and unrecognized. In more recent years they’ve become less inextricable and Tumblr culture has disseminated more directly into broader internet culture, as more platforms experience more osmosis.

McCracken: *How do you see Tumblr having evolved and where does it go from here?*

Romano: I think Tumblr has evolved from a largely meme-heavy culture dominated by aesthetic blogs and landscape, lifestyle, art, and fashion blogs, generally, to a largely fandom-heavy culture that’s informed by those other things. You used to see more outsider art and hipster culture generating trends on Tumblr, and now that happens more on spaces like Instagram. This evolution has coincided with the mainstreaming of geek culture, which I think makes noisy geek spaces on Tumblr that much noisier and geekier. The space feels simultaneously more crowded, more diverse, less monolithic, and more confusing, which is sort of the natural progression of any subculture as it moves toward the mainstream, but Tumblr has managed to retain its dorky outsider feel throughout this process.

And I’m actually less sure that Tumblr is entirely synonymous with fandom culture in 2017 than it was in 2013. People are more publicly fan-nish on more platforms now and I feel like a lot of fandoms are actually reverting to Discord and Slack servers and e-mail lists because they don’t trust Tumblr’s viability/longevity and they want to go back to those days of one-on-one communication.

Minkel: I agree that people are being more explicit about fandom these days, and that lessens the need for an opaque space like Tumblr. But lots of teens have come of age in the space, which is certainly a different thing than it was in the platform’s inception.

Romano: I do think people growing up on Tumblr makes the question of where this will all go when Tumblr (inevitably?) implodes much more fraught and interesting.

Minkel: Yeah I'm also interested in this, whether Tumblr's Tumblr-ness is inherent to the platform or the community there.

Romano: Tumblr-ness to me is that inherent spark of "I see your thing and I'm going to raise it with this other creative thing that's going to spark something even more hilarious/inventive/wonderful/perceptive in someone else and this is how we build ourselves up from the ashes as humans," and I don't think you can really get that on other platforms currently.

Minkel: Oh wow that's very positive about Tumblr.

Romano: I mean Tumblr is also a garbage place, but so is everywhere else on the internet. The things that make them inherently special and unique are generally platform-specific.

Minkel: Yeah, that's fair.

NOTE

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Reblogs, Monsters, and Erotic Amphibians

The Process of Critical Analysis on Tumblr

Indira Neill Hoch

Indira Neill Hoch is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies and Theater Arts at Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota. Her research interests include online boundary maintenance and social construction of technology, and her work has appeared in *Transformative Works and Cultures* and *Gamenvvironments*.

By the summer of 2017, the end of Tumblr felt close, coiling around users like a snake, cutting off our airways and siphoning what little enjoyment many of us had left when it came to pleasure with the platform. We had felt this constricting pressure before. Back in 2013, there was a similar swell of concern when Yahoo bought Tumblr. But that time, fears of Tumblr disappearing faded and everything returned to normal. Users going about their day-to-day blogging, sharing shitposts (low-effort, often absurdist joke posts), distributing art, building bonds, and burning bridges. But the purchase by Verizon that summer felt different. Yahoo, despite being a multibillion-dollar corporation, still felt scrappy when lined up next to a competitor like Google. But there is nothing scrappy about Verizon.

My own relationship to Tumblr was changing as well. Institutional Review Board approval in hand, I began data collection for my doctoral dissertation about the platform. My project was still messy inside my head, despite the one-hundred-plus-page proposal I defended in May of that year. I had envisioned an overview of the platform and its users as technology and human social behaviors tried to fit together in imperfect and difficult ways.

In this fraught environment, with Tumblr's future up in the air and my dissertation in disjointed pieces, the initial trailers for Guillermo del Toro's Oscar-winning film *The Shape of Water* appeared on YouTube. Tumblr's animated GIF makers picked apart the trailer, capturing its most aesthetically beautiful moments (and as a del Toro film, there was a virtual feast to pluck

morsels from) in endlessly looping, affective glory. I was initially drawn to the trailer, and the user reactions to it, because of the mainstreaming of affection for and attraction to monsters, something a lifetime of video game playing had instilled in me early on. I'm a "monster-fucker," and all my Tumblr followers know that (most of them are too). I stayed fixated on this post for months because Tumblr users couldn't stop fighting about the film.

The Shape of Water, featuring a romantic pairing of a working-class, mute woman in 1960s America and a non-vocal, government-captive fish-man with a suspiciously attractive ass, became a focal point on Tumblr for a discussion of issues concerning gender, disability, race, and sexuality, that would, presumably (at the time, virtually the only access anyone had to the film was through trailers) be taken up further in the completed film.

Tumblr posts can be difficult for an outsider not familiar with the platform to parse. The lack of formalized digital community structures makes it difficult to quickly acclimate to the platform. It is not a space where researchers can dip in and out, scraping what they need in order to write compelling research. Instead, it requires a web of connections, beginning with the researcher and fanning out, latching onto conversations and themes as they appear, letting go of memes and good ideas as they fall out of fashion too quickly to be meaningful, and looking for the moments where what is valued reappears. A specific post as it appears on the Tumblr Dashboard is rarely the only version in existence; additional commentary added on by reblogs shifts the tone and content of the post from aesthetically neutral, to combative, to humorous, and back again. The same original post comes to mean very different things to different audiences, not just because it passes from audience to audience, but because the initial post is thrown into different perspectives by the commentary added after the fact. Tumblr thrives on incoherency, and I believe that retaining messiness in online spaces is vital when increasingly we, as users, are pushed into more tightly controlled social sites that replicate the strict behavioral scripts that already dictate our in-person interactions.

Tumblr's reblogging feature specifically allows users to not only share original posts with their followers, but also to add additional commentary (text, images, more GIFs, videos, etc.) of their own to the bottom of the reblogged post. Pieces of art, viral videos, shitposts, and, in the present case, GIF sets, become the spark for further discussion among Tumblr users, as rebloggers add their own perspective, whether it be well-reasoned analysis or vicious attacks against the previously articulated statement.

My own position is a messy one to explain, informed by places where I don't quite fit: I'm non-white, but I also am white; I'm not straight, but I'm

married to a man who I absolutely adore; I grew up thin and “pretty” but despise my body for not matching the one in my head; and, I’m being absolutely serious here, I’m left-handed in a world where literally everything is designed to be done with the right. This background and my long-term Tumblr use since 2012 informs my research at every step. My particular methodological approach pairs qualitative auto-ethnography, participant interviews, and intersectional feminist positioning with more technologically oriented frameworks (actor-network theory; social construction of technology), to culminate in narrative accounts in the vein of Abu-Lughod’s “ethnography of the particular.”¹ Ethnography of the particular stresses how ethnographic moments are deeply rooted in social, technical, spatial, and historical conditions that are specific to the cultural group in which they originate. *The Shape of Water*, and the particular posts I isolated for research, allowed me to pinpoint a “cultural episode” and structure my narrative account of how Tumblr users argue issues of class, race, disability, and sexual desire.

The Shape of Water would not be released in theaters until December 2017. During the previous summer, Tumblr users had only partial information regarding the plot and characters when they began to embark on analysis of the film, often supported by GIF sets or still images from the film as a starting point (figure 6.1).

While a segment of Tumblr’s users shuns traditional, heterosexual film romance plots in favor of advocating for more queer storylines, I watched those same users express sincere excitement for *The Shape of Water*. Commentary often articulated that despite the primary relationship being between a woman and a “man,” del Toro’s film was exciting because it was about a woman and a *monster* and thus deviated from the typical heterosexual romance film. There is a long tradition in film of the sexualized monster’s suggested lust for human women, but *The Shape of Water* instead presented a consensual, romantic fantasy film where the monster and woman connect, fall in love, and share intimate moments starkly gentler than the likes of *King Kong* or *Creature from the Black Lagoon*.

One route discussions took included a concern with disability and the ability to speak. Both of the film’s leads (Sally Hawkins as Elisa Esposito and Doug Jones as the Amphibian Man) are nonvocal. Tumblr users discussed at length what this meant for both their characters and the other characters in the film, despite the lack of access to the final product. While some users expressed concerns regarding Elisa’s agency, given that she could not “speak” to those around her, others pointed out that there are rarely romantic leads in mainstream films with a disability. Others gestured toward intertextual references like *The Little Mermaid* and *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, the latter



Fig. 6.1. *The Shape of Water* GIFset by gayjamesmcgraw



gayjamesmcgraw

The Shape of Water (2017) dir. Guillermo del Toro

a film del Toro explicitly cited in interviews as a source of inspiration. Elisa's muteness, in this formulation, may not be accurately framed as a disability, but as a reference to Ariel the mermaid. And a particularly apt reference at that, given that this time the woman is a human and the love interest is part fish. Another train of thought drew from interview materials and referenced an unsourced discussion with Octavia Spencer (Zelda Fuller), who noted that the silence of the lead protagonists opened up the aural landscape of the film to allow her character, a working-class Black woman, and that of costar Richard Jenkins (Giles), a closeted gay man, to be heard in a film set during a time period where their characters would otherwise be the silenced ones.

These discussions (and countless more) swirled not only around this particular GIF set but around multiple posts sharing GIFs and stills from the trailer. Furthermore, these reblogged comments served as jumping-off points for dozens of different analyses centered on del Toro's film. The separate, usually text-only posts that were created in response to the larger circulation discussion often corrected, added on, or dismissed aspects of what these users felt compelled to share but felt the social norms of Tumblr prohibited them from adding directly to the post already in circulation. This practice keeps important, critical posts from becoming diluted by introducing tangential information. As the saying on Tumblr goes, "the New Post button is FREE." One example of an offshoot post that I witnessed much more directly broached issues of race and racism in *The Shape of Water*, as previous movie "monsters" often functioned as alarmist stand-ins for the sexuality of Black men. Del Toro, however, as a Mexican immigrant, was also seen by Tumblr users as adopting the monster-as-man-of-color metaphor to achieve a strikingly different end.

I was drawn to this GIF set initially because of my own aesthetics. And I love a good internet argument, whether it be absurd or serious or some combination of the two. Responses to this post ran the gamut, sometimes resulting in well-thought-out criticism, other times in bizarre retorts. But what this post reinforced for me was that interaction on Tumblr is messy, not easily quantified or qualified, as posts take off in dozens, hundreds of directions because of a single spark. It's not neat little boxes with demographic data or brand pages waiting for your likes. It's not just this single chain of reblogs either. That Tumblr is many, many things at once, difficult to understand and explain, is why it's so important. Verizon's acquisition felt like an ultimatum: either Tumblr would become financially viable, or it would cease to exist. But, for now, we can still be messy there, incoherent, strange, and monstrous.

NOTE

¹ Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System AD 1250–1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

Divine Fools and Ridiculous Mystics

Tumblr Humor as an Act of Defiance

The-Cimmerians

The-Cimmerians is employed by an intersectional feminist nonprofit as a Professional Irritant, and by two cats as a Devoted Lackey. In her spare time, she can be found on Tumblr, being vastly amused by the ridiculousness of the human condition.

Tumblr humor is a vast, weird carnival wasteland; a postapocalyptic raree sideshow peopled by aficionados of both the sacred and the profane, many of whom fit the archetype of holy fool. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* defines holy fools as “those who subvert prevailing orthodoxy and orthopraxis in order to point to the truth which lies beyond immediate conformity.” Speaking personally, I’m an atheist, neither a religious nor a spiritual person, but nevertheless I’ve had a lifelong love affair with the archetype of the holy fool, because it makes room for me to exist and because it comes closest to acknowledging the power and necessity of defiance.

I’m into defiance. I’m good at it. I was born in America in 1968 (a particularly defiant year within a defiant time period in that country), and for as long as I can remember, defiance has been my métier. I’m not a scholar. I’m an autodidact and an activist. My personal emotional wiring has two touchstones, two zones where I am most comfortable: rage and ridiculousness. To many people who are not me, these two states seem incongruous, if not oppositional, and for a very, very long time I thought that I was pretty much the only person in the world who understood their intimate, symbiotic relationship with each other and the solidity of the foundation they jointly provide.

I entered science fiction fandom as a spectator in 1980, occupying a fairly strange niche, as I wasn’t a SF fan per se but because I was a fan of nerds. I valued nerds in a way that even nerds themselves seemed to find inexplicable: valued them as friends, as mentors, as lovers. I was swimming in a

heady broth of bliss and lustful acquisition amidst a sea of people with non-normative gender expressions, big brains, weirdness affinity, intense creativity, social awkwardness, and a high capacity for defiance of sexual norms, all the qualities I valued highly. But I was clearly an outsider: what drew me there (the awesome nerds) was absolutely not what drew everyone else (the things the awesome nerds were into).

In 1983, however, I discovered slash fandom, and my days of being a blithely detached non-fan came to an ignominious end. I fell, and fell hard, first for *Star Trek* Kirk/Spock fandom, and then for “the other slash fandom,” Starsky/Hutch. And so, no longer merely an observer, I joined the ranks as an enthusiastic fandom participant. But my outsider status continued on, for two reasons: first, because back then most slash fans identified as straight and I am gay as fuck, and second, because slash fandom was absolutely the bastard stepchild of the larger fannish community: we were told that we were not welcome, that we were ruining fandom with our perversion, that we were pornographers, that we should be ashamed of ourselves.

But with the advent of the internet, well, things changed, and they changed fast. Instead of a handful/few hundred slash fans around the world, there were suddenly thousands, then tens of thousands, then more. And instead of a tiny number of fandoms, there was suddenly . . . everything; this was before Tumblr and before “everything is queer now, heterosexuality is cancelled,” but that sentiment was inherent in how it felt to be a slash fan when the internet happened.

Early fandom mailing lists, group lists, and archives that I participated in were all largely “invitation only,” but by 2006 I, like many, many other fans, found my way to LiveJournal. One of the things that changed with the advent of LiveJournal was that there was not only an opportunity for fannish engagement, but also other forms of community that were not primarily fannish in nature. Once I found social justice and political communities on LJ that embraced a nuanced and intersectional analysis of activist, political, and academic thought, it became easy for me to look there for human interaction. There were a bunch of smart, angry, funny nerds out there, and I was delighted to be one of them.

And yet, even among the smart, angry, funny nerds of LJ, I remained an outsider. I had a (comparatively) large platform due to my writing being popular, I had a deep fannish history upon which to draw, and I had a lifetime of activism and activist learning to help me navigate online social justice communities. But none of that seemed to really make a difference, because I was still the weirdo in the room. A happy, useful weirdo, granted, but a weirdo, and thus an outsider, nevertheless. And while the community around me

undoubtedly valued my contributions, I was keenly aware that I was still Other. The people in the LJ communities I joined were mostly deadly serious, and with good reason (many of them were fighting for their lives, for their right to exist), and so of course my humor (although I never “punched down,” as it were), my irreverence, were off-notes in their world. But I truly believe in humor as a *force*, as a *power*, and I was trying to use it that way, in furtherance of the work we were all committed to. And that, I think, more than anything, set me apart on LJ.

Which brings me, finally, to Tumblr. Tumblr as a platform seems much more open to the idea that humor can be used to inspirit those who need it, to create community and deepen belonging. It can create refuge and relief and respite and safety; even the most ridiculous perverse silliness can offer a moment of delight in a challenging and fraught struggle. LJ, as wonderful as it was, as silly as it could sometimes be, somehow kept circling back to a form of community and a strain of dialogue that, for all its weirdness, embraced conventions of normalcy within activist and academic rhetoric. The *point* of LJ, it seemed, was to create a community of our own, one that offered solace through its resemblance to the community we were excluded from, but that made room for everything that made us marginalized. The problem for me personally was that I didn’t really *want* a community like the one I’d been excluded from, because I preferred to highlight the ridiculousness of the entire notion of normalcy and the people who venerate it.

Humor on Tumblr skews dark, weird, blithe, and inappropriate: normalcy is forcibly divorced from its presumed sacred status through a ruthless unpacking and interrogation of its privilege. This could be because of Tumblr’s pseudonymity, or the (relative) youth and queerness of its users, or the lack of boundaries provided by the format: when you cast something upon the roiling waters of Tumblr there is literally no way to tell whether it will sink like a stone or circumnavigate the globe hundreds of times. LiveJournal doesn’t have a reblog option, which made for a more insular, boundaried, and less chaotic experience.

When I created a Tumblr page in early 2011, I did so strictly for lurking purposes, a necessity of convenience dictated by my fannish obsession of the time and by my desire to look at pretty things associated with it. At the time, fannish Tumblr didn’t seem to have the robust activist and academic community aspects that were so prevalent on LiveJournal, and many of the social-justice-focused people I knew on LJ chose to move to more text-based forums such as Twitter or Dreamwidth. However, social justice on Tumblr eventually gained traction, and its emergence, combined with Tumblr’s affinity for whimsical ridiculousness and its queer celebration of defiant deviance, made



Fig. 7.1. Example of Tumblr reblogging humor, post by wetorturedsomefolks

it my home. As social justice and activist nuance have infiltrated Tumblr strata, users of every age and background have used the platform to respond to the world they inhabit in precisely the way that holy fools are called upon to do: *subverting prevailing orthodoxies to point to the truth which lies beyond immediate conformity*. On my own blog I started tagging posts that I thought did this with “Tumblrfolk: ridiculous mystics,” and it’s still one of my favorite tags to create in, as well as revisit. Sometimes the truth these posts point to is profound. Sometimes it is exactly the opposite of profound. But it is always personal, and it is always defiant.

Nobody is more critical of Tumblr than Tumblr users. But criticism of Tumblr by non-users (those who even know about it) tends to be couched in the kind of language that is often used by the privileged to critique the oppressed: that Tumblr is just a haven for teenage girls and SJWs and anti-social freaks, the kind of voices that are automatically discounted. Within Tumblr, criticism centers more around the way the platform functions and the way Tumblr staffers respond (or don’t respond) to users’ wishes or critiques. In all my years on Tumblr, I have never seen a single user complain about Tumblr’s common exclusion from social media accessibility or wish that Tumblr had a higher profile as a platform: Tumblr is our underground carnival, our Wild West, our untamed frontier, and it seems that very few of us long for the kind of legitimacy that might be afforded us by giving up our voices, our weirdness, and our deviant interests (figure 7.1).

The above is a common form of post on Tumblr: short statements, embroidered upon or illuminated by ourselves or other people (most of whom most

likely do not know each other) through reblogging, a community examining and contextualizing itself within a framework that defies contextualization and elevates nonsense through the gravity of its value in our lives. We are humans, this post says, and as humans we have a lot of deep feelings about some truly ridiculous things. When we do that together, we collectively defy the world around us that tells us not to be so goddamn weird all the time.

Tumblr humor is vast and multifaceted, encompassing satire, sarcasm, meta, self-referential analysis, meme development, parody, dadaesque juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane, obscure knowledge deployment, puns, minimalism, and a thousand other forms as diverse as the posts themselves. The shared language of Tumblr is evocative of feminist, queer, fannish/academic porn culture. It is often profane, perverse, obscene, and sexually explicit. It is also inclusive, sex-positive, queer-positive, and rooted in a desire to validate and centralize marginalized voices (figure 7.2).

There are some folks on Tumblr who appreciate satire and approach life with lighthearted whimsy. There are some who have a deep knowledge of

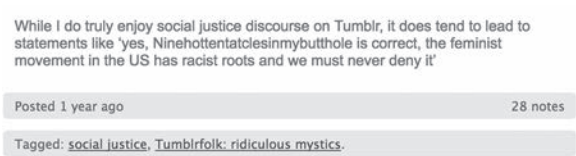


Fig. 7.2. Conflation of sex/queer positivity and social criticism in Tumblr humor, post by The-Cimmerians

social science history. And there are some extremely irreverent perverts. This joint effort creates almost a whiplash effect for the reader, a tidy, compact redirection that engages on distinct and separate levels before derailing (and delighting) in ridiculousness (figure 7.3).



Fig. 7.3. Irreverence and derailment in Tumblr humor, post by rotologie

Defiance, perversion, and queerness play a defining role in most Tumblr humor, as if the community as a whole accepts the foundational nature of these things, despite the absence of any formal framework reifying them (figure 7.4).



Fig. 7.4. Queer media analysis in Tumblr humor, post by andhumanslovedstories

This post is pornographic, ridiculous, fannish, and delightfully defiant. It offers comfort to the perverse and deviant, and “queers” normalcy in a way that some (certainly me) revel in with joy and recognition.

Tumblr is rife with divine fools, both amateurs and advanced practitioners of foolery. All make a contribution; I argue that it’s a vital one. The divine fool, through play, interrogates normalcy in a way that creates some much-needed breathing room for those of us who find normalcy to be stifling. The divine fool disrupts, and through this disruption comes introspection, awareness, growth, and space for challenge to an unquestioned status quo. The divine fool gets to tell the truth (there is no risk in doing so when you are already branded, already banished, already ridiculous, already radical and queer, already Other), and in doing so expands the conversation we humans are trying to have with each other.

The divine fool is *defiant*, magnificently so.

Tumblr Time

How Tumblr's Temporal Features Shape Community Memory and Knowledge

Milena Popova

Milena Popova (@elmyra) has a PhD in cultural studies from the Digital Cultures Research Centre, UWE Bristol. They are currently a rogue scholar and creative consultant working on representation of gender, sex, sexuality, and sexual consent in popular culture. They are the author of *Sexual Consent* (MIT, 2019). Parts of this essay also appear in Popova's forthcoming book about consent in fanfiction, tentatively titled *Dubcon*, also from MIT Press.

[Content note: This essay discusses rape and sexual assault.]

Tumblr has become the home of a range of overlapping fannish and feminist communities. As a platform, Tumblr is significantly different from both previous online platforms used by fannish communities such as LiveJournal and from other social networking sites popular today. It allows for the posting of content ranging from long-form text posts to compilations of still images or GIFs, videos, and audio content. Interaction and content propagation on Tumblr is done primarily through reblogging: posting another user's post to you own space, optionally adding commentary to it. While Tumblr has a tagging functionality, allowing users to add freeform metadata to their posts, both the volume of traffic and the inconsistent usage of tags mean that most content posted to the site quickly becomes irrecoverable. This interaction of features makes up Tumblr's unique timescape: a simultaneous timelessness and ephemerality that can be highly disorientating to new users.¹

In this essay I argue that these technical features shape the kinds of conversations that can be had on Tumblr. I use a case study at the intersection of fannish and feminist interest—the Hockey RPF (“real person fiction”) fandom community's reactions to the 2015 rape allegations against National Hockey League star Patrick Kane—to show how Tumblr's “interaction through reblog-

ging” functionality enabled the fan community to react quickly to unfolding events. This allowed community members to create new and sophisticated knowledges about rape culture, attitudes about celebrity, and the criminal justice system’s handling of sexual violence, years before these issues came to mainstream media attention through the Harvey Weinstein allegations and the #MeToo campaign. Beyond this short-term intense flurry of activity, however, I show that Tumblr’s ephemerality—created by both the “interaction through reblogging” mechanism and its poor searchability—is ill-suited to longer-term memory and the retention of community and institutional knowledge. I argue that Tumblr’s technical features in a very real sense shape what can and cannot be said, what can and cannot be remembered by the communities for whom the platform is a home.

A FANDOM WITH MANY HOMES

Fans started moving from primarily interacting through paper zines and conventions to online spaces in the early 1990s. A combination of improving technology and platforms’ willingness or otherwise to host fannish content has meant that these communities have migrated between many platforms over the years: bulletin boards, Usenet groups, mailing lists, LiveJournal, fanfiction.net and small fan-run fanfiction archives. Tumblr is only the most recent home for fanfiction fans in a long history of online activity. It has served as the main site of social interaction for these communities for the better part of the last decade, with the Archive of Our Own (AO3)—a fan-owned, fan-run large-scale fanfiction archive—acting as a more long-term repository of fanfiction works.

One subcommunity that uses these two platforms is the Hockey RPF (or real person fiction, fanfiction about real-life celebrities) community. For them, Tumblr serves as a social space for discussion, interaction, and the sharing of ephemeral content, while the AO3—which offers tagging, filtering, and search functions—is used to permanently store fanfiction stories. I was a member of this community for three years prior to the events that prompted this research, and the data presented here was collected primarily from my own networks within the community. I collected 350 separate posts in the course of two weeks immediately following the allegations against Kane, a popular hockey player and subject of fan RPF. I was also able to track developments within the community across both Tumblr and the AO3 for the following six months, which allowed me to investigate both the short-term and the long-term effects of Tumblr’s functionalities on the community and its dis-

cussions. I was immersed in the community's struggle to come to terms with the intrusion of rape culture into a space in which they had invested a lot of time, labor, and emotional energy. I experienced firsthand Tumblr's potential for facilitating conversations, the exchange of ideas, and the creation of new knowledge within the fandom community. Being able to take the longer-term view, on the other hand, also allowed me to gain insight into the challenges Tumblr poses to the memory of a community and the long-term preservation of knowledges it may have created.

TUMBLR TIME: THE STORM

In the summer of 2015, shortly after the Chicago Blackhawks had won the Stanley Cup (the NHL's ultimate trophy), the Hockey RPF community and wider hockey fandom were shaken by news of rape allegations made against the Blackhawks' star forward, Patrick Kane. Kane is what is known in the sport as a "franchise player," a star whose skill as a player, image, and story are used to market the entire team. Together with team captain Jonathan Toews, Kane was part of Hockey RPF's reigning slash (romantic) pairing. But he was also known in the sport and in the fandom for "off-ice issues," public behavior incongruent with his image as a star athlete and role model. This contradictory public image had led the community to generally characterize Kane as a "loveable rogue" in its fanfiction. When on August 6th, 2015, the news broke that Kane was under investigation for rape, the impact on the Hockey RPF community was immediate, and it unfolded primarily on Tumblr.²

Community members struggled to process the news. The uncertainty surrounding any rape allegation, particularly in our larger culture that routinely dismisses rape complainants as not credible, was a major issue for the community to navigate. So was attempting to reconcile Kane the loveable rogue RPF character with Kane the potential rapist. This was especially true for those who had been aware of Kane's previous off-ice issues and nonetheless participated in the collective creation of an RPF character often portrayed (as RPF frequently does) as much nicer, much kinder, more politically aware and even feminist than the glimpses that were now emerging of Kane's private life.³ The allegations took over all community social activity, generating hundreds of Tumblr posts over a two-week period.

Two key features of the Tumblr platform enabled this conversation to develop and spread: the ability to link to or embed outside content and the ability to reblog and build on other users' posts. Tumblr was unique at the time in offering these capabilities. Twitter, the closest comparable plat-

form, only offered limited media embedding and linking capability, and its 140-character limit made sophisticated commentary and conversations nearly impossible. As news, commentary, and speculation about the Kane investigation were published by mainstream media outlets, Hockey RPF community members linked to or embedded these articles in their own Tumblr posts. Thus mainstream news was reproduced and circulated on Tumblr immediately, in real time. Such posts were frequently accompanied by the user's own commentary, either within the body of the post or within the tags. Users also reblogged each other's posts, often with additional commentary agreeing or disagreeing with each other. Even within the relatively small Hockey RPF community, some of these posts acquired over a hundred reblogs and multiple layers of discussion and commentary within one or two days. Such layers sometimes reflected, within a single post, a shift of the temporal focus of the discussion, from the immediate sharing of and reaction to news to a more general, longer-term discussion of issues raised for Hockey RPF fans by the Kane investigation.

Hine identifies two temporal modes of online engagement with offline events: those driven by developments in the event being followed and those driven by the time constraints of users' own offline lives.⁴ We can see from the Kane case study that Tumblr's content-embed and reblog functionalities allow for both of these to happen within a single platform, and even within a single post. Hockey RPF community members both shared news and developments in real time and engaged in more fluid, longer-term discussions of the implications of the allegations against Kane. To a novice to Tumblr or the Hockey RPF community, or to someone looking back at such posts without sufficient context, these layered discussions sparked by real-time reports but extending into time beyond that event may seem confusing or even impenetrable. Hine highlights the importance of cultural competence in navigating different temporal modes of online engagement. Understanding the timescape of the layered Tumblr posts of the Hockey RPF community surrounding the Kane allegations required high cultural competence: familiarity with Tumblr and its functionalities, an understanding of the Hockey RPF community norms, and knowledge of the allegations against Kane and developments in the investigation.

CREATING FEMINIST KNOWLEDGES, TUMBLR-STYLE

While the community's initial concern was the legitimacy of any future fannish involvement with Kane, focus quickly shifted to issues of rape culture and the

criminal justice system, creating and elaborating feminist knowledges about sexual violence. The role of the law in rape and sexual assault cases dominated much of the discussion around the Kane allegations throughout the time the investigation was ongoing. Three separate positions emerged from the community. A small minority of members accepted that the criminal justice system would have the final word on the allegations; if no charges were filed or Kane was acquitted in court, they would accept this as an indication of his innocence. Another part of the community argued that legal practices such as the standard and burden of proof should not apply to their own opinion of Kane's innocence or guilt. Where the law had the power to mete out consequences to the accused, they did not, and thus their opinion could be formed on the balance of probability. A final group rejected outright the law's ability to provide justice in sexual assault cases. Their arguments focused on how rape culture was endemic in the criminal justice system itself, from the traumatic experience of rape kits (which at least one community member had personal experience of), to the low conviction rate in sexual assault cases, and the way the accuser is treated in court if a case does come to trial.

These discussions reflect wider feminist activist and academic debates about sexual assault and the law. The law's special position and power to determine the truth of a case has long been an issue of contention in feminist thought.⁵ The Hockey RPF community's conversations around the Kane rape allegations, therefore, served to establish and reinforce those feminist positions on the law within the community. Through discussing the case, bringing in personal experience of sexual assault and encounters with the law, and referencing wider issues of rape culture, the group created lively, diverse, and sophisticated feminist knowledges around assault, gender, and institutional power. The elaboration of these knowledges was directly facilitated by the mode of temporal engagement distinct to the community's use of Tumblr: discussions were sparked by the report of the rape allegations against Kane and concern for the immediate implications for fans' involvement with Hockey RPF, yet as their Tumblr posts' temporal focus shifted beyond the immediate, so did the focus of the discussion and the questions the community sought to answer.

One key outcome of these discussions was the decision by many community members to no longer engage with Patrick Kane fandom, or even with wider Hockey RPF fandom. In addition, community members expressed a desire to discourage any possible new fans from engaging with Kane as a fan object. Crucially, the impact of this extended beyond the community's Tumblr presence, as the attempt to turn away future fans from the Kane fandom led a number of authors to remove their existing fanfiction from the AO3.

As the Kane/Toews pairing was known to be both prolific and to contain high-quality fanfiction, the reasoning here was that by removing these works, authors would make the fandom less attractive. In the long run, however, the community was unable to prevent such new engagement or to retain many of the knowledges they had created. Both Tumblr's timescape and the decision to remove material from the more permanent Archive of Our Own were significant contributing factors to this.

FAST FORWARD: LONG-TERM KNOWLEDGE RETENTION

The initial reaction to the Kane rape allegations within the Hockey RPF community on Tumblr can be conceptualized as a time-bounded "event" sparked by offline occurrences.⁶ The intense discussion that generated 350 posts within two weeks marked a clear break in the fandom's relationship with its fan object. The intensity of the conversation, measured by the posting rate, dropped off significantly after the first two weeks and marked the event's conclusion, although further developments in the case sparked additional, smaller bursts of discussion. Tumblr's reblog functionality contributed to a timescape similar to the "link storm" described by Beaulieu and Simakova.⁷ They enabled a public conversation between multiple participants, where posts would be reblogged to show agreement, to contribute additional supportive commentary, or to disagree with the original post and put forward a different argument. In this way, each individual post could branch out into multiple conversation threads, either within the same community or reaching to new audiences and participants. These functionalities, and how they were used by Hockey RPF fans, were key to the community's ability to generate and reproduce the feminist knowledges discussed above and to galvanizing community action with regard to future involvement in the fandom, including the removal of works from the AO3 and the expression of the desire to discourage new fans from joining.

The initial, intense, and overwhelming discussion of the Kane case on Tumblr died down after about two weeks, when it became clear that the police investigation would most likely be protracted and new details would only emerge irregularly if at all. As new details did emerge, discussions flared up again on Tumblr, but these discussions were much smaller in scope and shorter in duration, only generating a handful of posts over a few days, rather than the sustained avalanche of the first few weeks. Where in those initial weeks the Kane allegations were the dominant topic across the fandom, inescapable for existing and new community members alike, as weeks and

months progressed it became easier to be new to the fandom and not be aware of the allegations. The police investigation was finally closed in early November with no charges being filed, which prompted another flurry of posts, generally reiterating community members' decision to no longer be involved with the fandom. This reflected their newly developed understanding of the law's role in rape culture: the closure of the investigation did not necessarily mean no rape had been committed, and someone who was at least potentially a rapist was not regarded as an appropriate fan object.

The impact of the rape allegations on the Kane-centric parts of Hockey RPF fandom is most obvious in the community's fanfiction output on the AO3 (below). Immediately after the allegations, the Hockey RPF community's output of Kane-centric works dropped by 80 percent. In the three months after the investigation, the rate of new works doubled compared to the August–November period, yet this is still only half the monthly rate of new works produced before the allegations. The overall number of authors active in the Kane fandom decreased by 20 percent in the August–January period compared to the two months prior to the allegations. Crucially, of the authors active in June and July, less than a quarter (22 percent) remained involved after the rape allegations became public, with the remaining active authors being new to the fandom. Of the authors active between August and January, nearly two thirds (64 percent) joined the fandom after the rape allegations. These numbers demonstrate three key developments: a mass exodus of long-term fans from the fandom; a significant slowdown in the creation of new fanworks; and ultimately an overall smaller community made up largely of individuals who joined after the police investigation was concluded.

Table 8.1. Works and authors in Kane-related tags on the Archive of Our Own in the two months prior to the rape allegations, during the investigation, and in the three months following the conclusion of the investigation

	June–July	August–October	November–January	August–January total
Total works	134	40	94	134
Works per month	67	13	31	22
Total active authors	84	28	51	66
Authors active both in this period and before allegations	n/a	12+4 ⁱ	14	19+4
New authors in this period	n/a	12	31	43

ⁱFour authors were active before June and then again after August, though two of them posted works that had largely been completed before the allegations and then withdrew from the fandom entirely.

By January 2016, the Hockey RPF community centered around the Kane/Toews pairing had been decimated, but what is key here is that the efforts by pre-allegation community members to discourage new fans had clearly failed. While the Kane-centric part of the fandom was much smaller, it still existed. Additionally, since it primarily consisted of new members, it is possible, and even likely, that many of them were not aware of the rape allegations at all. Tumblr's lack of persistence or searchability had wiped the slate clean for them. These new fans would have to go out of their way to access the material their predecessors created about the rape allegations, and as most of those predecessors had left the space, there was no one to even point them in the right direction by reblogging the wealth of posts generated on the subject. The removal of works from the AO3 exacerbated this effect, as there was no trace of the removed works and thus no prompt for potential new fans to investigate what had happened.

TUMBLR TIME: TUMBLEWEED

Once the investigation had concluded and most of the original community members had removed themselves from the fandom, Tumblr's design functionality offered no way to keep the feminist knowledges the original community had produced in the forefront of the fandom's consciousness. The storm had subsided, followed by nothing but tumbleweed. As new fans entering the fandom were unlikely to discover and follow those who had left, even the act of reblogging some of the older posts on the issue was unlikely to get the attention of those who had not been part of the community while the controversy was raging. Reblogged after the fact, the posts that used news articles about the Kane allegations to spark layered and nuanced conversations about rape culture lost their immediacy: they were unstuck in Tumblr time with no current real-world event to bring them into focus and help users navigate the complex timescape present within the multiple layers of reblogs, tags, and conversation. Unlike the websites and search engines investigated by Beau-lieu and Simakova, the "recoverability of the past" on Tumblr is extremely limited.⁸ The site's search functionality is notoriously poor. Its tagging system, while allowing users complete freedom in how posts are tagged, is also inconsistent and of limited use for archiving. The nuanced feminist knowledges and complex challenges to the power of the law to determine "truth" that the community developed over hundreds of posts became irrecoverable. On the contrary, any new community member with a minimal knowledge of the allegations and the investigation would find it relatively easy to access

mainstream news reports about it and its conclusion, which did not result in charges against Kane. Without access to the complex arguments made by the Hockey RPF community as to why an absence of charges or even a “not guilty” verdict did not vindicate future fannish involvement with Kane, any new hockey and Kane fans could therefore quite reasonably assume that this was a minor, baseless incident in Kane’s public profile.

The effect of Tumblr’s ephemeral timescape was further exacerbated by many Hockey RPF fans’ decision to delete works from the AO3. Once a work is deleted, the archive offers no indication that it was ever there. Thus, a new fan joining the fan conversation on Tumblr and browsing fanfiction on the AO3 would have no access to the history of the fandom and would not be able to see the large gaps left behind by the removed works or investigate the cause of those gaps. A small number of fans, instead of removing their works, chose to refer to the rape allegations in author’s notes. As this was only done by a small minority, however, and as such notes were by necessity fairly brief, the core of the feminist knowledges produced in the Tumblr discussions could not be reproduced on the AO3. Tumblr’s particular temporal modes of engagement, then, interacted with the Hockey RPF community’s reaction to the Kane rape allegations in ways contrary to many community members’ stated aim of discouraging the involvement of new fans with Patrick Kane as a fan object. While in the initial storm stage Tumblr’s reblog functionality enabled community members to engage with the allegations and develop feminist knowledges, once that storm had subsided Tumblr’s poor search functionality and inconsistent tagging system made those knowledges irrecoverable and impossible to pass on to potential new members. Counter to the wishes of many community members to minimize future involvement in Patrick Kane fandom and fanfiction, this enabled the fandom to be revived relatively quickly after the conclusion of the investigation against Kane, albeit on a smaller scale. These events show that Tumblr’s temporal features have a deep and often hidden impact on the structures and institutions of communities that use the platform, demonstrating the importance for those communities who call Tumblr their home to understand that impact and, where necessary, to mitigate it.

NOTES

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6. Sara Pink, Heather Horst, John Postill, Larissa Hjorth, Tania Lewis, and Jo Tacchi, *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice* (London: SAGE, 2016).
7. Anne Beaulieu and Elena Simakova, "Textured Connectivity: An Ethnographic Approach to Understanding the Timescape of Hyperlinks," *Cybermetrics* 10 (2006): 6.
8. Beaulieu and Simakova, "Textured Connectivity."

Gallery

@Staff

Indira Neill Hoch



Fig. G1. @Tumblr Staff

Tumblr users express a particular, personal closeness to what is a uniquely constructed social media entity: “Tumblr Staff.” Sometimes shortened to @Staff, which additionally alerts the Tumblr Staff blog that a post mentioning them has been created or reblogged. Tumblr’s staff, of course, consists of actual human beings working with the platform, maintaining and updating Tumblr’s code, posting to the staff blog, and generally participating in day-to-day functions that keep Tumblr functional. But when Tumblr users communicate with @Staff, there may be little knowledge of or concern with who those actual people are. Instead, @Staff is addressed often as if they are a singular person (or tightly knit hivemind) with their own personality traits, hopes, aspirations, and faults (especially faults). There is an intimacy of address between users and @Staff that reflects both Tumblr users’ general mode of address to others on a platform they largely regard as personal and private, and an expectation, to some degree, that their concerns will actually be heard by a person, if not heeded. Because Tumblr had a small staff for many years, users were, in fact, more likely to be addressing engaged humans and not machines, and the staff largely encouraged user play, feedback, and critical discourse.

This Gallery offers a sampling of how Tumblr users commonly converse, critique, play, and call out @Staff. Users interact with @Staff in both direct and indirect ways, employing sarcasm and crafting jokes at @Staff's expense, leveling criticism, raising questions, and generally looking for answers that may or may not come. Equally, they use their ability to communicate with @Staff to raise important concerns about the platform's coding, its policies, and the content Tumblr promotes.

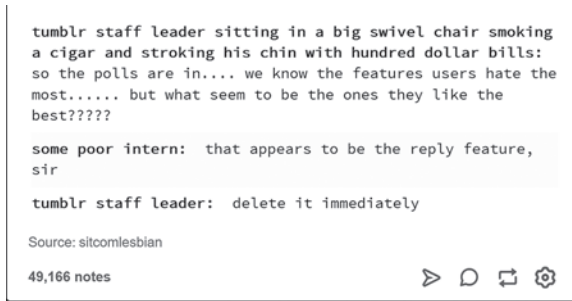


Fig. G2. “Tumblr Staff Leader” depicted as cartoon villain

When new features are introduced on Tumblr, users may be informed by @Staff in the weeks leading up to feature changes, or they may not be informed at all until after the feature is implemented. Or, in this case, removed. The Tumblr “Replies” feature referenced in this post was first introduced in 2015. Unlike many features that hit most of Tumblr’s user base as unpleasant surprises, Replies were, at least for some, a welcome addition. And then they disappeared without warning, to the consternation of many users, who expressed their frustration to @Staff by lampooning them in typical Tumblr fashion.

The post above by user sitcomlesbian is a representative example, casting the Tumblr Staff as a singular greedy capitalist supervillain in a swivel chair, trying to find the most effective way to terrorize the general unsuspecting Tumblr populace. While undoubtedly a critique of Tumblr’s refusal to address long-standing technical issues, the casting of “Tumblr Staff Leader” retains a comic, cutting playfulness. Tumblr Staff Leader is a villain, yes, but a cartoonish one, exaggerating traits one might find in Connery-era James Bond movies or Batman comics from the mid-twentieth century, before being evil became so deadly serious.

The anthropomorphization of @Staff into a singular entity allows it to be effectively cast in a number of different roles from popular media, occupying archetypes across genre and time, as long as the punchline retains a critical edge, here recognizable as combining an awareness of the inequality of power between @Staff and users, as well as annoyance with @Staff’s ineptitude.

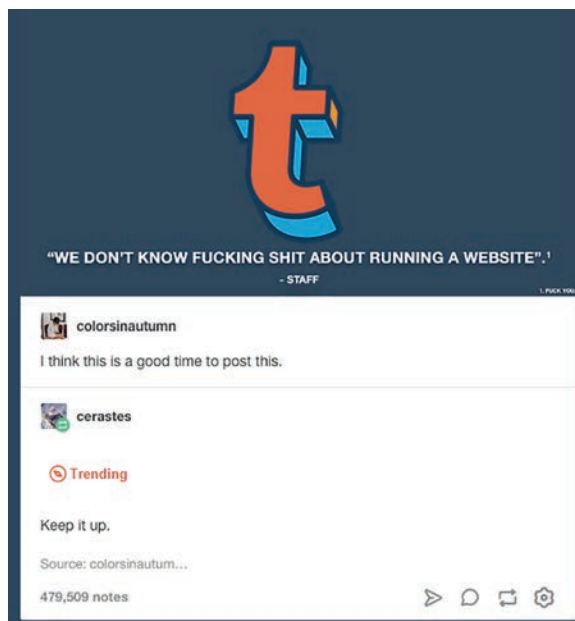


Fig. G3. Animated GIF mocking Tumblr's lack of competency

While the introduction of new, unexpected features to Tumblr can change the site dramatically, everyday functioning of the platform is also filled with bugs and glitches that are sometimes long-standing and tedious to work around and sometimes sudden and shocking. Chat posts are particularly prone to losing their formatting when reblogged; sometimes popular Text posts lose their notes entirely, rendering the bottom of the post menacingly blank; the Tumblr app is notorious for crashing frequently; and the Dashboard has a strange habit of merging two posts into a single horrifying amalgamation of unrelated text and images for no apparent reason.

The frequency and persistence of such errors have often led Tumblr users to joke about @Staff's inability to run the site properly. In the post above from 2015, user *colorsinautumn* shares an animated GIF he made of a rotating Tumblr "t" with the quote, "We don't know fucking shit about running a website," and attributes the quote (falsely) to @Staff. This post was so popular that it eventually hit "Trending" status on Tumblr. User *cerastes* took a screenshot of Tumblr's "trending" icon and affixed it to a reblog of the post, reminding users in the future that a post quite literally about how poorly Tumblr is run became one of the hottest posts on the platform on that given day.



Fig. G4. The Skeleton War is coming

Tumblr users’ interactions with @Staff can be equally playful and absurd. Until July 2015, Tumblr users could fully edit the original text of any post they reblogged. When reblogging, changing the original post was as simple as putting their cursor in the text box, deleting the original content, and adding something new. This allowed users to change @Staff’s posts (as well as the posts of any other user) to say just about anything. Although most user-edited posts stopped after the 2015 rule change, the transition was typical Tumblr in

not taking hold immediately, and some user-edited posts continued to slip through. In the post above, for example, originally from September 2016, an unknown user has edited a reblog of a staff post to make the staff account say, “if you fuckers do the skeleton war shit again this year we’re deleting the website for real.” The original post from the staff blog is a mundane one notifying users that a change has been made to Tumblr’s terms of service.

Building on the first unknown user’s joke of @Staff banning the skeleton war, user withfreyjaonourside later added a photograph of a human skeleton riding a horse skeleton and the caption, “en garde motherfuckers.” Skeletons are favorite avatars of Tumblr users because they are both absurd and macabre, like so much of Tumblr humor. The “Skeleton War” is a yearly event that was begun in 2014 by Tumblr users who shared a handful of posts of repurposed art accompanied with tags and descriptions that warned the war was coming. Leading up to Halloween, Tumblr’s favorite holiday, users share art, text posts, photographs, and other content full of skeletons engaging in epic battle with one another.

Tumblr staff played along with and built upon the joke. After this image became widely circulated and popular with users, staff responded by becoming themselves more actively engaged in the Skeleton War, such as sharing the occasional photo post in the lead-up to the event (which seems to begin earlier and earlier every year).

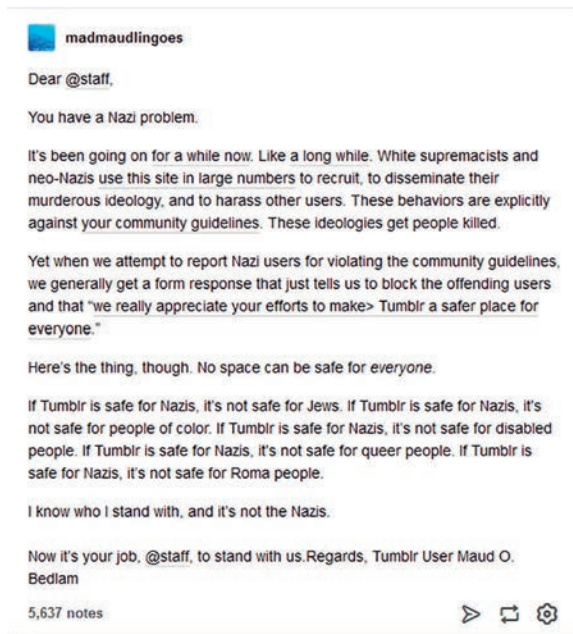


Fig. G5. Tumblr has a Nazi problem

Tumblr is frequently cast in mainstream media and academic discourse as a space that facilitates “social justice” and works toward the acceptance (however fraught) of minority identities and communities. But Tumblr’s historically lax content restrictions have also resulted in anti-Semitic, racist, misogynistic, transphobic, and homophobic content existing alongside progressive activism. Tumblr users became particularly vocal about white nationalist content after the August 2017 Unite the Right demonstrations in Charlottesville, North Carolina. While other online social media platforms such as Reddit quickly banned Nazi and white nationalist forums in response, Tumblr took no such action.

In this post from September 2017, Tumblr user madmaudlingoes employed the mentions feature (@Staff) to directly address the staff about the issue, eloquently calling for them to finally act on the “Nazi problem” and pointing to the fact that the existence of such blogs endangers users at large and are incompatible with Tumblr’s ideal of safe space. Madmaudlingoes highlights the ineffectiveness of Tumblr’s block function by including links to posts by other users who had been recommended Nazi blogs by Tumblr’s algorithm even *after* they had blocked them. Madmaudlingoes also supports her argument with outside sources, linking to an article about Tumblr in the Israeli

newspaper *Haaretz*, and to discussion of White Supremacist Tumblr by Miles Klee in *MEL Magazine*.

In the immediate aftermath of Charlottesville, the staff had reblogged an informational post from Action Tumblr (Tumblr's social impact office) sharing ways users could "push back against this evil, and support those who are threatened by it." Madmaudlingoes' post from a month later, however, suggests a continuing disconnect between the brand's activist rhetoric and actual platform function, a situation that persisted even *after* Tumblr officially banned hate speech in August 2018; the lack of adequate oversight of the process has meant that Nazi blogs continue to be a problem.

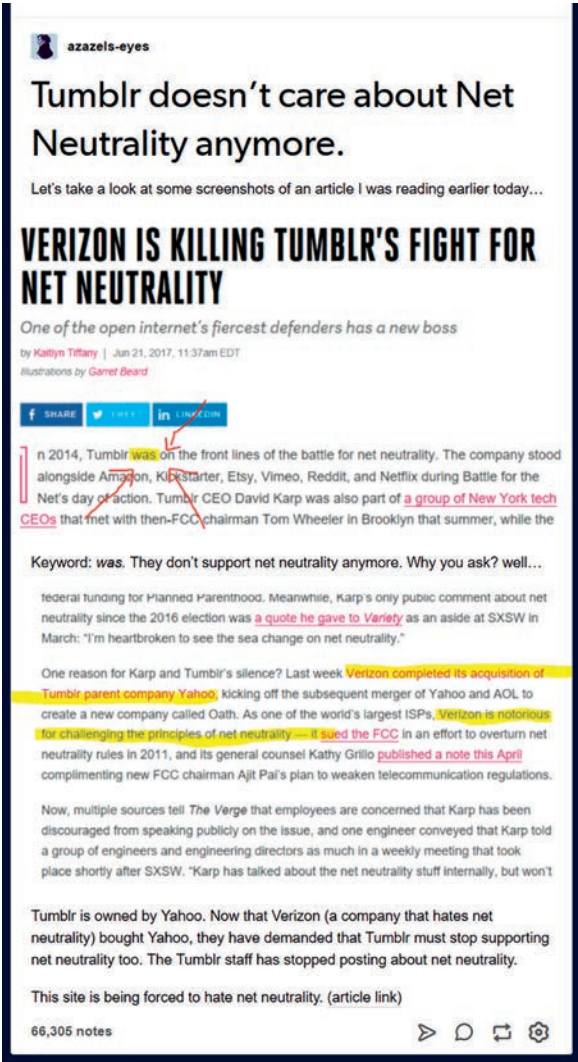


Fig. G6. Tumblr and net neutrality

In this widely shared post, azazels-eyes critiques Tumblr’s flip-flop on net neutrality after the company was acquired by telecommunications giant Verizon in 2017. Three years earlier, Tumblr and its staff, including founder David Karp, had been among the most vocal in the technology industry in the fight for net neutrality. Banners promoting a free and open internet adorned the top of every Dashboard, providing links to organizations that could facilitate users’ understanding of the issue and urging user activism. In 2014, Tumblr’s

parent company Yahoo Inc. also vocally supported net neutrality legislation, but Verizon, as an internet service provider, stood to benefit financially from its repeal.

This post, from June 2017, is representative of Tumblr users' continuing broad support of net neutrality and their awareness of the platform's ownership changes. Posts like these did not address @Staff directly, but continued instead to contribute to Tumblr's long-established environment of open and intelligent critique using tools Tumblr had supplied: the ability to share high-quality images, including those with substantial text, and to easily circulate such posts through reblogging.

In constructing his critique, young user azazels-eyes adapted an existing news source into a visually dynamic format best suited for publication on Tumblr. He has taken screenshots of industry journalist Kaitlyn Tiffany's June 2017 *Verge* article outlining Tumblr's limited involvement in net neutrality advocacy post-Verizon. He then highlights in yellow and draws bright pink arrows to the past-tense "was" in Tiffany's statement that Tumblr "*was* on the front lines of the battle for net neutrality." He then highlights additional statements that directly link Tumblr's acquisition to the policy change and inserts his own conclusion that Tumblr no longer supports net neutrality. The post's over sixty thousand notes is testament to how appreciated his intervention was.

Karp officially left his position as Tumblr CEO in November 2017.

SECTION 2

#Privacy and Ethics

Tumblr has presented a number of ethical challenges and concerns for researchers and users over the years. Because Tumblr is pseudonymous and almost unsearchable, and its structure de-emphasizes original authorship, navigating Tumblr's unusual and sometimes unintuitive affordances as a researcher requires a deep familiarity with the platform and its users' customs. Tumblr, like other social media, also highlights the outdated nature of many institutional research norms in the age of Google search; common requirements—from real-name consent to verbatim quotation—are often counterproductive in establishing working relationships with users and could even expose them to harm. Tumblr users themselves have pointed out how the platform's pseudonymity can, in fact, enable scholars and journalists to exploit and appropriate their intellectual work and life experiences. These critiques have popularized awareness of such theft on Tumblr and beyond, adding to the need for revised and updated ethical standards that reflect research conditions and power inequities specific to the digital era.

The authors in this section offer creative and conscientious commentary on the nuanced interrelationship of privacy, ethics, power, and Tumblr's specific platform structure and user norms. In his essay "Screaming into the Void," Julian Burton examines the way "privacy" as a concept is framed by adult, pre-digital understandings of the term and contrasts that with a Tumblr youth fan community's alternative conceptualization and deployment of the term. Akane Kanai, Crystal Abidin, and Matthew Hart explore the technological, methodological, and ethical difficulties of doing qualitative research on Tumblr in their essay. Writing from the personal perspective in "We Are More Than Footnotes," Aisha Mahmud recounts the scholarly and journalistic plagiarism of Black feminist/queer critical communities on Tumblr, which she identifies as an act of misogynoir; Mahmud points to the ease with which this public platform, once penetrated, provides access to subcultures in ways that have facilitated their exploitation. By gathering multiple perspectives that examine customs through the lens of platform, we aim for

this section to be a significant contribution to an ongoing and sometimes uncomfortable conversation about power, privacy, research, and ethics in the social media era.

Screaming into the Void

Reconceptualizing Privacy, the Personal, and the Public through the Perspectives of Young Tumblr Users

Julian Burton

Julian Burton is a PhD graduate in childhood studies from Rutgers University-Camden and is now a part-time lecturer in this program, where he is continuing his research in digital media cultures.

WHAT IS “INTERNET PRIVACY”?

On September 23, 2016, which marked the annual observance of Bisexual Visibility Day, a young woman posted a selfie on Tumblr in which she wore a shirt in the colors of the bisexual Pride flag and displayed a rough facsimile of the flag drawn on her shoulder.¹ She smiled widely in the photo, but below the image was a caption that read, “I’M STILL CLOSETED OFFLINE! DO NOT SHARE!”²

I was at first struck by the bravery that posting this image in a “public” forum entailed for a young woman who did not feel comfortable being open about her sexual orientation with her friends and family, but I then began to consider that perhaps this impression did not reflect her experience. After all, many users I had interviewed as part of my ongoing research on Tumblr fandoms had described these communities as more supportive and accepting spaces than other social contexts, both online and offline. Another bisexual young person, who expressed fear for her safety in the event that her parents found out about her sexual orientation, told me that she “would never have to hide from anyone” in her Tumblr fandom communities. Perhaps being out and proud on Tumblr was not so much an act of “going public” with “private information” about oneself, but a way of seeking comfort by being honest and open about oneself in what is perceived as a safe and isolated space.

This realization raised questions about the complexities of internet privacy. At its most basic, privacy is the right to control the flow of information about oneself, but this simple definition masks the variety in its potential interpretations.³ What kinds of information are considered personal or privileged? How are spaces defined as public or private? How is control over information exerted? How are potential audiences categorized as acceptable or unacceptable recipients of certain kinds of information? Each of these aspects of the management of information—and thus the meaning of privacy itself—can differ greatly in the experiences of different people in different contexts.

The social dynamics of Tumblr and the value it holds for its users can be better understood by acknowledging the platform as a space that affords young people a particular kind of privacy more in tune with their priorities and lived realities than that offered by more mainstream spaces like Facebook, which tend to be more tightly integrated with offline lives, norms, and practices. Privacy on Tumblr is built primarily through the shared establishment of norms and practices; it is nuanced and contextual and can be challenging to fully grasp as a user or a researcher. Working to understand how users manage information in this context has the potential to offer insights into not only Tumblr culture itself, but more broadly how privacy practices and priorities can vary between online communities and how researchers can respond to these differences in our work.

This essay is based on a larger ethnographic study of young people aged thirteen to twenty-two who are part of the fandom community on Tumblr.⁴ This is a group united by shared appreciation for books, films, and other media texts, but their connections run much deeper than these interests, as does the meaning their engagement in this space holds for them. Engagement with the fandom side of Tumblr tends to be significantly isolated from users' offline social networks—and indeed from the rest of their online presences—and this space exhibits some unique dynamics as a result of this position at the margins of digital social life. As a result, Tumblr serves as a space of possibility where communities can construct new ways of being that address their particular needs and priorities. I will focus here on how this plays out in relation to the managing of privacy and disclosure.⁵

The norms, practices, and expectations surrounding privacy within the fandom Tumblr community illustrate how particular experiences of internet privacy can be shaped by social structures and cultural norms, and how a relatively insular community can adopt new ways of thinking and acting as a result. They also present a challenge to academic and social discourses of

young people and internet privacy that judge young people by adult norms and expectations without taking into account their different social status, experiences, and needs.

CONCEPTUALIZING PRIVACY

Conventional notions of privacy tend to be binary, built on the assumption of clear, enforceable boundaries—typically physical ones—between private and public spheres.⁶ Dominant discourses of internet privacy tend to reflect this desire to draw clear lines between private life and wider society, often focusing on the goal of keeping information about one's identity, movements, and habits out of view of a broadly conceived public sphere.⁷

It is by this paradigm that young people's internet privacy practices are often judged. Teenagers' online privacy practices are commonly evaluated based on measures such as how likely they are to post photos of themselves, their full names, the names of their schools, or their phone numbers on social networking sites, a set of concerns founded mostly on specific fears of profiling by corporations or government agencies, identity theft, and sexual exploitation.⁸ Evaluating young people's privacy practices from this perspective leads to the emergence of certain apparent paradoxes in how they manage particular kinds of information. For example, teens and young adults have proven significantly more likely than older adults to have checked and changed their Facebook privacy settings, but also more likely to share photos of themselves and disclose personal information such as their relationship statuses, religious beliefs, and hobbies.⁹ No doubt, such seemingly contradictory observations feed the belief among many researchers, commentators, and parents that young people simply do not care about protecting their privacy or do not understand how to do so.

Some research suggests, however, that such differences between young people's views on privacy and those of adults are the consequence of their occupying social positions that produce different circumstances, pressures, and consequences surrounding the sharing and withholding of information.¹⁰ The most significant difference is perhaps the widespread notion that young people are not "worthy" of the right to control information about themselves, particularly where their immediate families are concerned.¹¹ Constant and detailed surveillance of youth is not only widely accepted, but fast becoming the default condition under which young people live and families operate.¹² Add to this the fact that children and teens generally live under the threat

of being punished for actions, choices, and even feelings or beliefs of which their parents disapprove, and it becomes clear that for young people, the “private sphere” of the family home is actually where privacy is most clearly and directly threatened and where the most serious and immediate consequences to unwanted disclosure may be felt.

Within this context, it makes sense that young people tend to have different priorities and concerns than adults when it comes to maintaining their privacy, generally placing greater value on *social privacy* than the more conventionally prioritized *informational privacy*.¹³ The former hinges on the ability to manage what people they spend time with in their daily lives know about them, the latter on control of the wider dissemination of information to third parties and larger institutions.¹⁴ An orientation toward social privacy changes the kinds of information that are treated as privileged; while personal data like locations and phone numbers are the logical currency of informational privacy, social privacy is primarily concerned with deeper information about one’s thoughts, identities, activities, and relationships. The fact that the most significant threats to young people’s ability to manage social privacy typically come from within the “private sphere” of the home often leads them to seek out moments of privacy in “public” spaces like workplaces and the street, where—despite the presence of a much larger *potential* audience—they find that they can exert more personal agency over information about themselves because no unwanted audience is (usually) paying specific attention to them.¹⁵

PRIVACY IN OBSCURITY: “A BENCH ON A CROWDED STREET”

Tumblr functions, for many users in the fandom community, in a similar way to these public spaces in the physical world in which opportunities for private expression might be found. Though it is, in technical terms, an extremely public forum, users often treat Tumblr as *more* private than other online social spaces, demonstrating a willingness to share personal information that might embarrass or even endanger them if shared in other contexts, precisely because of the camouflaging obscurity of being one of thousands in a “public” place. One teenaged user described Tumblr to me as “the internet equivalent of sitting on a bench on a crowded street”: statements, conversations, and interactions are private not in the sense of being unwitnessed, but more in the sense that they easily fade into the noise. A widely shared post describes this kind of obscurity with typical Tumblr irony:

Tumblr is so funny bc [because] u could have 20,000 followers but then only get 3 notes on some posts which is basically the equivalent of performing a song in front of a sold out arena and hearing like . . . 2 people clapping and one weak cheer

With fandom Tumblr users often following hundreds or thousands of blogs, and each of those potentially making or reblogging dozens of posts every day, individual pieces of content tend to become decontextualized, disconnected from any sense of the person behind them simply by virtue of being part of a steady onslaught of content from many users merged into the single space of a given user's Dashboard (or, in common Tumblr parlance, simply "Dash"). In fact, the visual structure of the Dash itself, which presents posts from each of a user's followed blogs using the same fonts, colors, and layouts—stripping them of the visual cues that would link them to specific users if viewed on those users' blogs themselves—helps create a kind of anonymity even in the presence of clearly stated usernames. Just as people speaking on a crowded street are identifiable by their faces and voices, but one is unlikely to pay attention unless they recognize someone they know, usernames on one's Dash might only seem deserving of attention if they are familiar, belonging to friends or mutual followers ("mutuals").

DEFINING THE PERSONAL: "A PUBLIC DIARY"

When I asked Tumblr user and media studies student hazelnutcorgi how safe she felt on Tumblr in relation to conventional, information-focused ideas of internet privacy, she replied:

in terms of practical safety, i'm not that good at that
[. . .]
it's easy to find me on facebook if people actually look
i dont connect my facebook to my tumblr ever, but i do link to instagram,
which has my name and college and face¹⁶

While she admits that her information is not as secure as it could be, hazelnutcorgi expresses no particular fear that others on the internet will track her down with ill intent. This is the attitude many Tumblr users share toward the idea that information like their "name and college and face" might become known to someone who would harm them: it is treated, like the potential that

one might become a victim of a violent crime in the offline world, as a possibility to be aware of but not one that should have undue influence over one's decisions. A popular post about "why meeting someone online isn't weird at all" plays down the danger of online "strangers" both by dismissively noting that "not everyone is trying to catfish or abduct you" and by arguing, as an example of contemporary young people's awareness of internet safety, that they are "going to sure as hell confirm their identity" before meeting an online friend in person.

Many Tumblr users react with a similarly dismissive attitude to the dangers of mass surveillance and "big data" technologies. The most common narrative of systematic invasions of privacy by larger institutions is one in which the data they might collect on Tumblr users is laughably useless: "*puts tape over webcam so the nsa doesn't see me eating chips and crying*" says one post with over 200,000 notes. Though clearly annoyed by obtrusive advertisements on Tumblr, users show little concern regarding the underlying profiling technologies common to internet marketing. This is likely due in part to the objectively poor state of Tumblr's ad targeting, as illustrated in posts made by a seventeen-year-old American user who has repeatedly seen a sponsored post reading "Norwegians 55-75 are eligible!" This perceived ineptitude on Tumblr's part does not seem to be the only reason concerns in this area are typically muted, however. There was also a sense among the users I interviewed that this aspect of privacy was simply not as immediate a concern as others with greater potential to directly impact their lives and safety.

Social privacy is taken more seriously. There are certain kinds of "personal" posts that are generally understood to be "off-limits" for wider sharing. Most of the content posted by fandom Tumblr users is, as might be expected, about their fandoms rather than about them; when users *do* edge into the territory of explicitly personal reflection, these posts are treated differently from others, seen as outside the typical discourse of fandom communities and not as content to be shared. As user koalaamidala put it, "for the most part, [notes] feel important, but when it's something personal, I'd rather not people reblog it? because I basically use Tumblr as a public diary." I have rarely seen a post of a personal nature garner more than a handful of notes, and any notes they do get are usually likes from mutual followers offering support or encouragement rather than reblogs. Personal posts include everything from complaints about conflicts with family to anecdotes about friends and romantic partners to reflections on life events like graduations. They may also include musings on "heavier" topics such as struggles with mental health issues or experiences of social injustice, but it is important to note

that posts such as these, even when they are written from deeply personal perspectives, are often seen as a form of activism or advocacy and presented as more “public” than “personal.” This is another example of the complexities of how these concepts are constructed and applied in this space, and users often recognize the difficulty in applying simple schemas to the varied and complex kinds of expression possible in this space.

MAINTAINING CONTROL: “#PERSONAL #DON’T REBLOG”

This understanding that “personal” posts are not to be shared demonstrates what is perhaps the most fundamental difference between Tumblr and more mainstream social networks like Facebook when it comes to how privacy is actually managed from day to day. Where Facebook relies on technological controls created by the platform’s developers—e.g., privacy settings for each element of profiles—privacy on Tumblr runs more on social norms established by its various communities. Again, the crowded street metaphor is appropriate; the privacy of a conversation in a public place is not guaranteed by any inability on the part of others to eavesdrop, but by the fact that to do so would violate expected norms of behavior in that context. This community-focused approach is particularly appropriate because Tumblr’s cultural norms do not, like those of many other online social spaces, dictate that connections and networks should mirror those in offline life. Tumblr users I interviewed frequently defined Facebook as a place where they were not safe to express themselves because they “had” to be friends with family members, an expectation that negates the benefits offered by Facebook’s extensive privacy controls. Where Tumblr is the digital equivalent of the crowded street, Facebook would seem, for many young people, to mirror the complicated and inadequate privacy experience of the family home.

Personal posts can often be identified solely by their content, but users frequently make use of the tag system to clearly mark them. Tagging a post “#personal” is an explicit signal that it is not something to be shared around the community. In some cases, users tag their posts with more explicit directives such as “#please don’t reblog” or even “#don’t reblog or interact.” The latter essentially asks that others not acknowledge the post’s existence at all, and it may seem odd to post something in a “public” forum and then make this request. As koalaamidala explained, however, “it’s comforting to yell into the void,” to be able to express oneself “out loud,” as it were, without the social consequences of being judged or having to explain. This sentiment is com-

mon enough that another tag that often serves as a synonym for “#personal” is “#screams into the void.” Of course, Tumblr is not a “void” in the sense of swallowing these screams unheard, and the fact that users know this expression will be witnessed—that others will “hear” their “screams” but, again bound by social expectations, will refrain from offering unwanted responses—is very much the point. Staying silent would offer neither catharsis nor an opportunity to reveal something of oneself through the kinds of things one yells into the “void.” These sorts of posts, even when unanswered, serve to cultivate deeper friendships through meaningful self-disclosure, something that has long been recognized as important in adolescent friendship building.¹⁷ The effect is amplified by the very fact that these personal posts are not intended for wider consumption and are thus implicitly directed specifically at users’ friends and mutuals.

This way of using the tag system is broadly congruent with the purpose for which it was implemented: to categorize posts, in this case by their intended audience. But users also frequently co-opt this same system for privacy management in ways that diverge significantly from its intended use. Unlike the main body of a post, tags do not persist as part of a post when it is reblogged by others. They thus become in some ways the most “private” space on Tumblr for expression that is still taking place within the “public” realm of the blog; tags are readable to followers and anyone who visits a user’s blog, but they cannot be shared by others. “i use my tags as like . . . a secret whisper space,” explains a post that currently has around 211,000 notes. “it’s like the BONUS FACTS part of the book or something, the special fan club secrets.” Users will sometimes write the entirety of a personal post within tags, their only concession to Tumblr’s restriction against “empty” posts being the placement of a single punctuation mark in the main body of the post.

Tags are not the only way in which Tumblr users mark posts as private or seek to exert control over how such information spreads. Another common practice is putting personal posts entirely or mostly under “read mores,” an option originally introduced to keep long text posts from breaking the flow of the Dash. Using a read more hides most of the content of a text post from casual readers behind a link that must be clicked to view the whole post. Though anyone can access the full post, the feeling is that using this feature makes personal posts less obtrusive for those who are not particularly interested in reading them, while keeping them easily accessible to friends. At the same time, it serves as a subtle signal that the post in question is of a personal nature and should not be shared.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TUMBLR AND BEYOND

Privacy is ultimately important to human society because it is a fundamental condition of personal autonomy and development, emotional release, and honest, open communication with others.¹⁸ These are basic social and emotional needs that, thanks to the larger social construction of youth as a group who do not have the right to privacy, cannot be met for them in the same ways or contexts they are met for adults. Within this understanding, young people's privacy practices can be seen as a particular site of the broader conflict between their struggle for agency and the cultural ideologies that often serve to silence their voices, marginalize their cultures, delegitimize their perspectives, and constrain their choices.

Tumblr is a social space defined by its separation from the offline world, where identities are flexible, massive amounts of content lend obscurity to individual posts and users, and a young user base has constructed a particular way of understanding personal information and a complex set of norms dictating interaction with such information. As such, it excels at providing the kind of online privacy young people tend to value: not the ability to prevent information about the minutiae of their lives from being indiscriminately disseminated to persons unknown, but the ability to live life, construct identity, express viewpoints, explore interests, and forge relationships outside the scrutiny of those who would watch, judge, and control them. The kind of privacy Tumblr affords offers many users a safer space for expression than they are accustomed to finding elsewhere, a fact that is central to many people's experiences of Tumblr as a whole. Many of those I interviewed stated that what keeps them coming back to Tumblr is the chance to "be themselves" away from the microscope they feel under in other settings. The implications are significant not only inasmuch as they add to our understanding of young people's online experiences, but in considering how we approach research in any digital context where the experience and practice of privacy may not align with conventional approaches.

In my own work, I have kept in mind the importance of Tumblr's particular privacy norms to the young people at the center of my research. For instance, I made efforts to allow participants to maintain the separation they desire between Tumblr and offline lives and personas: I did not ask for "real names" or demographic data beyond age, and users even signed research consent forms using their Tumblr URLs as their "names." After negotiating with my institution's research review board, I was permitted to waive the

requirement for parental consent so as to minimize the chance that participation in my research would lead to participants' activity on Tumblr becoming known to their families or others in their offline social worlds. I took URLs seriously as identities and "names," and extended them the typical privacy protections of an ethnographic study. I edited public posts I quoted to make them more difficult to attribute to an individual user by way of a web search.¹⁹ I also decided not to directly reference any individual post marked as personal or any material of a personal nature written in tags, out of respect for users' wishes that others treat these posts as "whispers." I do not claim that the choices I have made are the "correct" way of engaging with Tumblr in research. I do believe, however, that they illustrate the kind of questions that must be asked, and changes to typical research practice that must be considered, under an expanded understanding of "privacy" that prioritizes the perspectives of those whose experience is being discussed.

NOTES

1. This image description has been slightly altered to protect this user's identity.
2. Because public posts can be found easily using search engines, all quotes taken from public posts have been edited slightly in order to preserve users' privacy. Quotes from interviews are given word-for-word. Connections between these choices and broader privacy issues are discussed below.
3. Jan Holvast, "History of Privacy," in *The Future of Identity in the Information Society*, ed. Vashek Matyáš, Simone Fischer-Hübner, Daniel Cvrček, and Petr Švenda (Berlin: Springer, 2009), 13–42.
4. Julian Burton, "Making Space on the Digital Margin: Youth Fandom Communities on Tumblr as Spaces for Making the Self and Re-Making Society" (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2017), <https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/54981/>. Tumblr users often perceive and describe individual communities forming around specific texts (e.g., "the Harry Potter fandom"), but also frequently refer to "fandom tumblr" as an amalgam, recognizing the porous and shifting nature of the boundaries between these networks, the connections between them, and the cultural elements they share.
5. While parts of this analysis might be applicable to Tumblr culture in general, much of what I have observed has clearly been shaped by the particular social pressures regarding privacy and disclosure facing young people in their daily lives.
6. Holvast, "History of Privacy."
7. Alyson L. Young and Anabel Quan-Haase, "Information Revelation and Internet Privacy Concerns on Social Network Sites: A Case Study of Facebook." In *Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Communities and Technologies* (2009): 265–74, ACM (Association for Computing Machinery), New York.

8. Mary Madden, Amanda Lenhart, Sandra Cortesi, Urs Gasser, Maeve Duggan, Aaron Smith, and Meredith Beaton, "Teens, Social Media, and Privacy." *Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project*, May 21, 2013, <https://www.pewinternet.org/2013/05/21/teens-social-media-and-privacy/>; Deborah M. Moscardelli and Richard Divine, "Adolescents' Concern for Privacy When Using the Internet: An Empirical Analysis of Predictors and Relationships with Privacy-Protecting Behaviors," *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal* 35, no. 3 (2007): 232–52.

9. danah boyd and Eszter Hargittai, "Facebook Privacy Settings: Who Cares?," *First Monday* 15, no. 8 (2010); Emily Christofides, Amy Muise, and Serge Desmarais, "Hey Mom, What's on Your Facebook? Comparing Facebook Disclosure and Privacy in Adolescents and Adults," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 3, no. 1 (2012): 48–54.

10. danah boyd and Alice Marwick, "Social Privacy in Networked Publics: Teens' Attitudes, Practices, and Strategies," *Privacy Law Scholars Conference*, Berkeley, CA (2011).

11. Carol Warren and Barbara Laslett, "Privacy and Secrecy: A Conceptual Comparison," *Journal of Social Issues* 33, no. 3 (1977): 43–51.

12. Nick Wingfield, "Should You Spy on Your Kids?" *New York Times*, November 9, 2016.

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The Challenges of Doing Qualitative Research on Tumblr

Experience and Advice from Three Scholars of Young People's Tumblr Use

Akane Kanai, Crystal Abidin, and Matthew Hart

Akane Kanai is a lecturer in communication and media studies at Monash University, Australia. Her research focuses on gender, race, and affect, and how identities shift through digital culture and popular culture. She is the author of *Gender and Relatability in Digital Culture: Managing Affect, Intimacy and Value* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

Crystal Abidin is a socio-cultural anthropologist of vernacular internet cultures, particularly young people's relationships with internet celebrity, self-curation, and vulnerability. She is senior research fellow and ARC DECRA fellow in Internet Studies at Curtin University, and affiliate researcher with the Media Management and Transformation Centre at Jönköping University. She is the author of several books, including *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online* (2018), *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* (co-authors Leaver & Highfield, 2019), and *Media Interfaces: The Body on Social Media* (co-editors Warfield & Cambre 2020). Reach her at wishcrys.com.

Matthew Hart is a lecturer of digital society at the University of Leicester, UK, whose research interests include the sociology of youth, social media, and risk. He is the author of *Nude Selfies, Young People, and Social Media: The Pleasures and Rewards of Risk-Taking Online* (Palgrave Pivot, 2020).

We began doing qualitative research on Tumblr in the early-mid-2010s, when guidelines for doing digital research were rapidly evolving along with changes in social media platforms and the digital environment more generally. This chapter aims to provide readers with a sense of how we, as researchers from

different disciplines, have approached Tumblr's cultures of engagement and the particular set of ethical challenges we have encountered. It is our hope that our experiences will give readers a sense of the complex ways Tumblr may be understood through such research and the ethical concerns involved in doing so.

Tumblr is unusual because although most material shared on the platform is publicly accessible, the norms of anonymity on Tumblr mean that public material can also "feel" private for users. Thus, on Tumblr, simply because one *can* "stumble upon" a blog or easily access online material does not automatically mean that such material is "public" for researcher use and that researchers have automatic rights to it. It is important to understand that what is "private" and what is "public" is contextually determined.¹ In our own research, we have all drawn on the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) resource on ethical principles to assist in working through how to act with sensitivity and care in our research on Tumblr.²

Tumblr is often used by young people who are marginalized in broader society to share resources and connect with others with similar vulnerabilities. As researchers, this user base introduced additional concerns regarding self-positioning and "doing no harm" in these communities. We also found that Tumblr's specific cultural and interface norms presented difficulties when justifying our projects to university ethics boards, whose standardized applications are not suited to internet research on living subjects, much less those requiring more particularized standards of care.

Our research comes from three different disciplinary perspectives: cultural studies, anthropology, and sociology. We have, however, employed a similar ethnographic approach of immersion that requires us to develop a deep, multifaceted qualitative understanding of the spaces we study and their significance for their participants. While we are not suggesting that novice researchers need to be Tumblr "experts," we feel it is vital to understand the dynamics of one's chosen space from a first-person experiential perspective. For this reason, we all either already possessed or developed a basic understanding Tumblr before embarking on our projects.

In our three brief case studies, we discuss ethical and methodological challenges at different stages of collecting our data, which explores, respectively, how young people navigate "relatability," body image, and dating and intimacy on Tumblr. Akane Kanai discusses the question of permission in a Tumblr group of blogs based on young women's everyday experiences; Crystal Abidin considers the importance of care in undertaking sensitive research among "thinspo" posters on Tumblr; and finally, Matthew Hart addresses

managing verifiability and sensitivity for participants on Tumblr dating blogs, as well as discussing the institutional challenges of such work.

Permission by Akane Kanai

Research Stage: Completed and Published.

One central ethical consideration in my Tumblr research revolves around the subject of permission. In early 2012, I found a post from a Tumblr blog called “WhatShouldWeCallMe” (WSWCM)³ that I thought was witty and smart and that I connected with on a “relatable” level as a young woman. It was a reaction-GIF blog that detailed funny, embarrassing, or annoying scenarios, with a GIF as punchline/comment. For example, the GIF post below is intended to show how users might feel “when a really skinny person is talking about how much junk food she eats” (figure 10.1).

WSWCM attracted coverage in news media like *Forbes* for the way it seemed to speak to young women’s “collective subconscious,” inspiring many similarly themed Tumblr blogs.⁴ I was particularly interested in how these subsequent blogs, authored by young women, presented their “own” versions of WSWCM. My original research question was thus: Why was this blog so relatable to them, and what was the gendered basis on which these feelings of connection were circulating?

Fig. 10.1. A humorous reaction GIF of drag queen Bianca Del Rio slowly blinking her eyes as an indication of her frustration “when a really skinny person is talking about how much junk food they eat”



These blogs were publicly accessible and anonymous, and some had become famous beyond Tumblr, all factors that would indicate to many social media researchers that they were fair game to analyze without permission. But I was not comfortable with that position and decided to get the permission of the creators before I began my analysis. There were a number of reasons why I made this decision. The questions of whether or not and then how to seek permission are dependent on ethical approach and context. Feminist ethnographic ethics require that researchers should attempt to reduce hierarchies between researcher and participant as much as possible.⁵ I wanted to explore in detail the discourses of femininity that were present, and I was going to need to examine a substantial number of posts from each blog and undertake a detailed analysis of each blog. In doing so, I was going to benefit from these young women's creative production and social critique, in that I was going to begin building my scholarly reputation on this research.

Thus, I deemed it appropriate to request the bloggers' permission to help level the balance of power by acknowledging them as authors, like me. I drew on Nissenbaum's concept of "contextual integrity," which suggests that the specific norms of a space must determine how (or whether or not) a researcher may ethically observe it and disseminate information in relation to their observations.⁶ As we have noted above, negotiating what is contextually public and private space is central to research on Tumblr. In determining context, I had to know how "public" the blogs felt for their creators; some of the blogs appeared to have few followers and thus their creators may have considered them more "private" even if they were not created on Tumblr's "private" setting. To find out, I had to ask the creators' permission. In deciding to maintain contextual integrity, I had to risk not being able to carry out my research if no one agreed to allow me to analyze their blogs.

Carrying Out the Research: Permission Quandaries

I applied for my university's ethics approval before writing to the bloggers for permission. Notably, my university in Australia did not have specific digital media permission guidelines for conducting analysis of blog posts, which it deemed a "low-risk" project in terms of potential harm to either participants or me. After obtaining university ethics approval, I contacted the bloggers through a private message on Tumblr from my research account. In my recruitment message, I provided users with a link to the full explanatory project statement and the consent form required by my university. As I did not have an academic website at that point, I also provided my Twitter handle

as a way for the bloggers to verify my academic identity. (Depending on one's project and the safety considerations that your university asks you to take, it may also be appropriate to share your own Tumblr or other social media with your participants.)

I contacted sixty bloggers, and six agreed to let me analyze the posts on their blogs. The creators of these six blogs permitted me to undertake research, remained anonymous in their interactions with me, and allowed me to reproduce their posts in my thesis and other publications. This low number of respondents is typical in in-depth discursive social media analysis, but the problem I ran into was that I had originally counted on doing interviews with these participants as well. I had framed the consent process in two parts so in the first stage, the blog creators were notified that they might be asked for interviews at a later stage, but only one consented to participate. It was, of course, generous of these bloggers to provide me permission in the first place, but because I had structured my project around only sampling blogs for which I had permission, I ultimately had a very small pool of bloggers to work with. In the end, instead of conducting my own interviews, I was able to rely on data that these bloggers provided me over e-mail, as well as some publicly available interviews with some of them. In the case of this project, the data I obtained from analyzing the blogs was very rich, so I did not need to drastically rethink my project's aims and parameters.⁷

Making active permission an important part of the research process will sometimes mean that research outcomes will deviate from initial plans. Implementing feminist ethnographic principles will often require the researcher to adapt to or accommodate participants' needs rather than the other way around. In attempting to reduce power imbalances, participants may justifiably change the outcome or planned progression of one's research. Accordingly, it is important to be prepared to revise research questions, change frameworks, and adjust expectations of what one might learn and what one might be entitled to research as part of one's commitment to these principles.

Care by Crystal Abidin

Research Stage: Mid-Study

In this section, I emphasize the importance of care in understanding young people's—or any people's—engagements with Tumblr. I will begin by explaining how I came to Tumblr. In the late 2000s, I was actively mentoring a group of teenage girls as they began to navigate secondary school. During one of

our usual weekend shopping trips, one of the girls was on a mission to purchase wooden beaded bracelets. She said she needed something to cover her “scar” but wristbands were too gaudy and Band-Aids were not “prominent” enough. She then showed me a single shallow cut on her left wrist, scratched with a blunt pair of arts-and-craft scissors. She told me that she “didn’t really cut herself” but made “enough of a scratch” to leave a mark so that it would still be noticeable to her friends, like a badge of honor, but not visible to her teachers; this evasive strategy she learned “from Tumblr.”

My work with young people had taught me to reserve judgement and listen from a place of care, educating myself in *their* beliefs, principles, and cultural values. After that conversation, I spent a lot of time on Tumblr to understand the cultural repertoire of my mentees; that is, I wanted to learn what they were consuming on the internet, the vocabulary they shared, and their relationships with fellow users in order to “connect” with them. Almost a decade later, in the mid-2010s, this experience with young people and this ethics of care still informs my scholarship as a digital anthropologist of vernacular internet cultures. I continue to work with young women’s precarious cultures, here specifically investigating the culture of “thinspiration,” the practice, largely by young women, of producing, circulating, and consuming discourses that inspire “thinness” as a body ideal and overall lifestyle goal.

Web Archaeology

I adopted web archaeology and participant observation as methods for my project. Web archaeology provides tools for examining the way a platform’s interface, affordances, and changing corporate policies shape user practices.⁸ In this case, web archaeology helped me determine whether Tumblr’s corporate policies reflected an ethics of care regarding this particular area of social concern. To illustrate, when, writing in 2016, I entered a contentious search term (i.e. “thinspo,” “depression,” “suicide”) on Tumblr, the first item on the search results was always a prompt from Tumblr that read:

Everything Okay? If you or someone you know is suffering from an eating disorder, self harm, or suicidal thoughts, please visit our Counseling & Prevention Resources page for a list of services that may be able to help.

“Counseling & Prevention Resources” is a hyperlink that leads to a list of “Free and Confidential Counseling” services around the world.⁹ Initially, I could not remember when Tumblr institutionalized this automatic prompt,

but I recalled from my early days on the platform that contentious search terms like these had intermittently pulled out no results at all, an indication that the tags might have been censored by Tumblr at various points. To understand this history, I did an in-depth search for user-uploaded screen-grabs of earlier iterations of Tumblr's platform pre-prompt and also read up on Tumblr's policies on contentious search terms. As it turned out, in March 2012 Tumblr staff posted an update on "Tumblr's New Policy Against Pro-Self-Harm Blogs."¹⁰ After discussions with users, Tumblr staff substituted the previous blanket ban on contentious search terms for the above friendly prompt, which points users toward counseling services. Tumblr thus demonstrated a corporate ethics of care that was unusual, going above and beyond mere draconian and moralistic censorship of content.

Using web archaeology had thus provided me with crucial historical context and insight into how a contentious network such as thinspo had managed to survive and develop on the platform, and how young people's vulnerable internet cultures have thrived, resisted, or evolved alongside official dogma.

Participant Observation

Participant observation is the cornerstone of ethnographic fieldwork. In this early stage of my research, I wanted to survey the general atmosphere of thinspo networks on Tumblr—what thinspo on Tumblr looked like—rather than focus on specific Tumblr users or accounts. Therefore, instead of approaching key gatekeepers or soliciting interviews, I spent the first few months of my project "lurking," that is, reading and keeping up to date with the thinspo network without actually making my presence known via posting, commenting, or reblogging. I was relying more on the "observation" part of "participation observation" at this stage. I centered my initial observations on key tags such as #thinspiration and #thinspo, and I collated related tags on which users cross-posted by scrolling through dozens of posts every other day. There is no fixed amount of time to allot to one's immersion period, since these learning routes differ across social groups and content types; rather, the duration of lurking will depend on the nature of the Tumblr subculture you wish to study (i.e., how accessible are their practices and language?), the extent of the dataset (i.e., do users post frequently or in observable volumes?), and your ability to navigate the terrain of Tumblr (i.e., how savvy and involved are you as a Tumblr user?).

Ethics of Self-Care

In the next stage of my research, I will proceed to the “participation” aspect of my fieldwork by approaching selected Tumblr users for permission to converse with them about their thinspo practices and by engaging in selected community norms. As part of anthropological ethnographic practice, researchers attempt to experience the lifeworlds of the people they study as much as possible, in order to write about their practices from their point of view. As thinspo networks are contentious, I will not be participating in the full scale of subcultural activities (e.g., cutting), but I will select practices that I feel confident and ethical about engaging in, such as those that will not cause harm to others or myself (e.g., providing recovery encouragement). Decisions around selective participation are highly contextual and are best centered on an ethics of care.

In anthropological fieldwork, researchers need to adapt to their ethnographic settings in order to practice empathy and build relationships with their informants. Yet it takes time and effort, and there is no shame in scheduling down time or taking a break from your provocative work. Just as you practice empathy and care toward your informants, practice care toward yourself, especially since the depth and terrain of content enabled by Tumblr’s affordances and open search settings can be alluringly indulgent and emotionally draining to navigate.

Sensitivity by Matthew Hart**Research Stage: Complete and Published**

In this section, I will discuss issues of verifiability and sensitivity that I had to negotiate in my research. My research question was sparked in 2011, when a close friend happened to tell me how she met her girlfriend on Tumblr. She explained how they had been dating online for months and told of their impending plan to travel across the world to meet each other. I found it curious that young people were choosing to forge intimate relationships from within social networking sites (SNSs), rather than through specifically designed dating websites. And why were young people choosing to be intimate on Tumblr in particular?

Studies involving young people present researchers with challenges. Young people use Tumblr to discuss deeply personal thoughts or feelings, which they believe they cannot do anywhere else online.¹¹ Consequently, I

take the position that sensitivity should be exercised when dealing with anything that would typically be kept private and personal, result in offense, lead to social censure or disapproval if publicized, or cause the respondent discomfort to express. Because of the consequences that conducting research with vulnerable people can have on not only the researcher, but more importantly on the participants themselves, sensitive research also necessitates extra care be taken when collecting, storing, and analyzing data.

Girls Who Like Girls and the Chubby Hearts Club

In my research, I focused on two prominent dating blogs: *Girls Who Love Girls* (GWLG), which later became *Girls Who Like Girls*, and *The Chubby Hearts Club* (TCHC). The former was made known to me through the friend I had spoken with about her dating experiences on Tumblr. I found the latter by searching the hashtags “#online” and “#dating” on Tumblr. TCHC was, in its own words, for “chubby people” and “chubby-chasers.”

As specific findings from this research can be viewed elsewhere, I focus here on my methodology, the rationale for my research choices, and ethical issues I identified in relation to conducting research on Tumblr.¹² Finally, I will make some recommendations for those about to embark on their own Tumblr studies.

Methodological Approach

As a straight white male researcher, I needed to be especially cognizant of how my recruitment strategy (direct messaging) could be interpreted, particularly given the predominantly female population of the two dating blogs I was researching. Consequently, I designed a recruitment approach that was as transparent and verifiable as possible. I made explicitly clear who I was and which university I worked for, and I gave a brief overview of my research aims, my university Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) approval number, and contact details of both my supervisors and the HREC itself (should someone wish to make a complaint). I also provided links to my scholarly profiles at the university where I worked. One research participant commented to me in an interview that they would have ignored my request altogether had I not provided my “digital research footprint,” as it were, for validation.

In both cases, I initially approached the gatekeepers (moderators) of each dating blog by sending a private message from my Tumblr research account. The message introduced me and provided information on the study I was hoping to conduct, as well as the participant information sheet. My intention



Fig. 10.2. An example of a recruitment flyer, 2012

was to gain permission from each gatekeeper to upload a recruitment flyer to their dating blogs in the same fashion the users themselves had uploaded their selfies and biographies. I wanted interested individuals to read my flyer and self-select to participate; the only stipulations were that they had used the dating blog in question, had formed an online relationship through this participation, and were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. The gatekeeper of GWLG was extremely supportive and instructed me how to submit my research flyer to their dating blog (figure 10.2). In contrast, the first TCHC gatekeeper I approached was not as supportive. Despite showing the institutional approval of my study, the gatekeeper believed that I wanted to conduct market research on his community and would not allow me to post a research flyer on TCHC. Another gatekeeper at TCHC, however, permitted me to interview her, and I was able to use “snowball sampling” (the process by which a participant refers you to another potential participant, in a cascading fashion) to recruit the remaining participants.

Managing the Research Process

I ultimately conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews online with a sample of ten young people between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five to understand participants' intimate experiences through dating on Tumblr. Each of the ten interviewees nominated Skype as the locus of their interview, and they chose whether they wanted a video, audio, or text interview. By removing the need to be "visible" in the interview, and enabling the interviewee to control the location, timing, and nature of the research, online interviewing can prove to be an empowering experience for the participant. This was made clear when, upon conclusion of the interviews, many of the participants expressed joy or satisfaction for being able to reflect upon their intimate and social practices in an encouraging, safe space.

Online methods are known to raise questions of legitimacy regarding the verifiability of research institutions as well as participant identities. Indeed, my university HREC was concerned about the verifiability of my participants, that is, my ability to verify *their* identity. For example, HREC members suggested that participants scan their personal identifications (such as a driver's license) and turn their webcam on so that I could verify their identities. I explained that this approach was not appropriate given that Tumblr is favored by young people *because* of its pseudonymity. If I wanted to create a comfortable environment for them, it was imperative that I respect this cultural attitude and maintain their right to privacy. I also suggested how internet data can be verified through other means, such as scrolling through and conducting a trace ethnography on a user's archive. More simply, the researcher can make a judgment call on a user's honesty and sincerity by looking for consistency in their online presentation of self: the content that is shared, the selfies that routinely depict the same person, or the distinctions that are consistently upheld. These can all be measured against the interview data in a way that is non-invasive and does not compromise the user's privacy.

CONCLUSION

Analysing Tumblr can yield rich data, but attention must be paid to constructing an appropriate methodology for conducting this research. Public access is not the same as public property, and we should take care when shar-

ing Tumblr data outside of the platform, making sure to provide adequate context and accurate framing. In this essay, we focused on issues that seem to us particularly pertinent regarding Tumblr and its youthful user base: permission, care, and sensitivity. Through its pseudonymity, visuality, and lack of technical barriers mediating access to most material, Tumblr can provide a space for emotional connection and the articulation of awkward desires and dark or unsayable feelings for vulnerable young people in particular. We hope that in outlining some of our own experiences, readers are able to take away some insights into both the wonderful and challenging elements of approaching Tumblr as a researcher.

NOTES

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We Are More Than Footnotes

Black Women and Intellectual Theft

Aisha Mahmud

Aisha Mahmud is a writer and student of creative writing at Southern New Hampshire University, with a concentration in fiction.

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference—those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are black, who are older—know that survival is not an academic skill. . . . For the master's tools will not dismantle the master's house. They will never allow us to bring about genuine change.

—Audre Lorde

When I opened up my Tumblr inbox one day in 2015, I found an Ask from an anonymous follower thanking me for my blog commentary on racism and noting that it was the inspiration for them finally finishing their master's thesis. I was shocked. It wasn't due to any flattery either. I initially thought, "Ah yes, finally, I'm getting some recognition for my own opinions in the ongoing conversation about racism in our daily lives." I thought I was going to finally join the ranks of more seasoned activists and feminists and get myself a seat at the grown folks' discussion table. Finally, my opinions were validated with academic research! Unfortunately, that pleasant feeling didn't last when I realized what they were actually saying was, "Thank you for being so detailed in your opinions, sharing of anecdotes, and resources so that I have material to use to further my own academic career." That was it. There was no mention of compensating me, crediting me, or even coming off of anonymous to put a face to the scraps I was being thrown. Realizing that took the wind from my sails and reminded me that Black women are so frequently mined for our knowledge, experiences, and skills, but rarely ever credited for our contributions. Whenever we are, there is likely a story behind that credit that involves

the Black woman fighting just to have her name appear in the notes or byline, and usually comes long after the damage has been done. Somehow, I had become another victim of this phenomenon, all because I had done nothing other than being my truest self on Tumblr.

Like many Black feminists in those early days, I used my Tumblr for an amalgamation of personal anecdotes and updates, fandom-related activities, and, on occasion, as a platform to megaphone my own opinions about socio-political topics into the cybervoid and to meditate on my status as a queer Black woman existing in a world that seemingly despises my existence. A lot of my opinions were better articulated by people you have to call doctor so-and-so, but my thoughts were rooted in my own experiences, some of them strangely too personal to have floating in some publicly accessible research paper, but perfectly acceptable to commiserate with strangers about in an oddly open yet esoteric community like Tumblr. This Anon had taken things without permission that I'd shared that were deeply personal to me, such as my story of sexual assault, of fighting racism in a predominantly white school environment, and of how racism has impacted my experiences in fandom spaces. I had become a victim of academic plagiarism, and I was not the first Black woman to have her work stolen to further someone else's career. This wasn't even the first time I'd had something stolen from my blog, but it had more of an impact because it was an academic rather than a fan who did it.

I came to Tumblr in late 2009, when Black feminist bloggers were already sharing and having conversations about topics I was still mostly ignorant about but which affected me personally, like the intersection of being queer and Black in white spaces. I felt at home among these women, and like many who "found their tribe," I did not feel so alone as we all shared similar experiences over the course of the next few years. From 2009 to 2012 there was a mass exodus of Black feminist bloggers and writers from LiveJournal to Tumblr. The general consensus of these women was that Tumblr was an easier and more streamlined blogging site where they could have their conversations without being heckled by racist users in the comments section of the feminist magazine *Jezebel* or having to lock up their LiveJournals to keep their words safe from theft, since Tumblr was still new and still coming into its own as a blogging site. As Tumblr's popularity increased, a lot of these women also wound up becoming information resources for complete strangers. I'd see random users in the notifications of posts specific to Black women's interests demanding that we translate African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or explain some culturally specific aspect of Blackness that had nothing to do with them, as if we owed it to them to include them. This intrusion was actually what birthed the now oft-used catchphrase "Google is free."

As the conversations about race came more to the forefront of the public blogosphere in the early to mid-2010s, the Tumblr bubble popped as Black women found themselves newly exploited when academics, bloggers, and journalists began poaching their blogs for insights. Graduate students and professional writers alike mined Tumblr for posts, even going so far as to take entire screenshots without any credit or compensation given to the original poster. Due to Tumblr's lack of oversight, many prominent and prolific Black women began to depart the platform because of the widespread plagiarism of everything from their personal anecdotes to entire quotes, with the credit erased from their original posts entirely. At the time, I thought for certain that media outlets would listen to these women when plagiarism was brought up to them. And yet, there was no big blowout, nor were any of the accused outlets publicly reprimanded or the writers held accountable. No apologies were issued, and nonblack writers continued to profit from the emotional and academic labor of Black women who were quite literally just living their lives. Whole ideas, terms, and trains of thought were lifted directly from Tumblr posts I myself had reblogged and weighed in on, only to appear in online articles.

Black feminist bloggers such as Moya Bailey and Gradient Lair (Trudy) had already coined and popularized a term on Tumblr to describe a sinister prong of racism that targets Black women specifically: misogynoir. Misogynoir rears its ugly head in everything from fandom disputes to simple everyday racism, and the theft of Black women's ideas and experience that occurred on Tumblr was simply a new instance of it. Even the term "misogynoir" became mainstreamed without Bailey or Gradient Lair being credited, as they have noted elsewhere.¹ When you are a Black woman on the internet, privacy and the protection of said privacy are luxuries you are not afforded. Although Tumblr communities can feel private, any stranger can reblog and add to your post without so much as clicking the follow button on your blog. Your posts end up in what I have come to call "Feral Tumblr," where people you don't know and may never meet can access a post you likely never intended to be passed around like a high school yearbook. If your blog's content consists of critical race theory or analysis, or even something remotely academic, it may have already been taken and monetized by someone else without your knowledge or permission. It has become so prevalent and visible that more and more Black feminists, womanists, and academics are simply taking their talents to other platforms, locking their thoughts and observations behind Patreon paywalls or distilling them into Twitter threads. The truth of the matter is: we have been the voice of revolution long before anyone considered us people.

What made me so angry when I received that Ask from this "grateful"

graduate student was that not only had I—at the time—been fighting to get back into school to complete my *bachelor's degree*, but that I was just one of many Black women who had been used in this way. This is exactly how misogynoir works. Black women have always been burdened with being everyone's mother, nurturer, and fount of advice and wisdom. We are expected to teach, to raise, to uplift, and to further the personal development of everyone around us, from Black men to white women, and yet we are afforded none of these same niceties when we need uplifting, nurturing, and *protection*. It is why, when non-Black academics steal our words and parrot them as if they are somehow the authority on subjects that are literally our daily lives, I can't help but be angry. The message being sent is that Black women are not credible enough. It's why we struggle to reblog other people's movements when we are constantly viewed as less intelligent for not having as many degrees, despite knowing as much as we do. Our experiences are somehow not enough to quantify our intelligence, and yet people feel comfortable taking those experiences to further their own academic and journalistic agendas.

After I received that message I made the decision that so many other Black women made before me: I took my ball and went home. I locked up my blog when I decided to withdraw from "serious" blogging, carefully curating my followers and who I followed so as to avoid being sucked back into "the Discourse" (that is, arguments about whether or not an innocuous event is offensive or oppressive; speakers generally use various buzzwords from social justice academic circles to legitimize their claims). My writing since then has been kept under lock and key behind my Patreon paywall, because why shouldn't I be compensated for it? Since I made that decision, I've been good at keeping thoughts to myself, using them only when I know they will not only be heeded, but properly credited, and only when absolutely necessary. Others have gone to greater extremes, archiving and deleting their blogs or restricting their thoughts to short Twitter threads. I don't have the clout of some of the more well-known Black women who have been victims of this theft, but I can understand the measures needed to enforce boundaries.

This should finally be an age where Black women's voices are not only heard, but also heeded, and some Black feminists from that Tumblr era have managed to migrate to official websites and magazines to be compensated for their work, but only a small percentage. And yet we are the voice of many generations, and without our collective works and contributions to society, academia, and the blogosphere, these big-name publications and nonblack academics would have precious little to blog about. Look to *Teen Vogue* and its sudden turnaround from teenage fashion magazine to the powerful and

amplified voice of a generation, and all it took was putting a Black woman, Elaine Welteroth, in the editor's chair. Before you decide to take our words, thoughts, and experiences, ask yourself why you don't want to credit us and boost our voices instead. The answer is a lot less complex—and a lot more uncomfortable—than you want to believe.

NOTE

1. See Moya Bailey and Trudy, "On Misogynoir: Citation, Erasure, and Plagiarism," *Feminist Media Studies*, published online March 13, 2018: DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2018.1447395. Gradient Lair (Trudy) also eventually stopped updating on Tumblr due to alleged plagiarism and has since moved her content to Patreon to prevent theft and assure compensation for her work. Trudy posts newer content for patrons and can be found here: <https://www.patreon.com/thetrudz>. The Gradient Lair is still up in archival mode and can be accessed here: <http://www.gradientlair.com/>.

SECTION 3

#NSFW

Until its abrupt elimination by Verizon in December 2018, porn was a significant part of Tumblr's user practice and central to its politics of free expression.¹ Although contributors here note the immediate impact of Verizon's 2017 takeover, including its introduction of a new "Safe Mode," their essays were all completed before 2018's total ban.² Now, in its shadow, the pieces in this section gain an extra layer of meaning, standing as a time capsule that captures the many dynamic ways porn and other NSFW content provided pleasure and made meaning on Tumblr. By employing the popular Tumblr hashtag #nsfw (not safe for work) rather than #porn, we're indicating the ways that Tumblr differed from sites that privileged heteronormative pornography and was instead a vibrant hub for gay and alternative porn (feminist, queer, BDSM, audio-only, etc.), erotic art and photography, sexual education and sex work, and sexually explicit fan production.

The contributors in this section offer examples of Tumblr's distinctiveness as a platform for porn, beginning with media studies scholars Susanna Paasonen and Noah Tsika's discussion of the specifics of Tumblr's interface, its relationship with other digital porn producer practices, and the kinds of critical and creative engagements—often alternative and queer—that it enabled. Digital media researcher Katrin Tiidenberg's essay, "NSFW as an Intervention," then offers an ethnographic account of Tumblr users who post erotic selfies that challenge normative body image ideals of "sexiness" that are both unattainable and oppressive. We end with two personal essays: fan erotic artist and author Morgan Fisher (pseudonym) testifies to the significance of Tumblr as a space for reclaiming their own non-normative body by performing "Fandom Surgeries" that reimagine mainstream media's most idealized characters as sexual actors in bodies that resemble Morgan's own. Finally, anthropologist Shaka McGlotten's evocative essay describes their own longtime engagement with and ambivalence about gay porn on Tumblr. Its conceit is something that several contributors in this section allude to: porn on Tumblr has actually had *multiple* lives and deaths as a result of

changing cultural tastes or various administrative policies and “safe modes,” well before Verizon’s 2018 massive but never-quite-complete erasure.

NOTES

1. An Italian study in January 2017 estimated that around 22 percent of Tumblr users consumed “adult content,” with another 28 percent “unintentionally” exposed; they also noted that the majority of porn consumers on the platform seemed to be women. See links and analysis by Matthew Gault, “A Quarter of Tumblr Users Are There to Consume Porn,” *Motherboard*, December 5, 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/gy7w4b/data-scientists-estimate-a-quarter-of-tumblrs-users-are-there-to-consume-porn.

2. For contributor Katrin Tiidenberg’s immediate, eloquent reaction to the ban, see her Twitter post, December 3, 2018, <https://twitter.com/kkatot/status/1069658192211251200>.

Walled Gardens, NSFW Niches, and Horizontality

A Conversation about Tumblr Porn

Participants: Susanna Paasonen and Noah Tsika

Moderated by: Alexander Cho

Dates: June 22, 2018–July 2, 2018

Susanna Paasonen is professor of media studies at University of Turku, Finland. With an interest in studies of popular culture, pornography, sexuality, affect, and media theory, she is most recently the author of *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography* (MIT Press, 2011) and *Many Splendored Things: Thinking Sex and Play* (MIT Press, 2018).

Noah Tsika is assistant professor of media studies at Queens College, City University of New York. He is the author of several books, including *Pink 2.0: Encoding Queer Cinema on the Internet* (Indiana, 2016) and *Traumatic Imprints: Cinema, Military Psychiatry, and the Aftermath of War* (California, 2018).

Cho: *As a researcher and user, in your opinion, what makes Tumblr distinctive as a platform for porn?*

Paasonen: Tumblr allows for embedding video but not for uploading sexually explicit videos. Given the degree to which contemporary porn consumption is centered on the format of the video clip, and the degree to which its distribution is centralized on key video aggregator sites, it is exceptional for a successful platform to operate so centrally also on still images and animated GIFs. But then again it is already exceptional for a key porn platform not to be owned by Mindgeek, the company that runs most “tube” sites. Video aggregator “tube” sites emulate the operating

principles of YouTube, while Tumblr seems to have taken over the media ecological pocket that the “Pinterests of porn,” from Snatchly to PinSex and Pornterest, tried to occupy with modest success. Similarly to these, Tumblr caters user-curated porn harvested from diverse sources, often with considerable time and dedication. This allows for the articulation of highly specific taste cultures as well as for the isolation of particular moments within porn performances, by for example capturing them with GIFs.

Tsika: On June 21, 2018, a Twitter user named Michael Swartz (@MrMichaelSwartz) tweeted an image of Timothee Chalamet in the final shot of Luca Guadagnino’s *Call Me By Your Name* (2017), along with the caption “Me waiting for porn to load on Tumblr” (figure 12.1). Superimposed over the still of Chalamet—the young star tearfully, confusedly gazing at a raging fire—is the question “Is it a video?” The tweet speaks to a signal experience of Tumblr as a porn platform (especially for those of us with stubbornly sluggish internet connections). Indeed, when a Tumblr entry is slow to load, it is easy to wonder if it is, in fact, a video. Swartz’s tweet attests to the unique *jouissance* of waiting for Tumblr porn to appear, particularly on sites that promiscuously combine still and moving images, given the higher bandwidth required by the latter. But it also, in an important sense, queers *Call Me by Your Name*, effectively sexualizing an image that is too often reduced to sterile dimensions definable in terms of “true love,” “romantic loss,” “growing up,” and even “great acting.” And this has been one of Tumblr’s greatest gifts both to my private-erotic and public-professional lives: it is a platform on which so many users have queered moving-image texts—including those that, to some, seem *already* queer, such as *Call Me by Your Name*. Tumblr can, and often does, offer libidinous road maps that, in isolating fetish-friendly images unrecognizable to mainstream film criticism, simultaneously serve as instructive examples of close textual analysis.

Cho: *It’s interesting that you both interrogate Tumblr vs “mainstream” platforms, representations, erotics, or even file format. We know that Tumblr as a platform is associated with social justice and various subcultural/non-normative identities (queer users, feminists, users of color). Do you think this perspective is reflected in Tumblr porn as well?*

Paasonen: There’s a lot here! To start with a disclaimer, I am not so sure about the viability of a clear distinction between the mainstream and



Fig. 12.1. *Call Me by Your Name* tweet, @MrMichaelSchwartz

other stuff in the context of porn. All kinds of content get circulated on Tumblr, much of it repurposed from other commercial platforms. And, considered in terms of online economy, Tumblr is as mainstream as it gets: long owned by Yahoo and currently by a subsidiary of Verizon [Ed.: Tumblr was sold to WordPress owner Automattic in 2019], it may be alternative in the user practices it affords but not in its overall mechanisms of profit. In the context of porn, the mainstream remains an elusive concept both in terms of production and distribution.

At least for the uninitiated, however, Tumblr is much less intuitive to use than Pornhub when one is interested in finding something specific as quickly as possible and, given that one needs to log in to see stuff, it's less open to start with. Porn on Tumblr involves promotional efforts, diverse curated galleries, as well as loads of amateur content. There are

all kinds of pockets to explore, and perhaps all this does not invite as much random trolling as, say, Twitter that equally allows for sexually explicit content.

Tsika: Tumblr's specific affordances, along with its ineffable elements, have long suggested to me an erotically productive alternative to other microblogging websites. Seemingly unique is Tumblr's capacity to focus attention on particular sexual fetishes that, on competing social networks, would surely be forced to answer to the sort of patronizing, pathologizing users who invariably perform confusion and disgust in the face of "alternative" erotic practices, breathlessly wondering why, say, someone has dared to tweet (or even just to like) an image of one man standing on another man's face. Like their counterparts on the platform, individual, fetish-specific Tumblr blogs serve as their own kind of walled gardens, open, admittedly, to anyone who is logged on (and operating without "Safe Mode" turned on), but also insulated from the potential torrents of moralizing passersby so familiar from Twitter, and sustained by a self-selecting group of like-minded individuals.

My sense is that consistent Tumblr users have been conditioned to complicate conventional categorizations, to problematize constructions that might be taken to be reproductive of white supremacy, misogyny, ageism, and so on. To be sure, some users are more outspoken than others in their commitment to social justice. But there is also a pronounced respect, across Porn Tumblr, for what "works" sexually for some people, even if it may seem to others to be entirely objectionable. Porn Tumblr thus functions, in my experience, to fashion clear distinctions between, say, fodder for masturbatory imaginaries and *material* contributions to the maintenance of structural forms of oppression.

Cho: *It's pretty clear from industry accounts that Tumblr as a whole may have a hard time making money. What about Tumblr porn? Is it being monetized somehow outside of Tumblr's own corporate infrastructure? Who is making money here, if at all?*

Paasonen: Well the overall economy of online porn is more than a little opaque in terms of who gets what, and where, and how. There seems to be general consensus over performers' careers having grown more precarious within the current gig economy (Heather Berg is doing fantastic work on this). The abundance of free content, be it generated

by amateurs, shared as teasers, or pirated from wherever, is one obvious explanation. But the fact that Mindgeek runs so much of distribution, plus owns a fair amount of high-profile studios, means that profits flow somewhere close to there. However, since Mindgeek is not a listed company, there is no need to make any figures public. Meanwhile, much of the traffic of online porn happens within so-called mainstream frameworks, from platforms like Twitter or Tumblr to credit card companies reaping profits from consumers and producers alike.

So, Mindgeek makes money with Tumblr porn when it's uploaded and viewed on their sites. In addition, all kinds of pornographers use Tumblr as a promotional platform, whether this involves the idea of redirecting traffic elsewhere or having people pay for content or services accessed through the site. And here things get very complex, given the range of things happening on Tumblr; hard to generalize! And of course a large number of people producing their own content, or running tumblrs with repurposed stuff, are not that motivated by money.

Tsika: I'd like to echo Susanna's point about the opacity of material profitability on and around Tumblr, particularly given the rampant blackboxing that goes on at the corporate level. But porn-oriented Tumblr users increasingly avail themselves of newer sources of monetization, such as membership apps like OnlyFans; they use Tumblr as a jumping-off point to personal profits by providing links to their OnlyFans accounts. The matter of monetization—undoubtedly crucial to so many Tumblr users who freely admit that they are desperate for *any* sources of income in these harsh neoliberal times—should not, however, distract from the way in which (on Tumblr, at least) links to OnlyFans accounts seem entirely continuous not merely with Porn Tumblr's proud provision of fetishistic specificity but also with such other purported avenues of intimacy as Curious Cat and Ask.fm. After all, its monthly subscription prices notwithstanding, OnlyFans is of a piece with equally young social networks that promise to provide the sort of intimacy said to be missing on, say, Twitter. Such, it seems to me, is one of Porn Tumblr's legacies; OnlyFans as a popular "personal porn" platform is almost unthinkable without it.

Cho: *Whenever I tell people I research Tumblr, the most common answer I get is: Oh, so you just look at porn? Although there's a flippancy there, I actually think that's a very interesting response. Do you think there's any*

relationship between Tumblr's counterhegemonic "social justice" identity and Tumblr's long-standing accommodation of porn? Would Tumblr as we know it even be possible without porn?

Paasonen: I think the connection is pretty clear. Having spent a fair amount of time going through different social media service's community standards and content policies, I find it fair to say that Tumblr stands apart in the user engagements it affords and supports. The fact that Tumblr isn't owned by one of the real data giants, Facebook or Google, obviously means that it is not subject to their strict content policies, and this may also make it more attractive for users wary of the overall economy of social media. Not that Tumblr is external to this, but it's not within the belly of the beast exactly. Combined with the differences to the communicative practices of something like Twitter, which we've touched upon above, Tumblr invites all kinds of critical and creative engagements, both similarly and differently to how things were once with LiveJournal. There's this horizontality to the platform, in how stuff circulates and is made available, which means that porn and sexual content more generally aren't something fenced off from the rest, even if filtered through the Safe Mode function that Noah mentioned. A lot of Tumblr traffic comes from porn, so it's definitely a key factor in what comprises their business, and profile. But porn also weaves into subcultures, fandoms, kink communities, and identity projects in ways that give Tumblr particular sort of an edge.

Tsika: Tumblr will, I think, always retain its association with porn. Such is the power of the pornographic to eclipse all else. But I'm increasingly inclined to welcome these jokey constructions of Tumblr as a purely pornographic platform, however dismissive they may seem, because of relatively recent changes, most prominently the introduction of "Safe Mode" in 2013 and a newer version in 2017. "Safe Mode" imposed a new censorial framework that discursively reconstructed Tumblr as in need of surveillance and partitioning according to certain conservative guidelines. Indeed, "Safe Mode" has had immediate material effects that have served to limit the pornographic intelligibility of Tumblr. It used to be that even those without actual Tumblr accounts—who were unable to log on—could avail themselves of any and all iterations of Porn Tumblr simply by visiting these blogs. Increasingly, however, "Safe Mode" functions to withhold Porn Tumblr from internet users who don't have

Tumblr accounts. Porn Tumblr is thus, alas, less and less discoverable. So I, for one, am thrilled when Tumblr virgins cheekily align the platform with porn. It means that they are aware, through whatever process of cultural osmosis, of what makes Tumblr so special, and what, arguably, laid the groundwork for a range of activist uses of the platform. Because modes of community building that pivot around porn *are* activist, particularly when they seek, as so many Tumblr blogs do, to satisfy “niche” or otherwise underserved fetishes, fetishes that Tumblr has, in its own ways, helped to make “speakable.”

NSFW as an Intervention

The Case of Sexy Selfies on Tumblr

Katrin Tiidenberg

Katrin Tiidenberg is an associate professor of social media and visual culture at the Baltic Film, Media, Arts and Communication School of Tallinn University, Estonia. She publishes widely on the topics of sex, social media, visual culture, and digital ethics and is the author of *Selfies, Why We Love (and Hate) Them* (Emerald, 2018) and *Body and Soul on the Internet—Making Sense of Social Media* (in Estonian). More info at: kkatot.tumblr.com.

I've been studying how people use Tumblr since 2011.¹ More precisely, I've been studying the practices of an NSFW selfie community on Tumblr.² That is, naked or sexy selfies, why and how people post them, why it matters, and what it all means. And it does mean a lot, and matter, both for people involved in the practices, but also, I would argue, for culture in the larger sense. As one of my interview participants says: "I post pictures of myself where I like what I see, and the more pictures I take, the more I find things to like. I now have evidence that I like my body. All my life I have been trying not to hate my body, now I am spending time trying to genuinely like it."

During the years of my study, 2011 to 2017, Tumblr was an unusually tolerant place for NSFW content.³ Their censoring, flagging, and filtering rules were quite lax and followed a "live and let live" philosophy, which made users responsible both for filtering out content they didn't want to see and making their own content filterable (by self-tagging as NSFW). Tumblr was also unique because the confluence of shared practices and the platform's lax censorship policies made it a safe, body-positive space, such that NSFW selfie practices on Tumblr functioned as a rejection of the widespread regime of shame.⁴

The NSFW (Not Safe for Work) acronym serves as a warning label that points out content that is inappropriate for the typical workplace, and it is also a pop culture reference (perhaps like YOLO and FOMO were).⁵ Basically,

NSFW marks content you wouldn't want to have on your screen when your colleagues can see over your shoulder. In practice it is almost entirely used for sexually explicit visual content, and not, for example, for violence or racism. I focus on NSFW selfies, which mean (semi)-naked, sexy pictures voluntarily shared on one's Tumblr blog. For many years, Tumblr and its #NSFW subcultures stood out in this regard compared to other platforms such as Instagram and Twitter, neither of which allowed #NSFW searches until after the period this research was completed in October 2016.⁶ In the following, I offer a short overview of what NSFW selfies have meant for individuals sharing them on Tumblr and for their audiences there, and I consider their significance from the broader perspective of body-positive visual discourses.

NUDITY, NORMS, AND NETWORKED VISUALITY

I find NSFW selfies (also known as sexy selfies or nudes, figure 13.1) interesting because they occupy an intersection of issues we have with nudity and self-presentation, both of which are permeated by cultural and gendered ideas



Fig. 13.1. Collage of NSFW selfies posted by members of the community I have been studying

around attractiveness and norms of behavior. NSFW selfies may be repetitive, poorly executed, or trivial in composition and content, but their production and consumption is informed by Western visual culture's long-term preoccupation with the naked human form. How we take, edit, share our own, and interpret other people's NSFW selfies is thus shaped and constrained by our visual culture's past, by the perfectly sculpted male bodies of ancient Greek athletes; the ample, radiant Baroque depictions of female flesh; the shimmering nudity of women amidst dark-suited men in Impressionist paintings; and the stacks of intriguing nude self-portraits by photographers ever since the introduction of *daguerrotype*. John Berger claimed that in Western culture, being nude is about being seen by others, without being recognized for



Fig. 13.2. “Send nudes” on a dirty window in historical Aarhus, photo by author

oneself.⁷ In this context, the words used for NSFW selfies by different people and in different contexts are telling. Based on my observations, people refer to their own naked pictures as “selfies” or “sexy selfies,” while in generalized discourse about the genre, or when (mostly) dudes harass (mostly) women, they are referred to as “nudes” (as in the cultural trope of “send nudes,” figure 13.2). A power relationship is echoed, but also reproduced and legitimized, in the words we use for depictions of our own and others’ naked bodies. A selfie—even a naked one—is a (re)presentation of me, while a “nude” carries a built-in connotation of objectification. While I believe this to be the case across platforms and contexts, it is my argument that the affordances of Tumblr, as perceived and imagined by my participants, have allowed the “sexy selfie” interpretation to emerge and prevail over that of the “nude.”

NSFW selfies have a sort of absent presence in our everyday lives. Unplanned nudity is a source of embarrassment in many cultures, opening the exposed body up to both criticism of its appearance and shaming of the person’s moral character. Accounts are hacked and nudes found within are leaked for titillation-cum-ridicule (cf. Snapping and Fapping in 2014, celebrity iCloud photo hacks of 2017). Personally exchanged nudes are misused for a particular kind of bullying (i.e., revenge porn). This seemingly implies that it is not “normal” (in particular for women) to take, let alone share, sexy selfies.

On the other hand, there is a steady stream of clickbaity web galleries and “news” stories generated from the abundance of sexy selfies people have posted to photo and dating apps. These stories and galleries frame taking and sharing sexy selfies as something that is commonplace, but still vain, low-class, and self-objectifying. All the while, the abundance of memes and popular culture references to sexy selfies as a genre seems to indicate a fairly widespread, if partial, acceptance of the practice. The propensity some critically acclaimed celebrities (e.g., Lena Dunham) have for posting them has even resulted in NSFW selfies being framed as a “cultural phenomenon” by mainstream media.⁸

Existing scholarship on sexy selfies highlights gendered contradictions in their reception as well. While a study has claimed that 82 percent of Americans have sent or received sexy selfies, typical double standards apply.⁹ Kath Albury noted a cultural readiness (in Australia) to assume that boys’ sexy selfies are a joke, while girls’ are an indication of their lacking moral character.¹⁰ Despite doing it themselves, young sexy-selfie-taking men will still consider their female counterparts’ practices as cheap and self-sexualizing.¹¹

Yet I have found that from the perspective of the people taking, post-

ing, and sharing NSFW selfies on Tumblr, it is, like most cultural and self-presentational practices, much more complex than these discourses indicate. NSFW selfie practices, their meanings, and implications are inseparable from the web of social, cultural, and technological conditions from which they emerge. What people do, how they do it, how it makes them feel, what the platform technically allows, and how those technical affordances are experienced all matter. Tumblr's reblog function, the lack of inbuilt commenting, the fact that there is not a structured profile a user is obliged to fill out, and the differentiated messaging system, which allows anonymous, pseudonymous, public, and private interaction, all create affordances that facilitate NSFW selfie practice. While the platform can't generate shared practices, it can contribute to or inhibit their emergence, shape and constrain the forms they take. Because Tumblr enables #NSFW practices that are outside of the mainstream, the selfie communities on the platform make such complexities visible to us. In the remainder of this chapter, I will outline three key findings that help explain the nuances of adult practices of taking and posting NSFW selfies.

NSFW SELFIE PRACTICES MEAN A LOT TO PEOPLE PARTICIPATING

Even within the realm of NSFW Tumblr, sexy selfies mean something quite different to those people who post their own than to those who do not. Sexy selfies are a meaningful expression of themselves for people who take and share them, while for others they are merely objects with some social and (sub)cultural value.¹² Selfies gain their meanings in interaction, through shared practices and relationships. This is why it makes more sense to focus on, and talk of, selfie *practices*, not selfies per se. Selfie practices include the mental, practical, emotional, and interactional aspects of taking, editing, posting, sending, and deleting selfies. The meanings and functions my Tumblr participants ascribed to their selfie practices are varied and non-exclusive, ranging from impression management, social comparison, and communication to self-expression, self-awareness, and self-transformation.

NSFW SELFIE PRACTICES CAN TRANSFORM HOW PEOPLE EXPERIENCE AND MAKE SENSE OF THEIR OWN EMBODIED SELVES

We experience and live our bodies and selves as entangled, so changes in one obviously impact the other. Taking and sharing NSFW selfies usually starts

out as pure entertainment, but it can change how people experience their bodies and thereafter how they make sense of themselves and their lives. This was certainly the case for my Tumblr subjects.

First, people post pictures, where they like what they see; the more they post, the more they find to like. Posting, as opposed to sharing in a one-to-one situation, demands a certain courage, and entering one's own body into a stream of erotic, aesthetically pleasing content can feel like a claim to self-efficacy. Blogs become catalogues of evidence that the bloggers like their own bodies. A knee-jerk reaction might interpret this as simple vanity, but given the importance of embodiment for our sense of self, and the ubiquity of body angst, it should not be so easily dismissed.

Second, taking and sharing sexy selfies can become a practice of self-care and critical self-awareness, allowing participants to transform their own selves.¹³ This is possible because NSFW selfie practices—by allowing those partaking to be in charge of when and how they are seen—increase participants' sense of control and agency. The overall supportive feedback from the community bolsters participants' self-awareness, allowing them to stand up against occasional shaming or trolling and pushing them to clearly articulate that they are doing this first and foremost for themselves.

Third, because these sexy selfies are shared on diaristic, personal Tumblr blogs, everything posted is automatically archived, and their blogs often function as a way to catalogue self-growth and track both bodily and biographical changes.¹⁴ This can help manage life transitions or lead to questioning the meaning of existing social roles (e.g., parent or partner).

NSFW SELFIE PRACTICES CAN REARTICULATE HOW PEOPLE INTERPRET, AND RELATE TO, SOME DOMINANT SETS OF SOCIAL NORMS

Sometimes taking and sharing NSFW selfies can go beyond altering participants' experiences of their embodied selves and even become a "practice of freedom," which allows for transgressive, ethical-political self-invention, and active critique of the narrow norms of visual consumer economy.¹⁵ Tumblr's selfie communities have enabled these liberatory practices, which have developed there in several ways.

The body-positive atmosphere is the first thing that gets mentioned when I ask my participants what sets the NSFW selfie community on Tumblr apart from their other experiences. It is what makes the space that is not safe for

work feel safe for continual self-exposure. This body-positive atmosphere emerges from the double-interactive loop between supportive feedback and continual uploading of images. More diverse body imagery slowly saturates participants' feeds, transforming their personal aesthetics of what bodies look like and teaching them new "ways of seeing."¹⁶ While this does not have the power to replace the visual standards that the consumer economy utilizes to turn profits from our insecurities and body angst, it can confuse and diversify the visual discourse.

Once people notice the influence this body-positive, safe atmosphere has on their own experiences, they start consciously contributing to its reproduction. This means purposefully reblogging images of non-normative bodies, offering support, and in some cases using their own blogs and selfies to explicitly educate on, and push back against, the heteronormative, ageist, sizeist, sexist, ableist, and racist standards (figure 13.3).

Being able to presume a lack of abuse is a prerequisite for NSFW selfie practices and is necessary for the aforementioned transformation and resistance. But, paradoxically, it is the rare but recurring experiences of shaming and sexism that give some of my female participants an expressly feminist and activist voice. NSFW Tumblr spans much more than just the personal, selfie-posting NSFW blogs. It holds NSFW art, literary erotica, and a whole universe of banal porn. When NSFW selfies become very popular, they cross

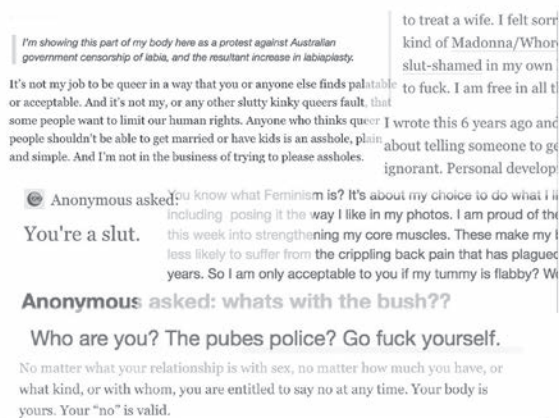


Fig. 13.3. A collage of blog outtakes, where NSFW selfie community members respond to audience demands, trolling, or just push back against heteronormativity, ageism, sizeism, sexism, ableism and racism

over community boundaries and gain the attention of people not aware of, nor interested in, the body-positive, interactive, supportive ways of the NSFW selfie community. Sexist reactions like “show your pussy,” “why don’t you shave?” or “you’re a slut!” are what force women to find, articulate, and express what their selfie practices mean to them, and through that carve out a mindful position within a patriarchal discourse of feminine sexuality.¹⁷

Overall then, the Tumblr of 2011–2017 did indeed offer a space where my participants’ NSFW selfie practices emerged as both personally transformative, but also liberating, perhaps even consciousness-raising. One of my participants has described it as a revelation: “I know I have the right to autonomy over my body. (. . .) I know that taking and posting selfies does not make me any less of a feminist or any less worthy of respect.”

DEMISE: VERIZON TUMBLR, 2017–

In the summer of 2017—on the heels of the mobile network Verizon acquiring Tumblr’s owner Yahoo—Tumblr introduced two changes to their content filtering system that undermined much of its liberatory feel for users. They launched a more restrictive, default “Safe Mode,” which hides content marked “sensitive” both from search results and the Dashboard. Tumblr also revised how they deal with blogs labeled “explicit,” now hiding them from everyone not logged in and from all under-eighteen users who are logged in. While “explicit” labels the blog in its entirety, “sensitive” was a new label and was applied to separate posts and images. All nudity, however, is now considered sensitive on Tumblr. When an image is deemed “sensitive” by a combination of opaque automation and human moderation, its poster sees a NSFW label appear on the post (figure 13.4).

These two changes—positioned by the platform as offering more control to users, but quite likely a commercially driven desire to reduce the visibility of content advertising clients might find unsavory—have been experienced as threatening by the NSFW selfie community. This has been expressed via two broad categories of reactions among my NSFW selfie-sharing participants.



Fig. 13.4. Example of a “sensitive” photo being marked by Tumblr

First, as one of my interviewees said, seeing the NSFW stamp on an image of one's own naked body feels "too close to how women's bodies are policed in general, it feels like being told you are beyond the pale." This labeling of one's own body also creates a dissonance in how the poster experiences the poster's own feed, as the NSFW label is visible to the person who posted the content but not those who have reblogged it. Thus, a fairly innocuous selfie of the participants' own breasts has the "NSFW" mark on it, while an outright pornographic GIF of fellatio, because it was reblogged, is not visibly labeled as such.

Second, participants whose blogs have larger audiences, who have cultivated an ethical-political voice that fills a gap in mainstream discourse, feel that by barring non-logged-in users from being able to find "explicit" blogs, Tumblr is partaking in censorship of discourse, information, and lifestyles. As another one of my participants says: "it's not like there are mainstream non-monogamy spaces out there, it's all swinger porn and misogynist wife swapping. And it annoys me that there are now extra barriers for people to find this info. I don't care how many hits I get, I don't monetize my blog, but I hate that people, who want to access it, can't. Once again I feel like I am told: 'you are deviant, this isn't ok, this needs to stay hidden,' and I never used to feel like that on Tumblr."

Both of these reactions stem from a feeling of being shamed. Sartre has described shame as something that makes us ashamed not just of our actions, but of our self, because "it is the recognition of the fact that I am indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging." In essence, shame means internalizing the judgment coming from outside. According to art historian Martha Hollander, shame is "profoundly visual, operating across an interface involving seeing and being seen."¹⁸ This brings us back to the previously mentioned observation by John Berger, for whom "nakedness" reveals itself but "nudity" is about being placed on display.¹⁹ It can be argued that Tumblr's new content-filtering rules flatten all content involving naked bodies into an objectifying category of "nudity." In the process, Tumblr is refusing to let the NSFW selfie bloggers reveal themselves or be recognized for themselves. With these changes post-2017, the NSFW selfie community feels that Tumblr has instituted a new regime of body shaming. In doing so, these participants—who feel NSFW content "basically built Tumblr"—think the platform is alienating some of their heaviest users and most popular blogs in their search for a revenue model. Perhaps this is empty anxiety, or perhaps it signals the point in time where Tumblr joins the junkyard of platforms that once used to be inspiring, progressive, or relevant.

CONCLUSION

While it is unclear what the future holds for NSFW selfie practices on Tumblr, my research over the past seven years has taught me that what may seem, and even be initially experienced as, a trivial pursuit can become a multiply meaningful practice. In the loosely regulated socio-technical environment that Tumblr afforded from 2011 to 2017, NSFW selfie practices allowed participants to recalibrate how they experienced their own bodies, selves, and biographies. This alone is a fairly significant alternative to the morally panicked interpretations that dominate public discussion around both nudity and selfies, but NSFW selfies on Tumblr also helped diversify visual discourse in the public sphere, which otherwise generally continues to operate with discriminatory standards. While these findings are not intended as generalizations about the genre of NSFW selfies or all Tumblr experiences, they do represent an important instance of users exploiting the affordances of a platform to create a counterculture of networked visibility and resistance through their everyday practices. NSFW, thus, has been an unexpected site of intervention. Or as one of the versions of the popular memetic saying goes, “you come for nudes, you stay for the revolution.”

NOTES

1. See Katrin Tiidenberg, *Selfies, Why We Love (and Hate) Them*, (Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing, 2018); “Ethics in Digital Research,” in *Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection*, ed. Uwe Flick (London: Sage, 2018): 466–82; “Research Ethics, Vulnerability and Trust on the Internet,” in *Second International Handbook of Internet Research*, ed. Jeremy Hunsinger, Lisbeth Klastrup, and Matthew Allen (Dordrecht: Springer, 2018).

2. Material collected consists of multiple (up to five per participant) interviews with thirty NSFW bloggers and selfie enthusiasts on Tumblr, blog outtakes from their blogs, their selfies, and other images, group interviews, and fieldnotes from ethnographic fieldwork. I obtained informed consent from all participants to analyze their thoughts and blog content and separately to reproduce their images in any publications. I process all reproduced images using visual ethical fabrication techniques, as outlined in Tiidenberg, *Selfies*, and Tiidenberg, “Ethics in Digital Research” in *Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection*, ed. Uwe Flick (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2017): 466–82. This material has been analyzed using different methods to answer different research questions for different publications. Participants are adults who blog in English, live in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Italy. Two identify as trans, sixteen identify as

women, twelve identify as men. While I have discussed this with my participants, this particular chapter does not deal with unsolicited dick pix or underage sexting.

3. In 2013 Tumblr was bought by Yahoo; this decision was met with discontent from users, 167,000 of whom signed a petition for the deal to be cancelled and promised to flee the platform if Yahoo came after their “porn and cat gifs.” Fernando Alfonso, “167,000 Tumblr Users Sign Petition to Stop Yahoo Deal,” *The Daily Dot*, May 20, 2013, <https://www.dailymdot.com/unclick/tumblr-users-petition-167000-signatures/>. When the deal went forward, Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer went on record saying that while Yahoo would try to develop a filtering system for those who want to avoid NSFW content, they would not restrict adult content, which was the case.

4. Hille Koskela, “Webcams, TV Shows and Mobile Phones: Empowering Exhibitionism,” *Surveillance & Society* 2 (2004): 199–215.

5. It is used across platforms and can be a static warning in interpersonal communication or a (hash)tag, which allows searching and automated filtering by firewalls and content-management algorithms.

6. #nsfwart was the closest on Instagram, and Twitter obligingly suggested #nsfwvines. Since 2016, however, #NSFW has somewhat mainstreamed on these platforms (Twitter allows #NSFW and autosuggest #nsfwsnapchat, #nsfwgroup and #nsfwkpop, while Instagram does not allow #NSFW but offers #nsfwcontent, #nsfwart and #nsfwvideos) and began garnering scholarly attention for its sexual, humorous, and risky aspects, Susanna Paasonen, K. Jarret, and B. Light, *Not Safe for Work: Sex, Humor, and Risk in Social Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, submitted).

7. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Association and Penguin, 1972).

8. Hunter Miller, “NSFW Nude Selfies We Can Totally Get Behind,” *Popculture.com*, July 14, 2018, <http://popculture.com/culture/2017/07/14/nude-selfies-nsfw-photos-instagram/>.

9. E. C. Stasko and P. A. Geller, “Reframing Sexting as a Positive Relationship Behavior,” *American Psychological Association* (2015): 6–9.

10. Kath Albury, “Selfies, Sexts and Sneaky Hats: Young People’s Understandings of Gendered Practices of Self-Representation,” *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 12.

11. Cristina Miguel, “Visual Intimacy on Social Media: From Selfies to the Co-construction of Intimacies Through Shared Pictures,” *Social Media+ Society* 2, no. 2 (2016).

12. Katrin Tiidenberg, “Bringing Sexy Back: Reclaiming the Body Aesthetic via Self-Shooting,” *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace* 8, no. 1 (2014).

13. These are elements of what Foucault calls technologies of the self, cf. Katrin Tiidenberg, “Bringing Sexy Back”; and Katrin Tiidenberg and Edgar Gómez Cruz, “Selfies, Image and the Re-Making of the Body,” *Body & Society* 21, no. 4 (2015): 77–102, for a detailed analysis of how selfie practices become technologies of the self.

14. Airi-Alina Allaste and Katrin Tiidenberg, "Sexy Selfies of the Transitioning Self," in *Youth Cultures, Transitions, and Generations*, ed. Dan Woodman and Andy Bennett (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015): 113–26.
15. Michel Foucault, "What Is Critique?," in *What Is Enlightenment: Eighteenth Century Answers and Twentieth Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 382–98; Nikolas Rose, *Inventing our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
16. Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
17. Katrin Tiidenberg, "'Nude Selfies til I Die'—Making of 'Sexy' in Selfies," in *Sex in the Digital Age*, ed. P. G. Nixon and Isabel Düsterhöft (London: Routledge, 2017).
18. Martha Hollander, "Losses of Face: Rembrandt, Masaccio, and the Drama of Shame," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (2003): 1327–50.
19. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*.

Fandom Surgery

Morgan Fisher

Morgan Fisher spends a lot of time obsessing over fictional characters, thinking about mental health, and staring into the Void.

Starting at a very young age and until my early twenties, I was afraid of mirrors in the nighttime. After nightfall, when the unconscious parts of my vulnerable mind bubbled up closer to the surface, mirrors filled me with dread. Whenever I rose from my bed to use the facilities or get a snack or glass of water, I would close my eyes and find my way by feel and from memory because I didn't want to see what a mirror might reveal. It wasn't my own reflection that terrified me. Rather, it was that the mirror might make visible other entities my naked eye couldn't perceive. Unwanted, tortured monstrosities whose intentions were unknown.

Starting a little later, at age twelve, if not earlier, one of my longest-standing fantasies began: plastic surgery. I have an artist's eye and training, which allows me to perceive and reproduce the particular shapes of a body. With that capacity comes the less desirable side effect that I am agonizingly aware of all the ways my body deviates from the mainstream ideal. I am a writer too, meaning I also find inventively cruel ways to describe all the ways my body is "wrong." I've seen enough images of people cut open to be able to furnish myself with a graphic and realistic concept of what plastic surgery entails. And so I have spent almost two decades, off and on, aching with longing for a scalpel to part me and excise soft, tender parts of me.

This may seem like a weird opener for an essay about sharing my erotic and otherwise explicit fan art and fanfic on Tumblr. Online I'm best known for reimagining my favorite characters as trans people, chubby/fat people, and trauma survivors. The two personal stories above give some context on why it's been important for me to reimagine my favorite characters with bodies like mine, bodies often seen as monstrous and unlovable. Looking in the mirror and seeing something worthy is still hard. Coping with the fact that my body is hated by many is still hard. But one of the best ways I've found to

reshape my relationship with myself is by projecting my most contentious traits onto my most beloved characters.

As so many people have said more eloquently and with better citations, representation matters. And while fandom has become a lot more inclusive of people and bodies like mine in the past ten years, mainstream media generally hasn't. So if I want to see bodies like mine as powerful, beloved, and sexy, I have to either create that content myself or hope some other generous and talented soul has already done so.

I find it delicious to take big-name characters—who 99 percent of the time are meant by their creators to be straight and cis and thin—and make them trans, or give them a soft, plush body instead of the thin muscular one they originally had. It's delicious to draw soft trans bodies, and it is delicious to claim characters not meant to represent me and *force* them to represent me. I may fantasize about cosmetic surgery all the time, but I refuse to actually capitulate by getting those surgeries. So instead I perform a kind of fandom surgery on my favorite characters to make them more like me. Many people use fandom as a way to project themselves onto “ideal” bodies, imagining a mind like theirs on a body more conventionally “lovable” or “desirable.” That's a kind of power fantasy, imagining oneself having access to the things mainstream beauty and its privilege can provide. I understand that. But what has been most healing for me is to take a heroic figure from popular culture and project my body onto theirs, so I can see a body like mine representing bravery, accomplishment, and beauty.

This includes in an erotic context. People that aren't thin and cis almost never get romance arcs in movies. We don't get slow shots panning over our forms with the intention of initiating a gaze filled with desire. When bodies like mine are shown at all, they are nearly always depicted as objects of mockery or disgust, as a punchline or a cautionary tale. This is how mainstream media wages war against people like me. I get told all the time, in a thousand different ways, that I should not exist, that my ongoing existence is disturbing and unnecessary, and that if I must exist that my top priority should be to alter every part of myself to be more palatable to others. So when I imagine heroic figures with bodies like mine and continue to imagine them as desirable and acclaimed, I am refusing to swallow what media feeds me. Media is a mirror—and the horror of looking into the mirror and seeing either empty nothingness or a monster can be overwhelming.

Sex isn't everything, and not all my fandom work has been sexual. But bodies and the ways they feel and receive desire, sexual or not, is important. When the sum total of media representation for people like you consists of

cruel jokes, fearmongering, and niche fetish porn, it's easy for your desire to become about three things: desire to destroy yourself, desire to be someone else, and desire to please others no matter the cost to yourself. In that context it becomes damn near impossible to imagine an erotic life which is about you and your own fulfillment. I still struggle with this, but Tumblr fandom, and in particular Tumblr erotic fandom, has helped.

Tumblr is a weird place to share one's erotic work. It's not a safe space by any stretch of the imagination, given that any post or blogger can be found and dogpiled by Nazis, fundamentalist Christians, and other breeds of violent bigot. For me in particular, bigots who encounter my work love to bluntly reiterate to me that I should not exist and that the existence of people like me is disgusting, including sometimes even describing to me the ways that we are disgusting. On top of that, even cis people who enjoy my work sometimes engage with it in ways I find disrespectful and/or fetishizing, like using offensive/objectifying language to describe trans people when they comment on or tag my work. I routinely have to block users who either misgender trans people or leave offensive commentary on my posts. I've had anonymous users send explicitly trans-fetishizing fantasies to my inbox, unasked-for and uninvited, because they assume that's what trans people are for and how they automatically interact with us. I've encountered "trans fan art" by cis fans that's little more than fetish porn by and for cis people, reiterating the process of turning us into objects for cis people to act upon rather than individuals with feelings and desires of our own. Much of this fan art focuses solely on trans genitals and the ways cis people feel about them and us for having them.

Despite that, Tumblr can also offer a diverse and welcoming space in which to share one's fandom feelings, including the gnarly, bizarre, embarrassing, perverse, and overly personal ones. If I wake up at 4 a.m. on a weeknight and want to share my belief that my favorite character is trans and would enjoy fisting, Tumblr is an excellent platform for it. And if I want to get really vulnerable and reimagine all my favorite characters looking like me, I can do that and have my work be welcomed and enjoyed by *others like me*.

It's the "others like me" bit which has made Tumblr's adult fandom enjoyable. When I post my work, I don't feel like I'm shouting into the void. Almost every single piece of work I've made and posted that featured fat bodies and trans bodies has gotten multiple responses along the lines of "it feels so amazing to see bodies like mine as good" and "I've never had anyone actually want someone like me before but this gives me hope."

I was trying to create hope for myself when I got into fandom ten years ago. I had just come out as trans, my family members were outright telling

me that no one would ever love me again if I transitioned, and the only concept I had of being desirable was as a fetish object. I referred to myself using terms widely considered fetishizing slurs because I didn't know that better language existed. And it was in that state that I started creating trans erotica. I was desperate to imagine scenarios in which people like me were passionately desired, fulfilled in their sex lives, and committed to by people they loved. When I gained weight several years after coming out as trans, I needed similar reassurance that people could still love, desire, and commit to me. I still need that reassurance now.

Not only has adult fandom on Tumblr been a way to meet people similar to me and thus create community support and affirmation, but I've literally met partners like me through fandom too. One of the best relationships of my life started with us reading each other's trans erotic fanfiction and then writing it together, after which we started dating. I've felt the most loved and desired and understood with people I met through fandom. Even the friends I've made through adult fandom and our enjoyment of each other's work has gone a long way too in bolstering my self-esteem. And on days when the self-esteem simply isn't there no matter what I do, my fandom friends are around to commiserate.

Fandom has been a mirror for me for a decade now. Looking in mirrors has always been risky for me, and like I said, Tumblr fandom is not without risk. But for the most part, it's a mirror in which I see faces and bodies like mine reflected with love and affection.

TumPorn Is Dead, Long Live TumPorn!

Shaka McGlotten

Shaka McGlotten is an artist and anthropologist whose work focuses on art, media, race, and sexuality. They are the author of *Virtual Intimacies* and the recipient of a 2017 Creative Capital|Andy Warhol Arts Writers Grant.

I'm in a fetal posture in bed, phone cradled in my hand, inches away from my face. I use my thumb to scroll through dozens of new posts. Scroll, tap, scroll. Waiting to load. Watch, pass, scroll, tap. I linger on GIFs, their condensed repetitions of heightened affect reflecting my own.

Then my (much) younger partner tells me, "TumPorn is dead." That sinking feeling again. *I* used to be the one attuned to media trends. And over the past few years Tumblr had become one of my main go-tos for porn. I'd collected dozens of blogs that lived in a dedicated xxx subfolder in my Chrome browser's bookmarks with titles like *CUMblr, just a taste, Discipline for Boys, Daddy's Favorite Things, LET ME SIT ON IT*, and *Sup Faggots*. Normally I would scroll through the list clicking on what struck my fancy. If one didn't work for me, I clicked on another. And sometimes I'd find that a favorite blog had been deactivated. Clicking on the page would simply direct me to a screen with a flashing disco ball with a brief note: "Sorry, there's nothing here."

I was disappointed then when a reinstall of my operating system inexplicably disappeared all of them, my curated bookmarks wiped. There was a pleasure, however, in having a clear slate, in starting over, in collecting new collections.

I didn't have the courage to ask my partner about the origins of the neologism "TumPorn." I hadn't heard it before (and neither did the editors of this volume, although my queer students had). I didn't know that it was dead and didn't want to seem even further out of the loop of social media looping.

I pretended an interest more intellectual than my actual, defensive one. I mean, I *was* interested.

"What do you mean it's dead?" I asked.

"No one uses it anymore."

“Who’s no one?”

We spent hours in the coming days transitioning all of our pornographic browser bookmarks into following porn blogs on new, individualized Tumblr accounts, giving truth to that lie. The rationale?

“Putting them in one place just makes more sense. That way you don’t have to open bookmarks anymore. There’s just one feed,” my partner explained.

If you’re interested, here’s the way to do it: create a new Tumblr, then copy and paste the title (not the URL) of one of your bookmarked favorites into the “Search Tumblr” field and then click “Follow” when their blog appears. It’s simple! Alternately, and this is my preferred method, conduct a Google search of your favorite genres, which will rank the most popular blogs: “muscle daddy cum tumblr.” You can replace those terms with something more up your alley. Eventually, you’ll find the blog you’re looking for.

Back into our porn archives TumPorn goes, simultaneously archiving pleasures, our own, those of others, and, perhaps, even those of the fiber-optic cables, servers, and the machines with whom we have become so intimate.¹

TumPorn Is Dead, Long Live TumPorn!

I DON’T REALLY KNOW HOW IT WORKS

As I write this, I realize that although I have used Tumblr for years, I’m not sure if I really even know how it works. I mean, I can set up a Tumblr; I’ve used them to document the work of students in two of my courses, *Queer Media Convergence* and *Drag Theory and Practice* (the latter an automatically generated but so apropos URL). That’s about it, though: sign up, post, period. I don’t reblog, I don’t comment, and I keep my own porn hoarding set to private. I only just began to like posts in my now streamlined pornographic feed.

And, still writing right now, I can’t go to Tumblr to read all of their FAQ because I’ve used the Self-Control app developed by my colleague, the New Media artist Steve Lambert, to block my access to the site for twenty-four hours so that I can stay focused on this essay and not get distracted by . . . porn. It’s just a mini porn fast. I’ll be back on tomorrow, or I’ll get desperate and redownload the Tumblr app to my phone, which, in spite of my occasional too-close-to-my-face cradling, I don’t usually prefer. The iPhone SE screen is just too small. Anyway, having TumPorn on the move is tempting but risky. More than once, I’ve been on a bus or in a public toilet and had to hurriedly lower the volume after accidentally tapping on a video, making it full screen and activating sound, otherwise defaulted to mute. Laptops are

better because you can use one hand to scroll and the other to . . . well, that should be obvious.

Since I can't get to Tumblr's FAQ, I of course end up on Wikipedia to learn more, and from there I follow a citation and learn that porn accounts for up to 22 percent of all Tumblr content, at least as of 2013.² Tumblr won't say, of course.

After making the same mistake of blocking my access to the site once more, I finally read Tumblr's Community Guidelines, and I figure out their hard-to-understand policy regarding sexually explicit material. They allow users to post materials so long as they do not violate any laws or promote violence, including the violences of self-harm, but they do not allow sexually explicit materials to be hosted on their servers.

Uploading Sexually Explicit Video. You can embed anything in a Tumblr post as long as it's lawful and follows our other guidelines, but please don't use Tumblr's Upload Video feature to upload sexually explicit video. We're not in the business of hosting adult-oriented videos (and it's fucking expensive).³

But one can recirculate porn from anywhere else, from anyone else's server, so that's not usually a problem. Recent laws, however, like New York City's revenge porn law, makes illegal the sharing of an intimate photo of someone, even if that photo was originally shared with another, without their express consent. There's another, perhaps more obvious constraint: sexually explicit depictions of minors are also illegal.⁴

IS THIS GOING TO GET ME INTO TROUBLE?

Where is all of this coming from?

Sometimes I accidentally follow tumblrs I quickly realize aren't for me. *Extremehardcore.tumblr.com* can be hot sometimes, but I'm not into scat (no shade if you are!), and there's only so many rosebuds I want to see in a day.

Then there are the images that worry me for different reasons. Twink blogs obviously feature images of young men. And some look really young, like 90 percent of the models at Helix Studios, perhaps the most popular twink porn production company. These photos, videos, and GIFs are likely to raise the eyebrows of some. They raise mine. And sometimes this eyebrow raising is a result of Tumblr's own algorithmic suggestions. Clicking on a recommendation based on my current subscriptions, I'm taken to pages featuring high school wrestlers, teenage body builders, speedos at the beach.

Heek! I anxiously close the worrying new tab, unfollow some of the twink tumblrs that are shaping my taste profile, and turn on my VPN, trying to disappear behind proxies, although I don't know if it will do any good. Tumblr is enabling precisely the forms of objectification that worry other users of the platform, as well as drawing the attention of government watchdog groups.

The aforementioned *Discipline for Boys*, by the way, is an eighteen-plus website that features eighteen-plus models, whatever the term “boy,” commonly used across queer and kink communities, might otherwise seem to indicate. Just so we're clear on that.

RABBITHOLE (THUMBLR)

TumPorn is a porn rabbithole, albeit one with an ostensibly more curatorial angle than any of the “tube” sites.

You know the drill on those sites, you log on and skim left to right, top to bottom, the most recently posted videos. This design is not accidental; it drives you toward particular content, toward ads, toward new subscriptions. Tumblr's scroll, in contrast, keeps you attuned to what might appear next.

Of course, Tumblr, tube sites, and social media dating apps are organized in and through categories. On tube sites or dating apps, if you don't find what you want, you click on a filter, narrowing down your maybe-I'm-in-the mood-for objects of desire: creampiees, DILFs, FTM (which you usually have to switch over to the straight sites to find), twinks, gingers. Of course, going down the rabbithole, the more or less urgent practice of intensified browsing doesn't necessarily mean you'll find what you're looking for. For a while, I watched compilation videos, but now I'm onto popper training videos, which are video compilation popper-alongs, instructing you when to take a sniff.

“Inhale . . . deeper.”

Then, too, there are the hypno training videos, aimed at converting straight betas into gay sex. “I love big cocks,” repeats a synthetic voice for the next thirty-two minutes.

Tumblr works differently: when you search the domain for “gaping holes,” to take one example, you aren't directed toward particular videos, but to Tumblr pages where these terms have been tagged. Or you can follow tags directly, which are categories too, of course, though personally I have never found this particularly effective. It's better to take my earlier advice: use Google and search terms. One other key difference here: tumblrs are, ostensibly, curated. So a particular blog should feature content that matches your search term, though most, in the end, post kitchen sink porn.

Anyway, how do you find your porn, and what are *your* go-tos?

“Rabbithole” sounds negative, but it is really just about registering my ambivalence about porn, which has nothing to do with most critiques of it. For me, it’s about time management and managing the wearing down that comes with ordinary busyness. I mean to take a nap and then I end up in an hour-long edging session. No nap after all. I get up, clean myself off, eyes burning, screenache.

After I gave a talk on porn fasters, in which I critiqued their logics for pursuing fasting (they say it gives them super powers, erections of steel!) while also describing my own porn fasting experiments, the attending theorist Lauren Berlant called me out.⁵

“Is this,” meaning my analysis, “eroto-phobic?”

Huh.

My ambivalence isn’t phobic, I replied. It’s just that I don’t always know what to do about my desires. That *is* desire, of course. My ambivalence is not only about various practices of self-optimization, like checking off the long list of work-related tasks or getting enough sleep, it is also about how my archives and affectspheres of desire are being shaped by these platforms, training me to scroll and swipe. This isn’t new either. It’s just updating to remain the same.⁶ When I first started consuming online porn in the late ’90s, my patience was tested as I ever-so-slowly waited for images to load. Rows of pixels slowly appeared until I’d decide whether it would work for me or not. I’d wind myself up, feeling urgency and, often, furious impatience.

I basically feel the same today, checking in to see if there’s anything interesting on my feed, whether there’s anything new. And as I complete this essay, I discover that another new phrase has entered into circulation among other self-confessed porn consumers in my orbit: “there is no new porn on Tumblr.” There is no new desire either; that is the rhythm of desiring that structures my ambivalence. Hail desire, hail ambivalence! TumPorn is Dead! Long live TumPorn!

NOTES

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<https://techcrunch.com/2013/05/20/tumblrs-adult-fare-accounts-for-11-4-of-sites-top-200k-domains-tumblrs-adult-fare-accounts-for-11-4-of-sites-top-200k-domains-adults-sites-are-leading-category-of-referrals/>.

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4. Andrew Liptak, “The First Lawsuit Has Been Filed Under a New Revenge Porn Law in New York City,” *The Verge*, April 15, 2018, <https://www.theverge.com/2018/4/15/17239838/new-york-city-revenge-porn-law-first-complaint-tumblr>.

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SECTION 4

#Fandom

Affective pleasure is Tumblr's primary attraction and its fuel, and "fandom" is the word most frequently used by both Tumblr users and staff to identify these emotional intensities and practices. Because the terms "fan" and "fandom" suffuse all of Tumblr, however, the specific nature of Tumblr's media fandoms, and their relationship to media fan culture more broadly and historically, can be difficult to parse. While media fan communities have always populated a range of platforms, Tumblr quickly became the primary platform for many fans as soon as it was introduced, especially for new, young fans. In particular, Tumblr drew in fans who were invested in creating and sharing transformative works (such as fan art, fan fiction, fan video, GIF sets, and playlists), those that re-envisioned the source text in ways that contrasted with or exceeded the more "normative" fan behaviors encouraged by industry interests. Not surprisingly, these fans were nonconforming in other ways as well; Tumblr has been largely dominated by feminist, queer, and activist fans of all ages. Media fandom at large throughout the 2010s was deeply affected by Tumblr's aesthetics, fan cultures, and community practices, all of which continue to be felt across platforms.

The pieces in this section consider both how fandom has impacted Tumblr culture and how Tumblr has impacted fan culture more generally. The section begins with a foundational conversation about Tumblr fandom among fan experts (Flourish Klink, Rukmini Pande, Lori Morimoto, and Zina Marie Hutton), who give their own nuanced assessments of the distinctiveness of Tumblr as a fan platform and identify the positives and negatives of it for particular fan identities and cultures. In "Kitten Thinks of Nothing but Murder All Day," J. S. A. Lowe examines the aesthetic, narrative, and often critical role of Tumblr fan "text posts," a form of meme that combines familiar visuals from fan-beloved series with texts. Annie Galvin explores the way in which queer young women use Tumblr to share narratives of their own relationships, developing "fandoms" of their personal lives among their followers, which they represent as multimedia narratives through Tumblr. Jessica

Pruett also considers queer young women's use of the platform, in this case discussing how and why Tumblr became the primary space for lesbian One Direction fans to congregate and create. Finally, although there are wonderful examples of various fan art forms throughout this volume and particularly in this section, we wanted a distinct space where fan artists could offer commentary for their own work. Our Fan Art Gallery thus concludes this section.

A Roundtable Discussion about the Cultures of Fandom on Tumblr

*Participants: Flourish Klink, Rukmini Pande, Zina Hutton,
and Lori Morimoto*

Moderated by: Allison McCracken

Dates: July 3–14, 2017

Flourish Klink is half of Fansplaining, “the podcast by, for, and about fandom,” and has been a fixture in various fan communities since the late 1990s. She holds a master’s degree in comparative media studies from MIT and today works in the entertainment industry, advising large franchises on fan cultures and strategy.

Rukmini Pande is an assistant professor of English literature and communication at O.P. Jindal Global University. She is the author of *Squee From the Margins: Race in Fandom* (2018), and is editor of *Fandom, Now in Color: A Collection of Voices* (2020) both published by the University of Iowa. She has published widely on the topic of race/racism in media fandom.

Zina Hutton runs Stitch’s Media Mix, a website focusing on representation—primarily race, gender, and sexuality—in media and in fandom spaces. She has a master’s degree in English Literature and has published both short stories and nonfiction for a variety of publications, including *Fireside Fiction*, *Anathema Magazine*, *The Mary Sue*, *Comics Alliance*, and *Women Write about Comics*. Her first book, *Judge Anderson: Flytrap*, was published in 2019.

Lori Morimoto is an independent scholar of fan and media studies, focused specifically on transcultural fan interactions and transnationally circulating media. She has published widely on transcultural fandom and is co-editor of a special issue on “Tumblr and Fandom” for the journal *Transformative Works and Cultures* (2018).

McCracken: *What do you feel most distinguishes Tumblr fandoms from others?*

Klink: Tumblr fandom is less visible than other types of fandom to the entertainment industry, because it's harder to track user activity than on other sites (e.g., Twitter and even Facebook). That makes it less influential, although of course some youth-centered sectors of industry are aware that it's important; they just have a hard time quantifying *how* important. Tumblr fandoms also tend to be younger and more female and/or nonbinary than other fandoms, and in fandoms that span multiple social networks, women tend to be on Tumblr. This has, I think, to do with Tumblr's history as a platform and the people who are already currently present there, as well as with how it advertises itself (for instance, through its partnership with the MTV Fandom awards). By comparison, fandoms centering around Reddit (for instance) are more likely to be more male and cisgendered. This is by no means always the case, of course.

Tumblr fandoms also tend to be more fraught with schisms and groups that don't speak to each other. Because of the way that posts can quickly be taken out of their original context on Tumblr, I have noticed that conflicts there tend to become wide-ranging and very bitter, focused more on identity signposts (for example, gender, sexuality, race) that are easily recognizable than on actual interactions (positive *or* negative) between individuals.

The other side of the coin, of course, is that Tumblr makes it easy to find "your people": if you see a post that's been reblogged by a variety of folks, you can quickly find yourself engaging with individuals you'd never have met otherwise, and it's easier to identify them because of the signposting that most people seem to take part in. It's a blessing and a curse, then.

Morimoto: To me, the greatest difference between previous sites of online fan engagement and Tumblr is the how Tumblr's design and features encourage a kind of "crossing the streams" between subcultures within a given fandom. I've used Mary Louise Pratt's notion of "contact zones" to theorize how fandoms on Tumblr contrast with the "communities" of LiveJournal, Yahoo Groups, Usenet, and so on. Specifically, where fandoms on LJ and other "comms" operate(d) on a hierarchical, closeable model (involving community "owners" and moderators, and peopled by

self-selected members), Tumblr is characterized by a more rhizomatic, non-hierarchical structure where connections happen largely through tags that *might or might not* hold the same meanings for different fans.

This commingling is both a strength and a weakness of Tumblr. On the one hand, speaking from my own experiences, such contact zones have allowed me to step outside my own comfort zone and interact with fans whose race, gender, ethnicity, age, and so on are different from mine, enabling me to consider “fandom” through lenses other than my own. At the same time, I’ve experienced transcultural conflicts for the same reasons, largely centering on my open fandom identity as a fan studies scholar. These experiences are, I think, generalizable to experiences on Tumblr writ large.

Pande: I would say that Tumblr differs from these earlier platforms due to a mixture of factors. Its design is certainly part of that, as its non-centralized structure and the ability to quickly reblog content has allowed for a greater proliferation of content within and between fandoms. Also the lack of control over how a piece of content is reblogged/commented on is also key to the types of conversations (or lack of them) that are being had in fandom. In this way Tumblr is certainly more dialogic than previous platforms, and that has enabled more visibility for critiques of both popular cultural media texts and fandom practices (figure 16.1).

The critiques made by fans that have interested me most are those around race/racism, which is why I argue for Tumblr fandom as a postcolonial space. This is not to characterize it as universally resistant or revolutionary but to identify the ways in which arguments around what “representation” means, particularly in queer-identified spaces, are involved in a push-and-pull that still privileges both whiteness and identity categories conceptualized in the Global North.

For example, as an “acafan” (an academic and fan) from India I often struggle with discussions around cultural appropriation, which can mean very different things to me versus a member of the Indian diaspora in the United States. But the fact that multiple dissenting voices can, and do, chime in on a particular issue is something that other fandom spaces have been less friendly toward. This does not mean that this engagement is always fruitful, but it has pushed the discourse around fandom’s own hierarchical structures more into the limelight than in previous mediums.

Hutton: To me, the major differences between Tumblr fandoms and fandoms that were born on other websites both deal with issues of access. First, there's no control over who gets to engage with your content on the platform. For the majority of my fannish life pre-Tumblr, there's been a balance between having your work and thoughts available for everyone and no one. Tumblr doesn't have that.

While, as Rukmini points out, this does mean that critiques of media texts and the fandoms they spawn do get more visibility, the same openness also means that it's easy for a post to go viral and leave you with no way to screen the people coming into contact with it.

The second major difference—and it's related—is the way that people in the subfandoms and communities on Tumblr talk to and about actual people related to their fandoms in a way that is dehumanizing (either by labeling critics of a fandom as enemies or “antis” or by placing people they like on shaky pedestals where the threat of being knocked off is ever-present). Tumblr was the first place where I actually felt as though people in fandom were trying to strip me of my humanity specifically because I pointed out the problematic aspects such as racism, misogyny, and homophobia in the things they liked. And when I talked about the direct impact of racism in media and in fandom on my life as a queer Black person, these things that should've inspired empathy really didn't.

McCracken: *Can you discuss the aesthetic/expressive aspects of Tumblr fandom you think are especially significant?*

Klink: Tumblr fandoms tend to be much more visual than other fandoms.

I often find that this is the most difficult part of Tumblr for people who are not familiar with it. The visual languages in play on Tumblr are as meaningful and complex as any slang or textual interactions on Twitter. This is also part of what can make it difficult for companies to effectively interact with people on Tumblr. They are often used to hiring an outside designer to create all images, and they often don't have this person on call, nor do their social media teams have the ability or authority to create or modify images on the fly. Since they also can't usually speak with a personal voice, this means they're very limited in their ability to take part on Tumblr.

Morimoto: What strikes me as particularly noteworthy is how Tumblr privileges visual communication—images/screencaps, GIFs, videos,

fan art—facilitating interaction between fans who might not otherwise ever come into contact. Of course, the same can be said of other image-centric sites like DeviantArt or Japan's Pixiv, but on Tumblr visual and textual communications are equivalent (and even mutually dependent) ways of expressing fannishness, which sets it apart from those sites.

This equivalence de-centers fanfiction as representative of English-language transformative fan culture, and because fan art and images effectively translate across language borders, I'd argue it encourages a higher degree of transnational fan interaction than was possible on text-based platforms.

Lest this sound unduly utopian, it's important to remember that these interactions occur within contact zones that are, by definition, sites of potential conflict. Its transnationality notwithstanding, Tumblr's English-language fan cultures continue to evince a singularly Anglo-American bias (what one fan friend has aptly termed "American monoculture"), to the extent that the "norms" of such cultures are precisely that: normative, for a specifically (Anglo)-American, white-privileged understanding of the word.

Pande: I think for me the visual-ness of Tumblr is key to the ways in which it has enabled practices like racebending, which have functioned to foreground the whiteness of Western media texts in a very immediate way. This is a type of fan work that I rarely saw at all before Tumblr and so I find its rise in popularity significant. One of my respondents identified this practice as specifically postcolonial in its direct confrontation of the "source" of whiteness in media. I believe that overall Tumblr has led to a rise in consciousness among non-white fans about their identity vis-à-vis fandom spaces.

Racebending is also postcolonial in making visible the limitations of fandom, such as the persistence of colorism, with lighter-skinned actors regularly being cast more often by fans. And racebending has also failed to translate into noticeable fan support of canonical non-white characters. In this way, despite its seeming status as a home for critical thought, I don't think Tumblr reflects that much of a break with modes of racialized fandom engagement generally.

To respond about Zina's points above, the "stripping of humanity" that is seen in Tumblr discourse, I completely agree. I think the difference is in the way conflicts are perceived and circulated on Tumblr. While there were always (very nasty) conflicts, both interpersonal and around meta-issues like racism and misogyny, for example, between

Fig. 16.1. Harry Potter characters were commonly racebent on Tumblr, most often with Harry portrayed as brown and Hermione as Black, as in this piece of fan art (a pencil illustration) by Sophia Canning, titled the “The Golden Trio,” posted March 2016



THE GOLDEN TRIO!

94,759 NOTES 3 YEARS AGO REBLOG TAGS

fans on previous platforms, those conflicts could not be circulated in such a porous way before Tumblr. So a conflict in *Due South* fandom largely remained in *Due South* etc. While some wish to attribute the toxicity of some Tumblr exchanges to the youth of participants or to the co-optation of social justice language for ship purposes [Ed.: that is, to serve their preferred romantic pairings, “relationship”], I would also see this in continuity with other fandom platforms. And it is interesting that we’re much more likely to see these conflicts reflected in larger fandom discussions, both among fans themselves through meta-commentary and by scholars, around this kind of “toxic fandom” as an “all sides are as bad” kind of equivalence. It’s important to note, however, that certain kinds of harassment (around ships and kinks) are seen to be against “fandom culture” and certain kinds (most notably racism) are seen to be outside of that ambit entirely. A popular fandom post about “harassment in fandom” will almost never include the daily racism that fans of

color face. If it does mention race/racism, it inevitably puts the blame for heightened tensions on those fans who “bring drama” by insisting on talking about uncomfortable issues.

Hutton: I made such a noise at Rukmini bringing up “racebending” because that’s actually one of the things that I feel Tumblr fandom has had an immense impact on. Tumblr makes it so easy to put together a quick photoset talking about your personal headcanons (individual conceptualizations) of a character and have it reach an interested audience in a matter of moments. It’s something that can be amazing because of the way it provides a necessary form of representation for folks in fandom that may otherwise not get to see themselves in media. One of my favorite things about being on Tumblr is seeing the way that members of the fandoms I’ve been in—primarily the DC and Marvel fandoms—reimagine their favorite characters as characters of color and give them queer and gender identities that match theirs. You can see photosets reimagining the Batman family group as more visibly diverse, and fancasts (fans re-casting roles with actors of their choosing) of Marvel superheroes where they’re portrayed as women of color. And these fancasts generally push back against the idea of whiteness as a perpetual default.

But the way that racebending moves across Tumblr can at times feel like a type of “lip service,” where white members of fandom just reblog a dose of diversity without engaging further. For example, when I was active in the DC fandom on Tumblr between 2010 and 2016, I saw many “Black Batman” and “Black Harvey Dent” headcanons in the Batman sub-fandom that recast the characters with relatively famous Black actors, sometimes with an accompanying text describing how Blackness



Fig. 16.2. Batman’s canonical white Harvey Dent character racebent as a biracial Black man and “fancast” with actor Rick Fox. Posted by Zina Hutton (stitchmediamix)

would impact their lives and what details of the canon would change with the absence of white privilege. These posts often received hundreds of endorsements, but I'm still one of maybe five writers that has written Harvey Dent as a Black man in fanfiction because racebending on Tumblr (and otherwise) rarely moves beyond visuals (figure 16.2).

Klink: I definitely agree with Rukmini that there have been aggressive interchanges in fandom for a long time, and that Tumblr has given fans of color the chance to connect with each other as well as fans in other marginalized groups, which I can speak more to: I'm thinking especially of how the genderqueer and trans communities have become more prominent. I think that genderqueer and trans communities have actually had more luck changing fannish attitudes. For example, "genderswap" fics (a term that can mean multiple things, but in this case stories in which a character somehow changes genitalia and secondary sex characteristics) were once very common and usually written and consumed without much discussion of the issues facing actual trans and nonbinary people. Today, stories that deal with similar themes are typically called "genderbending" fics (allowing for the existence of more than one gender) and are often written with more awareness of the community. I think this change in fandom practice is partially due to trans and genderqueer fans being more visible thanks to Tumblr fandom, but I also think it has to do with general cultural change around these issues separate from fandom [Ed. See genderbent fanart, figure 18.3].

By comparison, I believe that in the past, more closed communities like LiveJournal created a perfect environment for cozy forms of discrimination, especially racism but also sexism, transphobia, and so forth. In a small, closed community, many people don't feel comfortable rocking the boat; the nature of the community contributed to folks "going along to get along" even when they were faced with very bad systemic discrimination. On Tumblr, ideas pass very quickly from person to person and soon escape the confines of the community in which they originate, gathering speed and bringing in people who have absolutely no connection to the initial posters. It means that people can see patterns across multiple communities more easily and find others who share their experiences, helping people identify and speak out against discrimination. But I think it also lends to the sense that arguing on Tumblr is just arguing with air, with nobody, with nothing. And that leads to the kind of dehumanization Zina speaks to.

McCracken: *How do you see fans organizing themselves on Tumblr? Do you feel the term “communities” is appropriate?*

Klink: I used the term “identity signposts” earlier to refer to the methods that Tumblr users use to self-disclose their particular identities to each other, to people they like or don’t like. I’m thinking of the ways that people express themselves on their own blogs. You’ll see someone’s paragraph about themselves that reads “ashlee. 20. ravenclaw. wlw. proud terf.” (I’ve made that up, by the way, though it is typical). To me, this is instantly legible; this person is engaged in certain types of discourse about gender and sexuality and is ready to fight me about it. The term “terf” or “trans-exclusionary radical feminist” (meaning feminists who do not recognize transgenderedness as a valid identity), which I would personally use as a slur, has been reclaimed and is on there as a way to say to me (as a person who disagrees with the type of arguments that people who are called or call themselves terfs often make): “come at me, bro.” Or to someone who doesn’t feel frankly threatened by them: “let’s be friends.” And it leaves many aspects of identity out, of course.

I don’t know that this is different than any other way that people depict themselves on any other platform; actually, I’m sure it’s not. But on Tumblr, where so many people primarily use reblogging as a way to express themselves, this can sometimes be the only self-disclosure in someone’s own words on their page. Therefore, it can be a really important key, or signpost, to deciphering what else they mean on their blog: what is the context in which they’re writing a post? What should a reader assume their words to mean? Am I endorsing a whole system of values by liking a post or reblogging it? It’s complicated.

Morimoto: My Tumblr fandom experience became more “community-based” in about 2013 in *Sherlock* fandom. I’d withdrawn from the comms (LJ, Dreamwidth, InsaneJournal) largely because they were feeling a bit claustrophobic in terms of interfandom politics. Tumblr, by contrast, seemed like a place where I could be more anonymous and invisible. As my interest in *Sherlock* grew, I began seeking out other fans whose fic I liked, and “my” *Sherlock* fan community grew from there in reciprocal following with fans I clicked with. I visualized it as more of an eddy in a bigger river than a totalizing “community.” In retrospect, I think “*Sherlock* fandom” was probably more monolithic on Tumblr than I initially recognized, but my changing perception itself is part and parcel of how

fandom plays out on Tumblr. There's no one understanding of what "fandom" (or "fan") means on Tumblr. When conflict arose in *Sherlock* fandom in 2014, fans attempted to appeal to unspoken "fandom" rules of conduct that might have held in the comms era but were easy to bypass on Tumblr's more fragmented platform. This is where my interest in "contact zones" comes from; when the eddies of smaller fan groups within a given fandom intersect, each brings with it its own mores (resulting from age, fandom experiences, culture, etc.) that may be the seeds of cross-cultural conflict within an ostensible fandom "community."

If anything, fandoms on Tumblr to me mirror nothing so much as contemporary life in a globalized world: smaller communities (of nations, but even of locality, language, religion, race, etc.) bump up against others in ways that seem to compel either communication or the fortification of boundaries. That is, in much the same way that the comparative porousness of borders and the concomitant rise in immigration and cross-border contact has resulted both in attempts to accommodate changing populations and—especially recently—reinforce racial, social, economic, etc. barriers between groups of people, so too do fandoms on Tumblr reflect the convergence of cultures on social media, in ways that make "community" an increasingly ineffective way of understanding them.

Pande: I find it difficult to talk about fandom communities on Tumblr in isolation from Twitter because for me the two have always been intertwined. Tumblr is where I go for finding fandom content and Twitter for regular interaction with other fandom people that I trust. I met some of those people through Tumblr but our interactions have mainly been through Twitter, which I find more personal and controllable as a space.

In terms of how my own communities have formed on Tumblr, from a POC fan standpoint I have noticed a change in my own strategies and patterns. When I first came on Tumblr for instance, I mainly followed people I knew from LiveJournal and "Big Name Fans" whose writing I had followed in previous fandoms. This resulted in my Dashboard being filled with almost exclusively white-dude content. In retrospect this is not surprising, but the visual-ness of Tumblr made it particularly apparent, especially post-Racefail at a moment in fandom in 2009–10, when POC fans had started becoming more vocal about this whiteness.¹

These days I've noticed that I tend to follow POC fans and other

fans that create content about non-white characters and continue to follow them even if we grow apart in terms of fandoms because they've signaled that they're consciously engaging with media from an intersectional standpoint while also queering about Regency AUs. I hesitate to call this a community—because I don't always engage with everyone on Tumblr in the traditional sense of media fandom connectivity—but there is definitely a sense of kinship and safety in these networks. Tumblr fandom links outwards as well and can facilitate people communicating on other platforms in more controllable environs.

Hutton: I can't stop thinking about the recent rise of a new type of “anti-fan” I referenced above and the communities they've created on Tumblr. All of the fandoms I'm active or lurking in on Tumblr currently have very rigid rules about shipping (e.g., who can ship what, what sex acts/kinks are acceptable in fan works, what makes a ship problematic, etc.) that, aside from a few variations, remain relatively constant. There are people who identify as belonging to an “anti-community” and take it upon themselves not just to criticize a fandom's ship choices, but to actively attempt to exert control in fandom spaces where the users behave in ways that are frowned upon by their rules.

What's been interesting is watching the development of those rules as Tumblr fandom has become more comfortable talking about and using social justice terminology, in part because the rules they develop and the methods they use to try and enforce them are often not consistent with social justice values or practices. Sometimes, the rules make sense and it's clear why people feel they need to try and stop people from shipping certain ships (such as racism or homophobia), but at other times this rhetoric is used primarily to serve the ships of certain groups over others. Therefore, what might look like an attempt to minimize harm in fandom spaces becomes an excuse for personal harassment and causes harm to other fans, rather than addressing the problematic or harmful content directly. These threats can be extreme, such as accused fans being placed on public block/shame lists, having a “call-out post” written on your activity, being excluded/ostracized from certain fandoms, death/rape threats, in-person harassment, and even calls to the FBI or local law enforcement. I think these fears have changed the way that people in fandom on Tumblr create fan works and share them.

My “brand” on Tumblr revolves around fandom and ship criticism because of its problematic aspects, such as racism or the sexualization

of specific historic atrocities such as American slavery or the Holocaust. So, I'm right on the cusp of this evolving anti-fandom, and because my writing and commentary set me apart as both a rule breaker *and* enforcer to some people, I experience a fair amount of pushback that's similar to what I've described. It can be so uncomfortable that I have often had to leave the platform for periods.

McCracken: *Zina's response anticipates my final question: Tumblr is seen as a platform in which fandom and social justice discourses intersect. How do you perceive this relationship on Tumblr and in broader public understandings of Tumblr fandom?*

Pande: I definitely think the reputation of Tumblr as a space of "SJW's" has had an impact on both scholarly circles and fandom itself. In my scholarly work I often struggle with balancing the fact that Tumblr fandom *is* more concerned with issues of social justice with a recognition that it has also opened up certain marginalized fans to significantly greater exposure and possible harm, as Zina has discussed. I struggle with it because criticism of Tumblr-centric discourse often then becomes weaponized against *all* efforts to address fandom's issues with racism/ableism/cissexism etc. This is a familiar situation to most people trying to address issues within progressive movements so it isn't unique to Tumblr fandom but it definitely influences the ways in which I try and discuss it.

I find that the identification of Tumblr fandom as socially progressive *as a whole* by academics and pop publications, as a contrast to fandom platforms more overtly associated with white masculinity such as Reddit, to be disingenuous. They point to POC Tumblr fans and their work—fan campaigns around *Sleepy Hollow*, etc.—as examples for how female-identified fandom is intersectional without acknowledging how deeply intra-fandom racism affects these same fans. This is something that needs to be called out more often

Morimoto: I have the comparatively unique experience of both being a Tumblr-based fan and having a child who's also easing into Tumblr fandom; where I bring experiences of having been a fan on other online platforms, contemporary Tumblr fandom (plus DeviantArt, etc.) is all my kid has ever known. For them and their peers social justice and fandom begin as inextricably linked. Anti-fandoms and the kinds of

conversations about “call-out culture,” sexuality, race, and so on that Zina mentions are, for them, endemic to fandom, and have shaped their interactions in (or, rather, withdrawal from) Tumblr fandoms. Although such conflict has been part of fannish experience for years, it was largely invisible to me until I began participating in Tumblr fandom, because it simply was not visible in the comparatively homogeneous circles where I was active. The difference in our experiences suggests quite strongly that scholars of fandom need to account for how fandom may increasingly be a much different experience and identity from what we’ve heretofore understood.

But there’s a way to think about it from a slightly different angle as well: How does social justice change if it’s part and parcel of fannish experience? “Minority points,” my child tells me, are one (supposedly playful) metric for community belonging within some Tumblr circles. It seems that for some normative fans (white, heterosexual, cisgender, neurotypical, Anglo-American), the perceived distance between them and non-normative fans (who are rightly vocal about their experiences within normatively hegemonic fandoms) seems to have engendered a discourse of “reverse” discrimination that, like “reverse racism,” largely misses the point of criticism in the formation of a kind of defensive identity politics.

Hutton: While I do think that fandom spaces can be progressive ones, I’ve always hated the idea that fandom has always been progressive, because that isn’t even remotely close to the truth. These progressive movements, moments, and ships within these spaces are frequently only on the surface and rarely intersectional at that. Many people on Tumblr think that all they have to do is reblog #BlackLivesMatter posts, signal boost donation links for marginalized people, and share a “Punch Nazis” photo every once in a while, and that’s it, they’re the ultimate blame-free progressive. Although, like Rukmini, I do think that Tumblr fandom does quite a bit more when it comes to talking about systemic problems present in those spaces than previous fan platforms, I also think that Tumblr fandom could still do a lot more.

Klink: Tumblr can be very influential and very effective in spreading ideas, and as a location for fandom it looms large in our minds. But to many in the industry, like film executives, Tumblr is a place for teen girls. That’s it. No awareness of the “social justice warrior” stereotype, no deeper

understanding of the communities there. If there *is* an awareness of the SJW stereotype, it is entirely ascribed to the perception that Tumblr is for teen girls; ironically, Lori says that the intertwining of politics and fandom as a generational shift ought to be understood more clearly by fan studies scholars, but film and TV executives already understand activism and especially progressive politics as something that is inherent to contemporary teenagerhood.

Posting a picture is clearing an anti-racism bar so low it's on the ground but might, on another social network, have an impact on the corporations that own your favorite movies or TV show: franchises track which characters are favorites, which are spoken about and posted about the most, and take that into account. Tweeting about how you love Lupita Nyong'o might help her get the next gig, might be one snowflake on the snowball that rolls down the hill. But on Tumblr, a picture signals things mainly to other fans, not usually to a wider audience, and I think Tumblr fans are aware of this fact.

To me, that's the heart of our entire conversation about Tumblr. It is a site for internecine fan conflict, and because it is one of the few sites that still is relatively opaque to the industry, the stakes are (oddly) highest there: Every discussion feels like it genuinely might define the future of the fan community. There is no chance that William Shatner will stumble into the discourse and provide a convenient target for everyone involved to get mad at; no one "owns" the space and so no one can define the space except the fans within it. There can be no splintering away from Tumblr, because that would suggest there was some center of Tumblr to splinter away from. Everyone feels that they have the right and the duty to gird their loins and fight for their ideas about how the space should be. The result is Tumblr being simultaneously a freeing and revolutionary platform for fans to express the problems they see in their fan cultures, and also a mire of conflicts that have no simple solutions because all their elements are so debatable and so constantly in flux.

NOTE

1. Ann Sommerville, "A Themed Summary of Racefail '09," March 11, 2009, <http://annsomerville.net/a-themed-summary-of-racefail-09-in-large-friendly-letters-for-those-who-think-race-discussions-are-hard/>.

Kitten Thinks of Nothing but Murder All Day

Tumblr Text Post Memes as Fandom Détournement

J. S. A. Lowe

J. S. A. Lowe is a poet and writer who recently received her PhD in poetry and literature from the University of Houston, and now teaches there as a lecturer.

ALL ABOARD THE TRAIN TO SADNESS TOWN

The below meme (or image macro, as they were formerly called) attempts to be both poignant and hilarious, depicting the antihero from *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, James “Bucky” Barnes (Sebastian Stan), who has been programmed by evil Soviet scientists to be a cyborgian assassin with the caption “Kitten thinks of nothing but murder all day.”¹ As viewers of the film know,



Fig. 17.1. Tumblr user buckybarnes’s Onion headline addresses two character traits at once

however, buried somewhere underneath his lethal demeanor lies Captain America's brainwashed best friend. It's almost a lolcat meme, starring Bucky as adorable kitten, though the caption in this case is from the satirical "news" source *The Onion* and isn't his utterance. The macro works because fans of Bucky view him as both thrillingly dangerous, capable of taking down entire groups of opponents seemingly without effort, but also as beleaguered by HYDRA, struggling to remember his past, and a figure of tragic, even romantic suffering. The caption acknowledges Bucky's canonical violence but also draws out and amplifies the less-obvious reading of Bucky as a floppy-haired emo kitten whom fans wish to protect and nurture.

In mid-2014, Tumblr users began to create—in droves—this specific variation on the meme, captioning screencaps from film and television with text from various sources, but in particular from well-known Tumblr text posts. These intertextual, multimodal posts quickly gained in popularity and have since appeared on users' Dashboards with some frequency. The particular affordances of the Tumblr interface, primarily the ability to reblog content swiftly, helped facilitate the creation and viral spread of these posts. To be understood and appreciated fully, they require familiarity with both fandom-beloved characters *and* the undertones of their caption sources and implications, and as such are a singular form of meme humor.

From 2014 to 2016, much of my research focused on collecting and analyzing such fandom text post memes, and I now offer an account of this kind of meme in order to interrogate the ways in which it functions within fandom communities, and in relationship to text posts as a humorous form, often self-deprecating or sarcastic. Henri Bergson argues that the comedic is necessarily social. In his words, "You would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others. Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo. . . . Our laughter is always the laughter of a group." The humor of Tumblr text post memes depends heavily upon being precisely the laughter of a group; these are sophisticated inside jokes, relying on intimate knowledge of both texts. These memes also serve as a specific species of fandom *détournement*, signal-boosting fandom's views of specific characters and narratives and acting in conversation with, even contradicting, their initial textual signifiers. They address corporate texts in highly specific ways, some centered around reinterpretation and talking back to perceived queerbaiting, racism, and rape culture, with others being highly playful reinterpretations of content or intensifiers of affect. In their comments on media properties and producers, these memes help clarify the underlying shape of Tumblr culture at large: whether users are literally female, young, people of color, queer, or

differently abled is less important as a demographic reality than as a widely upheld ethos of participation and a shared aesthetic and cultural values. Tumblr culture more often than not valorizes social justice and equality in media representation, as well as reflecting statistically female-driven fannish practices such as vidding, writing fanfic, and editing and curating images.

Critical theorist Guy Debord argues that images “derive their full [ideological] power precisely from [the] isolation of the individual [receiver]”; Tumblr’s text post captioning disrupts the ideological isolation of Debord’s consuming individual, as well as the static dominance of the commercial spectacle (e.g., the blockbuster feature-film franchise).² Instead, text post memes create an occasion for culture jamming and guerrilla semiotics, connecting fans through shared articulation of interpretations. By giving the meme’s depicted characters an utterance beyond their official narrative, and by imparting self-awareness on the part of both creator and viewer, text post memes reclaim that narrative for online communities, confronting capital with fandom’s irrepressible, unrepentant interpretations of the story.

I’M SORRY, YOU MUST BE AT LEAST A LEVEL 4 FRIEND TO UNLOCK MY TRAGIC BACKSTORY

Tumblr text post memes are, generally speaking, a fandom-specific variant of image macros, albeit with a more restricted form of captioning. The typical presentation of the text post meme is in a picspam format: the post is usually eight to ten stills or screencaps (less frequently animated GIFs), each captioned directly on top of the image in such a way as not to obstruct it. The username of the writer of the original text post is invariably included, speaking to Tumblr users’ commitment to accurate content sourcing and citation.

The whole meme may focus on one character or relationship or may include an image for each member of the entire cast. The captions can come from a range of sources, yet no matter the source of visual or text, the memes present the captions that accompany the images as some imaginary yet plausible admission of the person in the frame, an imitation of an honest utterance or obvious truth about their personality which in their canonical lives they would not be able to state so bluntly; in that translucency lies the meme’s humor. Captioning reveals character, makes a statement about how the user and, usually, the fandom at large perceives that individual, whether or not the corporate text would back up this interpretation in any overt way (figure 17.2).

Text post memes may be constructed by creators using software such as



Fig. 17.2. To understand fully this Hannibal meme by user jacrispyretro, the viewer needs to know at least two facts from the series and one from fandom: that Lecter (Mads Mikkelsen) values proper etiquette and dislikes rudeness, that he frequently brings meals to FBI profiler Will Graham, and that his interest in Will is inappropriately intense and verges on stalking

Photoshop after they have acquired both screencaps and text captions; they are not difficult to assemble, which partially explains their vast number. Typical text sources include not only Tumblr text posts (though they're the most common) but also Tumblr tags, popular text-based tweets, headlines from satirical news site *The Onion*, SMS texts, tags associated with the fanwork site Archive of Our Own, or mockups of "Breaking News" chyron captions. These appliquéd texts always come from without; they are linked only to the image by the meme author's forcible association.

While the images of the meme most typically come from genre television or film, they needn't always: one post reproduces engravings from Arthur Conan Doyle's original *Sherlock* stories, while others caption reality television such as *The Great British Bake Off*, the musical *Hamilton*, and images from RPS/real person slash (fan works centered around celebrity relationships). Older or relatively inactive fandoms, such as those for *The X-Files* and *Xena: Warrior Princess* can and do enter the fray just as frequently as newer fandoms.

All that matters in the end is that the texts be novel and yet recognizable and shareable by participants; as Ryan M. Milner writes, "[memes] . . . balance

the familiar and the foreign. They're at once universal and particular. . . . In this way, memes are a multimodal dialogue between individual creator and popular imagination."³ Fandom text post memes, like other memes, enclose and remix multiple registers: in the case of Tumblr meme culture, users combine redolent traces of meaning from the source texts used, the individual creator's thoughts and feelings, and the shared discursive practices of the larger online fandom community.

SOMETIMES IM LIKE ? BUT MOST TIMES IM LIKE ??????????

The text post meme imports a textual disruption from outside the closed world of the media text being excerpted via image, yet in a way that reveals something about that image. One way of thinking about the text post meme's highly particularized set of textual interruptions is via the rhetorical idea of the *metalepsis*. Narratologist Gérard Genette defined *metalepsis* as "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe . . . [that] produces an effect of strangeness that is either comical . . . or fantastic."⁴ Genette further describes this "boundary" as "a shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world *in* which one tells, the world *of* which one tells."⁵ Similarly the meme, with its intruding, external caption (controlled by the narrating meme creator) is juxtaposed against the static media world, the visual story of which that narrator tells—what Ezra Pound would call the image's phanopoesis: "a casting of images upon the visual imagination."⁶

Describing the act of captioning as an intrusive, extradiegetic *metalepsis* points to ways in which text meme captioning ruptures the original text, inserting a foreign element and lifting the perceiver out of the textual moment. Yet for the meme creator, the caption is nonetheless somehow native or belonging to the image, inherent in her reading of the original media property. For her, meaning is not so much added as adduced, not so much inserted as elicited; the act of captioning draws forth something that the creator witnesses as already present in the initial text, but which she further sees as being suppressed or elided by it. Thus, to the creator and her followers, text memes do not so much cross borders as express something fundamentally diegetic and meaning-filled. Fans embedded in that particular practice or discourse will experience both their meme making and its joyful reception as evidence of their authentic reading. Further, fans seem at ease with any resulting self-referentiality, continually code-switching and fluently negotiating as they do the space between media properties' official

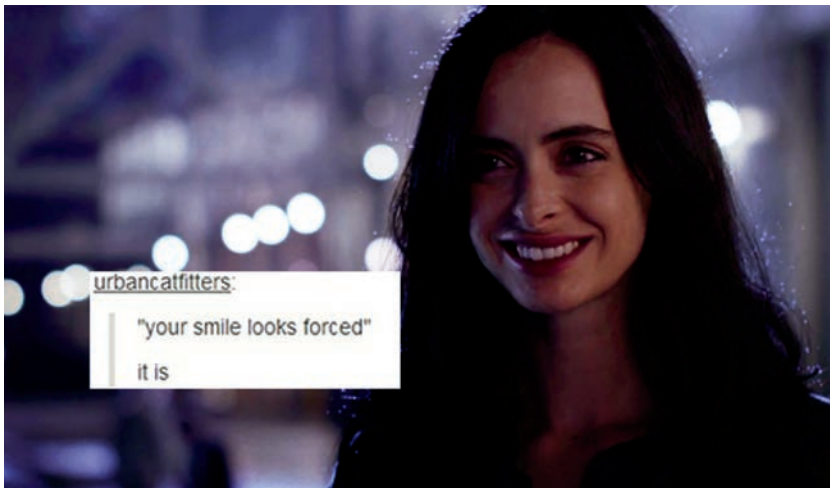


Fig. 17.3. Tumblr text post caption for the Netflix series *Jessica Jones* by user cassian-andoor

texts and the adumbration of those texts into their own playful engagements and revisionings.

At times, rather than serving as an interpolation, the meme's pleasure lies in the uncannily close fit between caption and image, relying on the viewer's knowledge of the visual text to make sense. This image from the Marvel series *Jessica Jones* shows the title character (Krysten Ritter) apparently smiling happily, but viewers know that at this exact moment, she is pretending to be mind-controlled by the villain Kilgrave in order to trick him into approaching her, so her smile is literally forced (and throughout the series, female characters have dealt repeatedly with the coercive microaggression that comes from being told to smile) (figure 17.3).

While textual interventions are most often humorous and parodic, the Netflix television series *Jessica Jones* offers an example of ways the memes can be serious as well; an earnest, sincere text post, when appliquéd over a painful image, can become an important revelation about the character's inner suffering or self-doubt writ large. Likewise, an image can come across as having extreme gravitas despite a humorous caption. Indeed, on occasion, a text meme can overlay a tragic moment with distance or humor, providing distraught fans with humorous relief, as in meme sets for the AMC series *The Walking Dead*, known for the brutally short lives of its characters and rare, therefore all the more precious, moments of sanctuary and levity (figure 17.4).

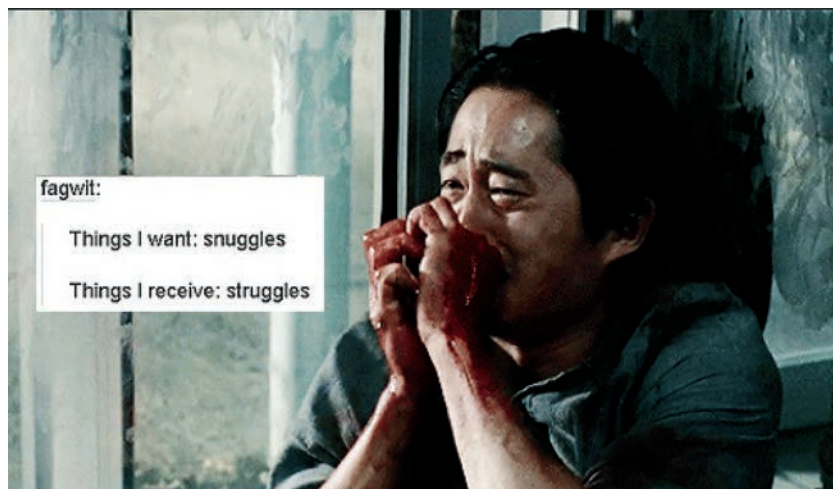


Fig. 17.4. This humorous meme of *The Walking Dead*, also by user *cassian-andoor*, offers a sharp juxtaposition of the bleak postapocalyptic zombie landscape and attempted relief from same. The caption, by *fagwit*, reads: “Things I want: snuggles. Things I receive: struggles”

I, PERSONALLY, WOULD LOVE TO CALM DOWN, AND YET

Reflecting Tumblr fandom culture at large, text post memes can and do express fans’ interest in social justice and their disapproval of corporate media decisions, as well as their alternate readings (or creative misreadings, depending on your perspective) of source texts. The work of Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter, among others, has demonstrated this particular and unique aspect of Tumblr culture, borne out in its creative activities, including meme making; they note that “Participants in our study who did not create social justice content said they still heavily reblogged it. [. . .] Participants told us that they felt a sense of ownership over the fandoms they were a part of and, therefore, felt a responsibility to critique the social elements in the shows.”⁷

For example, Tumblr text posts often celebrate a type of femininity not dependent on normative gender presentation, artifice, or the products hawked by late capitalism as being necessary for performing femaleness. I think of these as “swamp demon” posts, thanks to this example from *nicoler-ichiecirca2003*, which has more than 220,000 notes (figure 17.5).

This specific subgenre of text posts offers an ethos of defiant refusal (via declared incapacity or inability) to conform to expected heteronormative ideas

Fig. 17.5. “but i am a swamp demon” is a message with an ironic kind of inverted pride



of what constitutes the feminine. Many of these text post memes apply such staunchly antisogynistic texts to images of powerful female genre characters. Female expression is repeatedly characterized as being separate from male regard and approval, and, rather than existing independently from appearance, is specifically posited as not having been shaped to appeal to the heterosexual male gaze. Of course, the same female characters are all played by actors who almost invariably conform to typical standards of beauty. But Tumblr culture devotes itself assiduously to seeking out images and representations of the unconventional, and within genre narratives, that can mean any instance of action heroines depicted as realistically dirty, muscular, wearing sensible shoes or nonrevealing costumes, and in general being positioned as either uncaring about male attention or actively avoiding and disliking it (figures 17.6–7).

Even when female characters are dressed provocatively, such as Natasha Romanoff’s catsuit below, the captioning redirects the viewer’s attention away from their physical attributes and toward their fierceness, impassivity, or clear superiority to any available male characters in their milieu. As an ex-Soviet spy and assassin, Romanoff’s character, for example, is deployed repeatedly in text post memes to indicate profound indifference to male attention. She is a favorite for captioning that reflects not only her toughness but also her canonical apparent total apathy when it comes to romantic possibilities. Here, fans employ Kelis’s milkshake lyric to reassert Natasha’s priorities (figure 17.8).

Overall, text post meme captions for female characters consistently reflect opposition and pushback to the pressures of rape culture and misogyny. One imagines that for younger Tumblr users, the pressures to conform physically and emotionally to expectations of adult female sexuality are intense and consistent if not near-constant. Tumblr text post memes provide such young women with a communal space for rewriting the narrative forced upon women by corporate content.



Figs. 17.6–7. Some female genre characters expressing indifference to both conventional standards of prettiness and male interest in same: Leia Organa from the original *Star Wars* trilogy (squiddleprincess), and Imperator Furiosa from *Mad Max: Fury Road* (mattymurdockss)

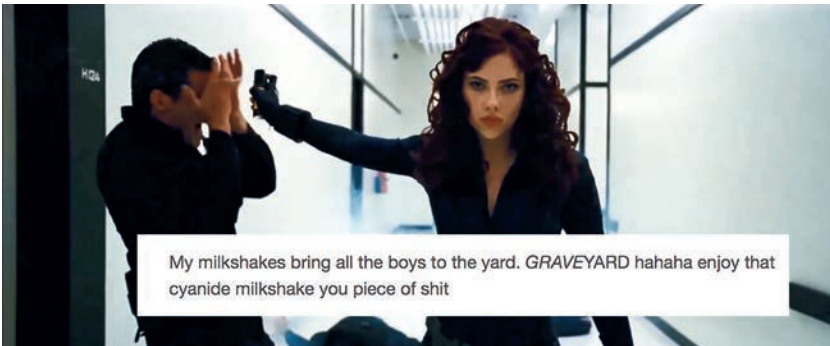


Fig. 17.8. User rhymeswithmonth here screencapped Romanoff showing actor Scarlett Johansson's characteristic lack of facial expression in the role

AND THEN SATAN SAID “HERE, HAVE FEELINGS”

The Tumblr platform fosters close community among users who are passionate about shows, characters, and social issues and who are frequently frustrated by corporate consumerism. Fans often have fraught relationships with their beloved media properties, an “aesthetic of attachment,” in Lauren Berlant’s words, that is precarious and defined by fans’ ongoing compromise and bargaining.⁸ Being a fan of any media franchise involves what Berlant has described as “compromised conditions”; the nature of corporate-assembled text contains within itself these inherent conditions of compromise.⁹ The text post meme in particular reflects that frustrated connectivity, which celebrates even as it resists. Such fan works contain the tension between enthusiasm and fans’ ongoing sense of being exploited as consumers and content producers (even though corporate media does sometimes praise fannish creativity, if only within certain bounded and well-policed limits).

Thus when a fan’s beloved object is—by her reading—treated badly or made to behave out of character, her locus of control as an audience member lies in her own creative and resistant acts of interpretation, reinterpretation, and misinterpretation. By creating and sharing fan works that are reparative texts (to borrow Eve Sedgwick’s term), fans demonstrate agency and autonomy in producing pleasure for their close communities as well as for themselves. Even something as ephemeral or casual as communal delight at the inside joke of a meme has a profound and irreplaceable value in this particular affective economy, for fandom’s endless re-creation and re-constituting of itself via such gestures is the very means by which its subject can form a sense of herself as a part of something more. Such gestures posit her as part of a community of playful creators and critical, interrogative viewers, no longer merely an isolated powerless devotee of a capitalist product.

In particular, text post memes can be viewed as a form of what later Situationists and artists have denoted as “culture-jamming”: guerrilla communication, disappropriation, hypergraphy, obtainium, subverting, artivism, etc. The meme maker has undertaken the necessary plagiarism of lifting the original image from its spectacular, ideological context and reappropriating it via an ironic, subversive, self-reflexive caption; the meme “deletes a false idea, replaces it with the right one,” or at least, with the ideas of its fan creator, which are often in opposition to those of the canonical corporate version.¹⁰ Through their shared irreverence and glee, fandom memes can decommodify static media spectacles and return the power of meaning making to audiences and practitioners, offering online fans a joyful opportunity to interpret

text as they choose and to share this re-visioning with other like-minded users.

REBLOG IF U A LITTLE PROBLEMATIC

Meme theorist Limor Shifman reminds us that:

By uploading a self-made video or a Photoshopped image people are able to express their individuality: they signify that they are digitally literate, unique, and creative. On the other hand, the text that they upload often relates to a common, widely shared memetic video, image, or formula. Through this referencing, people simultaneously construct their individuality and their affiliation with a larger community.¹¹

Memes mean nothing in isolation, but only as they are shared, cross-referenced, and vigorously remixed by fans working as activists. In the meme pool that is Tumblr, competition is fierce for which phrases, snowclones, macros, and other types of information will survive and which will gain traction, meaning, and durability in an ever-shifting, gift-economy landscape of reblogs and likes. We might think of John Fiske's term for especially rich texts, the kind he defines as "producerly"; that is, a text which "offers itself up . . . it has loose ends that escape its control, its meanings exceed its own power to discipline them, its gaps are wide enough for whole new texts to be produced in them—it is, in a very real sense, beyond its own control."¹² And Tumblr as a platform, for all its flaws, uniquely enables the spread of such producerly text very well, both through its reblogging functionality and open interface.

Thus the viability of any meme is based on its producerly qualities: how abundant are the possibilities of its being manipulated, appropriated, hijacked, adapted, and therefore reblogged. As Jenkins et al. note in their collaborative text *If It Doesn't Spread, It's Dead*: "these works allow fans to explore the nature of the social bonds and emotional commitments that draw them together as a subculture . . . [fans] understand their works as a contribution to the ongoing life of their community . . . [and] they value more strongly those whose works reflect the core themes of fan culture more generally."¹³ All the memes discussed and depicted here have survived some sort of winnowing or culling and rose to prominence because they express something that a great many Tumblr users and fans have found valuable or worth preserving.

As energetically as corporate advertisers and focus groups try to emu-

late their audience's creativity, media-astute, fluent users of platforms such as Tumblr's can invariably tell the difference between things they've made for one another versus things made in imitation of them and ostensibly for them; fans are notoriously hard to fool.

Text post memes not only reproduce in and as groups, but ultimately have helped spawn their own generational ethos: a fertile guerrilla space of sly disrespect and the subtle reassertion of what matters most to audiences, whether or not it was the message they were meant to consume and repeat, especially audiences who may feel themselves marginalized due to their social status, their contributions and perspectives devalued by corporate media. Tumblr fans' singular, defiant acts of *détournement* bring multiple rhetorical tactics to bear on source texts and offer an example of fandom at its most sophisticated and canny, transforming ideology and eliciting multiple meanings both daringly and playfully.

NOTES

1. For this essay, explicit permissions have been obtained from the creators of the text post memes. Permissions have not been obtained for the user-produced captions for these posts nor the essay's intertitles, which represent widely recirculated idioms on Tumblr that have hundreds of thousands of reblogs; I, in consultation with the editors, therefore consider them to be part of the platform's lexicon and general culture rather than the product of an individual user, and I am invoking them in that sense and for that purpose.

2. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 64.

3. Ryan M. Milner, "Media Lingua Franca: Fixity, Novelty, and Vernacular Creativity in Internet Memes," *Selected Papers of Internet Research*, 14.0, 2013; Denver, USA, 1; <https://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/spir/article/view/8725/6943>.

4. Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980).

5. Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 236, emphasis added.

6. Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions Publishing 1918), 25.

7. Serena Hillman, Jason Procyk, and Carman Neustaedter, "'alksjdf;lksfd': Tumblr and the Fandom User Experience," Designing Interactive Systems Conference, Vancouver, BC, Canada: Association for Computing Machinery, June 21–25, 2014.

8. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 21.

9. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 21.

10. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 76.
11. Henry Jenkins, "A Meme Is a Terrible Thing to Waste: An Interview with Limor Shifman (Part Two)," *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, February 19, 2014, <http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2014/02/a-meme-is-a-terrible-thing-to-waste-an-interview-with-limor-shifman-part-two.html>.
12. John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 104.
13. Henry Jenkins, Xiaochang Li, and Ana Domb Krauskopf, with Joshua Green, *If It Doesn't Spread, It's Dead: Creating Value in a Spreadable Marketplace* (Convergence Culture Consortium, Comparative Media Studies at MIT, 2008): 97–98.

Lesbian One Direction Fans Take Over Tumblr

Jessica Pruett

Jessica Pruett is a PhD candidate at the University of California, Irvine. Her dissertation examines the relationship between lesbian feminist politics and popular culture.

Shortly after creating a Tumblr entitled *everydirectiondrag* in late 2013, a group of drag kings called Every Direction posted a video of their first performance.¹ The video of the group, composed of queer and lesbian-identified members, shows them performing a boisterous rendition of One Direction's 2012 hit "I Would" to a rapturous audience. Every Direction's formation was inspired by queer fandom of One Direction on Tumblr, and their performances represent one of the most publicly visible manifestations of the thousands of lesbian One Direction fan works produced on the platform between 2012 and 2016. The platform's status as the primary digital home for One Direction (henceforth 1D) fandom, coupled with its massive popularity among LGBT youth, made it the central gathering place for many lesbian and queer 1D fans. This essay will analyze the crucial role that Tumblr played in fostering lesbian 1D fandom, using lesbian re-readings and re-imaginings of 1D circulated by lesbian fans on the platform to explore the many and varied manifestations of queer joy, obsession, and self-articulation that the platform enabled. In doing so, I show how lesbian 1D fandom on Tumblr destabilized the heteronormative assumptions found in most scholarly and mainstream discussions of girl-fans' relationships with boy bands (figure 18.1).

Popular discourse often frames 1D as one of the pop music machine's most artificial products, in part because the group did not form organically. Rather, all of its teenaged members auditioned as individual acts for the British singing competition show *The X-Factor* and were subsequently grouped together by judge Simon Cowell. 1D was a hit with young women, who made up a large portion of the show's audience demographic.² Shortly after being voted off the show, the band was signed to Syco Records; their first studio album was released in early 2012 and became a massive global success, the first debut album by a Brit-



Fig. 18.1. The members of Every Direction, posted on their tumblr everydirectiondrag, “OH yes this is gonna start happening. Prepare yourself!,” 2015

ish band to enter the U.S. charts at number one.³ Buoyed by the huge amount of enthusiasm expressed by fans on social media, the boys embarked on their first headlining concert tour in the U.K. in late 2011. The group went on to release four more chart-topping studio albums, headline many more sold-out tours, and become the subject of a successful Morgan Spurlock documentary (*One Direction: This Is Us*) before finally disbanding in 2016.

Less visible to the public at large than the band’s music, touring, and official merchandise was the vast, active fan base that took shape around them on various social media platforms, especially on Tumblr. Tumblr served as a primary hub for 1D’s fans from early on in the band’s career, and the boy band’s popularity on the platform remained high even as their broader public appeal began to wane in 2015–16.

There are many reasons why the platform was ideal for 1D fandom. Its multimedia interface could allow fans to use a single platform to circulate video, audio, GIFs, photos, and text-based posts about the band, and its

infinite scrolling dash acted as a constant content generator for a world-wide fandom that was active 24/7. Also, as several critics have pointed out, 1D had a uniquely “chaotic” appeal, with the boys generally wearing artfully mismatched outfits and engaging in light roughhousing, and Tumblr was uniquely suited to accommodate this chaos.

Although 1D’s youthful antics certainly made them easily GIF-able, I argue that the group’s success on Tumblr had much more to do with the platform’s ability to accommodate fans’ particular needs and desires, particularly those of queer fans, than it did with the boys themselves. 1D fans’ avid use of Tumblr to not only consume, but also create media for other fans helped 1D retain its popularity on the platform for more than a year into the group’s hiatus. According to Tumblr’s own metrics, 1D was the platform’s second most reblogged band for the year 2015, and Larry Stylinson—the name given to the imaginary romantic relationship between Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson—was Tumblr’s most reblogged ship.⁴ In 2016, a year into their hiatus, 1D was still Tumblr’s third most popular fan fiction topic, as well as the third most popular band on the platform.⁵

Directioners also valued Tumblr because they regarded it as a more private space than other social media.⁶ Fans’ perception of Tumblr’s status as the home for true 1D fans is tied to the anonymity that the platform offered its users; unfettered by the judgment of their families and peers, who might mock their love for the band, fans took to Tumblr to express their unfiltered thoughts, opinions, and desires. In her analysis of the Larry Stylinson phenomenon, Daisy Asquith notes that many Directioners considered “Tumblr to be an almost sacred space, in which the *Larry* fandom can be private.”⁷ Ksenia Korobkova’s study of identity formation in the 1D fandom turned up similar results, with one of her informants praising Tumblr “for having a logic that is harder for adults to crack and thus less likely to be invaded by adults, unlike Facebook.”⁸ This language of privacy and no-adults-allowed policies recalls Jenny Garber and Angela McRobbie’s seminal 1977 identification of girls’ bedrooms as important subcultural spaces that often revolve around the consumption of popular culture.⁹ Tumblr’s relative privacy from parents placed it within this tradition and made it appealing to Directioners looking for a virtual home.

For lesbian fans of 1D, such private spaces were especially important and, like so many other LGBTQ youth from this period, they congregated on Tumblr. Several studies of young people’s media preferences in the mid-2010s have found that LGBTQ youth were more likely to use Tumblr regularly.¹⁰ As a result, Tumblr became an outlet for the expression of girls’

queer identifications and desire, challenging the heteronormative depictions of girl-fans that have long characterized both scholarly and popular media about them. In her 2016 study of lesbian fans of male pop idols, scholar Barbara Jane Brickman argues that we need to update Garber and McRobbie's work by complicating heteronormative readings of "what girls do in their bedrooms." She demonstrates how male pop idols in particular enable homoerotic interactions between female fans, drawing attention to "the fan's consumption of a sign of female masculinity and lesbian erotic potential in the figure of male pop star."¹¹ One Direction's blurring of gender lines—their "female masculinity"—was marked by their youthful, androgynous appearance and boyish sartorial preferences, which gave them enormous lesbian aesthetic and erotic appeal. Tumblr's 1D fandom provided a multitude of digital evidence of how this lesbian aesthetic sensibility and "erotic potential" was incorporated into fans' processes of individual and collective identity formation; this documentation highlighted the boy band's relevance to both lesbian-identified fans and a broader lesbian (and non-lesbian) community.

Queer women use Tumblr to cultivate fan communities through multiple practices, sharing queer-specific fan texts, artwork, and personal confessions that cannot circulate as easily on other social media platforms. For example, lesbian Directioners frequently posted images and videos that combined 1D's lyrics and/or music with visuals pulled from movies or music videos featuring queer women. One set of images, created by Tumblr user *poweredbylouis*, features photographs of two women kissing, limbs entwined, overlaid by lyrics from two popular 1D songs (figure 18.2). The pastel pink images, taken from the music video for pop singer Hayley Kiyoko's 2015 single "Cliff's Edge," are combined with the love-struck lyrics of 1D songs "Diana" and "Olivia," evoking the visual aesthetic of Jamie Babbit's 1999 lesbian camp classic *But I'm a Cheerleader*. Posts like these demonstrate the extent to which 1D fandom facilitated the formation of community and sexual identity for lesbian fans; through the consumption and remixing of these images and texts, lesbian fans were able to connect with each other and conceptualize their own identities.

Another wildly popular genre of lesbian 1D content on Tumblr was Larry Stylinson "femslash:" art and fanfiction that reimagines Styles and Tomlinson as two girls in love. Tumblr user *twotalkaholics*' "fem!larry" illustration features Styles and Tomlinson engaged in a passionate liplock, with Styles' iconic mane of hair cascading down her back and Tomlinson wearing a short black skirt (figure 18.3). Femslash posts like this were common on Tumblr both within and beyond 1D fandom; here they both highlighted the band

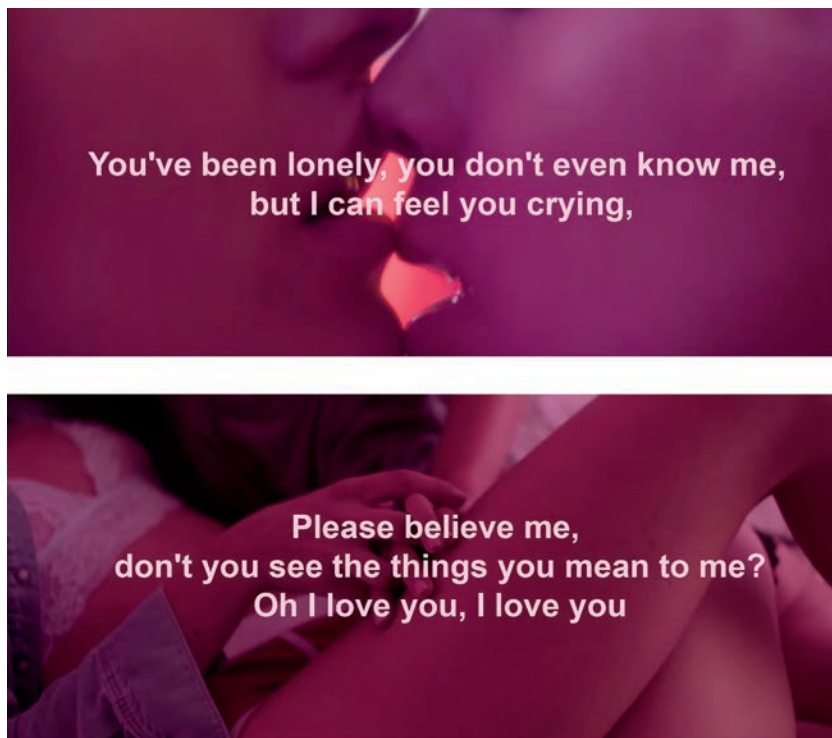


Fig. 18.2. “Diana//+//Olivia 2015” by poweredbylouis, a multimedia work that queers 1D songs “Diana” and “Olivia,” superimposing their lyrics on Hayley Kiyoko’s “Cliff’s Edge” music video stills

members’ lesbian aesthetic appeal and disrupted the notion that it is exclusively straight girls who are invested in the Larry Stylinson phenomenon. Rather than simply asserting the band’s appeal for lesbians, femslash like this went one step further by imagining the boys *as* lesbians, literalizing the lesbian erotic potential found in so much of 1D’s work.

The widespread and prolific nature of lesbian 1D fandom on Tumblr influenced fans throughout the platform; because of Tumblr’s open structure, *all* 1D fans were exposed to lesbian readings of the band. Lesbian fans’ ability to rework deeply heteronormative texts and build community through these reappropriations cast doubt on the popular conception of boy bands as a primarily heterosexual cultural phenomenon. When asked about her interest in One Direction, for example, Every Direction group member Shannon observed that “as we got into it, you know, it’s like we were listening to every-



Fig. 18.3. Femslash fan art featuring the One Direction ship Larry Stylinson: “fem!larry” by twotalkaholics, 2014.

thing differently, suddenly like all of their songs had all of this amazing queer subtext.” As drag kings, Every Direction reaffirmed and extended the radical sense of possibility generated by this link between boy bands and Tumblr’s queer feminist subcultures, embodying and making visible the queer joy of lesbian 1D fandom through their performances.

Lesbian fans’ contributions to and extensive presence within 1D Tumblr fandom thus gave queer and straight-identified fans the opportunity to read

queerly and explore their sexuality and gender presentation. Or, as Tumblr user jack-nought's popular Tumblr post succinctly proclaimed: "one direction really is lesbian culture wow."

NOTES

1. Drag kings are performers who make masculinity into an act, as defined by Jack Halberstam and Del LaGrace in *The Drag King Book* (London: Serpent's Tail Books, 1999).

2. Rachel Barnes, "A Question of X Appeal," *Campaign* (November 24, 2010).

3. Isabel Mohan, "Story of Their Life: The Rise and Fall of One Direction," *The Telegraph*, August 24, 2015, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/music-news/11495353/Story-of-their-Life-The-rise-and-fall-of-One-Direction.html>; Sarah Fitzmaurice, "One Direction Make History as First UK Group to Hit No.1 Spot in the US Album Charts with Debut," *Daily Mail Online*, March 21, 2012, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-2118004/One-Direction-UK-group-hit-No-1-US-album-charts-debut.html>.

4. Dana Rose Falcone, "Tumblr's Most Reblogged 'Ship 2015: One Direction's Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson," *EW.com*, December 8, 2015, <https://ew.com/article/2015/12/08/tumblr-most-reblogged-ship-2015-harry-styles-louis-tomlinson/>.

5. Kaitlyn Tiffany, "Tumblr Trends for 2016: At Least the Teen Had a Nice Year," *The Verge*, December 5, 2016, <https://www.theverge.com/2016/12/5/13846890/tumblr-2016-year-in-review-memes-actors-ships-fan-fiction>.

6. For further discussion of Tumblr as a private space for youth, see chapter 9 in this volume.

7. Daisy Asquith, "Crazy About One Direction: Whose Shame Is It Anyway?" in *Seeing Fans: Representations of Fandom in Media and Popular Culture*, ed. Lucy Bennett and Paul Booth (Bloomsbury Academic USA, New York, 2016), 79–88.

8. Ksenia A. Korobkova, *Schooling the Directioners: Connected Learning and Identity-Making in the One Direction Fandom* (Irvine, CA: Digital Media and Learning Research Hub, 2014).

9. Jenny Garber and Angela McRobbie, "Girls and Subcultures," in *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, ed. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (Routledge, New York, 2006), 177–88.

10. Paul Byron and Brady Robards, "There's Something Queer About Tumblr," *The Conversation*, December 22, 2017; see also chapter 26 in this volume.

11. Barbara Jane Brickman, "This Charming Butch: The Male Pop Idol, Girl Fans, and Lesbian (In)visibility," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 28 (2016): 443–59.

Ships, Fans, and #beatingthedistance

Queer Intimacy and the New Genre of Interactive Memoir on Tumblr

Annie Galvin

Annie Galvin, PhD, is a Mellon/ACLS public fellow and the associate editor at Public Books. Her writing on literature, visual culture, and popular music has appeared in *Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, *Breac: A Digital Journal of Irish Studies*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Paste Magazine*, *PopMatters*, and elsewhere.

On May 11, 2016, at 7:34 p.m., Cammie Scott tweeted to her tens of thousands of followers: “Shannon and I are no longer together. I love you guys endlessly but please understand we have to do what’s best for ourselves right now <3.”¹ Soon to be retweeted five thousand times, the message drew replies ranging from supportive messages from friends (“love you cam!!!” from @amyordman) to the early rumblings of a conspiracy theory (“please tell me yall are joking” from @karlasccamila) to expressions of dismay (“and my heart is suddenly broken” from @prideslaurenx). GIFs were tweeted: Kris Jenner crying, Mariah Carey donning oversized sunglasses with the text “I can’t read suddenly,” Tyra Banks screaming, “I was rooting for you! We were all rooting for you!” Many replies confessed that the breakup had warped their faith in love: “but the way you look at each other. . . . The only reason I ever had faith in love.” “I’m panicking please no.”

Cammie Scott and her ex, Shannon Beveridge—known as #ShaCam by fans—were a young gay couple who met on Tumblr in 2012 and began making videos together in 2014. By the time of their breakup, they had made about a hundred YouTube videos about their relationship, also published on Tumblr, and gained a substantial following: more than 300,000 subscribers on YouTube, hence the panic-stricken reaction to their breakup.² In many ways, their relationship reflects a trajectory that has become increasingly common in the world of queer female social media: two strangers meet online—usually

on Tumblr—and fall in love while texting, FaceTiming, “liking” each other’s content, posting about one another, and so forth. They then meet up in person, typically at an airport, which is often filmed and then posted by a friend; continue to date long distance; and sometimes end up moving in together after months or even years of dating from afar. This trajectory resembles the most traditional fairy tale or rom-com narratives, an enticing journey that begins with a “meet-cute” and ideally ends with a happily-ever-after, the couple having overcome the tribulations of geography and achieved a state of cohabiting, domestic bliss.

Despite the relative conventionality of such narratives, queer relationships that evolve on Tumblr diverge from traditional models in two ways. First, the relationship becomes a public narrative to be consumed by “fans” in real time, and second, that public narrative, combined with Tumblr’s interactivity, enables a form of “shipping” that fuses elements of fandom with the cultural representation that such visibility provides. Relationship tags like #ShaCam, for instance, reflect how fandom and social media consumption converge around such public LGBTQ couplings. Both of these features may, at first glance, appear fraught, potentially dovetailing with the moral panic evinced by cultural critics who link girls’ use of social media with superficiality, self-objectification, and—even worse—pathologies including anxiety, eating disorders, and depression. Relationships like #ShaCam, however, undermine such negative claims because they both model LGBTQ sociality for girls and reach predominantly LGBTQ audiences often starved for visibility in pop culture. Such queer relationship narratives on Tumblr prompt us to rethink the dominant negative perceptions of how girls use social media put forth by writers such as Nancy Jo Sales and Peggy Orenstein. Focusing on queer user bases and on Tumblr as a specific platform for young queer women’s cultural production allows us to access a more nuanced and less panic-stricken understanding of social media, specifically of LGBTQ uses of Tumblr. In this essay, I explore these two features of Tumblr relationships—their emergence as public narrative and their interactive dimensions—before demonstrating how content on Tumblr, specifically among LGBTQ users, amounts to a new form of cultural production: the interactive memoir online.

As a queer person navigating my own identity in my twenties, I’ve paid attention for more than four years to a group of women on Tumblr who share a few common characteristics: they are in their late teens or early twenties, they identify as gay or bisexual, they are largely white, they’ve been in high-profile relationships on Tumblr (akin to Shannon and Cammie’s, though not as widely broadcast), and they inhabit a common “scene” on Tumblr, convers-

ing with one another and reblogging similar material.³ In following this inter-linked group of Tumblr blogs, I've come to think of these spaces as home to a form of queer life-writing, inheriting and building on a genre that has long formed an important cornerstone of queer artistic practice.⁴ In its pastiche of visual and verbal documents, content production on Tumblr clearly diverges from more recognizable forms of memoir: mostly written out, bound, and published in books. Yet Tumblr blogs tell and archive the story of a life just as memoirs do, and I argue that the aesthetic affordances of Tumblr—as well as its dimension of interactivity—expand the possibilities for queer memoir to, in Paul Monette's words, “leave behind some map, some key, for the gay and lesbians who follow.”⁵

CENTERING QUEER ONLINE NARRATIVES

Tumblr relationships such as Shannon and Cammie's diverge from traditional models in part because they unfold in public: broadcast to followers (or really anyone with an internet connection) through platforms like Tumblr, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube. Originating on Tumblr and then spilling over into other apps, this type of relationship becomes a spectacle, a romance unfolding in real time that followers can monitor with the focus of a news reporter or the desire-laced avidity of a fan. In fact, Shannon and Cammie claim that they began dating because their followers literally “shipped” them into being: before *@the-2nd-star-to-the-right* (Cammie's Tumblr handle) and *@now-this-is-living* (Shannon's) followed each other, they would receive deluges of anonymous messages urging them to meet each other and date. Eventually they became the OTP (“one true pairing”) that their followers had dreamed up.

Tumblr's interface—particularly features such as “Ask me anything!” and anonymous messaging—facilitates this unique form of real-life shipping. In other words, figures such as *@the-2nd-star-to-the-right* and *@now-this-is-living* can exist as characters in a fan's imagination, but also as actual people with the potential to meet, and date, in the world, and then to generate even more content for fans to consume. When relationships like #ShaCam end, they often unleash a period of public mourning, for their fans confront an abrupt cessation of the relationship narrative, a lack of detail about why that narrative ended, and often a radical loss of faith in the #relationshipgoals that the couple had modeled. Like any genre of narrative, therefore, the spectacle of lesbian relationships online has developed its own set of tropes and con-

ventions, coalescing into a script that many couples follow and, in so doing, amass armies of fans who “ship them,” root for them, live vicariously through them, and even count on them for a model of what queer relationships might look like.

Indeed, a widely broadcast queer relationship can sustain fan attachment even after the breakup. This phenomenon aligns with Rebecca Williams’s concept of “post-object fandom,” in which the object of interest (such as a television show) ceases to generate new content for fans to consume, even as fans continue to interact with the object in new ways.⁶ Shannon retained all the relationship-related videos on her YouTube channel, and fan accounts like @shacaminators on Instagram persisted long after the women ceased making videos together. In the case of a public online relationship, fans can follow the individuals into new endeavors and thus recenter their attachments to new iterations of queer intimacy. (Both Shannon and Cammie are now in long-term relationships with other women, thus spawning new narratives for fans to consume and new archives of queer visibility to consult as models for identity- and relationship-building.) As Williams writes, television fans “draw on the texts to perform identity work through points of identification.”⁷ In online spaces, this collective identification circulating around a media object can prove particularly nourishing for queer youth, who often lack opportunities to access such communities offline.

The #ShaCam breakup thus illustrates how deeply followers become invested in these online relationships and how powerful these narratives become as articulations of queer life and relationality. The writing, photography, conversation, reblogging, and hashtagging produced by queer women as a means for expressing themselves are also creating community both through and within the medium of Tumblr, and thereby generating a whole new archive of LGBTQ visibility that serves as a supplement and alternative to representations in other media like TV and film.

In analyzing queer memoir production on Tumblr, I push back against the predominantly alarmist, overwhelmingly heteronormative public discourse about girls’ use of social media, as represented in recent bestselling books by Nancy Jo Sales and Peggy Orenstein. This discourse expresses deep concern about the effects social media is having on young women’s sexual and social development.⁸ Sales laments the damage caused by girls’ tendencies to work hard at looking “hot,” to take constant selfies, and to bow to demands (frequently for “nudes”) from boys whose understanding of sex is shaped by their extensive exposure to online porn. While her analysis does reveal a troubling status quo for young women trying to navigate sexuality within

unequal, heterosexual gender dynamics, its focus is blindly heteronormative, and neither she nor Orenstein show a general understanding of social media, conflating platforms to give the impression that Snapchat stories, Instagram photographs, and the heterogeneous blogs on Tumblr produce (straight) female sexuality in identical ways. These authors seem more invested in stoking moral panic over the state of teen sociality—marketed to a largely adult readership—than in exploring the nuances of social media, particularly among queer youth, whose opportunities for finding love and friendship in the real world are often relatively limited.

TUMBLR'S QUEER MEMOIRS

Beyond the scope of popular discourses lies a whole universe of social media production by young queer women, to whose stories I now turn. In so doing, I aim to shift focus away from a tendency to panic about sex and social media and toward the content that queer users create and the effects that such content can have on others. That content, in my framing, amounts to a new genre of interactive memoir online, which both derives from a deep tradition of queer life-writing and gains new formal dimensions thanks to Tumblr's unique digital resources.

Over the past decade, queer memoirs have become more present in the American publishing market, just as queer representation has increased in other cultural fields. Books by celebrities including Portia de Rossi and Maria Bello have worked to destigmatize homosexual relationships, while coming-of-age narratives by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (*Dirty River*, 2015) and Gabby Rivera (*Juliet Takes a Breath*, 2016) have foregrounded the perspectives of queer people of color and, in Piepzna-Samarasinha's case, queer people of color with a disability. This work contributes to a growing archive of life-writing available to young people searching for narratives with which they might identify. At the same time, however, these published works are inevitably mediated by publishing houses beholden to market forces, and they are typically written in retrospect by authors later in life. While important, they lack the stream-of-consciousness immediacy that characterizes blogs and social media content, which are often responding to life events and emotions as they evolve. As such, this new form of online memoir better captures the vicissitudes of excitement and disappointment, elation and depression that shape the consciousness of a young person, especially one whose sexual orientation is in the minority.

In this sense, contemporary online memoir resonates with Julie Avril Minich's inquiry into what queer memoir might look like in a post-Stonewall era, one in which social progress must always be viewed in relation to a history scarred by exclusion, persecution, and injury both physical and psychological. Analyzing memoirs by Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Terry Galloway, and Alison Bechdel, Minich has argued that these texts "invite us to think about why queer lives matter, about what we might learn from their unusual embodiments and their nonnormative unfoldings in time and space, and about the literary modes, genres, and formal strategies that represent them."⁹ Minich's inquiry focuses on explicitly literary texts, though I believe that her claim about queer memoir and textual form can be extended to consider the forms of online composition that one finds on Tumblr, too.

Tumblr's diachronic nature—the fact that an active blog unfolds constantly in time and never technically "ends"—enables exactly the "unusual embodiments and nonnormative unfoldings in time and space" that Minich distinguishes as queer praxis. The "self" expressed through a Tumblr blog seems always suspended in a kind of narrative flux, displaying original content in fits and starts alongside material reblogged from other users. Following Cammie Scott or Shannon Beveridge, for example, one would see the shape of a life constantly shifting, responding, creating, and interacting. In terms of Tumblr as memoir, this means that the platform offers many venues for self-expression, some of which can be strictly original (text, photos, audio files, or videos), but much of which becomes dialogic (chats, quotes, links, and reblogs). Even if a user consistently generates her own textual and visual materials, Tumblr remains fundamentally interactive, for a blog is almost always dependent on input from others along with the original content that its user creates. Tumblr's anonymous "Ask Me Anything!" feature, in this sense, proves essential to queer memoir production on the platform, because users can interact with each other—asking questions, making comments, and thus generating more textual production across the blogs—without fear of being "outed." This interactivity generates new contours of narrative and description, for questions and comments can spur a user to further fill out the story of her life. Jon M. Wargo has highlighted "curating and collecting as two forms of remediated communicative practice" on Tumblr, and we can see how these practices shape the way a queer user can define herself in relation to and against others in this counterpublic space.¹⁰ Even if certain tropes develop across blogs, such as the "first meeting" video or the #you tag to indicate that a post relates to a user's girlfriend, the blogs become highly individualized over time and thus present an array of incomplete selves navigating and reacting to their circumstances in real time.

PROFILE: @KATEAUSTIN

Kate Austin, a twenty-three-year-old self-identified lesbian who lives in Philadelphia with her girlfriend Sarah and participates in the scene I've followed, presents one such example. Kate's Tumblr feed, @kateaustinn, is peppered with adorable pictures of herself and Sarah—kissing, partying, vacationing, snuggling with their teacup Yorkie—some of which get reblogged more than fifty thousand times, as well as supportive reblogs of her friends' posts and many responses to "Anons" asking for advice or details about her life. Kate and Sarah were introduced through a friend over three years ago and first started messaging through Facebook. They met in person on Kate's twenty-first birthday and, according to both, connected instantly. They endured over a year of long distance coupledness, Kate in Ohio and Sarah at college in Delaware, before moving into an apartment together in 2015 (figure 19.1).

Following Kate since the early days of her relationship with Sarah has been like watching an epic love story unfold in a movie, minus the unhappy endings that plague lesbian romances (see: *High Art*, *Loving Annabelle*, etc.). Yet thanks to Tumblr, a love story like Kate's is constantly being updated, extended, and enriched by additional photographs, videos, and testaments to how things are progressing. "I'm living a dream!" she recently posted. Like other Tumblr users, however, Kate's feed isn't entirely rose-colored; in her case, she has emphasized the challenges of being in an "LDR" and has recorded a "long distance relationship advice" video that has been viewed 31,388 times on YouTube.¹¹ Kate has been open about the difficulties she has faced since coming out to her mother, who still does not accept her sexuality



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Fig. 19.1. Kate Austin

and refuses to meet Sarah, and Kate frequently counsels Anons who bring up similar problems. But Kate has mostly devoted her Tumblr presence to modeling a successful LDR and encouraging others to persevere over similar circumstances; to my knowledge, she coined the hashtag #beatthedistance, which can signify either a method of cheerleading (i.e., “Beat the distance! You can do it!”) or a token of accomplishment (“You did it! You beat the distance!”). Clicking on that tag now links to thousands of photographs of queer female couples attempting to, or having, beat the distance that often comes with the territory of meeting a girlfriend on social media. Outside of her relationship, Kate gives advice to Anons on topics ranging from their own love lives to their career aspirations, their life plans, and their family situations.

I recently corresponded with Kate on Tumblr to ask about her experience sharing her life online. Having observed firestorms erupting around couples like #ShaCam who share their lives online, I was curious about the relative advantages and challenges that come with broadcasting massive amounts of personal information to a public audience. (To be clear, Kate and Sarah are very much still together.) As with her Anons, Kate was friendly, open, and enthusiastic, saying she was “honored” to answer my questions. Unlike the young women that Sales focuses on in *American Girls*, whose social media activities are constrained by heterosexual norms and gender inequity, Kate experiences Tumblr as an LGBTQ-friendly space that has been overwhelmingly positive and only occasionally combative. “People like to judge our relationship a ton,” she says, which is clearly a common issue for couples, like Kate and Sarah or #ShaCam, who have generated their own mini-fandoms.

Yet despite the occasional harassment by an Anon, Tumblr seems to have been instrumental in Kate’s coming out and critical to her growing self-acceptance. After coming out for the first time in 2015, she “started sharing photos with the lesbian hashtag and started exploring through that and realized just how large the lesbian community was on Tumblr.” I asked her what it is about the community on Tumblr that has made her feel like she could share personal information, and she pointed to an issue that Sales’s and Orenstein’s lack of attention to Tumblr corroborates: that “Tumblr kind of flies under the radar. It’s so popular but at the same time so low key.” Since Kate initially didn’t know many people who had a Tumblr, she says that “being myself on Tumblr was easy because I knew it was kind of hidden.” In other words, Tumblr’s unique facets as a social network—that it requires almost zero personal information to sign up and that one therefore holds a large amount of agency over how to display oneself—enable modes of self-expression that could be



Fig. 19.2. Kate and Sarah, Pride flag

risky for a queer person to explore on other networks, like Facebook or Instagram, that encourage you to “find friends” that you already know.¹²

Ultimately, Kate’s experience attests to how Tumblr enables a form of life-writing the benefits of which are both personal and communal. “It has given me a safe space to express myself openly and freely,” she says. “Tumblr has made me so much more comfortable in my own skin and given me such an ‘unapologetically me’ attitude.” This comes through in the posts she writes, the advice she gives others, and the Pride-related images she shares and reblogs, including one of Sarah and her kissing, wrapped in a Pride flag, at a social justice march (figure 19.2). But it seems that what moves her most, and what probably matters most to her forty thousand followers, is this: “The number one thing I have benefited from is helping people accept and love themselves. I have gotten so many messages saying I have helped people from

taking their own life. Every time I read messages like those, it makes sharing my story & my life so much more than worth it.”

As of this moment, Kate is mostly living what we might call an extended happy ending, giving followers a glimpse into what happens *after* “relationship goals”—getting a girlfriend, moving in together—are reached. The period after a relationship begins is not, of course, always happy, as Shannon and Cammie’s breakup attests. In that case, however, after a substantial period of recovery, @now-this-is-living and @the-2nd-star-to-the-right have found other ways to model experience that is “unapologetically” out of the closet, as Kate would say. While both women post less frequently on Tumblr, they have developed successful crossover careers as “YouTubers”: Shannon has won a Shorty Award and a Celebrity Rising Star award at the British LGBT Awards Ceremony, while Cammie has launched a cross-platform blog called *In Full Bloom*, in which she gives advice on everything from makeup techniques to dating as a femme lesbian and also markets products as an influencer. It is significant, however, to recall that Tumblr is the place where Shannon met Cammie, where they developed a following and gave those followers hope for what might be possible as a queer person both in and out of a relationship. Kate Austin, Shannon Beveridge, and Cammie Scott are all, in different ways, self-aware about Tumblr’s impact on their own self-image and about *their* influence, through Tumblr, on others searching for a role model who is both a digital character and a real person, someone to follow and someone to talk to. Interactive memoir online, therefore, becomes a new narrative phenomenon that offers important models to LGBTQ youth, and indeed serves as an outlet for self-expression, education, and community: in sum, a new archive of visibility that transforms and sometimes even saves young people’s lives.

NOTES

1. Camden Scott (@cammiescott), “Shannon and I are no longer together. I love you guys endlessly but please understand we have to do what’s best for ourselves right now <3,” May 11, 2016, 7:34 p.m. The replies I cite can all be found below this tweet.

2. Tumblr profiles do not publicize follower counts, so it is difficult to discern the extent of their fan base there, other than to assume that it was quite extensive among queer couples using the platform.

3. While these users frequently reblog material from users of color as well as political posts relating to race and social justice, their whiteness insulates them from what might otherwise be another layer of exclusion and oppression that queer youth

of color face. Scholars have noted, however, that these youth value Tumblr as a space apart from “constant homophobic and racist surveillance from pre-existing (or future) life networks.” Alexander Cho, “Default Publicness: Queer Youth of Color, Social Media, and Being Outed by the Machine,” *New Media & Society* (2017): 3. My use of the word “scene” here comes from Matt Hart, who views it as a more accurate alternative to “community” as a way of characterizing groups of Tumblr users. Matt Hart, “Youth Intimacy on Tumblr: A Pilot Study,” *Young* 23, no. 3 (2015): 204.

4. Julie Avril Minich, “Writing Queer Lives: Autobiography and Memoir,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Gay and Lesbian Literature*, ed. Scott Herring (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

5. Paul Monette, *Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992).

6. Rebecca Williams, *Post-Object Fandom: Television, Identity, and Self-Narrative* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 16.

7. Williams, *Post-Object Fandom*, 21.

8. Nancy Jo Sales, *American Girls: Social Media and the Secret Lives of Teenagers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016); and Peggy Orenstein, *Girls & Sex: Navigating the Complicated New Landscape* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016).

9. Minich, “Writing Queer Lives,” 62.

10. Jon M. Wargo, “#Donttagyourhate: Reading, Collecting, and Curating as Genres of Participation in LGBT Youth Activism On Tumblr,” *Digital Culture & Education* 9, no. 1 (2017): 14–30.

11. Kate Austin, “Long Distance Relationship Advice / LDR,” online video clip, YouTube, September 2, 2015, accessed July 11, 2018.

12. See Cho, “Default Publicness,” 2.

Gallery

#Fan Art

Curated by Louisa Stein

The art we selected for the fan art gallery represents a range of types of fandoms and forms of fan art present on Tumblr. We included works emerging from music fandom, TV fandom, anime fandom, gaming fandom, celebrity fandom, and Disney fandom. While no small selection of images could fully capture the expanse of diverse fan artistic engagement that has thrived on Tumblr, it is our hope that the fan works curated here gesture to the multiplicities of fandoms and fan artworks shared on the site. In their commentaries, the artists speak of their sometimes deeply personal engagement with the cultural and political interventions in the fan sources that have inspired their work, and the importance of community sharing, feedback, and support on the platform in nourishing and sustaining their creative energies.

xloon's work of *Hannibal* art uses symbolism and an expressionistic style to offer an evocative visual interpretation of the two main characters' investment in one another, an interpretation that resonates throughout the fandom. Corinne Reinert's *Steven Universe* artwork grants two characters a needed moment of support and connection that the series does not directly depict within its narrative. Nobbie's original character art intervenes in prevailing racist discourse in the game *Dragon Age* and in its fandom by creating and sharing an original character, a powerful Black woman. Amanda Allen Niday's *Protesting Princesses* transforms the Disney princesses into representatives for the women's resistance movement that followed Trump's election in the United States. Space_mementia's Beyoncé fan art captures and conveys the iconic moment of body diversity and positivity when Beyoncé performed pregnant at the Grammy Awards. Morrindah's *Yuri on Ice* artwork renders in lush visuals an image from a fellow fan's work of alternative universe fan fiction, thus contributing to a network of fan creativity and transformation.

In this piece, I wanted to convey the nature of the relationship between



Fig. G4.1. *Hannibal* art and text by xlo0n

Will Graham and Hannibal Lecter, the empath and psychopath. Specifically, I wanted to capture that moment at the end of season three of *Hannibal*, where Will completely lets go of everything he has stood for and loses himself in the deep rooted empathy he has for Hannibal. The single pair of antlers represents Will becoming one with Hannibal in a way, and the antlers simultaneously represent Hannibal's inherent influence over and possession of Will.

The process is pretty spontaneous for me. I rarely plan stuff out. Generally, I've gotten positive reactions, and now and then I'll see people use my art as their icon, which is always cute. Tumblr fandoms are as daunting as they are endearing. I drown in them on the regular.



Fig. G4.2. *Steven Universe* art and text by Corinne Reinert | calonarang

This piece is one of my many contributions to the *Steven Universe* fandom. I'd been using DeviantArt for posting and finding art for years, but around 2012 all my favorite artists seemed to be moving to Tumblr, and I began actively posting on Tumblr too.

My blog has always been really casual, just drawing what struck me and not expecting much feedback. I didn't really see spikes in popularity until I started drawing *Steven Universe* characters. Fan art I had done in the past for more niche fandoms would typically get about a hundred notes. For *Steven Universe* fan art I began seeing several thousand. I think I just got interested in the fandom at the right time, when *Steven Universe* was really taking off on Tumblr in 2013. I drew this particular piece because the show was coming

off hiatus. The previous batch of episodes involved Steven and Peridot (the characters pictured) being rejected by their love interests. I thought it would be fun to show them healing together with ice cream and watching romantic comedies.

Of course, the note spikes were validating, but what I was more excited about was how welcoming the community was and how they were equally excited about the show. People I'd never met messaged me to chat and invited me to projects. Throughout my time on Tumblr I've met a lot of friends, participated in loads of collaborations, and even contributed to a few zine projects. It was a joy to finally be able to talk to people online about something I was interested in and we could enjoy together. And like in any fandom, it is always exciting to take someone else's work into your own hands and affix your vision to it. I just love making something new for fellow fans to enjoy.



Fig. G4.3. *Dragon Age* original character art and text by Nobbie

This piece features one of my *Dragon Age* protagonists, Inquisitor Callie Lavellan. The *Dragon Age* games allow players to create their own customized characters using a character creator, and then play the game's narrative as that original character (or "OC").

Callie is black, fat, incredibly intelligent, skilled with her magic, and the leader of a massive organization. She has her flaws, but her positive attributes would make her "unrealistic" to modern/racist audiences. While my previous original characters were skilled and capable, none were best in their field, and I wondered why. Why was I so hesitant to make someone the best? Was it unrealistic? Well, so are dragons. And who's stopping me? And with that, Callie was born.

Countless Black folks left the *Dragon Age* fandom due to racist harassment on Tumblr. The games themselves are also hostile to all people of color and constantly remind us that they're written by (and often for) white people. *Dragon Age* games include insensitive depictions of slavery and vilifying

of darker-skinned characters. Yet, in 2015 when I first played *Dragon Age II*, the role-playing elements and decision making were groundbreaking, and despite the games' flaws, continuing to develop my OCs past the game's ending enhanced my enjoyment. Now, I only engage with the fandom with my own original characters or those of my friends. I choose not to stick around and watch people swoon over White characters and defend racist content creators.

Nevertheless, I still think it is important to make and share Black content. Black folks can only continue to lift each other up, despite what non-Black fans (including other POC) throw at us. Hopefully someday people will stop trying to stifle our voices, but until then we all need to work together and push through. I think this includes people of color and white people who show empathy and actively support creators of color. There are some people who adopt a stricter Us vs. Them mentality, but if there must be Us and Them, I suggest we make the Us as big as possible.

Also it would be great if racists would just knock it off and learn some manners, but we should be realistic.



Fig. G4.4. *Protesting Princesses* art and text by Amanda Allen Niday

I created the *Protesting Princess* series early in 2017, directly following the Women’s March. These steadfast, kind-hearted, boldly dreaming women were my idols as a kid, and I continue to be inspired by them in my adulthood. By updating the Princesses’ setting and dress, I wanted these women to be re-cast as the heroines I need now. The core themes of the film characters remained in my art, because, like these princesses, modern women still face

challenges like unsupportive families and being dismissed for who they are or where they come from. By envisioning them as remaining strong and fighting for their own truth in 2017, I hoped I could do the same.

Tumblr offers a space to not only express your shared enjoyment of media but to find a community of people who want to discuss it; users take and dissect media in a powerfully crowdsourced way. While my responses were overwhelmingly positive, there were dissenting voices too, which I also considered valuable and I engaged with. Many questioned my portrayal of Jasmine as Muslim. Some concerns focused on historical accuracy, while others noted that not every Middle Eastern woman, regardless of religion, chooses to wear a cover. These users had valid and thoughtful reasons for their critiques, some of which were personal and heartfelt.

While I had done my own research into these topics, it was ultimately a personal story that influenced me most, too. A close family friend had been living as a Muslim woman in America. For a time, she chose not wear any head covering and, because of her looks, she could pass through life without being subjected to assumptions based on her religion. But as the climate shifted, she found herself wanting to put the hijab on. It was important to her not to hide, especially because she could have. Instead she stood in solidarity with her more visible community members by making herself visible too. And in a piece that was about standing up and making your values seen, I knew I needed to include that representation in my work too.



Fig. G4.5. Beyoncé art and text by space_mementia

I chose to create my digital media piece “Beyoncé” because I loved the beautiful aesthetic behind her elaborate maternity photo shoot, in which she announced that she was having twins. My image is actually from her Grammy performance but was released with her own maternity pictures. How her

body looks in the particular piece is very important to me because she isn't depicted as a small-waisted model, but as a pregnant mother. I think it is important to represent every type of person, no matter the body shape. The pregnant female form is one to be celebrated and I wanted to accentuate and emphasize that.

My specific goal as an artist is to spread beauty through realistic portraiture. I enjoy capturing emotion and expressing beauty through a figurative art form, although it is a difficult practice because of the detail and time put into it. Digital media is a great way to really bring out details and color because of how easily it can be manipulated. If you mess up, you can just hit the undo button, and it yields results that are comparable to traditional media like acrylic or oil paint. I specifically chose digital paint for this piece because I can easily zoom in and get all the details of the outfit accurately, and I created a "speedpaint" of this process for my audience.

Tumblr is a great platform for artists because of how easy it is to expose your art to others and how open and diverse the community is. All the Tumblr artists I have met agree that the best art on Tumblr breaks social norms, which is unlike a lot of art geared toward a younger audience on social media that tries to capture the "ideal body type." By contributing art that promotes the idea that everybody is beautiful, I reach people who need to hear that message. I see Beyoncé in this piece as a very strong female character that inspires body positivity and elegance, and I hope the people who have interacted with the piece on Tumblr take that beauty and apply it to themselves.



Fig. G4.6. *Yuri on Ice* art and text by Morrindah

Cheerio! What you're seeing here is fan art for *Yuri on Ice*, an anime series about anxiety-prone Japanese professional figure skater Yuuri Katsuki and his lifelong idol, Russian living legend Victor Nikiforov, who suddenly appears at Yuuri's home to become his coach. On their way to Yuuri's Grand Prix competition they find love and life in each other.

From its first moment of airing in October 2016, *Yuri on Ice* had me and lots of other fans on Tumblr mesmerized. *Yuri on Ice's* encouraging story appeared on my screen when I was feeling a lot like Yuuri myself. Week after week it pulled me out of my negative state of mind, and now I'm a way happier and more active person.

But! This isn't only a *Yuri on Ice* fan art, it's also a fan art for my friend Lucy Camui's popular fiction "Siren's Call," in which the siren Yuuri and pirate captain Victor fall for each other. As in the anime, Lucy's two characters are completely devoted to each other. I wanted to depict an intimate moment, with the two cuddling in what Yuuri calls their "nest." Victor's bed is always described as having golden sheets etc., only the best for his "lovebird," so having those luxurious materials and making it look cozy was important to me. I also wanted to show Yuuri braiding Victor's hair and adding his own feathers

to decorate it. Those strands of silver give him a really divine look, and it's an unbelievably relaxing activity to draw it.

As usual, I began this piece with a pencil sketch, then traced it with a fine liner. Most of the time I then do the coloring using Photoshop on my PC. In my everyday life as an illustrator I usually paint with watercolors and acrylic paint, but I feel like digital art is better received in fandom culture, so I chose to improve my skills there. I guess I still tried to make this piece look like traditional art with that mosaic effect though. The legend of sirens comes from a time of myths; that's why I just had to go for that look.

SECTION 5

#Activism

Tumblr's role in inspiring liberal and progressive activism has generally been overlooked not only because of its lack of public visibility in comparison to platforms such as Twitter or Facebook, but because Tumblr activism is markedly different from that of other platforms. Tumblr is vast, murky, and bottomless. The platform offers space for huge stores of educational information and resources, enables the wholesale embedding of news articles and video, accommodates long posts attesting to a user's lived experiences of social inequities and their battles for change, and permits anonymous questions. In this section, we focus on identifying and examining some of the Tumblr-specific practices, both professional interventions and "everyday digital activism" (as our contributor Kendra Calhoun terms it) that users have employed to serve their larger communities both off and on the platform.

We begin by interviewing Tumblr's Social Impact Lead Victoria McCullough, who discusses Tumblr's social justice roots and how her office engages in public advocacy and education to address the political and social concerns of Tumblr users. Shifting from management to user agency for our next two essays, Lesley Willard's "Tumblr, XKit, and the 'XKit Guy'" demonstrates the unusual amount of freedom Tumblr users had in the 2010s to modify their digital environment, focusing on the example of the "XKit Guy," a Turkish college student who developed a widely used extension framework. In "Digital Decolonization," Emily Rauber Rodriguez describes a 2012 community action in which Latinx Tumblr users worked to redirect search engine results away from sexualized images of Latinas by purposefully populating the #Latina tag with alternative Latinx images. Interviewee Joe Varisco highlights Tumblr's importance in facilitating "on the ground" activism for Chicago's queer community in the early 2010s, providing a shared space for resources, event planning, and the creation of the influential community zine *Chicago IRL*. In their personal essay, "Behind the Scenes of a Popular Youth Trans Resources Tumblr," Lee Brown identifies the daily challenges and rewards involved in being a young transgender moderator who provides

advice, resources, and education to literally thousands of other trans youth globally. Finally, Planned Parenthood queer sex educator Maureen Kelly discusses the formation and history of “Queer Tips,” Planned Parenthood’s first and only queer-focused sex education Tumblr. Kelly focuses on the way Tumblr has provided her office with the knowledge to more effectively address the needs of LGBTQ users within her New York State community, within Planned Parenthood, and for the public at large.

A Social Good Brand

An Interview with Victoria McCullough,
Lead, Social Impact, Tumblr

Interviewed by: Allison McCracken

Dates: May 17, 2017, and June 29, 2018

Victoria McCullough currently leads the Social Impact and Public Policy team at Tumblr, focusing on engaging and activating advocacy groups, activists, and other changemakers to tell powerful stories, catalyze engagement with the Tumblr community, and drive measurable impact. Prior to Tumblr, she worked for the Obama administration in the White House Office of Public Engagement and the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Congressional Affairs.

McCracken: *How would you describe the Tumblr brand? How would you distinguish it from other brands?*

McCullough: Our users come onto the platform seeking something that they're passionate about, and they feel Tumblr is a safe space, sometimes because it's anonymous and often times just the nature of the community that's been built. I think it is in our DNA to be empathetic, to listen to people's stories, for this to be a place where there's a lot of peer support. If you're a kid that lives in rural Missouri and is gay and can't come out to parents or friends, Tumblr is this space that really provides a level of support from strangers across the world. And a lot of that is inspired by the fact that people come here to express themselves and want to be accepted and supported, and they tend to accept others in the same way.

We're a "social good" brand. We are blessed in the fact that the social activism and the progressive aspect of our users is built into our platform. We just have a political space in a way that I think a lot of brands don't. We have a uniquely young set of users too, they're radically diverse,

they're part of the queerest generation we've ever seen, so we're really lucky.

McCracken: *How would you describe the role of your office?*

McCullough: I think it's about being mindful of where the community's needs and conversations are around social justice. And then either identifying people already within the Tumblr user community or identifying educational resources outside the community and bringing those together in an effort to really educate and arm our users with the information that allows them to take action. We closely evaluate which issues Tumblr can actually move the needle on and where we should step back and focus on providing promotional support. Planned Parenthood is a great example of this. They will always be the experts in reproductive rights, so it's better for Tumblr to focus on providing support and elevating their mission. And in issues like mental health, Tumblr not only focuses on lifting up partners but we also try and build our internal and external policies that make our platform safer for every user as well as provide leadership and support coalition building around eliminating the mental health stigma.

McCracken: *Can you describe your background and how that led you to Tumblr?*

McCullough: I started here in February 2016. My background is in community organizing and advocacy and politics. And government. I spent most of my twenties working for Senator Obama on the 2008 presidential campaign as a field organizer. And then after we won, I moved to DC in the administration. I ultimately became Special Assistant for the Director of Public Engagement at the White House, which I always describe as one of the best translations of community organizing into the White House. Our mantra was that we were making the White House the people's house. We worked to build coalitions across a number of communities, including the Black community, the Latino community, the faith communities, and essentially served as their ear in the White House. We would really leverage that space physically to bring in people who represented communities across the country.

After that, I moved to Chicago to work for Organizing for Action, the nonprofit arm that had attempted to keep the Obama volunteer organi-

zation intact and mobilized. As the Director of Public Engagement there, I was liaising with the creative community, the Hollywood community, and the digital influencers to connect them to our policies. And so that kind of led me to Tumblr. A fellow Obama alumnus shared the job description and I remember looking at it thinking, “Oh, man I think I really wanna do this.”

And part of it was working for a brand, specifically Tumblr, that I knew had such a social justice DNA, so it felt like it could be a great fit. And the social impact part of the ad was to serve as the point person for advocacy groups across a range of issues, which included reproductive rights and mental health, all these issues that I was extremely personally passionate about. And then the other aspect was the policy piece, which was about representing Tumblr on issues like net neutrality and really paying attention to any issues that might come up on Capitol Hill that could actually have an impact on user policy and how our users are operating online.

At Tumblr, we’re a scrappy team. In a lot of other places, there’s a team of five or six people who do social impact and then another ten who do public policy, but for Tumblr, I do both (with a lot of support from other departments).

McCracken: *Was this a new position, and if not, can you tell me about the history of the position?*

McCullough: It’s not new. This position was originally called the Politics and Activism “Evangelist,” I believe. Liba Rubenstein, who hired me, was in this role starting in early 2012. She sat alongside the Music Evangelist and the Fashion and Books Evangelists. As Tumblr evolved, she also picked up the public policy role and then it transformed into a social impact and policy position, more brand-oriented, and we began to develop partnerships with other organizations. So this role has definitely been around for a long time and was a part of a response to the unique community of activists that started expanding on the platform.

McCracken: *How did you further develop this role based on your experiences and priorities?*

McCullough: I’ve increasingly relied on my strong network of friends and former colleagues built up over those years of organizing and govern-

ment advocacy. I want to make sure that whether we're talking about racial justice or mental health or reproductive rights, we're doing it right, that Tumblr is being as diverse and thoughtful about a particular issue as we possibly can. Just to get really specific, when we're hosting "Answer Time" or "Issue Time" on subjects such as mass incarceration or the school-to-prison pipeline, I've been able to ask friends and former coworkers who are working directly in those spaces or know people who are and ask them who would be the best person to come in and talk about implicit bias.

The second thing I would just add is that these established relationships also facilitate conversation about emerging issues. Because of my organizing advocacy background, I am just put into different spaces or invited to different events where I become aware of issues like the school-to-prison pipeline. Although it may not have been being talked about specifically using that language on the platform, there were certainly anecdotes of users talking about discipline in schools. So we had an "Issue Time" roundtable on October 7, 2016 (partnering with Mic.com), and we had a lot of kids ask questions about it. Some users were like, "Oh my gosh, I know what that is! I've experienced what that is!" or "My family has experienced that but I did not know it had it a name." Keeping up with a lot of those trending issues, through my contacts, has been super beneficial (figure 20.1).

McCracken: *What are some of the ways you feel Tumblr can make the most difference?*

McCullough: I think a lot about where our brand can have the most impact when deciding where to put our resources. In a space like racial justice, you've got a lot of brands who still are fearful about touching that topic. And so that has been one of the topics we've thought long and hard about in terms of what conversations we can host and what types of content we can build around it. We have such a passionate user base within the community of color that we have really tried to put a lot of emphasis on that issue.

McCracken: *Are there ways that you have been able to address the social concerns of users as you've seen them arise?*

McCullough: Yeah, a specific example would be the March for Our Lives. That was a very strong conversation I think across all social media, but

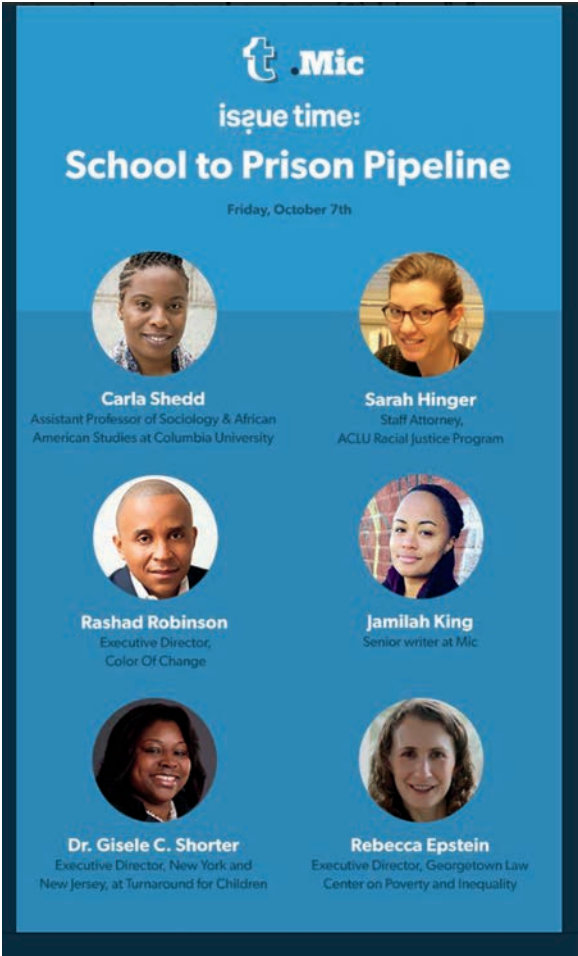


Fig. 20.1. Issue Time: “School to Prison Pipeline,” held October 7, 2016

especially for our users. From a data standpoint, #MFOL was our top trending tag for days, even compared to some of our more pop culture type tags. And we don’t see that a lot. You always see social justice tags trend at different times, but this was a magnitude that we had just not really seen before. And it was interesting to look at our user posts, because again, I kind of look at these as coming from the next generation of leaders. You could see that a lot of these kids were in high school and the languages they were using to talk about gun violence prevention was becoming the moral compass for everybody else. And the fact that they were not only talking about injustice but also feeling helpless indi-

cated to us that we needed to make sure we had strong partnership with an advocacy group on this.

Everytown.org had a great Tumblr presence, and so we worked closely with them to make sure we were giving our users resources. I knew MFOL was going to be something that was big, but I don't think any of us expected the magnitude of the movement. I think within that larger public conversation we helped really guide our users, making sure they understood what they should be asking for when they were calling their representative, and then what they could do at the local level, whether it was talking to the school board or starting their own "Students Demand Action" chapters. There was just an appetite for that that we had not seen previously.

Voting rights is one other area of user interest now. In our market research, one of the things that surprised me is that you'll see a lot on Tumblr about mental health, you will see racial justice—Black Lives Matter is always a strong, strong tag on the platform—but lately we've seen a lot of tags around voting access and voting rights that cuts across a lot of our user base, so this is one of the many reasons why we're paying attention to voter and civic education right now (in 2018). You see that during election years, but we're seeing it now for a midterm year when you generally don't see millennials or generation Z necessarily talking about things like that.

McCracken: *How do you actually address that in terms of voter and civic education?*

McCullough: A couple things. First, I've spent more time at voter and civic education conferences during the last couple of weeks, basically trying to figure out what is the best messaging that has the most impact on voter turnout. Specifically, for vulnerable communities, like communities of color. The thing you hear over and over again is generation Z and millennials do not feel like their vote matters. Even if they're educated, even if they feel like they know the importance of voting, anyone from an Ivy League kid to a kid that is out of high school and working and struggling to make ends meet, they still are intimidated by voting. Voter turnout was so, so low in 2016 among youth, so we're spending a lot more time finding the right message to turn out that vote. We're educating users to help them overcome those two big obstacles of "my vote doesn't count," and two, "even if I do vote, I'm kind of intimidated and

I don't know enough to be an educated voter and therefore I shouldn't vote at all." We need the right messaging, how do we communicate to our users in a way that's gonna actually inspire them to vote? And then more importantly, we need to give them something really specific to do.

One of the things we know is that Tumblr users are often very likely to see something online and take some sort of offline action. And this year, there's a lot of movement in the voter education space to change the culture of voting. To get this next generation to think of themselves as voters, we are attempting to create celebrations around polling places, to turn voting into a party and something that isn't so serious and intimidating. And so we're working with organizations to communicate with our users, "hey there's a party happening at your precinct where you're voting, you can sign up here," or "do you wanna organize your own party?" And I think for Tumblr users who are so active, those are great calls to action, to really get folks excited about voting but hopefully make an impact in what will inevitably be one of the most important elections that we've seen in a long time.

McCracken: *What are the specific organizations you're partnering with for that?*

McCullough: For civic education and voting, one of our main partners is Civication.org, an organization that we've worked with across a number of areas. They essentially house all of President and Michelle Obama and Vice President Biden's initiatives that they started in the White House, including ItsOnUs.org and the UnitedStateofWomen.org, and now they also house VoteTogetherUSA.org, which is the polling place party concept.

McCracken: *Can you also tell me more about the different forums you have developed on Tumblr to provide user resources and education, such as "Issue Time" and "Action Tumblr"?*

McCullough: We launched "Issue Time" as a part of our voter education work and our 2016 election efforts. We wanted a forum that would allow us to give our users access to a wide variety of experts and advocates on the most pressing social issues and particular topics that are important to our users. We've often paired with one of our partners, so, for example, we partnered with Refinery29 for a conversation on abortion access

and reproductive rights and the *Washington Post* for a discussion about historically Black voting rights. We have not done “Issue Time” as frequently in 2018; instead we’re now identifying very specific Tumblr influencers and lifting them up in a more deliberate way than I think we have in years past. So, for example, during Black History Month we featured the tumblrs Badass Black Women’s History Month (bbwhm.tumblr.com) and Black Contemporary Art (blackcontemporaryart.tumblr.com). We also featured users for Women’s History Month, Pride Month (LGBTQ users), and for Mental Health Month. I think it’s more effective for a Tumblr user to hear from another Tumblr user than for us to bring in people from the outside or celebrities to talk about a particular issue—I think something that’s unique to this next generation is that they are much more responsive to each other and much more likely to be more influenced and take action if they hear or see a peer of theirs talking or speaking out on a certain issue (figure 20.2).

So in terms of our partnerships as well, we have not done as much with our media partners in 2018—such as the *Guardian* and the *Post*—as



Fig. 20.2. Featured blog, Charlene Carruthers, Badass Black Women’s History Month, posted February, 5, 2018

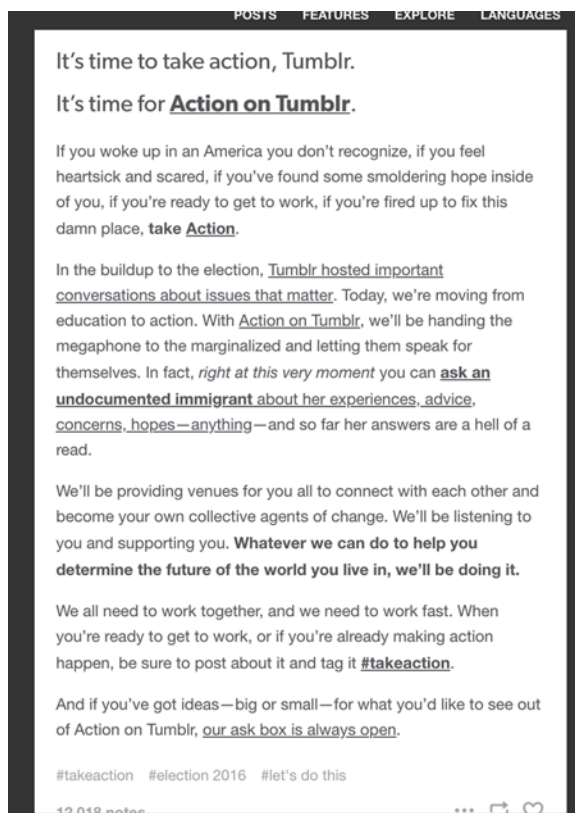
we did in 2016, and that wasn't deliberate necessarily. We've really focused on advocacy groups this year. We've continued to work with theblackout.org, who started on Tumblr and have a really strong Tumblr presence to help lift up communities of color. We have worked with Makers, the women's voices online platform. They've been really incredible partners and really used this year to refresh their Tumblr (makers-women.tumblr.com) and speak around women's voices and issues, especially as it relates to the #metoo movement. And then we have continued to work closely with LGBTQ users and advocacy groups such as GLAAD.org and ITGetsBetter.org.

McCracken: *And Action Tumblr?*

McCullough: Action Tumblr started the day after the 2016 presidential election. I actually pitched it ahead of the election, the idea of having a Tumblr-owned blog on social action that would make it super easy for us to educate our users on topics we thought were important for the social justice community. But it got shot down. And then the day after the election, our communications director and I were standing in the kitchen area and mourning a little bit, and I said that it just feels like this would be a great time to resurrect the action idea. We could use it as a call to action for our users, so if they're feeling helpless, if they're feeling overwhelmed, we can say like, today we might be sad, but tomorrow we can act and resist. And our communications director was like, why don't we do it now? And so basically, in twenty-four hours we got approval from our CEO to actually start it.

That day, we had coincidentally already scheduled an "Answer Time" with an undocumented immigrant "DREAMer" ("Answer Time" is our forum in which guests answer questions live from users; we often do this with partners, in this case Refinery29). Usually, "Answer Time" lasts for an hour, and participants answer as many questions as they can within that time period. But on this day, the young woman answering questions stayed on nearly all day, four or five hours, taking questions and responding to them during the breaks she had at her retail job. She was asked a range of questions, some of them angry at immigrants and some really fearful for their position as immigrants in the new administration, and she responded through her own lived experience, which was really powerful (figure 20.3).

Fig. 20.3. “Action on Tumblr” announcement, posted November 9, 2016



McCracken: *So what do you see as the goal of Action Tumblr now, in 2018?*

McCullough: We're homing in on a few issues. Reproductive rights, women's health is still a big conversation, but we've been focusing, again, a lot on lifting up Tumblr's advocacy users in their own space. It's more organic and more effective when we can lean on users to tell those stories around certain issues. For Action, we hosted Art Action day at the beginning of this year on the first anniversary of Trump's inauguration. We also launched Action at Home, asking our users, "What do you want the headlines and history books to say about 2018 and then what will you do about it?" So a lot of Action is populated with artwork and pledges from our users to make different changes and that thread of "what will you do?" That was the hashtag, #WhatWillYouDo was the name of that campaign that we launched in 2018. We actually call it our

“ally to accomplish” strategy, this idea of using Action to produce and promote content that could inspire users to move off the sidelines as allies and move into the field. So the theme for Action and the strategy for Action this year was to really house our user sentiments around how they were gonna try to change the world this year.

McCracken: *What events do you feel it's important for Tumblr to be involved in, both online and on the ground?*

McCullough: More than ever, I think it's so important for us to do events on the ground. I know that there's got to be a lot of change from the top. Like we need to continue to lobby, there needs to be a movement to really change a lot of those policies at the government level, but for right now I think without that happening, the onus is going to be on a grass-roots effort to educate, to provide that type of education. We're trying to organize more offline activations. The trend is showing that social media—and I think that this is not necessarily reflective of the Tumblr community always—but social media in particular has really contributed to less social interaction, that is in-person community. I'll just use voting as an example, but one of the things that the research has shown is that it's one thing to register to vote online, but if you were asked in person to register or if someone knocks on your door reminding you to go vote, you are much more likely to do it. So just looking ahead to voting, that's where we're placing a lot of emphasis. We want not only to support that message online but to put resources into really supporting those gatherings and communities offline.

Tumblr users' empathy and passion are so important and it makes Tumblr special. In Tumblr's early days, they would send out meetup packets for users who actually wanted to do in-person meetups. We've stopped doing that since, but I think it is a good example of that Tumblr DNA, that there's something unique to Tumblr because a lot of folks want to meet each other in person, they want that social interaction. And I think where it's possible for our users to connect offline, it's more important than I think it's ever been.

Not only on these issues, but we just generally try to be supportive of community. A couple of examples: I just got back from a public health conference that we supported working with public health academics to talk about how we can make communities safe and resourceful for anything from opioid abuse to mental health. I'm trying to learn and do

more in that research space but to also use Tumblr to try to contribute to some of that research based on what we're actually seeing with the next generation relating to, for example, social media consumption and depression. So that's one aspect, academic-focused, but we also cosponsor events such as an upcoming screening in DC of a really illuminating film called *TransMilitary* around trans rights in the military, in partnership with GLAAD. But right now, a lot of what we're doing is trying to activate folks offline and encourage gatherings around the voter conversation.

McCracken: *How important do you think it is that Tumblr is still based in New York City?*

McCullough: Oh, I think that's so important, from a social-impact perspective and having worked in advocacy. Even though there is a great economic disparity here, the reality is that everyone uses the train, everyone shares the streets together, you're in proximity to people that are different from you. And that exposure makes New York an incredible place to find inspiration about why it's important for brands to be invested in social impact and social justice. That inspiration for me comes from the people that I encounter here, whether it's strangers or whether it's people who work in advocacy space. I think that the New York piece of Tumblr is very important to who Tumblr is, and that the type of passion and empathy and engagement that we see across our Tumblr team is reflective of the fact that our home base is New York.

McCracken: *Do you see brands like Tumblr having a progressive role in this post-2016 election, "fake news" environment?*

McCullough: More than ever, one of the things we're thinking about as we move forward is to continue to play the role of educator, especially because there's an increasing amount of technology that is going to make it even harder for this next generation to know what is fake news and what is not. And we're starting to see regulations come out of the European Union right now, which is really demanding that kids be safe. As we move into this new world of technology and challenges for this next generation, and as that collides with this need for regulation, I think we're going to need and see a greater amount of social responsibility from social media platforms. I've been talking to leadership here to

try to get ahead of that. Tumblr is already doing a lot of that but I want to put more resources into it. As a global platform—our user base is growing exponentially in the EU, Brazil, and Korea, especially—we want to make sure this is a really safe space and a space that people can come to for reliable information, not only on things like mental health, but on politics and understanding how to get involved in their own communities. We're really trying to invest in a civic education for our users. We need to be a part of that in any responsible way we can.

Tumblr, XKit, and the XKit Guy

Toward an Extended Platform Ecology

Lesley Willard

Lesley Willard is a doctoral candidate in Radio-Television-Film, researching promotional labor, fan professionalization, and social media platforms at the University of Texas at Austin.

On April 9, 2015, Tumblr user *runestele* posted a fictitious exchange between the platform's users, its technical staff, and an open-source coder popularly known as the XKit Guy:

Tumblr: *updates*

Xkit Guy: Okay, I think I've fixed most of the issue—

Tumblr: *updates*

Xkit Guy: *Stares into the camera like he's in the office*¹

This long-running Tumblr meme illustrates users' frustrations with the platform's frequent (and frequently infuriating) updates. Moreover, it connotes reverence for the XKit Guy, the creator of XKit, an unofficial user modification (mod) framework that allows users to fine-tune and safeguard their experience on the platform by manipulating Tumblr's technological affordances. Coined by ecological psychologist James Gibson, "affordance" broadly refers to the action possibilities within a given environment.² Tumblr's affordances are the features and functions—like the Dashboard feature and the "liking" function—with which users interact, the technological constraints that control the platform's permissions and possibilities. For years, each time Tumblr tweaked its architecture, users took to the *#xkitguy* hashtag to express their need for and belief in his ability to correct any and all perceived mistakes with Tumblr's new code.

While many of XKit's corrections hark back to issues of functionality (tagging, searching, navigation, etc.), many more are geared toward supporting or improving user practices, politics, and demographics. More than any other platform, Tumblr courts and aligns with millennials, media fandoms, and marginalized groups, but it is through mods like XKit and the labor of open source coders like the XKit Guy that Tumblr is truly optimized for its alternative user base. By orchestrating a means through which users can make the platform's technology serve their needs, the XKit Guy became a platform microcelebrity and maintained a cult following on the site until his untimely and telling fall from grace. While many studies address media fandoms and fan practices on Tumblr, they rarely address Tumblr fandom as operating within a dynamic platform ecology, even as they help shape it.

Conversely, the platform studies that consider the structures and strictures of Tumblr overlook mods like XKit and Missing e, which offer an unsanctioned, technologically afforded agency that complicates current approaches to platform analysis. Considering the reciprocal and reflexive relationships between platforms like Tumblr, mods like XKit, and platform microcelebrities like the XKit Guy allows users and researchers alike to better understand the politics at play. Only by addressing all facets of Tumblr's platform ecology—its unique affordances, modifications, users, celebrities, and politics—can we start to understand and analyze the dynamic realities of social media platforms. Augmenting platform analyses with user experiences and modifications, as this chapter models, prompts a new approach. Unlike standard platform analysis, what I term *platform-use analysis* accounts for and balances platform technology, user agency, and communal norms. This approach allows us to better map the multiplicity of technologies, practices, and stakeholders that dynamically form, enable, inhabit, shape, and reshape each platform: an analytical framework that balances affordance with agency, function with fandom. Applying platform-use analysis to Tumblr, XKit, and the XKit Guy illustrates the complexity of extended platform ecologies, highlighting the articulations between technologies, strategies, developers, and users operating on, through, and within Tumblr.

TUMBLR: OPTIMIZED FOR ALTERITY

As XKit and the XKit Guy are native to Tumblr—its interface, community, and corporation—it is necessary to first understand the context in which they developed. Tumblr's userbase, architecture, and affordances form the

foundation of its platform ecology. Unlike the comparatively uniform user distribution of social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, Tumblr is disproportionately popular with adolescent and teen users.³ This is largely due to its unique affordances and to its development within the broader social networking landscape. David Karp created Tumblr in 2007, around the same time that LiveJournal (LJ)—the previous entry hub for millennials and media fandoms—began to censor and police content, especially adult and queer content. As platforms like LJ became increasingly hostile to these communities, users began to migrate to greener pastures like Tumblr. While the migration of these groups from LJ to Tumblr was not direct or definitive by any means, Tumblr began to emerge as the *de facto* hub for millennials and media fandoms around 2012; this is due, in large part, to the fact that Tumblr is designed to support creativity and positivity, traits highly prized by both groups.⁴ Unlike Reddit's up- and downvoting, Tumblr affords an approval-only architecture that aims to foreclose opportunities for harassment. As Tumblr designer Zack Sultan explains, "we don't want to allow you to have your feelings hurt on Tumblr."⁵ The emotion encouraged by this architecture ultimately drives the circulation of content on Tumblr, combining affect and affective labor to create a culture of "feels."⁶

Enabling this "feels" culture, Tumblr's affordances and architecture provide an optimal environment for its core user base: millennials, media fandoms, and marginalized groups. While Tumblr utilizes the same basic functions as other social media platforms—following accounts, reblogging older content, etc.—it also boasts a number of unique features that help optimize the platform for alterity, like protectionist architecture and user-driven affordances. Collectively, they protect these alternative populations with high entry barriers while simultaneously affording them more agency than most social media platforms. Tumblr's design, which Alex Cho calls an "alien architecture of affinity and attunement," provides a steep learning curve and functions as a significant entry barrier.⁷ While Tumblr's "alien architecture" can be frustrating for new users, it is an added layer of protection for the current user base: Tumblr's oblique design actually safeguards its users. Tumblr's design makes the platform difficult for the uninitiated to navigate successfully. In so doing, the platform effectively privileges the kind of safe spaces and coded, in-community communication that have protected marginalized groups for centuries.

As a public-facing platform, all Tumblr blogs and posts (unless specifically hidden by the user) are technically visible. Therein lies Tumblr's paradox: all is visible, but little is accessible. Unless new users know which blog(s)

they want to access, it is nearly impossible to locate specific posts within the continuous, individuated streams of content on user Dashboards. Unlike the industrially curated Moments of Twitter or the /r/all feed of Reddit—which arguably function as a “barometer of the community as a whole”—Tumblr feeds are user-specific.⁸ In that sense, user feeds are personally curated, privately viewed collections that reflect a given user’s fluid affinities, communities, and identities. As a result, there are no gatekeepers or moderators to provide direction, nor are there site-wide aggregate pages like Reddit’s /r/all to orient new users. Tumblr has no front page and the lack of a central feed—a central narrative—challenges the possibility of a “dominant culture” and decentralizes any kind of official, institutional archive. Thus, Tumblr’s affordances perpetuate insular, decentralized communities that privilege those already embedded within its various cultural milieux. This alien architecture renders Tumblr at once inclusive and exclusive, visible and invisible.

Though its affordances are structured from the top down, Tumblr’s circulation and navigation are controlled and shaped by users. With circulation, Tumblr is actually designed to obscure chronology: instead of providing an accurate timestamp with each post or note, Tumblr exponentially fuzzes the timeline to “36 minutes ago,” “4 days ago,” “3 weeks ago,” “4 years ago,” etc. This relative time, in conjunction with the rhizomatic nature of reblogging, sacrifices linearity for virality and creates a queer atemporality that both extends into a limitless future and folds back on itself.⁹ Posts circulate on Tumblr out of order, out of context, and out of time, which allows marginalized groups to tell, share, and develop their own histories, in ways and in archives that are largely illegible to outsiders. Users can choose to post or reblog, to contextualize or decontextualize anything they choose. Tumblr’s navigation is similarly user-driven. It is primarily based upon two structuring forces: blogs and hashtags. Users can elect to follow certain blogs, which may or may not be oriented toward specific content. Users can choose to create and/or follow as many blogs as they want. The posts of these blogs, aggregated in users’ individual feeds, offer one method of navigating Tumblr’s content flows.

The other mode of navigating Tumblr relies on hashtags. Users can utilize hashtags to organize their content or, like those using the #xkitguy tag, enter platform-wide conversations. Tumblr’s organization relies—by and large—on this tagging system, and the power of this system lies in the hands of the users. The tags can be broad (#race), specific (#blackrepresentation), promotional (#Oscars), grassroots (#OscarsSoWhite), or any combination therein. These tagging conventions can be used in whatever permutations necessary to perform in-community codes and join insular conversations. As

with many of Tumblr's features, users choose what to tag their posts and, indeed, whether or not they want to use tags at all. Despite its optimization for alterity, however, Tumblr is still a top-down, closed system; its code and affordances are developed and implemented by its staff, not its users. Despite which tags users choose, their choices still enable Tumblr's tagging system and render their content searchable, their data quantifiable.

Not all user agency is granted by Tumblr, however; much of it is enabled through the adoption of user practices and mods intended to undermine or circumvent any technological limitations. For example, many Tumblr users have adopted alternative (alt) tagging. Alt-tagging replaces coherent (easily navigable, quantifiable, commodifiable) tags like #OscarsSoWhite with stream of consciousness tags like #why are there so many white dudes getting awards? By stripping their tags of measurable data and undermining Tumblr's tagging infrastructure, users subvert Tumblr's affordances and assert more control over their digital identities, a measure of control that can be further extended with browser extensions like Missing e and XKit.

XKIT: FLIPPING THE (USER)SCRIPTS

User mods add another facet to Tumblr's platform ecology. Mods are third-party apps or browser extensions that allow users to make alterations to the platform's core code. In 2011, as millennials, media fandoms, and marginalized groups began to migrate to the platform, open-source software coders began tinkering with Tumblr to improve user experience and expand user agency. In March 2011, Jeremy Cutler released Missing e, "a large collection of tools and interface improvements for Tumblr."¹⁰ This browser extension sought to improve basic functionality for users, allowing them to magnify images, streamline reply functions, reblog their own posts, and more. While many users appreciated Missing e's configurability—it was downloaded more than 250,000 times by the end of 2011—Tumblr did not. Within six months, Tumblr's legal counsel Ari Shahdadi contacted Cutler to outline the platform's concerns, ranging from misrepresentation of the site to misappropriation of Tumblr's API. As Shahdadi stipulated, "Browser extensions that materially modify Tumblr's experience are currently forbidden by our Terms of Service and it is imperative that any such modifications follow Tumblr's Application Developer and API License Agreement."¹¹

In the fall of 2011, while Cutler was arguing legalities with Tumblr, another extension was introduced. XKit—an open-source, user-generated browser

extension framework—was created by Atesh Yurdakul, a Turkish college student. As its official website describes, XKit is an extension framework “made of small other extensions . . . You can disable, enable or delete extensions . . . or download new ones with one-click.”¹² Broadly, XKit’s function is to provide a collection of unsanctioned features to “meet the needs” that Tumblr cannot or has not. Yurdakul began writing small userscripts which eventually coalesced into XKit. He “realized that he could compile all the scripts into a single extension, while also replicating some of Missing e’s functions so as not to have to run two extensions.”¹³ XKit shared (and, indeed, replicated) many of Missing e’s tweaks to improve functionality, as well as its modularity: both extensions allowed users to pick and choose which features they wanted to enable. XKit, however, took that customization one step further. Rather than just creating a menu of tweaks for users to select, Yurdakul created a framework that also allowed users to make and share their own userscripts. As its website proclaims, users “can write your own extensions or inspect extensions already available on the extension gallery, and submit yours” (XKit). The open-source nature of XKit protects it from the limitations of Tumblr: it is inherently democratic in its modularity and customization. While Cutler provided Tumblr users with tools to improve their experience, Yurdakul gave them access and agency to make their own, a choice that spurred his subsequent canonization as the XKit Guy but also escalated Tumblr’s legal concerns.

The disagreements between Tumblr and these browser extensions intensified until, in January 2012, Missing e users who logged into Tumblr were met with a message from Tumblr staff: “Hello! We’ve noticed you are using a browser hack, Missing-E, that can cause serious problems for you and for Tumblr.”¹⁴ The message warned users about the potential consequences of using an unofficial browser extension and required them to acknowledge that Tumblr staff would not provide support for their blogs in the event of any technical issues. XKit users received similar messages and rumors abounded that Tumblr was deleting accounts using either extension. Despite persistent concerns regarding the scope of the platform’s Terms of Service, Tumblr responded to vocal user backlash in March 2012, conceding that they would no longer flag, prevent, or penalize the use of such extensions. Embodying Karp’s vision of Tumblr as a platform of positivity and creativity, they explained, “While we’ve always been within our rights to deny access to anyone making unsupported modifications to Tumblr, we do our best to err on the side of openness. The more enthusiastic developers and happy users, the better.”¹⁵ And users were happy with the extensions, as XKit’s half-million-

strong user base attests.¹⁶ While not all users take advantage of extensions—Missing e has been all but abandoned and, statistically, XKit is only utilized by a small percentage of Tumblr users—their proliferation and adoption on Tumblr are illustrative of both the platform's culture and the need to reframe our understanding of platform technology and user agency. As mods like XKit demonstrate, it is impossible to truly understand a platform's affordances without also considering the ways in which that technology is used and modified, experienced and politicized.

For example, Tweaks (one of the XKit extensions) affords an unprecedented level of control. By adjusting forty-four potential “tweaks” across the post editor, user interface, aggregate feed, blog sidebar, and search function, users can customize their Tumblr experience to best suit their individual needs. It allows users to hide share buttons, slim block quotes, and even wrap tags, facilitating the aforementioned alt-tagging. Most of XKit's userscripts similarly empower users. AccessKit grants users the means to adjust the accessibility of both Tumblr and XKit. No Recommended removes monetized advertisements that are generally embedded within user feeds, while the Anti-Capitalism extension “removes sponsored posts, vendor buttons, and other nonsense that wants your money.”¹⁷ It also specifically enables users to hide Yahoo View links, subverting the cross-promotional strategies of Tumblr's (then) parent company. Through these endlessly configurable userscripts, XKit—as a tactical intermediary between platform and user, structure and agency—actually allows users to further enact and operationalize Tumblr's creative, affirmational ethos. The millennials, media fandoms, and marginalized groups who use Tumblr to create community and perform their identities in safe spaces can use mods like XKit to exert control over their own corner of a vast social network, extending and customizing the protections already afforded by the platform. Tumblr's protectionist architecture essentially primed the pump, with open-source software developers and their mods stepping in to extend user agency in ways that Tumblr may be unable or unwilling to do.

XXKIT GUY: THE RISE AND FALL OF TUMBLR'S (ANTI)HERO

Open-source software developers like Cutler and Yurdakul shape platform ecologies, and not just through their mods: in the case of the XKit Guy, he also became one of Tumblr's microcelebrities.¹⁸ All public social media platforms cultivate and exalt their own microcelebrities, from YouTube's Vlogbrothers

to Vine's Nash Grier to Twitter's Felicia Day.¹⁹ In each case, their celebrity is partially constructed by the platform's affordances and informed by its culture, effectively holding a mirror up to the platform and its users. On Tumblr, the coder behind XKit became a Robin Hood-esque anti-hero popularly known as the XKit Guy. In this capacity, XKit is remarkable—even among mods—for its reception: the mod and its creator are celebrated in true Tumblr fashion with wit, irony, and, of course, fandom. The XKit Guy's subversive brand of microcelebrity is constructed by fans, external sources, and Yurdakul himself. In addition to numerous fan blogs like *xkitguyfandom* and *fye-ahxkitguy*, Yurdakul provided fodder through periodic XKit updates and blog posts. His fandom, however, was largely maintained through ambient affiliation, with fans using the *#xkitguy* tag to enter into a platform-wide discussion between users "who have not necessarily directly interacted online."²⁰ With the XKit Guy, Tumblr's tagging architecture and alternative ethos shaped his celebrity as much as he shaped the platform. Through hashtags and ambient affiliation, XKit users were able to establish a *de facto* fandom and utilize Tumblr's own affordances to venerate its former antagonist.

Just as its architecture and affordances shape their celebrity, platform microcelebrities also crystalize the politics and norms that animate each platform. On YouTube and Instagram, they generally demonstrate the ability to monetize authenticity.²¹ On Twitter, they often mobilize their niche, subcultural capital through personal branding.²² With Tumblr, however, the elevation of a young, open-source coder highlights the creative, subversive ethos that attracts millennials, media fandoms, and marginalized groups alike, though his eventual vilification and ousting also expose the darker side of that alternative ethos. By and large, the emotions that characterize "feels" culture are positive: fans celebrating popular (relation)ships, teens validating non-normative identities, etc. Tumblr, however, fosters both "feels" culture and call-out culture, validation and recrimination. Users are routinely called out for problematic or regressive viewpoints and behaviors. While this clearly benefits Tumblr's alternative user base, it also risks creating the aggressive, toxic culture for which Reddit and 4Chan have become (in)famous.²³ The duality of Tumblr—simultaneously fostering both "feels" and call-out cultures—is exemplified with the exaltation and subsequent expulsion of the XKit Guy, whose mod inspired feels enough to become a platform microcelebrity but was ultimately driven from Tumblr by accusations of misconduct.

On October 31, 2014—four years after he launched XKit to help users optimize and safeguard their experiences on Tumblr—a post on predator-exposed (a blog devoted to calling out predators on Tumblr) asked users to

come forward if the XKit Guy had ever made them feel uncomfortable. Earlier on, there had been rumors that he was racist and xenophobic, prompting Yurdakul to post a “personal message from the XKit Guy” on the official blog. Somewhat presciently, he argued “once you tarnish a name, it takes a long, long time to fix that, so I ask everyone to do a little research before labeling anyone. Research never hurts anyone. Rumors do.”²⁴ After a second incident, even without evidence, Tumblr users flooded Yurdakul’s XKit and personal inboxes with hate mail and death threats. Within a couple of days, Yurdakul abandoned both his personal and official blogs. In his last personal post, Yurdakul said “the worst thing about being told you are ‘trash’ and ‘scum’ for day after day after day for months is after a while you start to doubt yourself. and I am not sure if I ever felt this disoriented, ever.”²⁵ The claims were never substantiated and the predator-exposed blog has since been deactivated, the URL redistributed, and the blog retitled “in memory of those fuckwits who wrongly accused the xkit guy.” After one last update in January 2015, Yurdakul left Tumblr, and both XKit and the XKit Guy mantle fell into disrepair—at least for a little while.

Two months after his departure, two new open-source developers forked the code Yurdakul had shared on Github to continue updating XKit (now known as the New XKit). Due to the pseudonymity of the XKit Guy, the new developers took on not just Yurdakul’s responsibilities but also his mantle. Each time Tumblr updates the core code, users still rely on the “XKit Guy” to correct the perceived mistakes: “Everytime Tumblr updates, we wait for Xkit/New Xkit to fix those problems or at least make thing like they were previously.”²⁶ While the lamentable fate of Yurdakul exposes the darker side of Tumblr’s protectionist call-out culture, his replacement highlights its adaptability, modularity, and affectivity. XKit’s creation and the continued fandom of the XKit Guy illustrate the platform’s alternative architecture; the subversive, creative ethos of its user base; and the triumph of its collectivist “feels” culture. With the passing of the torch, the XKit Guy became more symbol than person, a platform microcelebrity abstracted as agency and optimized for alterity. Through XKit and the XKit Guy, Tumblr’s extended platform ecology—its unique architecture, affordances, mods, politics, users, and celebrities—is reflected and refracted, mirrored and mobilized. It is only through a thorough examination of affordance *and* use that we can truly map social networking platforms like Tumblr, balancing technology and authority with community and agency.

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Digital Decolonization

Reclaiming Tumblr's #Latina Tag

Emily Rauber Rodriguez

Emily Rauber Rodriguez is a PhD student in Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Southern California. Her work centers on Latinx participation and depictions in popular culture.

In the early years of Web 2.0, the term “Latina” offered a Search Engine Optimization (SEO)-friendly conglomeration of both racialized and gendered meaning, making it especially appealing as web searches and tag-based social media became more refined. But as pornographic sites began to dominate use of the term, the relatively neutral descriptor of identity emerged as a shorthand for primarily sexualized images that reflected a white, colonial view of fetishized Latinidad. For Latinx users of these platforms, including pre-Yahoo (2013) Tumblr, the appeal of curating one’s own blog space contrasted sharply with the objectifying, pornographic results displayed on public tag searches and pages. Tumblr’s image-privileging format made it particularly susceptible to being overwhelmed by pornographic spam, even though many of its users were young teens still formulating their own identities and self-worth. To combat this experience, in 2012, several Latinx Tumblr users organized as a community with a single goal: to subvert this new manifestation of the white gaze by filling it with non-sexualized representations of Latinas. Importantly, the project was called “Reclaiming the #Latina Tag”—not “Censoring” or “Filtering the Latina Tag”—at once establishing the hashtag as a space that could indeed be claimed, while also identifying their primary conflict as being with the content generators rather than the content itself. Conceptually, this intervention served as an act of digital decolonization, whereby the Latinas themselves, the native subjects of the hashtag, rejected the racist and misogynist overtones of the tag’s colonizers by amplifying their own voices and attempting to reclaim the space for themselves. In this essay, I will trace the development of this

movement, its specificity to Tumblr as a platform, and its significance and endurance for the Latinx community there.

Tumblr's utilization of a tag-based architecture lets users track and share posts based on common interests, even among users that do not follow each other. Since posts are public and anyone can look up content by tag, the structure facilitated the proliferation of Tumblr's fandom culture (and fandom wank), as well as other interest-based subcultures, including aesthetic blogs and "studyblrs."¹ Unrestricted access to tags, however, also means that divergent segments of users can often overlap in these spaces, leading to tension. Although teen users, particularly Black and Latinx users, account for a large share of Tumblr's demographics, pornography has always claimed a significant amount of Tumblr's space as well.² Around the time of Yahoo's purchase of Tumblr in 2013, more than 11 percent of Tumblr blogs were pornographic and accounted for 16 percent of the site's overall traffic.³ Prior to Tumblr's reorganization of NSFW content in 2013, seemingly innocuous search terms like "#Latina" would result in the display of primarily eroticized images; Latinx teens potentially searching for cultural models, subjects, and connections would instead find pornographic images produced to serve a white gaze. These search results reflected broader Internet trends in which Latina women were consistently sexualized in this way. In 2006, for example, approximately 38 percent of websites that foregrounded the term "Latina" were pornographic.⁴ Similarly, a 2012 study of Google Image searches found that the term "Latina" produced mostly explicit images, while nonfeminized terms like "Latinos" and "Hispanic" displayed much more innocuous results.⁵

Though today the media frequently characterizes Tumblr as the ultimate liberal foil to Reddit's conservative dogmatism, the site still reproduces a fundamentally white, non-neutral user experience as the default. As Lisa Nakamura has noted, though early theorists had predicted that the Internet would provide online racial equality, in fact the reliance on graphic interfaces has made race even more visible in building online communities.⁶ Though Tumblr users may forefront their own race through avatars, biographies, or blog entries, they still must operate in a system where white perspectives can easily override the lived experiences of people of color. The sexualization of the term "Latina" in particular privileges a white colonial gaze that emphasizes the woman's "exotic" ethnicity and sexual desirability as the primary marker of her cultural identity and value. Repeated contact with explicit, degrading media of this type has been shown to affect self-sexualization and self-image development in young girls, especially young women of color.⁷ While Tumblr's basic user experience relies foremost on which blogs the user

has chosen to follow and which posts the user has chosen to reblog, the tag search results represent an intrusion into this ability to self-curate. Furthermore, this illusion of user control might mask considerations of others' experiences with the site, as white users can more easily establish their feed as a fandom- or aesthetic-specific, apolitical space and might mistakenly equate their own "neutral" experience as equivalent for all. Without motivation to search "Latina," non-porn-seeking white users may not have even realized the race-based sexualization was occurring, further isolating Latinx users in this dehumanizing experience.

To disrupt the pornographic usage of the Latina tag, then, users had to work together to disrupt the viability of the search function itself; hashtag activism on Tumblr needed to reflect the platform's structure. Specifically, Latinx activists showed their resistance to pornographic representations by putting their bodies visibly on the line. In September 2012, Tumblr user @political-linguaphile created the blog *Reclaiming the #Latina Tag* (@reclaimingthelatinatag) with the express purpose of filling the #Latina tag with non-sexualized representations of Latinas. The blog "was created as a safe space for our sisters, no matter race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, class status or employment," adding, "part of our goal is to foster a community." @Political-linguaphile's phrasing of the project as a "reclamation" denotes a conception of the search tag as acknowledging that space on a visual platform like Tumblr will be claimed by someone's gaze, either by Latinas/Latinxs, or by non-Latinas (including non-Latinxs as well as Latino men). Reclaiming the tag thus depended on a mass influx of non-eroticized images of Latinas that would effectively render the tag useless for those (presumably non-Latina) users searching for pornography. The blog especially encouraged the use of selfies for this project. This choice is significant, as social media scholars have demonstrated that, though often denigrated as a form, the selfie serves as an important stage of identity construction for today's youth, particularly young women, in a cultural landscape in which their bodies are otherwise largely mediated.⁸ More pointedly, by severing the colonial gaze, pornography seekers were forced to at least momentarily consider these women as humans rather than anonymous objects for their sexual gratification, in images authored by the women themselves. By deliberately positioning their bodies to be disruptive, these Latinx participants engaged in an active, though digital, form of resistance.

Though they could not ultimately affect the number of pornographic images populating the tag, these users did make claim to a Tumblr space for Latinas. If they could not control the tag itself, then the blog could serve as a

curated, more humanized version of that tag. Users who wanted to connect with the Latina community on Tumblr—and who knew that the #Latina tag was not the place to do so—could instead simply follow the blog and witness how that tag might have functioned in a world where Silicon Valley had prioritized their user experience as young Latinxs. While other Latinx blogs served as community meeting points on Tumblr, *Reclaiming the #Latina Tag* uniquely responded to and critiqued the structural function of Tumblr itself. Not only did *Reclaiming the #Latina Tag* provide a “para-hashtag” space for users, but in doing so it also asked them to consider Tumblr’s functional limitations, especially as they related to Latinx users. The blog thus centered its burgeoning community around an ethos of activism, and increased awareness, for even casual Tumblr users, of the ways in which the structures of social media can affect perception.

By the time of this writing, in 2018, few truly explicit results appear in the #Latina tag, which now incorporates a more diverse mixture of user selfies and Selena GIFs alongside cheesecake photoshoots. While *Reclaiming the #Latina Tag* may have increased the popularity of selfie tagging, the decrease in explicit images more likely directly came from Tumblr’s more rigid censoring of its search function in 2013, partly to avoid being blocked as an adult app on the iTunes App Store. Even after this reorganization, though, which made the original intent of the specific tag intervention mostly unnecessary, the blog *Reclaiming the #Latina Tag* has remained in place, though in a new form. While the majority of posts in 2012 were reblogs of users’ selfies, the blog began focusing more on promoting social justice causes, by sharing news, petitions, and protests. The blog has also started incorporating the “Latinx” term more frequently, leading to some inconsistencies in past blog language but to the benefit of greater representation for nonbinary Latinxs. Of course, the mods still encourage selfies on the tag, though they have slowed in recent years, but they continue to view selfies as an important source of personal and collective empowerment.

Somewhat problematically for the mods, however, the blog has now emerged as a powerful arbiter of personal Latinx identity for some users seeking membership into that community. Now that the Latina tag boasts more selfies than explicit pornography, users searching for the term might discover the potential of community, rather than dehumanization. According to the moderators, they have hundreds of messages in their inbox from people, usually anonymous, detailing their specific family history—they are light-skinned, dark-skinned, have one Mexican grandparent, were born to European parents in Venezuela, and so on—and asking whether they “count”

as Latinx. These queries reflect confusion over a historically malleable term that has no specific phenotypical requirements and describes a people largely defined by their *mestizaje* (mixed race).

These users have ultimately cast the blog as something of a gatekeeper of Latinidad. While the mods now largely avoid answering these questions publicly, their prevalence seems to indicate that the blog has reclaimed not only the Latina tag, but also, to some extent, the idea of online Latinx identity itself. Since the blog has largely focused on celebrating Latinidad rather than detailing the racism that Latinxs face in their day-to-day lives, it promotes an appealing and supportive community. By approaching *this* blog with *these* questions, then, rather than educators or family, these users seem to understand ethnicity as more of a community—to which one may be admitted—rather than as a neutral statement of genetics. Their desire to be deemed part of the group may stem from primarily experiencing positive representations of ethnicity online and in pop culture, through blogs like *Reclaiming the #Latina Tag*, as opposed to the harsher offline reality to which these blogs are, in fact, reacting. These questioning users see that the voices and images of Tumblr Latinas, rather than outsiders, are now defining the hashtag; thus, in search of a community, they turn to the blog for the answer to “Well then, who *is* Latina?”

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Queer Tumblr IRL

An Interview with Joe Varisco

Interviewed by Alexander Cho

Date: June 29, 2018

Joseph Varisco is an independent curator and producer of public arts and educational programming. He is the founder and program director of QUEER, ILL + OKAY, which explores the contemporary experience of living with HIV/AIDS. He is the recipient of AIDS Healthcare Foundation, Chicago Community Trust, and Visual AIDS grants.

Cho: *When did you start going onto Tumblr?*

Varisco: I started using Tumblr in probably 2010. An arts colleague of mine had turned me on to it and showed me some queer stories that were happening there. I was just in the process of breaking up with my boyfriend of three years and getting ready to move into the city, and it immediately became a resource to me in connecting with Chicago's queer community and finding out what was going on in the city. A lot of organizations like Chances Dances [a Chicago queer DJ collective] happened to be utilizing Tumblr as a community space where they could share articles, reblog any of their colleagues, their community members, contacts from their own events, related topics that were going on in the city at the time. And what that became for me after the first year and people started moving to Chicago was a space where I could galvanize community members, other users of Tumblr, and create an event where people could attend. We reached out on Tumblr to create an event, that was hosted at my apartment at the time, to bring all these people that I had started interacting with together, to meet one another, some for the first time.

Cho: *Can you talk more about people moving to Chicago to be part of this queer community who found out about it via the internet, specifically Tumblr?*

Varisco: We saw at least in that first year five to ten people from all over the place. We had a budding DJ that moved from Florida, we had some folks that came from the South, from South Carolina and I believe West Virginia. I think that's actually really notable, that a lot of the people that did come to Chicago were people who were not living in queer hubs already. They didn't have direct resources that they could go to and use to engage with people. They were all people who had just maybe started coming out or maybe had just graduated from school and were looking for jobs. So it was sort of a time for people to identify, "Oh where is it that my next chapter of my story begins?" And there was just a lot of awesome energy around that.

Cho: *Why do you think that Tumblr was important for this?*

Varisco: This happened to be the space where people were socializing and engaging, and because I think other people had seen already some actions within their community, they could observe that there was a group of folks [in Chicago] who were connected with others around the country and around the world. But a distinct group here, where you could go and you could see photos and images and video of whatever of us hanging out with one another. I think that sort of galvanized people to want to become a part of that in some way. And so after one person did it, it started this snowballing, "Oh, well, somebody already took the risk and did it and it seems to be working out, so why not try it?"

Cho: *Tell us more about the Chicago IRL ["in real life"] magazine. Who was behind it how and did it happen?*

Varisco: We had these events going on, us gathering all the time. [Co-editor] Topher [McCulloch] was really great in educating me about queer culture. They were pretty deep in the academic world and often shared zines with me. It was sort of a dream goal of theirs to create a zine project, which has a great history within queer communities and cultures. There were just a whole bunch of these events going on in the city, too, similar to Chances Dances, these queer dance party events that

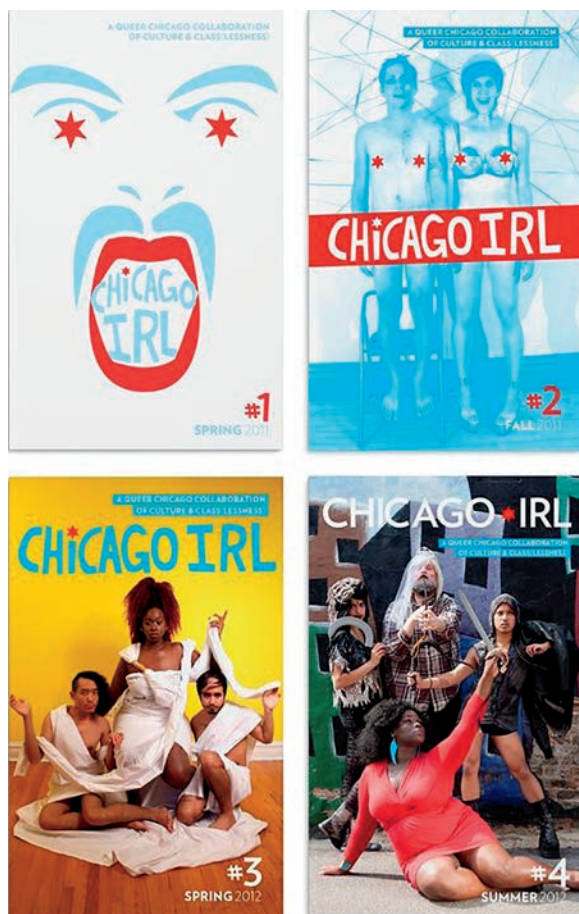


Fig. 23.1. Covers of the four issues of *Chicago IRL*, 2011–12

didn't take place in Boystown, where none of us felt very welcomed or comfortable. What Topher and I saw was, "Gosh, so many of the people we're working with are doing such dope stuff, such interesting art or writing such great things, how the hell can we highlight that?" It really was Topher's idea. We created an application process and posted the open call through Tumblr, and we used our network of Tumblr kin to amplify that message all around. There were literal ways at that time that people could actually submit work directly through Tumblr. *Chicago IRL* (figure 23.1) was a really high-quality glossy, what I ended up calling more of a "literary and arts digest." Our first issue featured about thirty to forty different artists. To celebrate the launch we had a kickoff party,

another way in which we could transition all of these digital relationships to real life. This was my first foray into curating performance art. And so this was my way of selfishly finding an opportunity to connect with people who were really cool by creating an excuse to talk to them. [laughs] We did four issues in one year, quarterly, which was a huge undertaking. I know that we Kickstarted one. Two of them were paid by my student loans, at least partially. And one Topher fronted the cost for.

Cho: *What do you think its significance was ultimately, to both you and Chicago?*

Varisco: I think that its significance was in creating a level of visibility that had previously not really been present, of how many people had seen Chicago as a national or even international queer hub. For me personally it was an awesome way of seeing that manifest, those communities. I was desperate for community at that point in my life. And so that hunger for community really became fulfilled by bringing all these folks together. We fed each other in all these ways, and we spent so much time together.

I think one of the highlights of that era for me was the blizzard of 2013 or 2012; it was a big fucking blizzard in Chicago. I got out on Tumblr and trumpeted, “Hey you! You need someplace to go? Get trapped in the house with us.” We had about twenty different people who sort of barricaded themselves into my apartment during this blizzard. And people came over, walking down the middle of the street, facial hair encrusted with ice and snow. We closed the doors and stayed inside with each other for almost an entire week as the blizzard raged on. As you can imagine, it was sort of a funky time. It was a lot of fun but there was a lot of energy in one space. I think if I look back on that now that actually might have been the point where some divisions started to make themselves apparent.

Cho: *You’re alluding to a schism or some kind of falling-out. What exactly do you mean by that?*

Varisco: What’s the best way to describe that? What began to appear was the distinction of privilege that was afforded to us who were gay and white, who had more privileges. And how it made it a lot easier for us

to navigate the world and to get the support to create this book, to host people in our spaces. The more gender nonconforming, trans, queer POC had more difficulties receiving support, which became a conflict because they were like, “Well, why are you guys getting the support and funding and we’re not?”

Cho: *Even watching from a distance on Tumblr at the time, I sensed that there was a trend toward “celebritizing” a particularly embodied, white untouchable scruffy Tumblr-hottie artist aesthetic. And that you had to be similarly embodied in order to even get any kind of response to a message; it was a sexy hierarchy. Was that part of this schism that you’re talking about?*

Varisco: Absolutely, you’re totally, 100 percent right. The queer POC side was like, “Hey, you guys are getting all the support and stuff like that because you’re sharing your like fucking scruffy half-naked bodies on the internet.” I did fully embrace the idea of “celebrifyng” the situation. I thought, “How cool is it if we could turn our community members into celebrities?” I thought there was empowerment in that. What I failed to see was that it needed to be equitable, that representation had political ramifications.

Cho: *What happened after that?*

Varisco: I withdrew entirely and got really isolated. And it was in that second year that I was diagnosed with HIV, a lot of things had changed for me at that point. I sat down with NIC Kay, and they talked to me about this thing called “call-in culture” [Ed: as opposed to “call-out culture,” or pointedly identifying when someone benefits from or acts with systemic privilege.] It was coming from some of those queer POC radicals that I had known at the time, the idea that none of us are disposable. If we can remain empowered by the ideas of calling people out and addressing concerns and ensuring that we are maintaining accountability within our community to be better, to continue to check ourselves, then at the same time, can we *also* make sure that we don’t burn bridges, that we don’t stop talking to one another, that no one is disposable?

Cho: *Let’s pivot to the annual performance art series QUEER, ILL + OKAY. Tell us more about what it is.*

Varisco: QUEER, ILL + OKAY grew out of that Tumblr era, though I stopped using Tumblr after that time. You can probably see how the things that happened at that time really influenced the formation of and the ongoing practice and political project of QIO. I was looking at QIO as a time of like, “Hey, I’m trying to find stories that resonate with my experience and with the experience of my peers and being [HIV] positive today in the world right now.” And what I encountered was the same sort of politics I was complicit in during the Tumblr era and wasn’t aware of, which was historically completely dominated by cis white gay men in New York and San Francisco. All of these things that, while vital at the time and vital in their contribution to queer history, were also incredibly negligent of a majority of the experience of anybody who did not identify under those terms. And there was a massive gap as well in that people weren’t up-to-date on current medical science and policy. It all seemed to remain as part of this big bunch of stereotypes of the past at the height of the epidemic. And so at the same time, while I wanted to share these stories, it was like a coping mechanism for me to find a way to reach out to people and share these stories as a way of sharing my own. Although I very intentionally removed my story from the process, as far as, like, me getting up and reading something myself.

The initial goal was to highlight and elevate underrepresented and underserved community voices, stories and experiences of living with HIV today, to start conversations. Honestly, the first incarnation of QUEER, ILL + OKAY was “QUEER, ILL + OKAY?” with a question mark at the end. It was as much of a question to myself as it was a prompt to the artists and to the audiences that were participating. It immediately became inclusive of other folks of other different forms of chronic illness, mental health issues, differently abled bodies. After six years, I think the goals have evolved and shifted a bit. Like, we *can* start a conversation, and now part of that goal is: How do those conversations lead to action? Intentional critical strategic action. I do not want to be centering what *exactly* those actions are; we have an advisory committee that helps assess the directives or direction of QIO. But we definitely need to commit to that, especially right now in the political climate we live in.

Behind the Scenes of a Popular Trans Youth Resources Tumblr

Lee Brown

Lee Brown is a premed student in the class of 2022 at a small liberal arts college in the northeast United States. They are transgender and Black. In addition to being a moderator for Trans Youth Resources (TYR), they run cross-country, work as an LGBTQ space manager and as a lab assistant.

I joined Tumblr when I was fifteen through word of mouth. A lesbian friend said there was an active *Star Trek* femslash fandom there so I made a fandom blog and a personal blog in 2014. Tumblr doesn't have much on-the-ground organizing for movements and local protests like Facebook has, but it's the thing that gets people to learn about activism so they can then go out and join movements or start something. I learned about gender-neutral bathrooms on Tumblr and realized how great it would be to have them in my school, so then I started advocating for the conversion of all the single-stall bathrooms into gender-neutral ones, and with the help of the GSA and supportive teachers, we were able to get four designated gender-neutral bathrooms. Similarly, I saw the LGBTQ community's reaction to the Pulse Nightclub shootings online through Tumblr and then created a solidarity protest in my town center using Facebook to inform people, since we didn't have any local reaction to the shooting and I felt like it was something that had to be done. Tumblr is more like education and raising awareness.

TRANS YOUTH RESOURCES

Trans Youth Resources (TYR¹) was created in 2012 by mod (moderator) P. and his friend because there wasn't a guide for trans teens anywhere; most community resources were by and for adults, and the rest of the resources were for parents of young children. There have been many other mods since then

cycling in and out over time, but P. is the only one who has stayed with TYR from the creation to present day. I followed TYR after an agender friend said it could help me, probably suspecting I was trans, and soon it did help: I had secretly bought my first chest binder online in an XS because I wanted to flatten my C-cup chest, but when I put it on it was too tight and I couldn't get it off again! I spent half an hour in a panic because I was closeted and couldn't ask anyone for help. Finally, I sent an "Ask" to TYR about it and a mod promptly replied with a link to a previously answered Ask that had instructions for that exact situation (since it turns out I wasn't the first to ask) and I was able to get out. Because of this experience, I wanted to help others too, so when TYR opened a round of mod applications in 2015, I became a mod. I've been active ever since and usually answer questions daily. It can be hard to get accessible and accurate information on the practicalities of being trans, especially for teens without parental support, so TYR fills that need. TYR is peer support by the community and for the community.

There's a lot to survive when you're a trans teen: coming out socially to peers and then dealing with misinformed allies (at best) and social isolation, transphobic rejection, and bullying (at worst); having to cope with being closeted, families who reject you and sometimes put you in danger of getting kicked out or abused; starting to date (need I say more?); dealing with our bodies changing in a way we don't want them to; coping with dysphoria when you can't present yourself how you want to without parental support; not being able to medically transition; and, of course, school: navigating school bathrooms, changing for gym class, and dealing with attendance lists that have the wrong name. TYR reaches transgender teens individually and directly with specialized knowledge that comes from personal experience. When teens need information or reassurance, they can find it on our blog because a lot of cisgender adults don't know what they're talking about. And since the mods are mostly teens ourselves, we use everyday conversational terms when we answer Asks, which also helps make TYR accessible to the younger set and disabled folks (figure 24.1).

Our blog according to Google Analytics:

- Our blog is composed of 96% original posts and 4% reblogs from other blogs.
- The Tumblr website says we currently have 49,156 followers, but I suspect that isn't the real number.
- We have around 250 unique users click on the blog every day, and 88% of them are on the computer.
- Only 1% of the users viewing our blog are on the phone, which I think is because mobile users tend to access our blog through the Tumblr app which doesn't count as a hit.
- 60% of the users viewing our blog are in the US, 9% are in the UK, 8% are in Canada, and 4% are in Australia. The last 19% of the views are from users in Germany, France, Poland, Brazil, the Netherlands, and all over the globe.

Fig. 24.1. Blog data for TYR, April 2018, compiled by Lee Brown

BEING A MOD

There are currently fifteen active mods. Mods are added to TYR either through association with a current mod or through extensive applications filled out on Google Forms that are opened when TYR is ready to replace a mod or expand the team. A hundred or so trans candidates usually apply to be a mod, then the mods sift through the responses to see if the applicants agree with our stances on issues (like if they accept nonbinary trans people and aren't transmedicalists), if they provide good answers to sample questions, and if they add diversity to the team in terms of race, ability, and trans experience. Trans experience doesn't necessarily mean having started medical transition, since not all trans people choose to medically transition, so it could just mean having identified as trans for a while. The mod doesn't have to be out in real life, since having experience being closeted can also provide a good perspective for followers who are closeted. We select around five mods and add them to the Facebook group chat the mods use to communicate. New mods go through a training period that has become more involved over time. I send them eleven pages of information on being a mod and we use a semi-interactive Google form that helps them learn various aspects of the blog, such as how to tag for triggers and what questions we don't answer.

Tagging is essential in creating accessibility, so we tag a variety of triggers that can be blacklisted by followers; this gives them a heads up when a post has a trigger so they can choose whether or not to see the post and have an opportunity to prepare themselves so it isn't a surprise. We all start our responses with the line "[Mod Name] says:" so the followers know who they're talking to. Our blog policies have grown and evolved over the years as the need for them has arisen (figures 24.2–3).

Running TYR can be a daunting task. We always receive more Asks than we have time to answer. Once the number of unanswered Asks in the inbox was over eight thousand, despite us deleting everything accumulated in the inbox once a year. We have to keep adding mods not just because TYR continues to grow, but also because mods usually stay for around two years before they become inactive or leave because the blog is a big commitment. Mods also occasionally leave because of a conflict with other mods over how TYR is being run. Mod inactivity is the largest hurdle TYR faces, and it is a hard problem to solve since being a mod is a volunteer position, a lot of the mods are disabled and mentally ill, and everyone has outside lives.

Mods primarily answer Asks sent in by trans teens; basically, folks send us their questions and problems and we try to help. We also create pages of

Trigger tags

We try to tag anything that people may be triggered by.

That means tagging ableist language, dysphoria, misgendering, racism, sexism, transphobia, body image, weight, alcohol or drug mentions, sexual content, genital mentions, phobias and things that trigger phobias (like #emetophobia for throwing up and #needles for things involving shots), eating disorders, capital letters, suicide, drugs, sex, self harm, and abuse, and the usual set of warnings.

Here are some of the ones we've explicitly been asked to tag: #caps, (for capital letters) #swearing, #needles, #medical, #slurs, #breast mention / #chest mention and #ftm and #mtf. Basically, when in doubt, tag it.

You can also backread through the blog for examples of tags, to see what we usually tag and how we reply to things. Use your common sense, and tag it if you aren't sure or if something seems triggering but we didn't specifically say to tag it.

Talking in tags is also okay, tons of us do that.

Ableist language

We have info on ableist language below if you aren't familiar with what it is:

We ask that you avoid using ableist language in your replies and posts, and ask the followers not to use ableist language in your ask response if their question had an ableist word in it. People tend to forget to tag for crazy, stupid, dumb, and derp the most because they're often casually used in asks. Make sure you take a moment and double check the ask before posting if you find you're forgetting to tag for ableist language because you're so used to it that it doesn't stick out to you yet.

This link has a list of ableist words and phrases: <http://www.autisticchoya.com/p/ableist-words-and-terms-to-avoid.html?m=1>

However, if someone says retard (and variations on this slur) delete the ask. Usually we answer the question then correct them on ableist language, but this is the exception to that rule.

Figs. 24.2–3. Excerpts from nonpublic training materials for new TYR moderators

resources, and I believe that's one of the best things we invest our time in. When we have comprehensive resources on a topic, we can direct askers to those resources so their question is answered without us having to repeatedly re-answer; it saves time for the mods to focus on other questions. Resources are created based on follower feedback, frequently asked questions, and a mod's interests and expertise. For example, we get a lot of questions about coming out, so we made a coming out page. I made the top surgery resource page before I got surgery because I was gathering links I found helpful anyway. We cobble together our resources primarily from the lived experience

of our transition and the issues we've encountered, as well as from forums and wikis, from contacting and asking professionals, a bit of research, and using common sense. One mod is good at looking through academic studies, for example, and I'm best at combing through forums, videos, and articles to gather personal experiences and see if there's a trend or contradictions.

To return to binding as an example of a common question, we have a resource page about binding with guidelines so people don't get hurt. Doctors don't always know about safe binding and many haven't heard of binding at all. When I asked my doctor whether binding while exercising and running was safe, she said yes, but many trans people have reported that they have suffered rib damage because of heavy breathing from exercising within a garment meant for chest compression. So we recommend taking the binder off and using a sports bra instead. My doctor didn't know this, and she also didn't bring up any other safety precautions or refer me to any other information like a website or pamphlet or another doctor. We are trying to answer questions like these but there's little data, so we can only make educated recommendations based on what the mods have found personally and from the experiences we have heard from followers and the community. We tend toward the better-safe-than-sorry side of things, especially because we have younger followers.

Over time the mod's duties have changed. We used to do more community/support things like hosting a popular selfie submission event weekly, but as TYR grew we had to choose which aspects to prioritize. We chose to focus on education and resources because it fills a need that isn't being met in other places. There are also questions we no longer answer, like how to self-medicate with hormones or any illegal behavior, because we don't want to encourage minors to do anything they shouldn't. We also don't want to be responsible for anything like a minor running away from home, and we worry that we could get in legal trouble if something bad happened.

We also used to reply to Asks involving triggering behavior, like substance abuse or self-harm, but we found that answering those questions seemed to prompt more of them, and it became a problem for mods who struggle with mental illness, which is pretty much all of us. There would be a suicidal Ask in the inbox frequently enough that some mods started to avoid checking the inbox. We lost our mod C. to suicide recently in 2018 and it can be hard to see someone else talk about how they want to die when you're trying really hard not to think about it. Although we delete suicidal Asks instead of replying, we created an international suicide hotlines post with numbers and resources, and we reblog that post as soon as we receive a concerning Ask, so the fol-

lower is able to get help. Trans teens are at an increased risk of suicide compared to the general population, and I myself was hospitalized within the last year, so suicide is a topic we address in our resources. I created a comprehensive mental health page with links to coping skills for different symptoms and ways to reach out for help, and I ran it by my intensive outpatient team and they said that it was a good resource.

We also try to create some positivity by posting a particular affirmative phrase (the equivalent to “Hooray!”) that our followers use to celebrate any victories that come their way, no matter what size they are, and this creates a sense of community. So, for example, “Hooray! I just came out to my family and they’re going to let me start hormones” and sometimes they’re like “Hooray! I managed to secretly buy some women’s soap and hide it. I’m so excited!” At the same time that we became more specialized, the number of trans blogs on Tumblr exploded, so we sometimes direct followers to an ever-expanding list I created that currently has 191 other trans Tumblr blogs labeled by their function: some blogs only post selfies, others only give advice on choosing names, and others post trans positivity like “Hooray!” posts, and so on.

TUMBLR IRL

Tumblr has advantages and disadvantages to its use. It’s a convenient platform because it provides the framework for our site, so I don’t need to know any computer coding to create pages on the blog, and anyone can send an Ask even if they don’t have a Tumblr account. There are two ways people access TYR: through their Tumblr Dashboard and through TYR’s website directly. Tumblr users who follow TYR will see the posts we make on their Dashboard, but they may never click on the website, and there are also people who go to the TYR site but don’t follow the blog.

On the negative side, our blog is blocked on many school Wi-Fi systems because it is hosted on a social media site, which means that teens can’t view it in the school library or computer lab. Some parents also restrict teens’ online access to LGBT websites, as my parents did. I couldn’t see the TYR website, but I could see TYR posts on the Dashboard, which circumvented the Wi-Fi blocking because its posts showed up on the Tumblr Dashboard and not on a specific blog. I bought privacy screen films for my computer and phone at the mall to hide what I was looking at. In order to work on editing the blog on my computer, I used my phone’s cellular data as a mobile hotspot to connect to my computer, or I’d walk to a bookstore with free Wi-Fi.

A friend circumvented their family's Wi-Fi blocks by using a free VPN on their computer. Another friend had a blocking program on their cell phone, not on the Wi-Fi, but was able to avoid it by going into low-power mode, which disabled apps running in the background to save energy. Blocking software on the device is harder to avoid than Wi-Fi blocks, and you may need to use a different device, but public libraries usually have computers that can be used to go online with few restrictions if a teen thinks to go there.

Another challenge working with Tumblr is Anon hate. We usually only get a truly hateful Ask a few times per month and it's often from trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFs) who don't respect trans identities, and other trans people who think that there are only two genders so nonbinary people aren't trans (truscum), but we occasionally get hate from straight-up conservative transphobes. We block anyone who sends hate because replying would just make it public, which could make the followers feel unsafe and encourage the trolls to send more. Blocking a user doesn't make it impossible for them to send us hate since they can get around it if they're determined, but it adds a deterrent. We don't preventatively block hate blogs, since we want to allow anyone to learn from our content, and we allow any blogs to follow us, partially because it's hard to monitor with the number of followers we have.

But we get far more positive than negative feedback from users. There are two different ways to numerically measure the reach of TYR: our number of followers and our web-based clicks. But the way I personally measure the impact is when I happen to meet followers in real life. We've never had a planned meetup with followers, but I've met followers at LGBT conferences, in intensive outpatient, at Pride, in the endocrinologist's waiting room; even one of my mother's high school friend's children turned out to be a follower! There's nothing more comforting than when I mention running a trans blog and thus outing myself as trans to hear "Hey, I've been following that blog for months!" Seeing followers and hearing about how TYR helped them discover their identity or helped them do something to express who they are cancels out all the Anon hate. Every time I answer a question, I know that I'm helping someone who needs help. I want to do something for my community, and this is one of the ways I'm able to contribute.

NOTE

1. The blog in this essay is being referred to as Trans Youth Resources (TYR) instead of the actual blog name or acronym for privacy reasons.

Queer Tips

Using Tumblr for LGBTQ Sex Education and Outreach, an Interview with Maureen Kelly

Interviewed by: Allison McCracken

Date: February 9, 2018

Maureen Kelly is vice president for programming and communications, Planned Parenthood of Greater New York. She is the proud founder of Planned Parenthood's Out for Health: LGBT Health & Wellness program in New York.

McCracken: *Can you give me some background about your organization Out for Health, its operations and relationship to Planned Parenthood?*

Kelly: We are an accredited affiliate of Planned Parenthood, Planned Parenthood of Southern Finger Lakes. We serve four rural counties in upstate New York. We are a queer-focused and queer-affirming Planned Parenthood, founded by LGBT activists in our community. We did our very first school-based homophobia workshop in 1988, so we have a phenomenal history that we build on. "Out for Health" is our LGBTQ Health and Wellness Program that's funded through the New York State Department of Health AIDS Institute. We got initial funding in the early 2000s, which was exciting because previously much of the funding for LGBT-related public health programs had been AIDS-related. So this was



Fig. 25.1. Out for Health Logo, 2018

an opportunity to look at health and wellness through a larger context of talking about—and with—queer people about sex and sexuality. We also have an active group of queer youth who hang out with us every week and keep us smart and adept in the world that exists and not just the world that we think exists.

McCracken: *What prompted you to start a Tumblr?*

Kelly: As a forty-seven-year-old person who has been at Planned Parenthood for twenty-four years, I'm definitely not the target audience for Tumblr. But my responsibility as an adult professional is to educate myself, to dive into spaces and understand the needs of the people that are my charge. When Tumblr became important to our youth in the early 2010s, we looked at it and said, "Oh, this platform rocks!" Tumblr was a natural fit for us because it was a place where queer youth were gathering and finding community. On Tumblr we could have a filters-off discussion about the actual lives young queer people were living as opposed to the cleaned-up version of talking about sex ed. The user questions in our Ask Box let us dive into important issues for youth, everything from "How do I do that?" to questions about the subtleties of being out and breaking up; we heard a lot of "school is irrelevant when it comes to teaching me about this so how do I figure it out?" For us, it was a moment where a number of pieces came together in a great way. We hired a digital media manager and strategist, Calvin Kasulke, to help us develop the QueerTips brand and curate for us. Calvin was a young trans man who came to us Tumblr-adept. And in 2012 we became the first—and I believe are still the only—queer-specific Planned Parenthood Tumblr.

The two of us have been the official mods from the beginning and it's still us today, but we ask questions and seek input from our educators and our youth groups and teen councils; they serve as our consultants on what topics we should pay attention to. We just published a post on what it means to be sober and queer and finding social spaces that aren't just bars. Many of the folks that first followed us in high school are now college-aged and have different questions. Sadly, last year we had to close our Ask Box because we were overwhelmed by the number of questions and we'd rather do it well than poorly. We weren't able manage the volume. If we could get additional grant funding, we'd hire a mod to do it all; it would be a dream to have Asks back. But we have continued

making the commitment to our thirteen thousand followers! What we're creating on QueerTips allows us to do our work on the ground better, as well as reach a larger audience.

McCracken: *How did you develop the Tumblr?*

Kelly: What we focused on is that this needs to be a place where we're telling the truth. And we will be fully inclusive in every way. We needed to be a place without fear or shame where identities and behaviors are discussed and we provide trusted, vetted resources about them. This is a place where a lot of what we do would be considered too much in traditional school-based sex ed programs. Here youth are able to get honest, reliable, health-based info without the heterosexism, homophobia, transphobia, biphobia, and ageism that are common in both direct and microaggressive ways when sex ed info is shared. There's a lot of misinformation out there, so we wanted to be a vetted, positive opportunity for folks to learn about the whole gamut of things, from PrEP for HIV prevention, to the sometimes awkward negotiation of safe oral sex, to mental health info and how to find LGBTQ history and literature and art. The invisibility and erasure of queer narratives, particularly queer narratives of POC and queer immigrants, are conversations that aren't happening in many places, so we wanted to lift up those voices.

McCracken: *How important has it been as someone who's doing queer material to have an #nsfw blog?*

Kelly: It's everything because it's the only place we've been able to do it. It's hard to find trusted, life-saving health information for people who face profound health disparities not because they're LGBTQ but because the world can be a terrible, bigoted, and stigmatizing place. And by making this information so hard to get, we are negatively impacting the health of LGBTQ youth. We're failing them outright. It's an embarrassment of the public health and sex education systems in America.

McCracken: *Did you see your Tumblr work as a corrective or a supplement for youth in your area or more broadly?*

Kelly: It was a "both and." Certainly the flashing red light for us locally was "wow, we're failing our queer kids desperately when it comes to sex

education. We should be better at that.” And obviously we’re not unique in this community. There’s a lot out there about making schools safer for queer kids so they don’t get hurt at school and so they can have equal access to restrooms, and that is vital. But very few sources tackle sex education, too, so we felt like that was our niche of expertise. Tumblr gave us a forum youth could access both locally and nationally.

McCracken: *What kinds of questions did you get asked in your Ask Box?*

Kelly: We were getting the whole array of life, mental health, sex, sexuality, and relationship questions in a very queer context. So “my girlfriend broke up with me and I am feeling all of these feelings and I can’t talk to anyone at school.” And we got a lot about coming out to parents and technical questions about sex. We’ve also done different series on dating trans men and sex with trans men because of user questions. Bisexuality, nonbinary issues, and trans issues have definitely topped the list. We have also seen more interest in general mental health stuff. Folks wanting support and a general high five for getting by and being okay and not sinking into a deep dark depression because the world that we live in can make it hard to be out and queer and feel alright (figure 25.2).

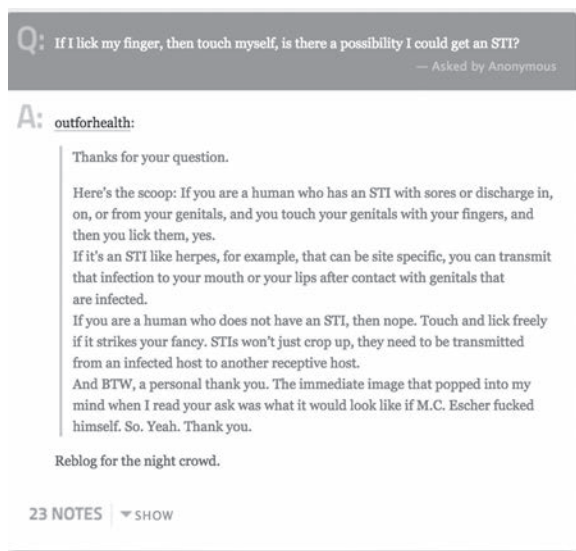


Fig. 25.2. QueerTips, example of Ask Box Q&A

McCracken: *So if you don't have the Ask Box at the moment, how do you know what's important to kids now? Talking to your youth and looking at your Tumblr Dashboard?*

Kelly: It's a combination of exactly that. Luckily there are three youth groups in our Planned Parenthood and one of the things that we have our group leaders ask them is "what are you talking about, what do you want more on?" Also, we're really research-informed. One of the great things about working at Planned Parenthood and running the Out For Health LGBT Health and Wellness Program is we're knee deep in the latest research about what's going on around youth and LGBTQ topics and sexual health and education. And then on Tumblr, we've figured out some folks to follow that give us access to reblogging opportunities. Then, when we see a post blow up, we add more on that topic because people are talking about it. Tumblr is like a daily focus group, and if we don't hit a mark, *we know* because it's crickets. Whereas if there's something that takes off, we also know immediately wow, fifty people in a few minutes are like "yup, *that!*" and that gives us a feel of what's happening. So that's made a difference for us.

McCracken: *What posts have been most popular?*

Kelly: Our most popular post addressed touch isolation in male communities and how homophobia has robbed all men of touch, particularly men of color. We got more than forty-six thousand notes and that's a lot for us. Considering the world we live in, pervasive structural racism, considering #metoo, considering that toxic masculinity is inextricably linked to homophobia and heterosexism and transphobia, the notion that communities of gay men and trans men—especially queer men of color—can reimagine the terms of what healthy manifestations of masculinity look like is remarkable. Gay communities and communities of color are often at the forefront of rewriting that narrative (figure 25.3).

McCracken: *What kinds of original material have you shared and how often?*

Kelly: We post about once a month. Our posts are called "#QT Says," and you can tag search that or "QueerTips says." We post everything from how to think about hormones through "what does it mean to be someone with sexual agency and sexual rights?" to "what are some of the



Touch Isolation: How Homophobia Has Robbed All Men Of Touch

"In America in particular, if a young man attempts gentle platonic contact with another young man, he faces a very real risk of homophobic backlash either by that person or by those who witness the contact. This is, in part, because we frame all contact by men as being intentionally sexual until proven otherwise. Couple this with the homophobia that runs rampant in our culture, and you get a recipe for increased touch isolation that damages the lives of the vast majority of men.

And if you think men have always been hands-off with each other, have a look at an amazing collection of historic photos compiled by Brett and Kate McKay for an article they titled: **Bosom Buddies: A Photo History of Male Affection**. It's a remarkable look at male camaraderie as expressed through physical touch in photos dating back to the earliest days of photography."

Platonic touch is crucial to human development and happiness, and this article discusses the damage done to everyone when two men can't casually touch without fear of backlash, and when the burden of physical affection is solely placed on women.

46,497 NOTES | SHOW

Fig. 25.3. QueerTips post, touch isolation

myths and facts about labels and how to be an LGBT person?” Those tend to be ones that get traction. We’re just one little group but we’ve done 8,638 posts. The blog itself had a huge moment when Tumblr founder David Karp visited with Planned Parenthood, and then Tumblr chose us as a featured blog right as the gay marriage case was being decided in 2015. We got a big boost in our numbers because of it.

We also featured a series on our Tumblr called “William Wednesdays” by a young trans man, Will, who transitioned very publicly on the Ithaca College campus. He talked about transitioning in a very upfront way, everything from coming out to his grandma to what it means to feel like you’re passing as a man for the first time, to what it meant for him to deal with puberty and how that sucked. We eventually turned William Wednesdays into a published two-volume booklet that we take everywhere, so it was this neat way of working with trans people in our community and also making sure we’re lifting up the stories of young queer people in general.

McCracken: *How has the Tumblr been useful in informing and shaping your organization’s goals over the years, both nationally and locally?*

Kelly: Certainly it affected our relationship with Planned Parenthood from early on, because their national communications team and social media department reached out to us when they got LGBTQ questions and had us do guest responses on their Tumblr. Over the years, the national Tumblr has done an amazing job of increasing queer visibility, and it’s reflective of who the folks are in the Tumblr community; they tend to be folks that really love the heck out of Planned Parenthood. But at one point our guest posts became particularly important because one of the things that has changed with Planned Parenthood in the last few years is that we began providing transgender-specific health care in a number of our health centers. We were the first Planned Parenthood in New York State to launch this, in 2013. In our first year, we had about eight patients and now we have almost six hundred patients. There’s a vital need for access to birth control, abortion, STD screening, and there is a growing awareness in trans health care that Planned Parenthood is a great place to meet those needs. So, as we prepared to offer service and training, our work on Tumblr became a unique opportunity to amplify that story with a specific population who it impacted.

One of the Asks we started to get a lot was “hey, it doesn’t seem like

my Planned Parenthood offers hormone replacement therapy (HRT); can you help?" And so we reached out to Planned Parenthoods across the country saying, "Hey, some Tumblr users in your area would love to be able to have this service with you. Here is the link to the national medical protocol, here are PDFs of all of our materials that might help you do this." We also made a post telling users that we would talk to their local Planned Parenthood for them, and we were overwhelmed by the response. As a result of that Tumblr interest, we now have a database that tells us who's doing what and where so we can connect folks to what they need in their home communities.

While doing this work, we were approached by Luca Maurer from Ithaca College's LGBT Center and another colleague, Eli Green, to help turn their phenomenal teaching materials on this topic into a book, and we together published the *Teaching Transgender Toolkit*, which is now used nationally and internationally. We're in our fourth printing and have won several awards, including Book of the Year from the American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors, and Therapists (AASECT). The authors sought us out because they knew that we were a LGBTQ committed Planned Parenthood and our Tumblr was a big part of that reputation. Once we published the book, we posted its availability on our Tumblr. So Tumblr is an important spoke in this whole wheel of cool stuff that has happened.

McCracken: *Are there other ways you know about the Tumblr being used? Have you heard from sex educators in schools, for example?*

Kelly: Yes we have! We get feedback from educators and from health teachers; they bookmark it for LBTGQ youth in their classrooms. And when it comes to Planned Parenthoods across the country, we have Listservs and ways that we communicate as educators. We've also met some of our users in real life when we've had resource tables at the National LGBTQ Task Force annual conference, Creating Change, or other gatherings around LGBT health and wellness. People are like, "Oh my God, you do QueerTips?" "Yes!" and it's thrilling to meet users that are otherwise out there in anonymousland.

McCracken: *What have you witnessed and learned over time because of the blog?*

Kelly: The evolution of support and information around gender identity has been amazing to watch, and the much broader, more nuanced conversation around trans identities, nonbinary people, and asexuality. In the queer world, these are people who have always been there, but Tumblr offers a larger platform to break through. Tumblr is a space in which people embody and blog the hell out of their truth in a way that's beautiful. Even in the last two years, watching the voices around what it means to be nonbinary, what it means to be queer, that whole spectrum of identity, there's been a lot of wonderful stuff about blowing up binaries and notions of labels around identity and behavior. The asexual community has been really amazing to watch grow. There's an evolution right now of identity labels that is thrilling to see unfold in real time. Tumblr is a bellwether. It's telling the story before most anybody gets it. I hear people say, "Wow, guess we should think about this!" And I think, "Yeah, people have been talking about this on Tumblr for three years."

McCracken: *What has been most meaningful for you doing this?*

Kelly: You know, I love my work. I love doing and thinking about health and wellness and agency and having a full life and having relationships that matter and being able to be better at communication and realizing that all of us almost universally have been failed in some way by families, public health systems, or school systems that don't do a good job of preparing us to be humans in the world. And so, for me, Tumblr is a hopeful place. And I think one of the things I have loved so much is the remarkable support for random strangers on the platform, whether it's a person with "shitty day, horrible parents," or a person with feelings that are really big and hard, or a person struggling with how to take their meds on time. There's this earnest support of one another that's lovely, which isn't always a story that gets told. Platforms can be toxic horror films, but there's another story there too, and I think that's part of it, the love and friendships that's there too. I also love that people are figuring out who they are on this platform and I feel that we're all in this together. There's this opportunity for us to be a voice for something that matters. A place that is compassionate, and one of connectedness and good sex and honest consent and negotiating relationships and being queer as hell and that's a good thing. It's just this really good place to be.

SECTION 6

#Identity/Affinity Networks

It's hard to overstate the significance of Tumblr on the personal and communal identity work of users who came of age in the late 2000s through 2010s, many of whom came from the social margins. Tumblr's obscurity and opacity as a platform has permitted users, especially young people, the time and space to explore sensitive identity issues and to engage in substantive expressions of and conversations about personal politics and self making, more than that afforded by other, more "public" social media or in their "real lives." Users have also benefited from the active mentoring and support, often intergenerational, that is a hallmark of Tumblr interaction. Although users have had to navigate the intensities of their interactions, the volatility of these networks, and ever-present threats from outside, Tumblr was, for many vulnerable users, the best—or only—space available to them for this type of learning and self-expression. Together, the essays in this section indicate the significant impact Tumblr has had on a generation of young people.

Our first three contributors point to Tumblr's particular significance for LGBTQ+ and nonbinary/genderfluid users. In "Tumblr as a Space of Learning, Connecting, and Identity Formation for LGBTQ+ Young People," Brady Robards et al. draw on their survey of young LGBTQ+ people in Australia to demonstrate how Tumblr became a key resource for community and knowledge sharing. Abigail Oakley and Avery Dame-Griff discuss the way Tumblr youth in the 2010s put queer theory into practice for a new generation by constructing and/or popularizing gender identities that better reflected their senses of selves. In her personal essay, "Developing a Black Genderfluid Feminist Critique," user *Strugglingtobeheard* recounts the evolution of her gender identity within a strong community of Black and queer feminists on Tumblr, who provided her with advice, resources, education, and creative opportunities despite the particular and constant forms of harassment this group endured on the platform.

The final two essays in this section focus on the way the platform also became a foundational space for community and validation around the

experiences of chronic pain and mental illness. Scholars EJ Gonzalez-Polledo and Jen Tarr discuss the ways people with chronic pain have used memes and other images to share their everyday experiences of living with chronic pain (“spoonie living”), creating new social worlds that counter their cultural invisibility. Finally, Natalie Ann Hendry’s “New Ways of Seeing” examines the way Tumblr users have coped with the official psychiatric diagnoses of BPD (borderline personality disorder) and the public stigmas surrounding mental illness by making visible their emotionally intense experiences through playful individual “chatposts” and therapeutic collective activities.

Tumblr as a Space of Learning, Connecting, and Identity Formation for LGBTIQ+ Young People

Brady Robards, Paul Byron, Brendan Churchill,
Benjamin Hanckel, and Son Vivienne

Brady Robards is a senior lecturer in sociology at Monash University, where he studies social media cultures.

Paul Byron is a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Technology Sydney, in the School of Communication. He is researching LGBTIQ+ young people's digital cultures of friendship and peer support.

Brendan Churchill is a research fellow in sociology at the University of Melbourne, where he researches the intimate and working lives of young people.

Benjamin Hanckel is senior research fellow at Western Sydney University, and holds affiliate positions at King's College London and the University of Tasmania. His research work examines youth digital practices and digital health, with a particular focus on the lived experiences of LGBTIQ+ young people.

Son Vivienne is a post-doctoral research fellow at RMIT, where they explore gender diversity, online activism, and queer storytelling.

There's something queer about Tumblr. In our 2016 survey of how young lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ+) people in Australia use social media, we found that—when compared to general population surveys of young social media users—our respondents were *five times* as likely to use Tumblr.¹ Why? What is it about Tumblr that makes it so appealing to young LGBTIQ+ people? What do young queer and gender diverse people get out of Tumblr?

BACKGROUND

Before Tumblr came along, the internet had long been considered a valuable resource for LGBTIQ+ people to find connections, friendship, and a sense of belonging in heteronormative and sometimes hostile worlds. In the '90s, scholars like Nina Wakeford were drawing attention to the possibilities of “cyberqueer” spaces as sites of resistance against heteronormative culture. In their study of an early 2000s IRC (Internet Relay Chat) room for girls and young women who “belong to sexual minorities,” Laukkanen described these as “productive and safe spaces . . . [that] enabled experience that can support . . . ongoing subjective construction of non-heterosexuality.”² In another example, Alexander and Losh pointed out that “the coming out video on YouTube” has now become a genre in itself.³ Similarly, time-lapse videos of gender transitions have become a significant source of peer support and information sharing for trans and gender-diverse youth.⁴ These sit within a range of networked videos—following familiar tropes and shared across multiple platforms—that have become easily accessible resources for LGBTIQ+ young people negotiating their genders, sexualities, relationships, and everyday life. Further still, in their study of an anonymous queer youth discussion forum, Hanckel and Morris found that the forum served as a space where participants helped each other overcome feelings of marginality by providing the emotional “support and sociability” of a community in a “safe and anonymous” online space.⁵ Facebook has also been the focus of several studies centered on how young queer people use social media to manage different audiences and tailor identity performances to specific contexts, for negotiating both religious and queer identities, privacy, and more.⁶

In other words, there has been considerable research around how the internet has been used by LGBTIQ+ people in productive ways to connect, feel safe and supported, and find models and resources for negotiating their own coming out experiences and queer identity formations. In this chapter we focus on Tumblr as a place of learning and connecting for young LGBTIQ+ people: learning about gender and sexuality, learning words and concepts to explain their experiences and feelings, and learning that they are not alone.

Although research on Tumblr and LGBTIQ+ people was sparser in the early 2010s, there was a growing body of literature by the mid-2010s. Scholars noted Tumblr’s particular importance among queer and gender-diverse communities, including genderqueer and trans communities, asexual communities, people of nonbinary genders, polyamorous people, and queer people of color.⁷ Cho described Tumblr as a “queer ecosystem” that operates on

a “felt register of suggestive imagery, one of intimation, assemblage, intensity, and aesthetic.”⁸ He suggested that “because queer people have had a historically fraught relationship with expressing sexuality in public, they have relied on underground economies of expression and relation that traffic in code, affinity, and intuition rather than the literal.”⁹ There is a clear resonance between the lived experience of queer people and the affordances of Tumblr itself. Despite this growing body of qualitative research, there was still a gap in larger-scale empirical data that explains wider patterns of Tumblr use for LGBTIQ+ young people.

OUR STUDY: SCROLLING BEYOND BINARIES

The *Scrolling Beyond Binaries* project began in 2016 in Australia. We surveyed young LGBTIQ+ people aged 16 to 35 years old (average age: 21.9 years) to find out about their social media use, with a total of 1,304 respondents. In terms of gender, 45.6 percent of our respondents identified as female, 26.5 percent as male, 19.4 percent as nonbinary, and 8.6 percent chose to describe their own gender identity, which included identifiers such as trans, agender, gender-fluid, genderqueer, and various combinations of labels (“trans masculine gender nonconforming femme”) or temporal nuances (“some days I am a girl other days I have no gender”). When it came to sexuality, 33.9 percent identified as lesbian, gay, or homosexual, 24.7 percent as bisexual, 18 percent as queer, and 19.8 percent chose to describe their own sexuality, which included pansexual, asexual, panromantic, demisexual, and more. As we explain below, Tumblr provides a unique environment for learning the language of diverse sexualities, nonbinary genders, connecting with peers with similar experiences, and engaging in identity work related to gender and sexuality.

Our respondents reported using a range of social media platforms, including Facebook (97 percent), Instagram (70 percent), Snapchat (67 percent), and Tumblr (64 percent). What is remarkable, however, is that Tumblr use is five times higher in our survey than for comparative surveys of general populations of young people. For example, a Pew Internet Research study found that 14 percent of their 1,060 U.S. teen respondents were using Tumblr, similar to an Australian Sensis social media study that found that 14 percent of their 160 eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-old respondents also used Tumblr (under eighteens were not surveyed in the latter study).¹⁰ While these two surveys and ours are very different (ours focused on sixteen- to thirty-five-year-old LGBTIQ+ social media users in Australia, whereas the other two were general

population surveys with different age ranges), a comparison here allows for some sense of the significance of Tumblr for LGBTIQ+ people. That 64 percent of our own respondents reported using Tumblr compared to 14 percent in the general population surveys of young people is striking. There is clearly something queer about Tumblr.

WHY DO SO MANY YOUNG QUEER PEOPLE USE TUMBLR?

We asked our survey respondents about their motivations for using a range of different platforms. For Tumblr users, 65 percent said their primary motivation was to communicate with “people who are like me,” rather than with family or partners (3 percent) or for meeting new friends (4 percent), but 27 percent said their primary motivation wasn’t necessarily to communicate with anyone in particular (see table 26.1).

Our findings show that Tumblr is not so much a place for connecting with friends like on Facebook, Snapchat, and to a lesser extent Instagram. Rather, Tumblr operates as a distinct platform where users are motivated to connect with a difficult-to-define, amorphous sense of “community,” based on shared experiences and interests. These might be related to gender and sexuality or race and ethnicity or fandoms like Harry Potter and One Direction. That 65 percent of our respondents primarily used Tumblr to connect with like-minded others speaks to the platform’s capacity to forge systems of belonging beyond existing life worlds. Whereas categories like friends, partners, and colleagues are all pre-existing, “people like me” is almost aspirational and implies a sense of searching and a nebulous feeling of connection. These findings also point to uses of Tumblr that extend beyond these categories,

Table 26.1. Motivations for using social media, across four dominant social media platforms

	Communicating with . . .				Meeting . . .		
	Friends	Partner	Col- leagues	People like me	New friends	New romantic/ sexual partners	Other
Facebook	83%	4%	2%	6%	1%	<1%	5%
Instagram	46%	<1%	1%	25%	4%	<1%	24%
Snapchat	87%	4%	<1%	2%	<1%	<1%	5%
Tumblr	3%	<1%	0%	65%	4%	<1%	27%

indicated by the 27 percent of our respondents who indicated “other” when asked about their motivations for using the platform. While we discuss this in relation to our findings below, we acknowledge the need for further research into these “other” motivations for using Tumblr.

In open-ended comments from our respondents, we identified two key prevalent themes regarding Tumblr’s significance for them: a desire for connecting, comfort, and community on the one hand, and for learning and exploring gender and sexual identities on the other. We explore these below.

Finding Connection, Comfort, and Community

Like the “queer cyberspaces” we discussed earlier—from IRCs and web forums to YouTube and Facebook—Tumblr is an important site of connecting and finding a sense of comfort that comes from being part of a wider community. One twenty-year-old, nonbinary, bisexual respondent explained, “[I] liked [Tumblr] because it was a real social network where I could feel comfortable and meet like minded people.” That they felt comfortable on Tumblr because they were among like-minded people is significant and suggests that they experienced a kind of “collective effervescence” on Tumblr, a felt sense of belonging and safety.¹¹ This was common among many of our respondents who took time to explain Tumblr’s significance for them.

A sixteen-year-old lesbian respondent also said, “[Tumblr] opened me up to many things I didn’t realize about myself, including being gay.” The kind of self-work and excavation implied here could figure into an explanation of the 27 percent of respondents who pointed to “other” motivations for using Tumblr, discussed above. Here Tumblr affords a chance to exhibit and work through a sense of self, but among queer peers. These accounts point to the significance of Tumblr as a platform where such communities can be felt and visible and where one’s identity-work is not only practiced privately—in a bedroom or a diary, for instance—but also shared and reshared as part of a larger peer-based discussion that constitutes queer and gender diverse identity work, Tumblr semantics, and where these things meet.

Yet another respondent, sixteen years old, female, and pansexual, said that “Tumblr was the most significant [platform] in terms of recognizing my identity, and interacting with others while exploring sexuality and gender.” Again, phrases like “recognizing my identity” are crucial to understanding what it is about Tumblr that makes it so popular among young LGBTIQ+ people. When representation of queer, trans, nonbinary, and intersex folk is largely absent in mainstream cultural forms, recognizing one’s self in a Tum-

blr post can be—as our respondent said—“crucial.” Tying this recognition to interaction with queer peers is also central in this account, as it is in the preceding two. Seeing one’s self represented here is not private, like watching a film or television show alone might be, but is shared and experienced in mediated networks of comfort and community.

These three accounts each resonate with Cho’s assertions about the “felt register” of Tumblr and its affective dimensions. These responses also highlight a kind of “collective effervescence” that queer and gender-diverse Tumblr users experience, a sense of togetherness and unity that many physical spaces—perhaps with the exception of a gay bar or a Pride parade, which are exclusionary in different ways—cannot reproduce. Indeed, spaces—both physical and digital—can be actively hostile for LGBTIQ+ people, and in these accounts Tumblr is also a kind of refuge.

Tumblr and Queer Pedagogy

The second key theme we identified relates to the affordances of queer learning and exploring through Tumblr. How do young people who feel like they don’t fit into a heteronormative, cis- and binary-gendered world even find the language to describe their experiences? One of our respondents, a seventeen-year-old lesbian, explained how Tumblr introduced her to a new world:

I had no idea that lgbt+ people existed (my parents are quite homophobic and very strict, so you could say I was very sheltered), and by using Tumblr I was able to fully immerse myself within its very lgbt+ culture. It also brought up words . . . I had never heard before, and through this I was able to “find myself” within a safe environment.

When queer and gender diverse people are hidden or erased in education and accessible cultural forms, stumbling across “people like me” on Tumblr can be revelatory and also a moment of learning and discovery: new words, new languages for self-expression, and new opportunities to connect one’s own experiences with others through this learned language. Another respondent, a twenty-seven-year-old female asexual/aromantic, explained that Tumblr was “significant because it was how I found the article that introduced me to the concept of asexuality.” This notion, of being exposed to and learning about a conceptual category such as asexuality, is commonly expressed by our participants, many of whom described these experiences as revelations that Tumblr offered.

A final example of Tumblr as a site of queer pedagogy comes from a twenty-two-year-old nonbinary pansexual respondent who noted:

I came out as Pan on Tumblr a few years ago, when being Pan was seen as just a fancy way of saying Bi. I felt very alone for a long time, but found other Pan people to talk to, and Tumblr learned (mostly) that being Pan was very different than being Bi.

This narrative of learning and discovering language with which to self-identify, and setting up identity boundaries around terms, was a common theme in the open-ended responses. This statement is not only about the respondent's own learning, but situates Tumblr itself—as some kind of cohesive, amorphous whole—as something that learns, changes, and evolves toward new ways of understanding gender and sexuality (in this case, that being pan was very different than being bi) over time.

These accounts are all partly about connecting and finding community, but also about finding specific information that reveals an aspect of one's own identity, something perhaps felt but not yet known, until Tumblr offers access to this vocabulary and knowledge. For many queer and gender-diverse young people, Tumblr offers the language to describe one's own experiences, feelings, and sense of place in the world. Identifying through language and making feelings known (even to a largely anonymous, asynchronous, and geographically dispersed collective) is a powerful act.

In these comments, it's clear that the affective dimensions of Tumblr also afford something beyond connection and community, to something *pedagogic*. Tumblr users are teaching each other about language, about diverse identity terms and practices, and about ways of thinking and being in the world. These processes of learning and exploring make Tumblr stand apart from other popular social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. In these other social media spaces, intense, in-depth self-discovery and communication regarding sexuality and gender identities (and the politics of this practice) are less likely, given the tendency for “real name” self-representation and networking, and interactions that are more commonly experienced as “public.” While many respondents mentioned that Tumblr could be a toxic environment, it was also noted (often by the same respondents) that Tumblr itself, being fluent in the language of diverse identities and practices, affords important opportunities for learning and exchange that are not available in many other spaces, including other social media platforms.

TURNING AWAY FROM TUMBLR?

While we have emphasized the positive dimensions of Tumblr to help explain why so many of our respondents used it, they also pointed out a more negative and challenging side of the platform. When we asked about platforms our respondents had left behind, there were many more accounts of people leaving Tumblr than leaving any other common platform. For example, one respondent, eighteen years old, female, and queer, said that she left Tumblr because “the atmosphere was negative and the oppression Olympics seemed to both be cult like and omnipresent.” For some, the intense drive on Tumblr to define vocabulary, circulate perspectives on power, and generally tackle the challenging ideas that we identified above can be experienced and levied as a negative style of policing. Several other participants also described leaving Tumblr due to an increasing feeling of discomfort, while at the same time noting that the platform had been “significant” and “crucial” for them at a younger age. A nineteen-year-old nonbinary bisexual respondent said, “I deleted my account due to an atmosphere of negativity and call-out culture I found unavoidable.” This suggests that because Tumblr offers a critical space in which people are schooled (in all sorts of ways), tensions are “unavoidable” and can create discomfort. For some queer and gender-diverse users of Tumblr, once a sense of identity and community was established, the space’s many frictions (variously labeled as “toxicity,” “oppression Olympics,” and “call-out culture”) made Tumblr a less enticing and more uncomfortable space. For instance, an eighteen-year-old male gay respondent said that he “had a blog from ages 12 to 15 [but then] deleted it as I had matured and didn’t agree with a lot of the naive ‘social justice warrior’ content.”

Massanari and Chess have noted that the term “social justice warrior” (SJW) has been employed for some time by “feminists, antiracist activists, and other progressives interested in ensuring both economic justice and recognition for marginalized identities.”¹² As they explain, however, through the #Gamergate phenomenon, the positive and progressive associations with the SJW term were muddled as the figure of the SJW became the punching bag of the Gamergaters and the “alt-right mediasphere.” The SJW instead has come to be associated with emotional fragility, overreaction, and policing political correctness. This discursive repositioning thus serves to delegitimize and dismiss progressive discourse from feminists, antiracists, and other activists, in the same way that Ahmed draws attention to the operation of the “feminist killjoy” trope.¹³ While our respondents did not expand on their use of

these terms further, unpacking how queer and gender-diverse people make use of these terms is worth further study, especially with added intersectional attention to users' racial and ethnic identity.¹⁴

Tumblr has also been celebrated as an important site for its "transformative potential to prevent and treat mental illness."¹⁵ But while discussing mental health with a sympathetic network can be cathartic and productive, there is also a risk of being overwhelmed. One respondent, sixteen years old, female, and bisexual, explained that "as a personal experience I found that even though many of the postings were upbeat, a large number of the people I know used Tumblr to outlet a lot of sadness." Another respondent, eighteen, female, and bisexual, said, "I stopped because the mentality surrounding mental health was becoming detrimental to me recovering from anxiety." If Tumblr is productive as a site for sharing and speaking openly about mental health, the flip side is that these disclosures can also become overwhelming for some users. Thus, in addition to avoiding the frictions identified above, Tumblr also comes to operate here as a site to be turned away from to avoid being overwhelmed and to care of oneself.

While there is some overlap between the frictions of the "oppression Olympics" and the discomfort of being surrounded by "Tumblr sadness," these accounts suggest more of a disconnect between the politics and practice of mental health work on Tumblr. For many users, the value of sharing and publicly excavating one's feelings and health issues is recognized, yet the practice of managing one's own mental health might be compromised through constant exposure to other people's sadness. This tension between the needs of the community and that of the individual user might be the common ground of these different discomforts; depending upon where the user is positioned in terms of their identity, self-acceptance, and health and well-being, the same discussions can be as negative as they are positive. This ambiguity was not lost on our participants, with many describing Tumblr use as both extremely beneficial *and* problematic.

Overall, there was a sense that for most Tumblr users, the benefits outweigh the harms. For instance, respondents who mentioned the negative dimensions of Tumblr also noted that Tumblr was pivotal to their self-discovery and becoming who they were. Seemingly, part of a Tumblr-situated self-discovery for some of our respondents was about realizing that they no longer needed Tumblr for education and support regarding their identities. These are themes we look forward to exploring in future research.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have mapped out research findings that support the argument that there's something queer about Tumblr. Our LGBTIQ+ respondents were five times as likely to use Tumblr than the general population of similarly aged peers. The motivations for using Tumblr are distinct from other forms of social media in a wider polymedia landscape: where Facebook and Snapchat might be used for connecting with friends, LGBTIQ+ young people's Tumblr use was more oriented toward connection with wider affinity groups of peers (i.e. "people like me"). This makes it distinct from other platforms and goes some way to answering the question: Why has Tumblr been so popular among young queer and gender-diverse people? We found that the LGBTIQ+ young people in our study experienced Tumblr as a place to connect, find comfort, be part of communities, and learn about diverse genders and sexualities. A minority, however, also experienced the articulation of knowledge about diverse genders and sexualities as overwhelming, policing, or competitive, or felt that Tumblr played a role only for a particular moment in their processes of learning and self-identification.

Despite progress on many fronts, at the time of writing (2018) and when this study was conducted (2016), it was still challenging to be queer or gender-diverse in many places. From news of the "gay purge" in Chechnya, the banning of transgender people from the military in the United States, to a divisive and drawn-out debate on marriage equality in Australia, many queer and gender-diverse people are still marginalized and persecuted. In this global context, Tumblr has offered many people a haven in a hostile world, where queer and gender diverse users can connect and learn. Our study goes part of the way to revealing some patterns of use, motivations, challenges, and the productive dimensions of these spaces, but there is more to be done in better understanding Tumblr, as well as in improving the world more generally for LGBTIQ+ people.

NOTES

1. We use LGBTIQ+ as a recognizable acronym to refer to trans, gender-diverse, intersex, queer, gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, and other sexuality- and gender-diverse people. We acknowledge this acronym has its limitations, but we use it here and in the recruitment of participants because of its recognizability. We also use the term "queer and gender-diverse young people" as an alternative inclusive term.

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7. See, for example, Avery Dame, "Making a Name for Yourself: Tagging as Transgender Ontological Practice on Tumblr," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 33, no. 1 (2016): 23–37; Bryce J. Renninger, "'Where I Can be Myself . . . Where I Can Speak my Mind': Networked Counterpublics in a Polymedia Environment," *New Media & Society* 17, no. 9 (2015): 1513–29; Abigail Oakley, "Disturbing Hegemonic Discourse: Nonbinary Gender and Sexual Orientation Labeling on Tumblr," *Social Media & Society* 2, no. 3 (2016): DOI:2056305116664217; Katrin Tiidenberg, "There's No Limit to Your Love-Scripting the Polyamorous Self," *Journal für Psychologie* 22, no. 1 (2014): 1–27, <http://journal-fuer-psychologie.de/index.php/jfp/article/view/320>.

8. Alexander Cho, "Queer Reverb: Tumblr, Affect, Time," in *Networked Affect*, ed. Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen, and Michael Petit (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 43–58.

9. Cho, "Queer Reverb," 47.

10. Lenhart, "Teens, Social Media and Technology Overview," and Sensis, "Sensis Social Media Report."

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A Conversation about Gender/Sexual Variant and Transgender Labeling and Networking on Tumblr

Participants: Abigail Oakley and Avery Dame-Griff

Moderated by: Allison McCracken

Dates: May 12—May 17, 2018

Abigail Oakley has a PhD in the Writing, Rhetorics, and Literacies Program from Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona. Her published works concentrate on nonbinary gender and sexual orientation identity construction on Tumblr.

Avery Dame-Griff is a lecturer in communication at Gonzaga University. His current manuscript concerns how the emerging commercial internet changed transgender politics in the 1980s and 1990s, and he also serves as the primary curator of the Queer Digital History Project (queerdigital.com).

McCracken: *According to your research, how did Tumblr become the key online space for gender and sexual minorities to construct and/or popularize new or more nuanced identities in the 2010s?*

Oakley: Members of gender and sexual minority groups value Tumblr because it's a place where they can have a modicum of anonymity that also intersects with community. They can step back from their daily presentations of self, which may need to meet normative societal standards of gender and sexual identity and expression and instead have conversations about things they think represent aspects of themselves they might not feel comfortable sharing with their friends and family. In my research, I talk about this presentation as *true self*, since it works to represent one's "true" inner self. This *true* self isn't false, but rather a different representation of their identity for a specific audience. So we're seeing a more in-depth, personal version of someone's gender or

sexual identity because both the user culture on Tumblr and the semi-anonymous nature of Tumblr supports that. In my work, I have focused on nonbinary identities, individuals that do not identify or fit with the two gender (male and female) binary. Such individuals often find that there are others with similar feelings and experiences on Tumblr since its very design encourages identity affirmation and community growth.

Tumblr's functionality is quite different from other social media networks like Facebook and Twitter, since communication moves through reblogging and tagging rather than just comments and replies. Reblogs specifically allow users to (1) amplify messages and (2) to participate in a conversation started by the original poster. Both of these functions can work to shape a Tumblr user's identity through the content on their blogs and also as identifying markers or claims to particular kinds of communities. For example, an LGBTQA user might reblog a request for help with a transgender user's cost of transition surgery. Such posts are reblogged as #signalboosts within the community to get the message out to a larger audience, but also to "signal" community investment and care.

Dame-Griff: When I interviewed transgender users in 2014–2015, one of the most common reasons they gave for why they used a given platform was their existing investment in it. Since they were already socializing, engaging in professional networking, or participating in various fandoms on Tumblr, it made sense to extend their existing presence to transgender issues. For users under thirty especially, Tumblr's core features (reblogs, tagging, limited privacy options) were more familiar than older platform formats like message boards. Message boards, most popular from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, often functioned as "enclave" public spheres, that is, trans-specific, trans-oriented safe spaces invisible to the wider public sphere where users could discuss and share information.¹ In contrast, Tumblr users preferred its constant level of activity, easy replicability, and social connection via tags to the static-seeming message board. As one participant put it in her interview, contemporary social media platforms "were actually active, they felt alive, whereas [message boards] didn't."

Tumblr's tagging system allows for a level of immediate interaction and networking that a closed enclave on, say, LiveJournal or a message board might not. A tag (for example, #trans woman) on one level offers local organization: When interacting on an individual's blog, selecting

that tag brings up all posts there with that tag. However, it also works at a platform level, as searching for #trans woman brings up all public posts using that tag. This two-pronged usage is a key part of the “networked counterpublic,” a countercultural sphere connected to but outside of mainstream public spheres, a more public version of the enclave, in many ways.² By connecting content to the wider public sphere, tags serve many roles (social, organizational, and informational) at once. They build connections between possibly disparate users’ posts, increase a post’s visibility within the platform, and make it easier to identify posts or users through search tools. Moreover, users can actually see their identity represented interactively, with constant visual accumulation as they scroll through a given tag.

McCracken: *Can you review some of gender- and sexuality-related identity labels and tags that have developed on Tumblr? How do you account for their proliferation on the platform?*

Oakley: In general, I would say that the discussions of nonbinary genders and sexual orientations on Tumblr have been evolving in a way not dissimilar to how language evolves. However, what’s key here is that it happens at an *advanced rate*, much the way that the internet has been hastening the evolution of our language writ large.³ Some Tumblr users really play with terminology, molding it to reflect their particular feelings and desires, such as variants on asexuality like demisexual or gray-asexual, yet the really specific terms don’t make it outside of Tumblr that often, and even less frequently outside of online discourse.

The lists I’ve created (table 27.1) summarize data that I collected during the summer of 2015 and show the range and variety of sexual orientation and gender identity labels being used at that time.⁴ Here, for example, we can see genders that are similar to one another, such as “genderfluid” and “genderqueer,” but that actually describe slightly different genders. People who are genderfluid, for example, feel that their gender identity shifts from masculine to feminine, and those who are genderqueer identify as neither male nor female and often strive for an androgynous appearance.

While both of these gender identities fall in the category of nonbinary, there are also those who only identify as “nonbinary.” So “nonbinary” is both a metacategory and a gender identity. In other words, a person might identify their gender solely as nonbinary, but individuals

Table 27.1. Gender/sexuality labels, listed according to their popularity on Tumblr, Oakley survey 2015

Types of sexual orientation labels used in order of most frequent to least frequent:	Types of pronoun labels used in order of most frequent to least frequent:	Types of gender identity labels used in order of most frequent to least frequent:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Queer• Bisexual• Lesbian• Pansexual• Asexual• Gay• Demisexual• Gray-Asexual	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• they/them• he/him• they/he• she/her• they/she• all/any pronoun• they/alternative pronoun	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Trans*• Genderfluid*• Genderqueer• Agender• Woman or girl*• Nonbinary• Cis*• Queer• Male• Demigirl*• Aerogender**

*Term was standardized or simplified (e.g., transman was shortened to “trans,” and “gender fluid” was changed to “genderfluid”)

**Aerogender is community-defined as a gender that changes based on one’s setting

Table 27.2. Examples of common trans identity tags on Tumblr, 2014–2015

Tag category	Example tags
Identity Label	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• #transgender• #trans• #ftm• #mtf• #tgirl• #boi
Alternative Labels	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• #trans woman• #genderfluid• #agender• #pangender
Other Identity Signifiers within Tumblr Trans Subculture	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• #testosterone• #preop• #qpoc• #wlv• #trans*

who are, for example, genderqueer or transgender might also consider themselves nonbinary since they do not fit into the male/female binary. I first noticed the term “nonbinary” on Tumblr in 2014. Since then, it seems to have grown in popularity both on Tumblr and on other platforms and has been increasingly discussed in the mainstream media.

The other aspect of gender identity is pronouns, that is, whether an individual chooses to refer to themselves as “he,” “she,” or “they.” Individuals who are nonbinary, and some allies who are cisgendered, include their pronouns in addition to their gender identities on their Tumblr bios (see table 27.1 above). Pronoun usage and gender identity go hand-in-hand, so identifying pronouns and being open about nonbinary gender identities has been evolving side-by-side on the platform.

Dame-Griff: Because Tumblr is so tag-focused, terminology plays a key role in helping users establish their self-identity for others. Users may tag posts to indicate post content or personal identity, or to provide blog-specific organization (see table 27.2). The self-directed nature of tagging also opens room for experimentation. So, where users might have to self-describe using broad umbrella terminology like “transgender” to make their identity sensible to wider publics or medical authorities, on Tumblr they can develop and use more specific labels alongside that term that feel closer to their lived experience and sense of self. They may also be uncomfortable with unidirectional, binary implications of terms like “mtf” (male to female) or “ftm” (female to male). If a user doesn’t identify with existing terms like trans man, FTM, trans woman, MTF, etc., they can search for or develop new, more accurate terminology, such as “pan-gender,” that better reflects how they understand themselves, as opposed to their representation in wider public discourse.

In Tumblr’s semantic-focused structure, the relative uniqueness of these terms and limited usage (compared to “mainstream” terms) allow users to build smaller, closer-knit social networks. The affordances built into Tumblr’s architecture can really be a double-edged sword at times, however, particularly around tagging and privacy. Terms within users’ shared vocabulary can become commonly sites of conflict. For example, discussion has emerged around trans-exclusionary radical feminists (often shortened to TERF), who hold that transgender women’s gender identities are illegitimate, as they were “born biologically male,” and that transgender men’s desire to transition arises from their false identification with patriarchal power. In its use, however, the #transgender and

#terf tags are employed by both proponents and opponents as content descriptors, so users also employ alternative tags that signal their positions in relation to terfs, such as “#anti terf” or “#terf safe.” This practice is also necessitated by Tumblr’s limited privacy options: either entirely private or entirely public. Such signaling attempts to deter possibly negative interactions, up to and including trolling.

McCracken: *What are some intragroup community-building practices and/or conflicts you have noted in your research?*

Oakley: One is the use of Asks. While a nonbinary Tumblrite’s personal blog isn’t *only* about their gender or sexual orientation, nonbinary bloggers commonly receive Asks about the definitions of terms because of askers’ desires to find a term that describes them. There also is conversation about financial support. It’s not uncommon to find a PayPal set up for donations on a nonbinary person’s blog, especially if they are mid-transition and need assistance with the associated medical costs. You also see requests for assistance for users who have come out to their family and been kicked out of their homes, or those who experience chronic illness and don’t have medical insurance. We can see here the intersections of class, disability, and gender having significant impact on nonbinary Tumblrites.

Dame-Griff: My research has turned up some of the same practices as Abigail describes, although I would qualify that these small-scale “community-building” actions aren’t an automatic indicator of an idealized, monolithic “community” in the way that they are promoted to be by social media platforms like Tumblr. Who belongs within the “transgender community” has always been fraught in transgender discourse, especially around the role of medical interventions like hormone replacement therapy and gender confirmation surgery.⁵ These same arguments continue on Tumblr: some feel that gender dysphoria and a desire for change are a definitional requirement of “transgender,” while others don’t feel dysphoria is necessary to fall under the umbrella. Yet because the terminology is limited, these users must often coexist within the same tags, leading to conflict over what the tag “really” means.

In a similar vein, the ideal of being one monolithic community of shared experience obscures the role of power and privilege. Trans users

of color are far less visible in tags using more mainstream trans terms (#transgender, #trans, #mtf, #ftm, etc.). Instead, they use tags that flag their status as people of color (#poc, #qpoc, or #tpoc) or use group-specific terms, (#boi, etc.). Their overall invisibility is of a piece with long-standing issues around the dominance of white faces, voices, and language in transgender discourse.⁶

McCracken: *What do you feel has been the broader impact and legacy of the identity work of these gender/sexual minorities on Tumblr?*

Oakley: When I first started my research on Tumblr, I found an amazing piece of bathroom stall graffiti. In the below figure 27.1, you can see a pretty nuanced conversation about gender, especially for a bathroom stall, but the best part is the quip at the bottom right hand corner: “Go back to Tumblr.”

The reason I love this is because it indicates that Tumblr is pretty widely recognized for its contributions to conversations about heteronormativity and nonbinary genders and sexual orientations. Tumblr definitely has impact. It has impact in forwarding our informal understandings of nonbinary genders and sexual orientations, it has impact on the nonbinary persons who seek various kinds of support there, and it has impact on activism because conversations about activism thrive there. These conversations impact those who see them to be able to speak about them outside of Tumblr, changing our discussion writ large about these topics.

Dame-Griff: Thinking historically (which is where I’ve been lately), Tumblr is among the most clearly counterpublic of the various online platforms. Trans users have a long history of using digital means to communicate, from the earliest days of bulletin board systems (BBSs) onward, and none of their practices, like linguistic innovation, are Tumblr-specific. But these were largely enclave spheres owned and maintained by transgender administrators. This isn’t possible on a corporate platform, from early walled gardens like AOL to contemporaries like Facebook. The social norms on corporate platforms aren’t set by an invested community member, but a company serving millions of users. Tumblr’s binary public/private privacy options in particular make establishing an enclave impossible; *only* a counterpublic can survive there. Users can discuss issues with each other, but unlike in an enclave, that sharing is



Fig. 27.1. Bathroom stall graffiti with a critique of gender and sexual binaries provoking the response “Go back to Tumblr,” 2014

visible at a platform level. The openness and spread of discourse make Tumblr unique: transgender terminology and concepts travel throughout the platform and into the public sphere much more quickly than on other platforms. How users adapted to this porosity will, I think, be Tumblr's longest-standing legacy.

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Developing a Black Genderfluid Feminist Critique via Tumblr

Strugglingtobeheard

Strugglingtobeheard works as a therapeutic mentor for youth coping with mental illness and trauma. She has three cats and is going back to school to become a licensed therapist.

My Tumblr experience began in April 2011, when I was twenty-three years old and a junior in college. Prior to joining Tumblr, I had some experience with social media sites like Facebook and MySpace and a few journaling sites and online chat/interest groups. At the time I turned to Tumblr, I was looking for information about Black feminism and queerness. I was majoring in sociology and was passionate about it. Also, I had been in a relationship with a cissexual heterosexual man for years that had just ended. I had identified as bisexual and had been out since age fourteen. I was, however, going through an identity crisis and confused and looking for answers. My queerness had always been present, but in becoming single I was really unsure what that meant for me in my adult life.

First, I discovered the *Crunk Feminist Collective*, an online (non-Tumblr) blog dedicated to Black feminism and feminist thought. Two of the bloggers there were scholars Dr. Moya Bailey and Dr. Alexis Pauline Gumbs. They also wrote on other feminist outlets, including blogs on Tumblr, which I began following. Both were completing PhD programs and were providing easy to understand, accessible history and background on Black feminism. Dr. Gumbs' Tumblr blog, *Blackfeminismlives*, had a side blog that allowed users to send Asks for advice on various topics, anonymously if they liked. This made me decide to create my own Tumblr, *Strugglingtobeheard*, so I could send Asks and follow other blogs and have them follow me.

It was here the Tumblr community made me feel like I was really embraced. I received some amazing advice and had the true feeling of being heard and listened to. This really struck me and was what made me start blogging on

the platform. On *Strugglingtobeheard*, I would write my own posts and post pictures. In order to get followers, I would send messages or respond to certain posts of the blogs I followed, which allowed me to create a solid network of mostly Black people and people of color of varying sexualities and genders. It was the diversity and expansiveness of this group that helped me to understand more of myself.

When I first joined Tumblr, I did not know anything about being genderfluid or nonbinary. I knew trans people existed but in a very white context. I had never heard the terms and I lived in a predominantly white city. I belonged to a Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA) in high school but I was the only Black student. The health teacher who facilitated the group brought some trans-identified people to class, but they were white. A lot of white discussions of gender in general felt unhealthy and stuck on a binary regardless of whether one was trans or not. Men did certain things. Women did certain things. One could change their gender identity, but they would still have to do things according to that identity.

So on Tumblr, it meant a lot to see others of varying genders who weren't white because it allowed me to see myself. Reading mostly Black queer people write about their gender and sexual identities was often like looking in a mirror. Things that I knew about myself but did not know how to confront I found on the blog spaces of so many Black people I followed. The discussion of loving people of all genders, of identifying and loving across a gender binary were all things that spoke to my soul and that I had not heard discussed prior to my joining. Engaging with peers, youth, and those who were my elders on Tumblr helped to really expand the possibilities around sexual/gender identities for me and then how I could expand upon my own identity to feel more whole or complete. My Tumblr elders did a great job of providing autobiographical and historical writing showing Black people discussing these feelings and identities as far back as the early 1800s. Mary Jones, a Black trans woman and sex worker in 1830s New York City, was one story that stood out for me. This was a history I had never learned! Dr. Gumbs also shared interviews on her Tumblr that she had conducted for own research, the Elder Black Lesbian mobile project.

Tumblr allowed me to find a place where my words, my ideas, my writing, and what I had to share were honored, respected, and reciprocated. It also provided space to process what I was learning from others. We extended our Tumblr community in private video chat groups on TinyChat, posting a call to join and making users send a private message to get the site information. Here we shared a lot of our hopes, dreams, trauma, and anger. We shared the

ways we fumbled in a world not designed to support us, to identify who we truly are and what we truly liked, wanted, and aspired to. This is also where we discussed the terms that did and did not work for us, the politics that we could not stand, and who and how we fucked or did not fuck. The connections that began on Tumblr eventually also led to late-night video chats, phone calls, and text messages.

Having this experience helped me to feel part of a community. My blog focused on reblogging Black feminist writing and scholarly work, as well as creating my own content. In May 2012, I made a video called “Twerk for Mother’s Day.” The video was meant to discuss my appreciation for Black mothers, to dismiss respectability politics and put a queer spin on a Mother’s Day gift. Many of my friends and people I did not know loved the video. I got a lot of praise and thanks from people who felt it broadened their view of the ways respectability politics can be so restrictive, and they felt affirmed as Black mothers who may be poor, queer, trans, etc. It inspired me to keep writing and producing similar content while expanding my commitment to Black feminist and womanist thought.

This video also led to an amazing opportunity for me to go to the Allied Media Conference and do a “skillshare workshop” for the group Shawty Got Skillz. Shawty Got Skillz was a Black feminist collective of sorts that did skillshare sessions where one could share a skill with other marginalized folks interested in learning it. They operated on and offline and I had been getting closer to two of the founders, Dr. Bailey and Dr. Gumbs. Skills varied and included coding, beekeeping, DJing, or, in my instance, twerking. Dr. Bailey asked me if I would be willing to do a twerk skillshare session after the success of my video. I agreed to do it if they could help me access housing and transport, and they raised the money.

This was my first time traveling alone, traveling to Detroit and going to a conference of this sort. But it was also a chance to meet people I had chatted with online and actually exchange these ideas face-to-face and affirm that this was all real. The lack of community and others in my life that identified in these ways made it almost surreal to finally find people who felt and thought similarly to me. I was overwhelmed with emotion during the conference at times, taking space to cry several times and take it all in. It was an ultimate affirmation of who I was and how I could be myself and still be loved and respected by people from so many places. To see these people and see myself in them, to receive guidance and appreciation from others for my own words, it was a lot in the best way.

With all the positives, however, came a lot of negatives. Tumblr was a

place where we had to be hypervigilant around safety, keeping parts of our identity private (real names, locations, etc.), and a place where we dealt with threats from others regularly. These threats ranged from personal attacks in inboxes (of rape or physical assault for beliefs/identity) to the extreme of stalking (users had to get restraining orders or constantly shift their online identities/locations to avoid some very unsafe people). This was the reason I never used my real name on Tumblr, why most people only knew what state I lived in, and why I let everyone know I was living with a man at the time. Safety was paramount and an important aspect of how one had to interact with Tumblr at all times. Usually it was white straight people making these threats, but occasionally it was white queer people, or, sadly, other Black people, usually cishet.

This is when theories and lived experience of anti-Blackness and misogynoir became very important to me, my writing, and how I navigated Tumblr. The threats of violence online replicated the very real violence Black people regularly experienced offline at the hands of non-Black people all over the world. Black queer and trans people, particularly those who identified as woman or femme, made easy targets on Tumblr due to always being easy and constant targets offline. And there were other forms of misogynoir, such as when prominent white feminists stole our work and our words without credit.¹ In the beginning, it was harder to defend ourselves without active block features on Tumblr or a supportive staff that adequately addressed the concerns of marginalized people, but users with programming knowledge helped create tools to block, redirect, or avoid certain traffic on pages. Some users with coding skills made or utilized technologies to help us protect one another as well.

Anti-Black attacks and threats affected so many people's mental health, including mine. It was again through Tumblr that I was also able to get the courage to begin understanding more about my own mental health, specifically the effects on me of anti-Blackness, misogynoir, white supremacy, poverty, and PTSD (eventually, this led to me finding a therapist and getting diagnosed). This learning informed me of the ways trauma can fuel some of our reactions but also propel us into spaces we need to thrive. With this knowledge, I saw how many of us struggled with our own mental health and that often these online spaces were a double-edged sword that gave us reprieve from parts of the world while still being unable to avoid its very structures of anti-Blackness, anti-queerness, etc. Personal and political liberation always comes with a price. Tumblr was yet another space that made this evident, and the cost was always highest for those most marginalized by the world

(Black, queer, trans, poor). Eventually, the mental cost led me to take a step back from the platform.

After about seven and half years of use, I am forever grateful for the Tumblr platform although, like myself, many of the people I have grown with now rarely use it. Tumblr is a space where language evolved and the use of words such as anti-Blackness, misogynoir, transmisogynoir, and many other important terms became part of our liberation vocabulary. It has been a place where our community helped many poor members, myself included, survive by raising funds for housing, medical costs, transition costs, etc. Now I see it as a coming-of-age space that is important for young queer folks of color in particular, who are finding and building community there. The platform, however, is one that has never truly honored its backbone, the ones who keep it going. It has never provided Black queer people with real protections, and as a result it will never truly be safe. Tumblr is a land mine one has to navigate. Now, a new generation of Black queer youth is navigating the space. Black youth will always push us into radical and transformative territories while adding to our liberation lexicon and theories, which will be exciting to witness.

NOTE

1. For more on this subject, see “We Are More Than Footnotes: Black Women and Intellectual Theft” by Aisha Mahmud, chapter 11 in this volume.

#Spoonielife

A Conversation about Chronic Pain Expression and Alternative Social Worlds on Tumblr

Participants: EJ Gonzalez-Polledo and Jen Tarr

Moderated by: Allison McCracken

Dates: February 12, 2018–February 19, 2018

EJ Gonzalez-Polledo is senior lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at Goldsmiths, University of London. Gonzalez-Polledo is the author of *Transitioning: Matter, Gender, Thought* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2017) and co-editor of *Painscapes: Communicating Pain* (Palgrave, 2017) and *Queering Knowledge: Analytics, Devices and Investments after Marilyn Strathern* (Routledge, 2018).

Jen Tarr is senior lecturer in social science research methods at Newcastle University, UK. She is a health sociologist and qualitative researcher with a particular interest in visual cultures, including those in digital environments.

McCracken: *You both have written a great deal about how the advent of social media has impacted public expressions of chronic pain. Can you describe what you feel are the most significant of these effects and developments?*

Tarr: One of the most significant developments we found was the way that images and memes have the potential to remake the standard “illness narratives” that are usually identified in research on pain communication. Much of that research is about what people with pain say to clinicians about their pain and how they say it, but there is very little focus on what they say to each other or to other people in their lives. Chronic pain is usually seen as an isolating experience, one that is difficult to communicate to others and that leaves people feeling relatively unsupported. One thing that people do on social media, through images and

memes, is build communities of support and relate to others beyond the clinical context. Social media enables us to see some aspects of people dealing with pain in their everyday lives. People have been making images to express their pain in different ways for a long time, but the kind of networked communication enabled by social media is new and different, as is the ability for people to make and circulate images *themselves*, through digital photography, image editing software, and the like.

Social media also allows us to extend our understanding of chronic pain expressions beyond the illness narratives I mentioned. Much existing research on people's experiences of living with pain focuses on how they make those experiences into a story of some kind. But most images and memes don't have a clear narrative structure. That doesn't mean they're ineffective as forms of pain communication, it just means they do that work in different ways.

Gonzalez-Polledo: And I think what is even more specific about Tumblr, particularly because of how the platform evolves through the form of tumble logs, is that users receive a constant stream of content that is almost entirely media; there is text, of course, but primarily people can communicate an agency through a material, such as an image, rather than communicate a concept or idea through text. People living with long-term pain often have to make descriptions of their own experience fit with diagnostic tools that stifle all that is not deemed “essential” for a particular form of therapeutics. But then, living with long-term conditions can also make people wary of those therapeutics; they are necessary to live better but not necessarily conducive to improvement. So social media, and Tumblr in particular, have been essential in allowing people to create worlds in which it is possible to live otherwise. I agree with Rayna Rapp and Faye Ginsburg in their insistence that these worlds (they refer to “disability worlds”) must no longer be defined in medical terms. They involve biomedicine, sometimes, but they are primarily about living differently and finding ways of communicating that lead to epistemic justice.

McCracken: *Can you say more about how Tumblr enables formation of these “disability worlds?”*

Gonzalez-Polledo: When I started researching Tumblr in 2013, I was surprised about the kinds of hashtags that were posted around chronic

pain. There were hashtags that described clinical diagnoses, but most seemed to refer to ways of living with chronic illness. For example, these tags personalized descriptors, as in #chronicallyill, or referred to a shared everyday experience of illness. Descriptions of “spoonie culture” took hold of Tumblr as we developed our research in 2013–14. These were showing people who did not experience chronic pain what life with a long-term illness was like, following Christine Miserandino’s description of the spoon theory in a blog post, where a “spoon” represents the unit of energy required for a person with chronic pain to complete daily tasks.¹ The key point that “spoonie” communities on Tumblr particularly related to, in the course of my research, was a desire to make public what often is invisible in everyday life, such as care relations or the effects of medicalization, as well as establishing links to other ways of communicating about illness online and offline, for example, by being critical of the social and cultural invisibility of long term pain. #spoonielife, #spooniestrong, #spoonieproblems exposed everyday challenges, but did so in a particular language, using an infectious tone, humor, and sarcasm. So in my view, as more people engaged with these memes, a community formed around playing with the indeterminacy of meanings of illness, and the performative inventions that circulating and transforming a meme brings about. After some time, these memes articulated around themselves a community of participation united by a common stance, a shared social world. We collected some of these memes in an open research blog, which is accessible at <https://communicatingchronicpain.tumblr.com/#141103589023>.

Tarr: Tumblr was a real contrast to Flickr in that sense, which was the other image-sharing site we researched. We looked at images that were tagged “chronic pain” and at groups where people posted images related to pain. “Spoonie” as a term is not used very much on Flickr. Tags are usually about pain or specific health conditions. When people post images about pain, these are much more about showing or revealing, making visible experiences of pain and what daily life is like when you have pain. Although Flickr has some affordances for engaging with other users via discussion boards for groups, including favoriting an image and commenting on others’ images, there wasn’t a huge amount of interaction on the images and groups we studied. Flickr doesn’t have the same kind of thriving exchange and community building that has developed on Tumblr. Of course, photos are often personal and individual, whereas

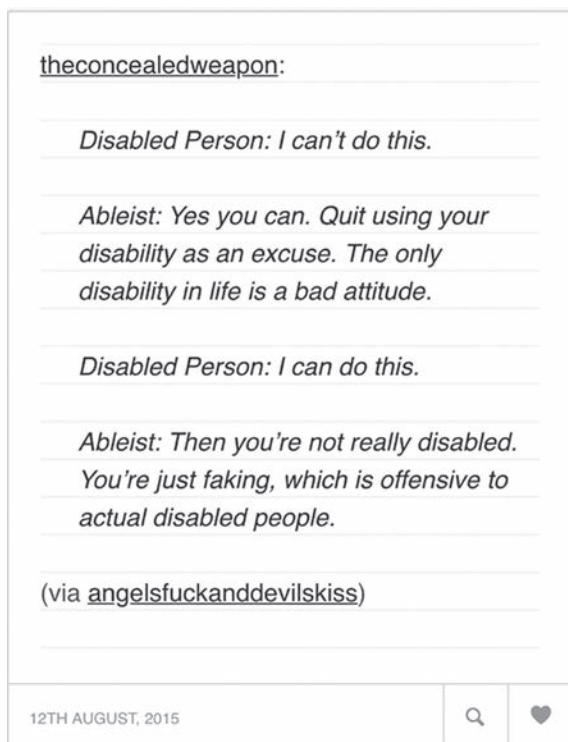


Fig. 29.1. Post critiquing ableism, by The Concealed Weapon

memes tend to have wider currency. So it's also about the affordances of the medium. But Tumblr as a platform promotes much more networked, less individualized forms of engagement.

McCracken: *Do you see this network building on Tumblr as related to or reflective of the perception of it as a “social justice” or activist platform?*

Gonzalez-Polledo: In my view, while Tumblr did become a space that afforded unforeseen kinds of discussion for many different groups, who saw in Tumblr an opportunity to have meaningful discussions about issues, we should not underestimate the particular circumstances in which blogging brings together issues, people, and wider social processes. My view is that for chronic illness activists Tumblr emerged as a way of figuring out and subverting life politics as usual. This does not mean that Tumblr became necessarily a safe space for everybody living

with a chronic illness, but that it allowed collective orientations through the formation of “boundary publics” that questioned mainstream understandings of health. Mary Gray defines boundary publics as social spaces that produce new conditions for political or sociocultural work, by disrupting taken-for-granted divisions between private and public, for example by making social identities visible, normal, or “safe.”² I am using Gray’s concept here because it was formulated to link social media to the emergence of a new public sphere for LGBT+ youths in rural America, but work on Tumblr’s trans communities and queer communities of color also reflects an iterative, artistic, and even speculative use of Tumblr as a place where practice, activism, and emerging collective identities converge in ways not completely foreseeable.

Spoonie cultures on Tumblr also employ images creatively to subvert and play with meaning, but in my view the particularities of activism around chronic pain emerge from a situated need to make illness visible beyond the language of biomedicine, and are based on a connective logic that is shaped by constant content circulation, which comes in and out of people’s everyday worlds. I think multiple kinds of support are to be found in this live stream; it gives back a liveable image of social and cultural worlds.

Tarr: From a health sociology perspective, digital developments are obviously changing how people engage with one another around health and illness. Internet cultures around health have sometimes been framed in terms of the democratization of information, the ability to educate oneself about a condition or participate in discussions with other people with the same condition to get support, but the types of health activism we see springing up in places like Tumblr go far beyond this. They are about positioning users as active, critical agents who are building worlds that, as EJ says, are *liveable* in a different way. In sociology we often refer back to Mills’ (1959) work on how “private troubles” can be understood as “public issues.”³ Spoonie cultures are a great example of that, in the way that chronic illness or chronic pain become socialized and politicized. Early work on digital environments in relation to health looked at exchanges on discussion boards, but unlike those environments, what is offered here is not just about individual stories and support but about distilling something from everyday experience, encounters, frustrations, into moments that are relatable, moments that highlight and challenge ableism (figure 29.1).

McCracken: *In your view, what have been some of the most important broader social and institutional impacts of health activist interventions on Tumblr and social media more generally?*

Gonzalez-Polledo: The proliferation of communication about pain and illness on social media has led some health service providers to place a lot more emphasis on health communication as a key therapeutic element, but in my view we are still a long way away from equalizing clinical and popular definitions of pain. What is emerging as an important consequence, however, is the development of artificial intelligence applications in pain management. I think this could be seen to emerge from increasing levels of digital literacy and an opportunity for commercialization that builds on how digital technologies increasingly become an everyday feature of illness worlds.

But alongside their possible effects on clinical environments, media ecologies leave behind a kind of memory in motion. Media ecologies point to the interrelation between actors and processes in media systems, as Fuller has pointed out, but allow us to understand the digital archive as a site of negotiations, interactions, play, and speculation, an affective resource that can be mobilized to serve multiple needs in the present.⁴

Tarr: I think there is as a broader awareness of social media as a place where something is happening with regard to chronic pain, but there is still an unfortunate tendency among those who are unfamiliar with digital environments to distrust people on the internet: the old “is anyone who they say they are?” digital dualism that suspects people are essentially different online than they are offline. I hope with time spaces like Tumblr will be understood as sites that pain researchers and clinicians might learn from, spaces where people with pain share things outside and beyond a clinical context that may be really key in understanding how people live with pain. Social media is a potentially rich source for such information. That’s not to suggest that we should treat social media as a large, free database of experiences. There are ethical issues about protecting users’ privacy, and it is important to recognize that sharing something to social media is not the same as giving researchers permission to use what you have shared.

But for people with pain who do get clinical help, there’s often a



Fig. 29.2. Chronic pain community meme, from a popular meme generator

problem of making the chronicity of pain visible in a short consultation: how it fluctuates across time, the ways it influences daily life at a micro level (as the meme above suggests) and not just at a macro level (e.g. “I can no longer work”). I think social media has tremendous potential for supporting greater mutual understanding.

NOTES

1. Christine Miserandino, “The Spoon Theory,” <https://butyoudontlooksick.com/articles/written-by-christine/the-spoon-theory/>.

2. Mary L. Gray, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Modern America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).
3. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).
4. Matthew Fuller, *Media Ecologies: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

New Ways of Seeing

Tumblr, Young People, and Mental Illness

Natalie Ann Hendry

Natalie Ann Hendry is a vice chancellor's postdoctoral fellow at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University, Melbourne, Australia.

My research began with being frustrated. After working for several years as a teacher in adolescent inpatient psychiatric care, based in Melbourne, Australia, I started a research degree to explore mental health and social media. At the time, in 2013, much of what I had encountered about young people using social media to engage with issues of mental illness had focused exclusively on images of self-injury and suicidal ideation. These images, of course, can be distressing for parents and carers, so perhaps it is not surprising that they drew so much attention. But what I was reading seemed too simple and ignored young people's diverse experiences—including the often conflicting and complex feelings they had about their health—and the many different ways they used social media.

My fieldwork at a youth mental health service continued to demonstrate a disconnect between clinical and academic narratives about youth and the way these young people were actually *using* social media, particularly Tumblr, to make sense of their experiences and to form connections with other people. The stories they told me emphasized that making mental illness visible can include more than just self-injury images or explicit references to emotional distress. Instead, they expressed mental health concerns through, for example, sharing hashtags or reblogging humorous memes. In this essay, I advocate for alternative, more user-based approaches to understanding mental health and its circulation on social media. I focus on young people's use of Tumblr because of its popularity among my participants during this period. The platform's affordances offered them new forms of expression and, therefore, new ways of seeing for me, allowing me to shift my focus away from images of self-injury to consider the wider array of "visibilities" the platform indicated.

By “visibility,” I mean more than just the visual images users share. Mental illness is made “visible” on Tumblr through images or videos but also through creating, sharing, and reblogging various kinds of posts, hashtags, emoticons, and other symbols that reflect not only individual pain and distress but also community support and empathy. These visuals are less spectacular but equally important user practices. We also ignore how Tumblr itself affords authenticity to expressions and experiences of mental illness through *both* identified and unidentified practices, including text- and image-based activities that mitigate emotional distress.

As examples of alternative approaches, I share two conceptual frames based on my work with young people: visibility as recognition and representation, and visibility as emotional authenticity and recovery. The first example explains how “chat” posts, memes, and hashtags provide opportunities to make socially visible experiences of borderline personality disorder (BPD) that are otherwise hidden or misrecognized. The second example relies less on platform vernacular and more on how Tumblr provides a safe space for users to engage in emotionally authentic visual practices, even if reblogged images are not explicitly or directly related to mental illness (and therefore can remain inscrutable to outsiders). I found that users experiencing anxiety often affectively connect with images in therapeutic ways that do not directly refer to mental illness.

My findings demonstrate that the way in which young people use Tumblr to express their mental illness is far more complex than most researchers and practitioners have considered, and it encourages us to think more broadly about how mental illness is made visible and circulated on social media. As researchers and practitioners, we need to understand how individual platforms work; we must more closely investigate text- and platform-based communication networks rather than simply decontextualize individual images for analysis. By engaging with young people and the multiplicity of visual practices they use to share their experiences of mental illness and distress, we can consider how such expressions may, in fact, offer us important therapeutic insights and opportunities for greater care and understanding.

TUMBLR AND VISIBILITY

Outside of Tumblr Dashboards, what is often visible about mental illness in popular discourses is that which discriminates, alienates, and marginalizes people experiencing it by adopting words like “crazy” or “schizo” that stig-

matize ill health or distress, or by depicting horrific asylums or psychiatric wards.¹ Such popular references do little to illuminate what is habitually a less spectacular and more mundane and exhausting experience. As a result, much of the everyday work of being depressed, distressed, or hearing voices remains publicly ignored or unappreciated. People living with mental illness must manage confusion and isolation, cope with boredom in clinic waiting rooms and underfunded services, and negotiate relationships with friends and family who may not “get it.” Young people especially face the persistent anxiety that comes with exposure to stigma and the uncertainty of how others see them.

During the years of my initial research in the early 2010s, the idea of Tumblr as a “dark space” circulated in psychology papers, clinical seminars, and media-panicked online news, further stigmatizing young people’s experiences.² One question that continually emerged from this discourse—“Is Tumblr detrimental or beneficial for mental health?”—echoed earlier and contemporary debates about platforms and websites as utopian or dystopian, debates that generally amplified anxieties about media as only ever harmful or contagious.³

Researchers in the mid-2010s who explored social media, Tumblr, and mental health continued to largely concentrate these debates around the most visible affordances of the platform; their work was dominated by studies of images of self-injury, such as those depicting cutting or other gestures of pain and depression.⁴ Such research reflected the assumption that this specific content was most distressing to users or that this content could only ever normalize or reinforce potentially harmful behaviors or feelings. Although these studies were motivated by sincere—and crucial—efforts to prevent and intervene in distress and mental illness, they did not adequately examine how these users engaged with the diverse, conflicting, and often ambiguous content that circulates through Tumblr.

My own research working with Tumblr users during this period made clear that this methodological transference didn’t fit; in the case of Tumblr in particular, such approaches did not address or appreciate the specific affordances of the platform or the many ways that users employ them for self-care and connection. The way posts concerning mental illness, emotional distress, and emotional relief circulate through Tumblr’s images, hashtags, chat posts, and memes is complex and often ambiguous and is not conducive to simple content analysis. Such approaches do not create space to explore the way Tumblr users, especially young people, experience what circulates there.

My use of “visibility” here also refers to how, in different ways, platforms

make practices and people visible to others: to see and be seen. Unlike platforms such as Facebook or Instagram, Tumblr affords the visibility of shared *interests* (e.g., reblogging) more easily than the visibility of its *users*. Because users employ pseudonyms on Tumblr, they are able to control what is visible about them. They are also not required to provide information that would identify them, such as a photo of themselves or information about where they live, as a condition of their participation. This pseudonymity and control of visibility has important social and political implications; to be “seen” is often associated with one’s position or inclusion in a society or community, and how we interpret what we see has ramifications for how we live in the world.

Because users can better control their visibility on Tumblr, the platform provides a safer space for them to identify and explore emotions without feeling pressured or that they are burdensome to their friends or family. At the same time, Tumblr makes visible to us young people’s “bedroom” experiences that might otherwise remain hidden or obscured. These are often interpreted by the public and by clinicians unfamiliar with the platform in ways that make it more difficult for people to seek support and empathy.⁵ Given the stigmatization of mental illness, this is a significant concern, which is why it is so vital to better understand how young people use Tumblr.

VISIBILITY AS BPD RECOGNITION AND REPRESENTATION

Self-injury (or self-harm) on social media is sometimes attributed to borderline personality disorder (BPD) traits in young people.⁶ Yet in some of my early Tumblr research I found that self-injury content (including images of injuring practices) was often disconnected from other BPD content or, at least, I was unable to see a clear link between them. I discovered that, in fact, BPD is visible on Tumblr largely through hashtags, conversation (“chat”) posts, or quote posts that represent users’ social frustrations in their experience of BPD. At the same time, these posts establish expertise and authenticity for these users.

BPD is listed as a mental disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, a classification system used by psychiatrists and psychologists to make decisions about how to diagnose and treat an individual’s psychiatric symptoms.⁷ As one classification, BPD includes experiencing chronic feelings of emptiness, impulsivity, emotional distress, self-injury, and suicidal ideation. People living with BPD experience an unstable sense of self that can often foster unstable interpersonal relationships, including difficulty

coping with abandonment.⁸ They may also engage in “splitting” as a way to avoid feeling hurt or rejected by others. Splitting refers to erratic thinking that shifts between idealization and then devaluation of a person or oneself; it positions others, or oneself, as either good or bad, with no “gray area” in between.⁹

Unlike other mental disorders like depression, the legitimacy of BPD as a diagnosis is controversial and stigmatized, with BPD often perceived—even by mental health professionals—as an individual character flaw (mostly of women) rather than something people experience as an illness or as a way for them to make sense of pain or trauma.¹⁰ Critics argue that as a diagnosis, BPD disempowers people because clinicians focus on patient classification rather than alleviating distress or addressing trauma. Others counter, however, that a diagnosis can relieve and reassure people, helping them to make sense of confusion or uncertainty.¹¹

For many Tumblr users, legitimating the diagnosis—and their suffering—is very important. Tumblr users make BPD visible through common hashtags linked to posts, such as #bpd, #bpdproblems, #borderlinefeels and #tbpdfw (“that BPD feel when”). Other hashtags such as #actuallybpd or #actuallyborderline construct BPD as an authentic experience, distinguishing it from “just” being “difficult” or “attention-seeking.” Tumblr users often capitalize or trademark illnesses or diagnoses around BPD as a humorous gesture toward authenticity, for example The Disorder™ and Borderline™. These practices connect users and allow them to curate shared knowledge, experiences, and feelings. Hashtags channel posts, making them searchable and amplifying the value of the content beyond an individual Tumblr account.¹² BPD-tagged posts often refer to the feelings of living with trauma, dissociation, and emotional instability. Through reblogging this hashtagged content, users recirculate things that resonate with their own experiences, thus collectively producing an emotionally and socially “authentic” sense of BPD. Even though these practices employ impersonal and clinical psychiatric

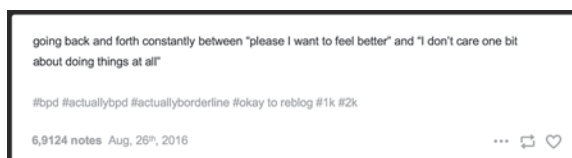


Fig. 30.1. #actuallyborderline post. This post and the two below are a modified representations of existing Tumblr posts according to Markham’s guidelines of ethical fabrication

language through hashtags and posts, users translate and reconfigure them in ways that express what it feels like to live with mental illness (figure 30.1).¹³

These collective practices and vernacular produce an affective BPD “community” on Tumblr, in which shared language, hashtags, and the visual structure of posts help users cope with how BPD is disruptive, distressing, or misrecognized by others. This community on Tumblr is distinct from mental health support groups or services that may not sustain their emotional or social therapeutic needs.

As one example, BPD conversations shared through the “chat” post format express the struggle between one person and their BPD “feelings” and/or the frustration with others who don’t understand BPD. Sometimes these posts represent an internal struggle between an individual and BPD, their brain, or the illness: me and also me, me and brain, me and my BPD. Other posts depict imagined dialogue between an individual and an “other”: me and you, me and them, me and a person, me and a friend. The posts can also establish the changeability of emotions over time or in different circumstances: me and me five seconds later, me and me at night, me and me alone (figure 30.2).

Me: That was reckless. Probs best not to do that.

Also me: “~_(\`)/_”

8 MONTHS AGO / 180,493 NOTES

I WILL DO IT ANYWAY # BPD # SPLITTING # OKAY TO REBLOG

Fig. 30.2. Me and Also me conversation post, including the shrug emoticon “~_(\`)/_” to express uncertainty or a lack of care about something or an event. This post is a modified representation of an existing Tumblr post

BPD posts may also refer to a “favorite person” or “FP” (sometimes hashtagged #fp), a person that someone living with BPD identifies as most important to them, and who they may (often unrealistically) rely on for connection or validation. “FP” is not a clinical term and seems to have emerged from BPD communities on Tumblr (I was unable to find references to “FP” on other platforms). In employing “FP,” users are converting the clinical concept of “splitting” into a shared Tumblr vernacular to convey the “black-and-white” thinking characteristic of BPD. Users may express ambivalent feelings towards their “FP” in chat posts by remarking on their behavior or thoughts prior to and after interaction with an FP. This humorous vernacular is not unique to BPD posts; it follows the patterns of other memes on Tumblr (and other platforms) that rely on dialogic structure. These posts playfully make

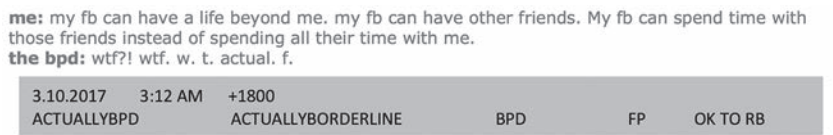


Fig. 30.3. #actuallybpd conversation post between “me” and “thebpd.” This post is a modified representation of an existing Tumblr post

fun of the user’s desire both to feel “normal” or in control and to simultaneously recognize human failure and imperfection (figure 30.3).

Tumblr’s platform vernacular of hashtags, chat posts, and memes reflects the way “each social media platform comes to have its own unique combination of styles, grammars, and logics.”¹⁴ While users’ humor may seem self-deprecating, it demonstrates their untenable social position, one in which those perceived as having BPD are dismissed as attention-seeking or difficult. The chat posts establish relatability, affinities, and recognition among people who share the frustrations of living with BPD, especially dealing with its social stigma. At the same time, as memes, they construct social hierarchies of belonging between insiders who “get it” and outsiders who don’t.¹⁵ These chat posts share the internal conversations or thoughts that characterize experiences of BPD that may otherwise be dismissed or derided.

VISIBILITY AS AUTHENTICITY AND RECOVERY

My second example explores Tumblr images that might not seem to be related to mental illness or may have multiple meanings for different users and contexts This example draws on my in-depth interviews and platform analysis research with young women under eighteen who were engaged with a youth psychiatric service in Melbourne, Australia.¹⁶ Here, I focus on experiences of anxiety and anxiety disorders.

These young women were highly attuned to visibility on social media. For them, visibility was about how others saw them: as women, as young people, and as people experiencing mental illness. They faced the tiring challenge of needing to be “seen” on multiple platforms to successfully manage school, family, and friendships, all while struggling with their health. These women acknowledged that although social media didn’t necessarily produce these pressures, most platforms made them visible in undesired ways that made

them vulnerable to embarrassment or hurtful peer judgment. For example, others could see images they posted to shared Facebook photo albums, or their “likes” on friends’ Instagram posts.

These young women explained that talking about their anxiety was exhausting, and at times others required them to justify how authentic their anxiety was, potentially leading to negative critique. They each described how peers and family members would sometimes minimize or misrecognize their emotional distress, assuming that their clinical anxiety disorder was the same everyday anxiety with which most people are familiar. This conceptual ambiguity increased the potential for their anxiety to be misunderstood, misinterpreted, or dismissed.

Tumblr, however, differed from other platforms in providing some relief for these young women. “Beatrix” explained that Tumblr afforded a space for her to collect and reblog images that made her feel less anxious and more connected to a larger group.¹⁷ Some of the images she reblogged expressed fatigue or boredom, others disconnection and loneliness. Some were fashion photographs of styles, colors, or objects that evoked and affirmed the moods she was feeling. Other images included words or quotes that emphasized emotions she recognized as familiar and those she desired for her future. The images were rarely hashtagged or captioned with words related to mental illness. Even as these were—to her—visible expressions of how she felt, they are ones unlikely to be captured through a content analysis or datamining search of #anxiety or #depression hashtags.¹⁸ Her therapeutic blog could thus easily be dismissed by clinicians and others as irrelevant or unimportant, especially as it did not include distressing self-injury images or suicidal quotes.

Like other women in my study, Beatrix didn’t converse with other Tumblr users, but she enjoyed feeling like she was part of something bigger, without the “work” she felt was required in actively talking to people. She described her Tumblr blog as an “art gallery” in which she could share her interests and experiences without directly engaging with others (nor they with her) and without having to justify her posts or defend the authenticity of her anxiety. Although her images were reblogged, she considered them to be personal and “real” to her because they felt emotionally authentic to her experience, even though she did not share images she herself had photographed or images of herself. These young women experienced relief from the pressures and frustrations associated with being visible, identifiable, and accountable to others on other platforms because, by curating images on Tumblr, they were able to *feel* in control of *how* and to *whom* they were visible.¹⁹

For Beatrix, these practices were “therapy.” She described her Tumblr

use as being explicitly connected to her clinical therapy work. For her, such engagements included scrolling through Tumblr as well as reblogging posts; scrolling provided relief and reassurance without the work of justifying her emotions to a therapist or of having to actively manage her mental state when at school or at home. Through Tumblr, she felt recognized and affirmed. Even though users were mostly unknown to each other and didn't converse, participants in my research described a sense of community or imagined community emerging from the visibility of others reblogging content that they could relate to; in fact, they described these as "communities" on the basis of that visibility alone. Similar to Tumblr users in the first example who found community through their BPD-related posts, reblogging images that resonated with their anxiety provided these young women with a sense of emotional recognition and belonging that alleviated the isolation of mental illness. They experienced this community as a safe space where the authenticity of mental illness was not challenged, but rather facilitated through affective recognition.

CONCLUSION

Exploring Tumblr and mental illness through the way users control and experience how they are seen by others urges us to think broadly and ethically about how we research discourses of mental illness on the platform and on social media generally. We must revise our idea of what an image of mental illness might look like instead of relying on decontextualized images of distress. We must consider everyday and indirect visual practices as well as the spectacular and explicit. We must recognize the way specific platforms like Tumblr can provide users with a therapeutic "community" space within which to feel recognized, understood, and affirmed without having to "fix" themselves in that moment, and we need to better understand how they do this through close analysis of the platforms themselves *and* by working directly with the communities that use them. By better understanding how young people on Tumblr who experience mental illness are able to develop personal self-knowledge, share communication codes, and negotiate social misrecognition of their emotional experiences, we can inform future education and therapeutic work within these communities. And in doing so, we can better acknowledge how users *themselves* are forming these therapeutic online community spaces away from family and friends in order to do vital emotional work toward hope and recovery.

NOTES

1. In this essay, I use the word “mental illness” to capture emotional distress, mental disorders, and psychopathology including and excluding clinical diagnoses. The term was preferred by participants in my research, but I equally acknowledge the important criticism of it (see, for example Jane Ussher, *The Madness of Women: Myth and Experience* (London: Routledge, 2011).
2. See, for example, Alice Montague, Kandice Varcin, and Alexandra Parker, *Putting Technology into Practice: Evidence and Opinions on Integrating Technology with Youth Health Services* (Melbourne, Australia: Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre, 2014), 37; and, later, Nina Jacob, Rhiannon Evans, and Jonathan Scourfield, “The Influence of Online Images on Self-harm: A Qualitative Study of Young People Aged 16–24,” *Journal of Adolescence* no. 60 (2017): 140–47.
3. Natalie Ann Hendry, Brady Robards, and Sonya Stanford, “Beyond Social Media Panics for ‘At Risk’ Youth,” in *Beyond the Risk Paradigm in Mental Health Policy and Practice*, ed. Sonya Stanford, Elaine Sharland, Nina Heller, and Joanne Warner (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 135–54.
4. Patricia Cavazos-Rehg, Melissa Krauss, Shaina Sowles, Sarah Connolly, Carlos Rosas, Meghana Bharadwaj, and Laura Bierut, “An Analysis of Depression, Self-harm, and Suicidal Ideation Content on Tumblr,” *Crisis* (2016): 1–9; Yukari Seko and Stephen Lewis, “The Self-Harmed, Visualized, and Reblogged: Remaking of Self-Injury Narratives on Tumblr,” *New Media & Society* (2016): 1–9.
5. danah boyd, Alice Marwick, Parry Aftab, and Maeve Koeltl, “The Conundrum of Visibility: Youth Safety and the Internet,” *Journal of Children and Media*, 3 no. 4 (2009): 410–19.
6. Stephen Lewis and Alexis Arbutnott, “Non-Suicidal Self-Injury: Characteristics, Functions, and Strategies,” *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy* 26, no. 3 (2012): 185–200; Lily Feinn, “9 Signs Your Friend has Borderline Personality Disorder,” *Bustle*, March 5, 2016, <https://www.bustle.com/articles/142966-9-signs-your-friend-has-borderline-personality-disorder>.
7. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th Ed.)* (Washington: American Psychiatric Association, 2013).
8. Jutta Stoffers, Birgit Völm, Gerta Rücker, Antje Timmer, Nick Huband, and Klaus Lieb, “Psychological Therapies for Borderline Personality Disorder,” *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* (2012): 8.
9. John Gunderson, “Borderline Personality Disorder,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 364, no. 21 (2011): 2037–42.
10. Pamela Bjorklund, “No Man’s Land: Gender Bias and Social Constructivism in the Diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder,” *Issues in Mental Health Nursing* 27, no. 1 (2006): 3–23.
11. Marie Crowe, “Personality Disorders: Illegitimate Subject Positions,” *Nursing Inquiry* 15, no. 3 (2008): 216–23.

12. Anthony McCosker, "Tagging Depression: Social Media and the Segmentation of Mental Health," in *Digital Media: Transformations in Human Communication (2nd Ed., revised)*, ed. Paul Messaris and Lee Humphreys (New York: Peter Lang, 2016), 31–39.
13. Seko and Lewis, "The Self-Harmed, Visualized, and Reblogged," 1–9.
14. Martin Gibbs, James Meese, Michael Arnold, Bjorn Nansen, and Marcus Carter, "#Funeral and Instagram: Death, Social Media, and Platform Vernacular," *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 3 (2015): 255–68.
15. Akane Kanai, "Sociality and Classification: Reading Gender, Race, and Class in a Humorous Meme," *Social Media + Society* 2, no. 4 (2016).
16. Natalie Ann Hendry, "Everyday Anxieties: Young Women, Mental Illness and Social Media Practices of Visibility and Connection" (PhD diss., RMIT University, Melbourne, 2017).
17. Each participant in my study chose the pseudonyms used in the dissertation thesis and subsequent publications (Hendry, "Everyday Anxieties"). The RMIT University Human Research Ethics Committee and the Human Research Ethics Committee of the health service I worked with for my thesis project requested that I use pseudonyms in publications as the young women were under eighteen years old and considered minors.
18. Seko and Lewis, "The Self-Harmed, Visualized, and Reblogged," 1–9.
19. Alexander Cho, "Queer Reverb: Tumblr, Affect, Time," in *Networked Affect*, ed. Ken Hillis, Suzanne Paasonen, and Michael Petit (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015): 43–58.

SECTION 7

#myAesthetic

Tumblr is often beautiful. The platform circulates chiefly short-form, image-based content and generates affective power through suggestive aesthetic accumulation. Who knew that a simple feed of seemingly random captionless images, one after another, would be so compelling, even entrancing? The section's hashtag title, #myAesthetic, is Tumblr vernacular for the poster's use of an evocative image or images (such as the popular nine-frame "moodboard") to represent a set of stances, identities, or feelings. Through claiming and posting their aesthetics, users on the platform are able to discover and share themselves through visuals as surely as they do through written discussions, but with more immediacy and accessibility. Tumblr's visual emphasis has enabled a range of affinities, from highly particularized images of fashion choices and nail design to facial/bodily expressions, natural settings, words or phrases, and historical objects (maps, book designs, typefaces, art of all kinds).

But image and aesthetic are never consumed free from context and politics, and the essays in this section tug at particular threads of Tumblr's compelling visuality to unravel or reveal these intersections. We feature a conversation between scholar-artists Devon Murphy and Carla McCutchin, who emphasize the platform's particular advantage for sharing art as a way to build community with other artists and cultivate interest in their art among the general public. In her essay "Unofficial Archives of Urban Life," scholar Annette Koh explores the way expressive images of city spaces circulate on Tumblr, cultivating an affective relationship with cities past, present, and future, and in so doing narrating the urban as both personal and political. Christine Goding-Doty's essay "Beyond the Pale Blog" analyzes the platform's popular youth-generated "pale blogs" to demonstrate how Tumblr's aesthetic-based communities can effectively mask the work of white racial anxiety. Jen Malkowski is also interested in the operation of digital aesthetic hierarchies in her essay "Tumblr's Gallery of Loops," in which they examine the evaluative criteria that Tumblr users employ to assess and categorize

the artistic merit of individual GIFs. Finally, this section offers our Original Art Gallery, a compilation of works that the artists either created specifically for Tumblr or that gained audiences through Tumblr circulation; the gallery showcases some of the most common art forms on Tumblr and offers the artists' own commentaries about sharing their work on the platform.

On the Value of the Social: A Conversation with Researchers about How Artists Use Tumblr

Participants: Carla McCutchin and Devon Murphy

Moderated by: Alexander Cho

Dates: May 19–June 16, 2017

Carla McCutchin is a PhD student at Carleton University in Ontario, Canada. Carla's background as an artist influenced her research and participation in the Tumblr art community. Her research has expanded to investigating platform policies and crime prevention.

Devon Murphy has an MA in art history and an MSIS in information science from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Their studio practice and interest in art information sharing spurred research into Tumblr art communities and art museum websites. They are currently a Getty Research Institute Fellow.

Cho: *What has your research revealed about how and why artists use Tumblr? What do you think are the strengths, uniquenesses, weaknesses, and/or pitfalls of the space and its uses for this purpose?*

Murphy: While the artists I interviewed worked in a variety of mediums (comics, ceramics, illustration, painting, etc.), there were several distinct motivations I found that cropped up in my research. The main reason is probably the most evident: to share their art. All of the artists I interviewed named Tumblr as a platform they chose with the intent of sharing their works with others, in a social, not monetary sense. Sharing art on Tumblr is more of a community-building exercise, where the artists post work to cultivate interest from general Tumblr users and other artists alike.

Follow-up reasons to use Tumblr relate back to this social concept. Joining other side communities, such as specific fandoms, illustrator/ animator groups, and even subcultures like furies, was a large draw for artists to Tumblr. However, this positive also had a drawback in that those artists that did not participate in distinct fan or art communities reported difficulty in reaching an audience, citing Tumblr's tagging system as part of the problem. Not only can tags be erased by those who reblog the post, making it harder to find, but the tags themselves can only be found by those making an exact search for that term, which in turn, will only be found on the search page if it is new or popular. Both are nebulous concepts, as a tag with little use will still display posts on the search page from months prior if no new ones are made, while a tag in popular use may only show posts from the last hour or those with at least three hundred notes.

Using promoted tags, artists found information about art competitions/challenges, like #inktober and #drawtober, compared commission prices and offerings, and joined in collaborative projects like journals, zines, and comics. Yet a major drawback that several of the artists noted was a lack of critique/feedback on their work, partially due to Tumblr's limited messaging support. Some artists also received harassment in the past and have turned the Asks function off, lessening its use.

The artists I talked to viewed Tumblr as just one of many social media sites they used to promote, sell, and discuss their art, which they distributed across several popular platforms. Signing up for Tumblr followed suit after creating accounts on Twitter, Instagram, and DeviantArt. These varied based on the medium and audience; one artist primarily used DeviantArt because most of his commissioners used the site, using Tumblr as a space to show his portfolio, another only used Instagram and Tumblr, the former as a professional site to show local galleries and the latter as a more relaxed space displaying works in progress and fan works.

McCutchin: My investigation of the value of GIF art and artists on Tumblr yielded similar outcomes to Devon's concerning the benefits Tumblr has offered artists. These benefits were predominantly reliant on the circulation of their artworks through the platform, afforded by Tumblr's reblog functionality, which they felt facilitated a sense of community, connection, and opportunities to collaborate with other like-minded individuals. Like Devon's participants, the fifteen GIF artists I inter-

viewed valued Tumblr primarily for its social benefits as opposed to its monetary advantages because very little of their income resulted from sharing their work on this platform. Instead, they relied on a combination of various social media platforms to establish a brand, or online presence, with the goal of attracting commercial work related to their individual expertise in video art, animation, or design. Furthermore, by viewing other GIF artists' works that were reblogged to their Dashboards by those they followed, my participants were inspired to create more GIF art, to challenge themselves and learn new techniques.

When asked to reflect on the impact of Tumblr on their artistic practices, my participants claimed that the platform influenced how their GIFs were made. One participant asserted that Tumblr's 2–3 MB size limit shaped how she produced her art and influenced what she considered to be a successful GIF creation: something that fits nicely within these limits. Another stated that crafting the perfect "looping" GIF meant taking into consideration the amount of time a Tumblr user would spend looking at their work while rapidly scrolling through their Dashboards.

Another significant benefit that arose during my interviews was the anonymity Tumblr afforded artists. The opportunity to remain anonymous meant that my participants viewed Tumblr as a safe place to express themselves and explore different methods of GIF making. For example, when asked to expand on why he viewed Tumblr as the best place for establishing a persona, one participant replied that Tumblr was a safe space for posting artwork "if you're insecure about it." Unlike social media that is tied to one's personal identity such as Facebook or Instagram, this participant viewed Tumblr as a space that encouraged growth and skill development through anonymous play and experimentation.

Cho: *Where on the scale of importance is Tumblr, then, for these artists, recognizing that there are multiple ways of thinking about "value"? And, conversely, how do artists respond to the idea that even though they may not be making money, they are providing (free) content to fuel Tumblr? I'm appending a picture I took in February 2017 of a sidewalk stencil that appeared in trendier parts of Los Angeles that makes this point (figure 31.1).*

Murphy: As mentioned earlier, financial motivations were not the largest drive to use Tumblr for the artists I interviewed, whether because of dif-



Fig. 31.1. Photograph critical of social media, Los Angeles, February 2017, by Alex Cho

ferent publics that used other sites/spaces to purchase their works, such as ceramic gallery owners and older art buyers preferring in-person purchases to fan art buyers using links to sites like Redbubble and Society6 in lieu of Tumblr (in the case of seven out of the nine artists talked to), or because of the structure of the site itself (the rolling blog Dashboard allows users to easily update with new works and art from others but is not so good for keeping pinned posts on prices or materials). The concept of “value” here is probably better defined in the case of these artists as social value, where the artists view Tumblr as a necessary space in their panoply of social media sites because of their connections to other artists, their personal community they’ve built around themselves, and wider communities they take part in.

Inclusivity of the space was another positive attribute that some of the artists mentioned, which Carla brought up. Tumblr is a valuable space for freedom of expression, for both the content of the work (political, personal, etc.) and for the format/stage of the work itself. One artist explained their division of social media accounts according to what stage their work was in, using Tumblr largely as a judgment-free zone where sketches or works in progress could be shown, while more finished works and items ready to sell appeared on their Twitter and Redbubble/Society6 shops. She divided her work accordingly because of the presence of her close friends and artist colleagues on the site, who would be more likely to provide feedback or accept works in progress, instead of more professionally oriented accounts. As for the second question, it actually never came up, but I can provide that all of the artists interviewed do make money off of their work, by using different social media platforms, online stores, or physical gallery spaces, and not directly through Tumblr.

McCutchin: I have to agree with Devon’s points regarding the social value of Tumblr for artists. The ability to share or “reach out” to others was a common theme that appeared during my interview process as well. During my interviews, I was able to ask my participants directly how they felt about Tumblr profiting from artistic individuals. However, the scope of my research more specifically addressed the use of creators in Tumblr’s brand identity—“Follow the World’s Creators”—and how their brand positioned them as a platform for creativity and art.

Interestingly, my participants did not acknowledge any sense of exploitation in their experience of this platform. They did not express

any negative attitudes toward Tumblr, and in most cases participants were not aware of Tumblr's brand identity at all. Instead, they viewed the usage of "creators" as an equal trade-off or mutual exchange of resources between themselves and Tumblr. For them, the social value of Tumblr, and the opportunities it offers my participants to develop their art form, outweighs notions of exploitation. More value is placed on building a prosperous network through a panoply of social media sites, as Devon discussed above, which enables these individuals to make connections with other artists, take part in communities, and hopefully benefit financially from their artistic practices.

Cho: *What advice would you give to any young artist who wants to use Tumblr as well as other social media to either start out or advance their career?*

McCutchin: This question is a bit outside the scope of my research, and I want to avoid making any broad generalizations about what may or may not help an artist advance their career based on it. I will say, though, that the GIF artists I was fortunate enough to interview over the last year stressed the importance of having a broad network for marketing and branding themselves.

These were not the most important factors in my participants' use of Tumblr, though. For them, the ability to experiment and express themselves through a unique art form played an important role in their everyday happiness, mental health, and their sense of personal accomplishment. Additionally, participating in online communities was extremely gratifying for these artists because it allowed them to connect with all sorts of talented individuals who impact their artistic practices in positive ways.

Murphy: Many of the artists I interviewed expressed frustration at the difficult process of reaching an audience for their work, with sources of that frustration placed either at Tumblr's large size or at Tumblr's tagging system. With all of that said, the artists I interviewed still had interest in using the site and enjoyed the social communities they had created on that space through art sharing and mutual interests. To that end, thinking about my interviews, Carla's observations, and my own personal experience as an artist that uses Tumblr, I would advise new artists to use a diverse array of platforms for their work based on different needs.

However, I wonder how Tumblr and similar sites interact with

physical art spaces, especially as several artists I interviewed did exhibit in galleries as well as posting their work online. I do think more study (such as an institutional ethnography study or systems analysis) should be conducted to compare physical galleries and sites like Tumblr. Such a study would illuminate possible similarities between Tumblr and galleries and if new recommendations should be made to new artists and art students on how to enter these spaces.

Unofficial Archives of Urban Life

How to Rewrite the Canon of Cities

Annette Koh

Annette Koh is an urban planning scholar whose research focuses on the urban commons, creative placemaking, and civic engagement in cities. During her doctoral studies at the University of Hawai`i, she co-founded the Decolonizing Cities project.

I first came to Tumblr in 2009 for fanfiction's radical repurposing of existing narratives, the ways feminist nerds and queer cosplayers had made Tumblr their new home. But as a student of urban planning, I stayed when I saw the popularity of cityscapes and city life and became curious how urbanism might be personalized or even radicalized on the platform in similar ways. Tumblr had drawn me in because of the way counternarratives emerged from people's enthusiasm for worlds that others had created. Could cities be told as stories on Tumblr? Into what genres might we write them? What would urban fandom look like on Tumblr?

This essay considers what Tumblr's "urbanist" (a recent term for those who study and celebrate cities) users created in aggregate from the years 2009 to 2017. Urban fandom on Tumblr took a variety of forms. Fans championed cities as works of art, constructed them into artworks, and crowdsourced archives. Just as fandom on Tumblr provided counters to dominant narratives and representational practices, urbanist Tumblr could rewrite city life to foreground the overlooked or marginalized in ways that were celebratory and affectionate. City-centric tumblrs reflected the breadth of fan impulses, from obsession with the obscure to crushes on the beautiful, except instead of pinups of Hollywood hotshots, urbanist Tumblr filled up with photos of Soviet-era architecture or dramatic neon skylines. The visibility of urban life to be found on Tumblr refreshed eyes weary of beige-scale highways and cookie-cutter chain stores.

Initially, I was fascinated by how much urban life was romanticized on

Tumblr. As a platform defined through affective visual pleasures, Tumblr facilitated certain kinds of urban imaginaries. Its unending scrolling feature and constant reblogging function meant that travel to cities by Tumblr was not bound by the conventions of “three perfect days in . . .” travelogues. Instead, users inserted themselves into cities like they might write themselves into a favorite novel. “I’m in love with cities I’ve never been to and people I’ve never met,” claimed one user with text overlaid on a three-frame GIF of a New York City avenue.¹ Scrolling through the images of cities on Tumblr was like stumbling through portals to elsewhere, a way to imagine living other lives in other places. Whether it was street fashion in Seoul or street chess in New York City, the popularity of portraits of urban dwellers on Tumblr was a testament to our curiosity about our fellow humans. They incited desires and wanderlust.

Other tumblrs took urbanism advocacy out of the aspirational and into the didactic. Like photos of farmers market produce, photos of better bike lanes and great public spaces had a pedagogical function to inspire good #urbanist behavior. Quotations from Jane Jacobs, Jan Gehl, and other urban planning luminaries circulated as commonsense exhortations for us to make cities better. My own posts were a scholarly version of this as I made my Tumblr into a public-facing discussion of grad school readings on housing and public space. Thankfully, expertise on Tumblr manifested much more informally than that of TED Talk “thought leaders.” The Ask function implied dialogue: a teenager in Kuala Lumpur could ask advice from a climate scientist in Washington DC on the urban heat island effect.

Tumblr tendencies to champion the underdog also found expression through urbanist fandom. Simple portfolios of street photography in so-called Third World cities overlaid human interaction—a toddler’s dignity, a grandma’s frank gaze—over false projections of social dysfunction. Other tumblrs explicitly contested problematic urban imaginaries that circulated in mainstream media. Popular tumblrs that foregrounded cities in Africa, for example, demanded the viewer escape the safari clichés of African life and explore Lagos, Durban, and Dar es Salaam as twenty-first-century urban metropolises. Tags helped coalesce communities of interest that could challenge default assumptions of what is beautiful. The concrete behemoths of mid-twentieth-century #Brutalist architecture had Tumblr fan clubs who celebrated the much-maligned buildings as exemplars of design rather than failures of modernism.

Niche fandoms found each other and shared their transformative works, what fandom calls the creative adaptation of other people’s published work.

There was a tumblr devoted to redesigning subway maps for greater legibility, which struck me as a kind of fanfiction for public transit. Cartography as art was enthusiastically embraced, with a boomlet in hometown maps constructed from hand-lettered neighborhood names. Maps also rendered unfamiliar cities knowable, the overwhelming massiveness of Moscow or London or Tokyo turned into a friendly tangle of crayon-colored subway lines.

The surreal and the allegorical was another genre of city narrative on Tumblr. The proliferation of cartographic renderings and aerial views on #urbanism, #landscape, and #architecture tumblrs made me wonder what was so appealing about these views. This was in 2009, a few years before drones enabled the semi-democratization of the overfly shot, but certainly long after Google Maps trained our eyes to read a world through satellite vision. Frankly, I think we were sick of grainy roofscapes and beige street grids. People wanted to see cities in other guises. Users' aerial photos brought an eclectic assortment of landscapes to our screens. They made familiar landscapes strange, the street-level banality of suburban cul-de-sacs transformed by this vantage point into farm-eating concrete sprawl. Aerial photography had its troubling aspects too in the ways it turned complex historical processes into two-dimensional photos of the eternal present. I could easily see and share the colors of fossil fuel capitalism, however strange it felt to "heart" the ruby reds of mine waste ponds two days after I shared the palm tree shape of Dubai's engineered islands visible from space.

Indeed, like other social dreaming platforms, Tumblr facilitated an aesthetic-emotional convergence that could become cloying at times. For those who wanted cities to be beautiful, delicious, and diverse, Tumblr made it easy to curate an optimistic visual narrative of the urban good life from renderings of #publicspace such as the #High Line Park in New York City or the convivial crowds of European plazas.² #Streetart spiked as graffiti birthed global superstars like Banksy and JR. A host of architecture tumblrs compiled classic and contemporary examples of architecture—Le Corbusier, Oscar Niemeyer, Zaha Hadid—cornices or plazas documented in black-and-white solemnity. This seemed all too similar to the sunlit details of healthy living that dominated #inspo Instagram. Visuals of urbanity were compiled into aspirational mood boards to escape suburban monotony.

On the same screens of aspirational optimism, users displayed a reverse fondness for cautionary dystopias. Our twenty-first-century affection for fictional zombies and civilizations in crisis also transferred to the popularity of images of #urban decay, what became known as #ruin porn of deteriorating factories or the claustrophobic Blade Runner—esque alleys of Kowloon

Walled City. The depopulated terrain of postindustrial Detroit reappeared on my Dashboard over and over, such as the popular tag #abandoned-Detroit.³ And my most popular Tumblr post for years was about the “ruin bars” of Budapest.⁴

The sunlit city park and the shadowy abandoned factory were not opposites, however. I began to see both as problematic. Beauty or blight, we seemed to be drawn to the spectacle that could be framed for display. In the stylized and aestheticized presentations of color and shape, cities became objects to be collected. Used this way, Tumblr was, again, not so different from a Pinterest scrapbook or an Instagram portfolio, although the images amassed were not just for personal “inspiration” but also provided proof of globetrotting urban sophistication.

By 2014 I could articulate what perturbed me about urbanist Tumblr’s fondness for aerial photos, maps, and architectural design elements that flattened cities into settings emptied of human beings. I worried that the ease with which we could collect the beautiful and the grotesque in city spaces as objects made it harder to see the politics of place. I didn’t want to make a portfolio of places stuck in the eternal flatness of an ahistorical present, whether that was grimdark or shiny technotopia. I wanted to push back against posts that advocated for a singular definition of the urban good life that stripped the social context from urban experiences. Images of the High Line Park and other urban design favorites did not address how revitalization of public spaces is used to justify the exclusion of the poor, the homeless, and youth of color.

At the same time, despite Tumblr users’ unexpected fondness for social theory (Marxist geographer #DavidHarvey for example), I also knew that turning Tumblr into an academic blog was to neglect its capacity for affective politics of collective excitement that could be generated: sharing, collecting, discovering, asking, and reblogging. Being a fan of cities did not mean we had to abandon critique, nor did attention to urban complexity mean we needed to forgo delight.

And as I looked further into Tumblr’s depths, I found posts that told more complicated stories about cities, making the city into a body to be celebrated in its beauty and scars. I wanted to push back against posts that told single stories about only the cities themselves—parks good, decay bad—that stripped the social and individual context from urban experiences. Like the unapologetic selfies by activists who insist on visibility for queer and trans bodies or the push for representations of people of color in tumblrs like myparentswereawesome, I found tumblrs from unofficial archivists such as



Figs. 32.1–2. Concert at Chicago’s Cabrini-Green housing project in the late 1960s: Photoset from *lostinurbanism* and the *Blvck Vrchives* project

lost in urbanism and photos from municipal historical societies that renarrated cities from different angles and centered people of color.⁵ The way that Tumblr encouraged submissions and cross-posting and sharing meant that an archive did not need an institution or even a pre-existing collection but could be called into being by anyone. These tumblrs took other people's photographs, photos taken before our lifetimes in some cases, and made them into counterarchives of multithreaded memories. These posts showed public housing projects as places of joy, or they implicitly dismantled the dystopic image of "the Bronx is burning" (figures 32.1–2).⁶ I got inspired and posted photographs of flatbed trucks turned into swimming pools, visual proof that childhood friendship thrived in decades now used as object lessons in bad urbanism.

These posts offered alternate readings of canonical plots such as the story of white flight into American suburbia from urban Black and Brown disorder. We could rewrite our understandings, read the city-as-novel differently with these secondary characters made into protagonists. "We are not a minority," asserted a 1978 mural in Los Angeles, and people reblogged and reblogged it.⁷



Fig. 32.3. "We Are Not a Minority" mural painted in 1978 in East L.A. Photo from the *Los Angeles Public Library Herald-Examiner* collection



Fig. 32.4. Black children playing in St. Louis, Missouri, circa 1970s: GIF made by biscuitsarenice from the documentary film *Citizen Jane: Battle for the City*

Each fresh flurry of reblogging was another dozen people proclaiming that this image of Chicax resurgence from forty years ago still resonated today, and in doing so they were inscribing it a tiny bit more deeply into our collective memory. I could trace the influencers that propagated this counter-narrative as certain Tumblr users set off a chain of reblogs that spiked in my activity feed: Chicax activists yes, but also street art fans and architecture students. More than “likes,” the reblogging function to me seemed a way to construct a counter-canon of city life.

Our joint determination as users to increase the availability of these historical moments through reblogs was indexical politics that changed what was normal and known. Call it expressive activism, or call it a politics of collective visibility. I found satisfaction in the ever-growing number of reblogs, not just because of the pleasant popularity spike, but also because it meant that we as users saw each other as belonging in these places and living in relationship with one another. The nostalgia was forward facing, an affective politics. As I write this, Chicago is shorthand for mayhem, and American cities have been redefined as not the “real” America. We continue to make our rebuttal through the visual and the affective, by posting archival photos turned into animated GIFs of kids of color frolicking at a playground in the 1970s (figure 32.4).⁸ Cities written off as wastelands full of monsters—“here be dragons”—can be rewritten. Here be us. Here be we. And we are having fun.

Tumblr users (including me) cultivate an affectionate and affective relationship with cities past, present, and future. We are able to rewrite the canon of cities by making visible the value of people often written off as unimportant. I'm still partial to panoramas or a well-designed map, but I feel the most expansive, the most expanded by, these cities of yesteryear that glimpse into ordinary lives on other streets.

NOTES

1. This assertion was originally written by thirteen-year-old blogger Melody Truong, but then appeared in the book *Paper Towns* by young adult author John Green; his fans then made countless memes of the phrase, which appeared all over Tumblr. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2015/feb/19/john-green-wrongly-attributed-quote-and-other-misquotations>.

2. <https://www.tumblr.com/search/high+line+park>.

3. <https://www.tumblr.com/tagged/abandoned-detroit>.

4. <https://anniekoh.tumblr.com/post/50593600563/budapests-ruin-bars-the-characteristics-of>.

5. <http://lostinurbanism.tumblr.com/post/124784910198>.

6. <http://lostinurbanism.tumblr.com/post/125185079433>.

7. <https://anniekoh.tumblr.com/post/74673385157/we-are-not-a-minority-painted-at-the-estrada>.

8. <http://biscuitsarenice.tumblr.com/post/164256505147/st-louis-missouri-1970s>.

Beyond the Pale Blog

Tumblr Pink and the Aesthetics of White Anxiety

Christine Goding-Doty

Christine Goding-Doty is a Mellon postdoctoral fellow with the Center for the Humanities at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Tumblr Pink was *the* color of 2016. By midyear, twitter user @33333333433333 posted the tweet that would launch a thousand think pieces about its ubiquity (figure 33.1). It read “im in a group text about how everything looks like this now” and featured a collage of billboards and branding material from Acne, Kinfolk, Delish, and Thinx Underwear, all in varied shades of matte and muted pink.¹ A host of clickbait articles and online listicles quickly attempted to construct a genealogy of the trend, referring to this range of colors as “Tumblr Pink.” They traced its popularity back through noted pop culture obsessions like the Rose Gold iPhone, the cover art for Drake’s chart-topping “Hotline Bling,” and visuals from Wes Anderson’s *Grand Budapest Hotel*.² But oddly, none of the commentators explained *why* they were connecting this trend to Tumblr.

This essay posits that the aesthetic foundations of the Tumblr Pink trend are reflected in a popular subset of tumblrs called pale blogs, a genre of digital youth culture on Tumblr that glorifies all things #pretty and #pale. Pale bloggers avoid vibrant content and engage a limited visual and affective palette. Although having a large number of followers is valued on pale blogs, questions of authorship or direct personal relationships are not a priority as in other areas of the platform. Rather, the primary mode of engagement is participation in the aesthetic norms of pale blogs by liking, reblogging, and sharing content. So instead of making case studies of individual users’ tumblrs or pale blog networks, my understanding of pale blogging practices developed over several years of observation, by tracking the latest content tagged with #pale or #paleblog. Most pale blog content is sourced from Google, WeHeartIt, Flickr, and other image host-

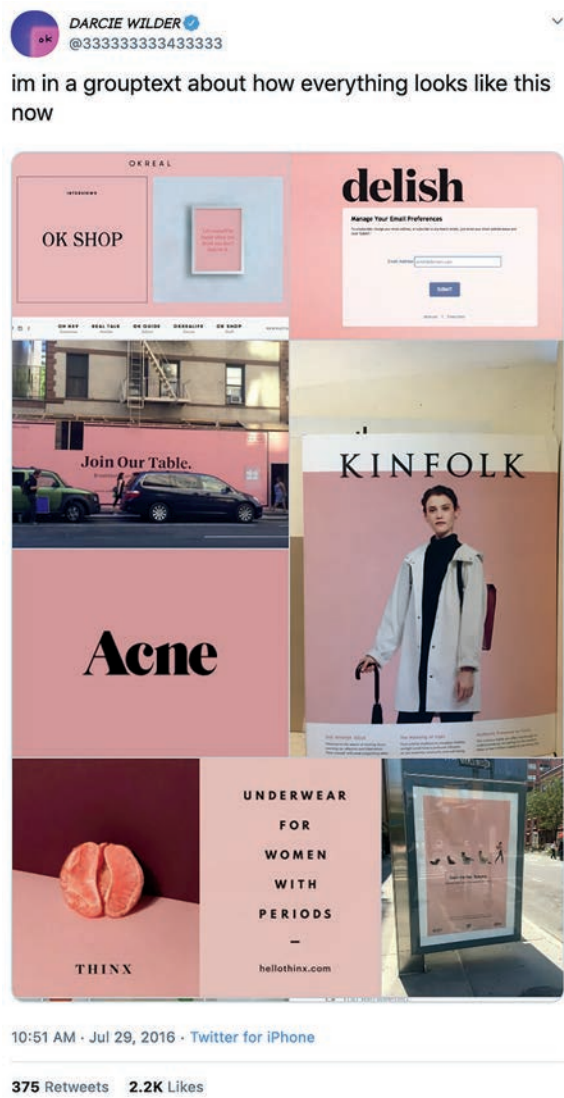


Fig. 33.1. Tweet by @3333333333333333, July 10, 2016

ing sites and is circulated uncredited. The most popular images on pale blogs are often downloaded and reposted so many times that their only meaningful tie is to the genre of pale blogging itself, rather than any particular author.³

As this genre has grown in popularity since 2013, users have begun to describe the coolly erotic, cutesy melancholia of the pale blog, almost

McCracken, Allison. *a Tumblr Book: Platform and Cultures*.
E-book, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.11537055>.
Downloaded on behalf of 3.146.105.194

benignly, as “A E S T H E T I C,” rejecting the idea that their blogs carry any political charge or bias. Attendant to the racial climate of the 2010s, however, I will argue that pale blogs reflect and rehearse broad social anxieties around the potency of whiteness at a moment when popular discourse has made “white fragility” a widely recognized term and as charges of racism against whites are on the rise.⁴ More than just reflecting the sense of racial anxiety, the curatorial practices of pale blogging manage the discourse of threat by aestheticizing precarity, redefining traditional symbols of white hegemony through associations with beauty and ethereality or weakness: the #pretty and #pale. Whereas many subsets of Tumblr have used the site to establish empowered and active communities committed to social justice, pale blogs do not engage in the same critiques of power that are sometimes assumed to characterize the platform as a whole. For example, in the WikiHow article “How to Become a Tumblr Girl,” which covered topics like starting a Tumblr blog, and “Becoming Tumblr Famous,” new bloggers are advised to “try not to be a ‘Social Justice Blogger’” and are referred to other articles on WikiHow that suggest “pale” as a popular genre of blog to begin on Tumblr.⁵

Although pale bloggers may be designated as an apolitical group in discussions of Tumblr, and I have come across the occasional pale blogger who explicitly denies any political—specifically racialized—content or intent, the political and the aesthetic are in fact intimately tied on pale blogs. To borrow a term from David Batchelor, I read pale blog practices as chromophobic, that is, they operate through the privileging of neutral colors and white. “Chromophobia manifests itself in the many and varied attempts to purge colour from culture, to devalue colour, to diminish its significance, to deny its complexity.”⁶ For Batchelor, a chromophobic aversion to color is not just about personal taste but has political commitments to whiteness built into it. Similarly, I argue that the chromophobia of the pale blogs serves this same purpose, reviving and simultaneously camouflaging the desire for the dominant fetish object of the West: the frontier. On pale blogs, frontier is reinvented in digital terms, rendered as an infinite resource that extends forward and backward through time, and is made available again as an object of desire for the millennial generation. Pale blogging is ultimately an exercise in reconciling an anxiety about the possible disappearance of white hegemony as we know it, with the perpetual expansion of white civilization into the technological future.

PALE AND PRETTY

Pale blogs began to appear on the internet as an identifiable type of tumblr in late 2012. In spring 2013, Rosemary Kirton (@grossmary) wrote a piece in *Medium* trying to describe the aesthetic being curated by these tumblrs, which she called “soft culture.”⁷ By the end of 2013, #paleblog was the common marker for these tumblrs and it rose in popularity, only starting to show signs of waning in 2017.

The dominant unifying practice of pale blogging is aesthetic, meaning the aesthetic takes shape in a participatory, performative way as each user likes, shares, and marks content as #pale. Pale blog content can be text, images, videos, or GIFs. Colors are rarely in full saturation and are usually presented in a restricted palette dominated by pastels, soft pinks, grays, blues, and purples. If the color content of an image or GIF goes beyond this palette, often times the image is treated either with some combination of lowered contrast, increased exposure, or a white or faded filter. Some bloggers make these changes themselves, called “edits,” and sometimes blog themes come with built-in features that automatically apply a filter to make images appear faded on the home page of the blog. Pale bloggers avoid any vibrant content, and the limited visual palette reflects the affective expression of pale blogs as well, which is restricted mostly to melancholy, regret, loss, or heartbreak. But even more striking is the explicit rejection of political passions. Accordingly, topics such as social justice are exceptionally out of place on pale blogs and discouraged.

Images and GIFs of bodies are striking elements of pale blogs for their ambiguous stance on self-harm and drug use, their erotic charge, and simultaneously gruesome content. Here the sense of broad white social anxiety is tacitly expressed in the presentation of the body as injured, fragile, or effaced. Pictures of the body often look to be illuminated by the blue light of the device. The drab, overexposed, washed out, or low-contrast images captured by phone or computer cams are fully recuperated in the pale blog aesthetic and valued for this lighting effect on the body. But images of the body are also tightly cropped, so the body is regularly cut off into single body parts between the middle of the face and the thighs. The full-length shot is rare, as is a fully exposed face. The viewer is drawn in close to the body, but is not given full access to it. This interrupted intimacy is heightened by the prevalence of injured body parts on pale blogs. Erotic or pornographic images generally display some sort of damage to the body—lips may be chapped, cracked,

and bleeding; eyes, presented in isolation from the rest of the face, are often bloody or bloodshot; the neck or dramatically protruding collarbone may be covered in bruises or hickies.

There are other aesthetic features of pale blogs beyond the visual. Sometimes pale blogs have embedded music players that cycle through variously ambient, echoey, and forlorn-sounding music by artists like Lana Del Rey or the Arctic Monkeys. The use of music, original layouts, and edits heighten the atmospheric quality of the pale blog. These features simultaneously imbue all the content with ethereality and cement the pervasiveness of the pale aesthetic by linking together images of different kinds, disparate places, and different modes of engagement—watching GIFs or videos, liking, listening—in a kind of synesthetic experience. Taken together, these features transform pale blogs from idiosyncratic collections or archives of content available for a viewer to peruse, to a rich environment populated by fairly regularized kinds of experience, invitations to interact, and modes of stimuli.

PALE LAND: A DIGITAL FRONTIER

Of all the content shared on pale blogs, however, I will argue that it is the relationship facilitated to place, not bodies, that is the defining feature of pale blogs and the site through which they negotiate anxieties around whiteness. While images of people and body parts are shocking and draw a lot of commentary, natural landscapes or cityscapes feature just as often on pale blogs, if not more. Most of the time these images convey a kind of barrenness or isolation, even when they are full of objects; places are usually covered with a thick layer of smog, snow, or rain, and there is rarely human or animal life evident. Pictures of non-domestic sites—like commercial buildings, alleyways, or roads—are usually absent of people, although they may feature some signs of life like fluorescent light and neon signs. The use of light itself is one of the major features of pale blogs. Although most of the content of pale blogs is very low-contrast, shadows feature prominently, as do rainbow or iridescent light. Light reflecting on water, the glow of the moon, the sun through clouds or fog, and lightning bolts are common in pale blog imagery.

In the world of the pale blog, as all locations are confined to the same aesthetic limits and flattened by the hazy pale blog edit, the effect is that all places become abstracted to represent no place in particular. Images of place are not only of sprawling panoramic views, but pale blogs routinely circulate images of light boxes, pools of water, untraceable corners, or animated

settings. In the sheer number of these images, place loses its ability to be located; location is divorced from the idea of a specific, historicized, established geographic space. Therefore, I posit that pale blogs do not so much produce places as they circulate what I am calling “non-places.” As arguably the dominant feature of pale blogs, the circulation of these non-places constructs an account of place itself as virgin territory in the realm of the digital. These non-places form a digital world of “terra nullius” that betrays an extant desire for frontier.

Terra nullius was a policy most closely associated with Australian politics—but present in the projects of European colonialism globally—of claiming a territory to be unoccupied no-man’s land and therefore available for European settlement.⁸ This was a deceptive policy, as practically all the land brought under European rule was quite thoroughly populated, but the process of strategic unseeing of the native people there spread to other aspects of the production of modern life.⁹ Concepts like terra nullius manifest aesthetically in what David Batchelor identifies as chromophobia and “negative hallucination,” both of which he sees as values central to Western art.¹⁰ As aesthetic and political concepts, chromophobia is the aversion to color, while negative hallucination is the refusal to see color even where it is present. Both of these are foundational to the pale blog aesthetic. Indeed, it is these pernicious ties to the act of not seeing or avoiding color that reveals the problematic obsession pale blogs perform regarding place. Pale bloggers claim to be doing nothing political, and yet the central object of pale blogs is the fantasy image of open land, devoid of color or competing authority, ready to be entered. The entire aesthetic practice democratizes participation in white Western narratives that celebrate the enterprising initiative of the imperializing man, whose prerogative is to move into new places, make the unknown known, harbor desires for virgin land, and arrive there to find it already empty.

The desire for virgin territory is central to the notion of beauty on pale blogs. This longing is explicitly expressed in the texts that overlay many landscape and non-place images that offer the viewer and blogger the opportunity to desire space and land, and to share and affirm this desire through posting. Take, for example, one image overlaid with the Lana Del Rey lyric, “It’s you. It’s you. It’s all for you.” The viewer is placed on the shore of an unmarked beach with a view of a verdant island off in the distance, a serene and sprawling inheritance for which she is destined: “It’s all for you.” In sharing this image, the pale blogger is both the viewer to whom the territory belongs and the authoritative voice offering the desire for territory to her followers. The fan-

tasy promoted by this engagement with territory, particularly concentrated in this image but present in the thousands of non-place images that circulate through pale blogs, is dripping with the lust for land that characterizes the West's relationship to frontier.

The production of frontier as a digital resource on pale blogs is a straightforward continuation of the abstraction of frontier that began at the end of the nineteenth century. As David Wrobel compellingly details, the frontier was the characteristic symbol of the American democratic experiment. Many opined that American democracy could only function as long as there was a frontier, a safety valve that could absorb the desires and discontentment of the modern Western man.¹¹ When the land ran out in the late nineteenth century, the West as a whole worked hard to preserve the idea that the frontier was still available by identifying the frontier in other resources. Some solutions advocated imperializing missions into international territory, but many of the new "frontiers" didn't resemble land at all. Frontier was to be found in and satisfied by the terms of the New Deal, the space race, the enterprising business acumen of the modern capitalist, as just a few examples. As Wrobel points out, frontier has historically been an abstracted resource across the West, regardless of its physical supply. The practices of pale blogging grant digital access to the right to frontier and renew the desire for this right. Far from being apolitical, an attachment to whiteness emerges on pale blogs as an attachment to frontier that can be endlessly reproduced with more images and more pale blog edits.

PALE BLOG AESTHETIC IRL: TUMBLR PINK

What I am pointing to is that through the network of relationships catalyzed on Tumblr, the codification of a pale blog aesthetic and the spontaneous craze for Tumblr Pink emerge as a kind of normative spread. My research doesn't account for the ways commercial spaces are made pink; rather it reads the digital buzz about the color and the circulation of the aesthetic as something that creates a kind of political continuity, a series of tiny opportunities to be activated by values of Western expansion, and a craving for eternal frontier. To compare the aesthetics that work to link Tumblr Pink to pale blogs is to track the contagion between platforms and the normative cultivation of broad social taste and desire.

As David Batchelor notes, chromophobic practices are politically important because they are about more than just color. We may read into the aes-

thetic production of pale blogs because “once again, it appears that we are not dealing with something as simple as white things and white surfaces, with white as an empirically verifiable fact or as a colour. Rather, we are in the realm of *whiteness*. White as myth, as an aesthetic fantasy, a fantasy so strong that it summons up negative hallucinations, so intense that it produces a blindness to colour, even when colour is literally in front of your face.”¹² This same question emerges in the craze for Tumblr Pink, which reverberates with the same chromophobic commitments that developed on pale blogs. At the same time that pale blogs have started to unmark themselves as just #aesthetic, Tumblr Pink has also gone through its own unmarking. As it is increasingly associated with being the color of a new generation, symbolizing the frontier of a new future, it is also referred to as Millennial Pink. In a comment requested by *The Cut*, the poet Natalie Diaz relates, “A more accurate color than Millennial Pink might be: white. . . . A shady white, as white can be so often.”¹³ Diaz was critiquing the way the Millennial or Tumblr Pink trend valorizes the neutral (where neutrality suggests whiteness) over vibrant colors in the construction of physical space. As Tumblr Pink has spread as the latest color in interior design, it has also extended to things like billboards and advertising materials that inserted long intervals of matte white space into the visual landscape, analogous to the digital production of empty frontier on pale blogs.

The most authoritative example of Tumblr Pink was one half of Pantone’s color of the year for 2016, Rose Quartz. The color of the year from 2016 was actually two colors, Rose Quartz (a pale pink) and Serenity (a pastel blue). These colors were presented as a pair, often blended into each other, which

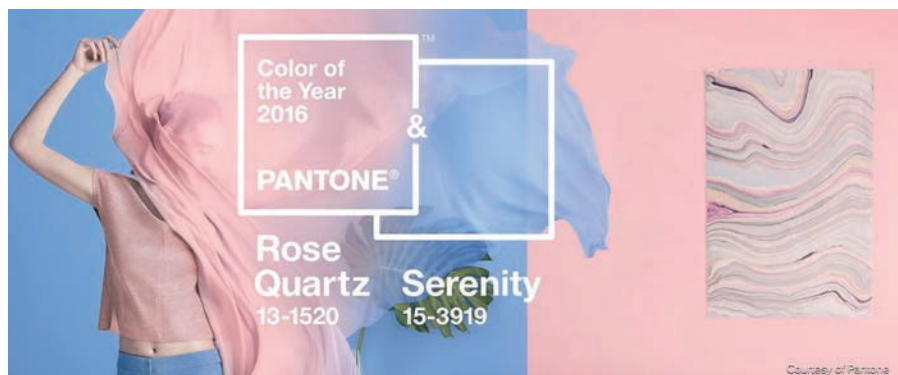


Fig. 33.2. Advertisement for Pantone’s color of the year, Rose Quartz

reproduced the grayish bruise value that is also central to the pale blog aesthetic (figure 33.2). Even more striking, the marketing materials for Rose Quartz and Serenity built from classic pale blog aesthetic markers in opposition to political conflict.

Pantone releases a promotional video along with the marketing materials that announce the color of the year. The purpose of the video is to demonstrate the mood the color conveys and to give examples of its possible use in design. Unlike the promo videos of Pantone's other colors of the year, which focus mostly on the color itself, the video for Rose Quartz and Serenity contextualizes the popularity of the colors historically. The dual colors of the year for 2016 are presented in contrast to 2015, a year the video characterizes as one of political and social unrest.¹⁴

The video opens with "2015" in white block letters fading in on a black background. For the first twenty seconds, the music is percussive and fast-paced. Clicking electronic and industrial sounds are layered over a series of quick cuts and double exposures. The sounds of typing and texting are paired with fireworks and missiles launching; a shot of the side of a glacier breaking off and falling into the sea is followed by children being bullied in an alley; there are protests, people texting, taking selfies, or waiting in long lines; marching boots, dividing cells, the Facebook-like logo, and droning alarms all combine in a hectic cacophony. The chaos finally fades as the Pantone logo appears on the screen to present the dual "Color of the Year 2016," Rose Quartz and Serenity in a puff of pink and blue powder. The soundscape of the last half of the video features soothing piano tones, the faint chirping of birds, and the long-held whole notes of a softly singing choir. In this piece of the video, none of the background images emit their own diegetic noises. Instead, the images are all presented in the same visual and aural aesthetic of Rose Quartz and Serenity. In white block letters, the words "BALANCE," "CALMING," and "WELLNESS" are overlaid on different scenes showing parts of female figures draped in billowing, gossamer fabric in Serenity and Rose Quartz ombré. The colors of the year are also presented as light, emanating from two glowing cubes, or shining on large cumulous clouds as though during sunset. Finally, a classic pale blog landscape image fades in, a foggy winter shot of a river in the forest in a blue and pink filter. The landscape is overlaid with the word "TRANQUILITY."

Rose Quartz and Serenity are meant to form the basis of an aesthetic experience that brings about the resolution of political turmoil. Commenting on the color, Leatrice Eiseman, the executive director of the Pantone Color Institute, ominously described, "Joined together, Rose Quartz and Serenity

demonstrate an inherent balance between a warmer embracing rose tone and the cooler tranquil blue, reflecting connection and wellness as well as a soothing sense of order and peace.”¹⁵ This order is to be achieved through the flattening effect also at work in the pale blog aesthetic, in the sense of uniformity it helps to establish. Tumblr Pink is often juxtaposed with the supposed contentiousness of our political times as a color that manifests “quietude.”¹⁶ While this rhetoric reinforces conservative claims of the impending upheavals to Western society, it also deftly displaces the political into the aesthetic, where appreciating standardization and rejecting the disruption of the status quo can be rewritten as fashionable and not politically suspect. Quietude promises the feeling of total escape from political concerns. Contextualized alongside the rise of the pale blog aesthetic, however, the craze for Tumblr Pink camouflages a conservative set of normative, long-held desires the modern West harbors for power that are on display in the trend but disavowed and unmarked.

NOTES

1. Darcie Wilder, “Im in a Grouptext about How Everything Looks like This Now, pic.Twitter.Com/Gfn8BKA4Xg,” Tweet, @33333333433333 (blog), July 10, 2016, <https://twitter.com/33333333433333/status/759038739951788032?lang=en>.

2. André Wheeler, “How ‘Tumblr Pink’ Became the Most Ubiquitous Color in Fashion Branding,” *Fashionista*, August 11, 2016, <http://fashionista.com/2016/08/tumblr-pink-fashion-color-trend>; Lauren Schwartzberg, “Why Millennial Pink Refuses to Go Away,” *The Cut*, March 19, 2017, <http://nymag.com/thecut/2017/03/why-millennial-pink-refuses-to-go-away.html>.

3. The question of how to study pale blogs was not straightforward. According to the ages many pale bloggers posted on their pages, the majority of them were young teens when they began making pale blogs. While everything I researched was technically public content, it was not clear whether pale bloggers actively consented to the public dissemination of their blogs beyond Tumblr or wished to be identified as the curators of the content they share. Pale blogs, however, do not have any strong thought leaders. Pale blog networks have popped up and gone defunct just as quickly, and even the most popular pages regularly go dormant or come down without warning. What this signals is that pale blogging is not about an individual tastemaker; rather it exists as the product of a collective set of actions, tastes, and desires.

4. Recent studies have shown that demographic shifts along with poor health outcomes and economic stagnation are contributing to a sense that whites are increasingly discriminated against or will be discriminated against in the future. Don-

ald Trump's campaign slogan was indicative of this sense of loss and commitment to returning to a prior state of open racial dominance in the plea to #MAGA (Make America Great *Again*). For scholarship on this question see Michael I. Norton and Samuel R. Sommers, "Whites See Racism as a Zero-Sum Game That They Are Now Losing," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 6, no. 3 (2011): 215–18; Maureen A. Craig and Jennifer A. Richeson, "On the Precipice of a 'Majority-Minority' America: Perceived Status Threat From the Racial Demographic Shift Affects White Americans' Political Ideology," *Psychological Science* 25, no. 6 (June 1, 2014): 1189–97, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797614527113>.

5. "How to Become a Tumblr Girl," wikiHow, <http://www.wikihow.com/Become-a-Tumblr-Girl>.

6. David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion, 2000), 22.

7. Rosemary Kirton, "Follow For More: Screenshots of Soft Culture," *Medium* (blog), November 12, 2013, <https://medium.com/@grossmaryk/follow-for-more-screenshots-of-soft-culture-49432de8f13e>. Because of the speed with which trends rise and fall on the internet, Kirton thought her commentary was already "worryingly stale" when she finally published her piece, first on Tumblr in October 2013 and later on Medium.com in November 2013. But Kirton was compelled to write this piece trying to analyze pale blogs because she noticed that images of her art or her face were being shared, uncredited, across these tumblrs.

8. Andrew Fitzmaurice, "The Genealogy of Terra Nullius," *Australian Historical Studies* 38, no. 129 (April 1, 2007): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10314610708601228>.

9. This "unseeing" was in no way benign, and as it has formed the basis of Western aesthetic practice, it is as informed by the elimination of color from the palette as it is by the genocidal elimination of colonized populations, programs of assimilation, and institutional forms of erasure.

10. Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, 47.

11. David M. Wrobel, *The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to the New Deal* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993).

12. Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, 47.

13. Schwartzberg, "Why Millennial Pink Refuses to Go Away."

14. Pantone, *The Pantone Color of the Year for 2016 Is Rose Quartz & Serenity*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AAJ1vPe4w2c>.

15. Pantone, "Pantone Color of the Year 2016 | Rose Quartz & Serenity," *Pantone*, <https://www.pantone.com/color-of-the-year-2016>.

16. Wheeler, "How 'Tumblr Pink' Became the Most Ubiquitous Color in Fashion Branding."

Tumblr's Gallery of Loops

GIF Art Beyond Reaction GIF Culture

Jennifer Malkowski

Jennifer Malkowski is associate professor of film and media studies at Smith College. They are the author of *Dying in Full Detail: Mortality and Digital Documentary* (Duke University Press, 2017), the co-editor of *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games* (Indiana University Press, 2017), and the co-editor of the book series *Power Play: Games, Politics, Culture* (Duke University Press). Their work has also been published in *Cinema Journal*, *Jump Cut*, *Film Quarterly*, and the edited collections *Unwatchable* and *Queers in American Popular Culture*.

It's an old lesson in the art world: Some works need the cultural framing of a gallery space to be seen as Art-with-a-capital-A and to reshape its very definition.¹ Muscled into those spaces by creators like Duchamp and Warhol with a drive to shake up the status quo, such works produced conceptual collisions between art galleries and their display of an ordinary bicycle wheel mounted on a stool or a painting of a Campbell's soup can. For those in the know, such works intervened in knotty disciplinary debates about the nature of art, but they also functioned in a simpler, more democratic spirit. Regardless of the earnest or cynical intentions of their creators, these works challenged spectators to see common objects in a new way, to put aside the prosaic associations such objects usually prompt and consider their aesthetic qualities.

Tumblr provides a digital evolution of that old lesson on the (now-dormant) account The GIF Connoisseur. There, an initially anonymous blogger (now identified as Thorne Brandt) curated, altered, and numbered a collection of GIFs, superimposing over each one the 2D painted figure of a balding white man in a gray suit. The man stands upright with his back to the user, holding his hat and umbrella behind him, and contemplates whatever is in front of him. Originally, it was an abstract, Pollock-style painting hanging in a gallery in Norman Rockwell's *The Connoisseur* (1962), from which this



Fig. 34.1. Three-frame sample of GIF #132, *The GIF Connoisseur*

superimposed figure is appropriated. On *The GIF Connoisseur*, he instead contemplates one of 417 carefully chosen GIFs, featuring hypnotic loops of everything from psychedelic morphing fractals (#415) to glitching fast food restaurant logos (#57) to rotating Bauhaus-style shapes (#132; figure 34.1). The connoisseur regards each of these GIFs the same way he did the abstract painting he stands in front of in Rockwell's original: with his back to us, giving little hint of his response. It is not his opinion that matters, but the fact and context of his looking: a well-dressed, older white man staring at a piece in a gallery (painted in *The Connoisseur*, implied in *The GIF Connoisseur*). Whether or not the ambivalent figure accepts this new form he gazes upon as art (a dangling question in Rockwell's image), he legitimates it through the very fact of his attention as an art consumer.²

Like a bicycle wheel or a soup can, the GIF today is a common object in the landscape of our modern lives, one as unrelated to Art for most audiences as those gallery objects were in their time. Despite the lineage of GIF art that spans most of the file format's three-decade history, GIFs circulate for the vast majority of users as casual tools of communication, drawn from pop culture, rather than careful aesthetic expressions. Efforts to reveal the deeper artistic potential of GIFs have certainly been made in formal galleries and museums, but brick-and-mortar exhibitions extract GIFs from their native environment of the Internet and of solitary, small-screen viewing. In this chapter, I would instead like to argue for the centrality of Tumblr in creating not a new kind of artistic GIF (as art GIFs long precede Tumblr's 2007 launch) but an essential new populist venue that recognizes that artistry and reshapes the public image of the GIF.

For it is deeply significant that *The GIF Connoisseur* is a Tumblr, rather than a stand-alone website, BuzzFeed list ("27 gorgeous GIFs that you'll rec-

ognize as art”), or anything else on the Internet. When The GIF Connoisseur’s blogger advises their audience, “try not to ever come out of the frame of mind in which you define things as art,” they are articulating not just a motto for their project but the ethos of Tumblr itself.³ The site supports a wide variety of artists from professionals to newbie fan art practitioners, purposefully blurring these boundaries as content flows across them. And on this social media platform, a hunger for aesthetic richness feels like the primary thread tying its heterogeneous users together. As Duchamp and Warhol, *The Connoisseur*, and The GIF Connoisseur all demonstrate, it is sometimes exhibition contexts that ignite artistic innovation. Tumblr above all other Internet locales has proven itself the right exhibition context for the art GIF.

(FILE) SIZE MATTERS? GIFS, RESOLUTION, AND “POOR IMAGES”

The graphical interchange format (GIF) presents a rare case of a digital moving image format sharply defined by its limitations. Designed in 1987 for speed of transmission rather than image quality, these small files (in their animated versions) deviate from cinema’s usual aspirations to smoothly simulate motion, instead displaying only a small number of frames in short, silent loops.⁴ The GIF’s efficiency at sampling moving image works eventually catapulted the format to extreme prominence in Internet culture. The 2010s saw an explosion of GIFs on sites like BuzzFeed and Twitter, where “reaction GIFs” gave rise to a robust new form of visual communication based in moving image quotation.⁵ The particular nature of the GIF’s mainstream success as a unit of communication, though, has obscured its artistic potential. Media consumers encounter GIFs as a response to some more primary thing: a tweet, listicle entry, text message, and so on. GIFs function as ancillary items whose artistry, if any, seems to derive from their source material or from their poster’s (not maker’s) creative deployment of *that* moment from *that* film in response to *that* life event (e.g., using a GIF of a river of gushing blood from *The Shining*’s trailer to declare “Not Pregnant”).

Not only is there little visibility on the mainstream Internet for GIFs with more artistic aspirations, there also seems to be almost no concern for the image quality or production value of GIFs, evident in the visible digital artifacts that litter many highly circulated GIFs. This lack of public concern for GIF image quality exists in tension with widespread contemporaneous investments in Netflix streaming speeds and 4K home television displays. For the GIF in many respects belongs to the class of media swirling about on the

Internet that Hito Steyerl dubs the “poor image”: “Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard . . . compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution. . . . It transforms quality into accessibility.”⁶ This transformation applies well to a poor image like a low-res, compressed video file of a feature film, but Steyerl’s description reveals a unique attribute of the low-res GIF among other poor images: it was never expected to be a quality image. Internet users rely on GIFs to communicate feelings, not to provide deep aesthetic experiences. If a feeling can be communicated clearly through a jumpy, degraded loop, then the GIF’s poor image becomes a useful commodity.

All this stands in contrast to the long history of GIF making by professional artists, who have used the format extensively since the ’90s, mostly creating meticulously high-res images with file sizes that reach the upper limits of allowable uploads on sites (like Tumblr) where they circulate their work.⁷ Paddy Johnson has published an invaluable four-part overview of the art GIF’s history, the third part of which she titles “How Tumblr Changed Everything.”⁸ Here I want to dig deeper into that assertion by expanding beyond the professional art world and examining Tumblr’s more populist elevation of the artistry of GIFs.

TUMBLR AS VIRTUAL GALLERY: THE DEMOCRATIZATION (AND EXPLOITATION) OF GIF ART

Artist Tom Moody described the GIF in 2009 as “[t]he purest expression of the democratic web . . . almost anyone can make one and almost every browser will read them.”⁹ His remarks are reminiscent of a slightly earlier era of heady web 2.0 optimism about how the Internet would democratize cultural production, letting “anyone” distribute their writing, photography, and filmmaking to a global audience. As a wasteland of little-read blogs spread across the early twenty-first-century Internet, though, it became clear how much distribution networks and platforms’ framing of “anyone’s” work would shape this dream of democratization.

For the democratization of artistic GIFs, Tumblr’s particular type of distribution network has been key. Johnson identifies some of the reasons why: Tumblr’s infrastructure was built to spread content, with easy systems of uploading, reblogging, and tagging, and as a social media platform it “was a more streamlined way of sharing images and meeting new artists than its surf blog predecessors” (stand-alone sites run by artists or collectives). Johnson

also recognizes the way Tumblr's infrastructure supported nonprofessional artists sharing GIFs alongside established professionals, since its Dashboard interface has a context-removing, democratizing effect.¹⁰ Tumblr's Dashboard, like most social media feeds, has traditionally presented content from the most talented or popular bloggers alongside and in the same format as content from those who are virtually unknown.¹¹ If one set up a Tumblr feed as a virtual gallery for artistic GIFs, in other words—following many accounts that post such content—then a reblog of Cory Arcangel's *Super Mario Clouds* (2002), one of the highest-profile art GIFs, might appear right below a rough 3D animation from a first-year art student.

I believe, however, there are more, and more complex, reasons than Johnson addresses for why Tumblr has become the primary home of GIF artistry. On the technical side, Tumblr has demonstrated support for the animated GIF through its regular increase of file size limits for GIF uploads, from 500 KB to 1 MB in 2010, 2 MB in 2014, 3 MB in 2017, and 5 MB in 2019. At the same time, the platform seems to recognize what's both practical and creatively generative about limits, not pushing GIF size past a point where users with a range of tools and connection speeds can easily engage with them (as Twitter did in 2016 with an increase to 15 MB for GIFs uploaded from non-mobile devices). In terms of creativity, Tumblr's upload limits have long functioned as productive constraints for those honing their GIF artistry and have shaped unique aesthetic trends on the site. Jason Eppink describes how the platform's early difficulties with processing GIFs that had highly saturated or bright colors, for example, compelled makers to develop "a distinct visual aesthetic of darker, desaturated GIFs."¹² And Johnson attributes GIF experiments on early accounts like Three Frames (which created anxiously gyrating GIFs from just three frames each of film scenes) to that initially low ceiling of 500 KB.¹³

Another technical quality, if a more abstract one, that strengthens Tumblr's hospitable environment for GIF art is what Louisa Stein calls "the infinite scroll": a constantly replenishing, bottomless depth of content as the user scrolls ever-downward. Stein describes this infrastructure as creating "an aesthetic of abundant multiplicity and multidirectional flow . . . a sensation of limitlessness."¹⁴ This spatial limitlessness is mirrored in the temporal limitlessness of the animated GIF, creating an intangible affinity between Tumblr as a platform and the GIF as a format.

The primary reason that Tumblr has become *the* hub of GIF artistry, though, is cultural rather than technical, and it speaks to Tumblr's unique identity among social media sites in both a celebratory and cynical way. Tumblr has defined itself as the most aesthetically driven social media site that

supports animated GIF uploads.¹⁵ While Tumblr users have a wide variety of aesthetic preferences, the site's community has defined itself broadly as one that cares about *taste*, manifested not just in what TV fandoms one belongs to, but in one's demonstrated visual sensibility. The unique affordances of Tumblr's platform promote such an aesthetic investment among its users, as Tumblr (unlike Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or Snapchat) offers users a broad choice of "themes" through which to visually frame their accounts and even provides links to edit the HTML code of themes for deeper visual customization.

More important than one's theme on Tumblr, though, are the aesthetics of the content one uploads or—far more often for most users—reblogs. While many social media sites have mechanisms for recirculating content posted by others (Facebook's share, Twitter's retweet), Tumblr's voracious culture of reblogging eclipses all of these and functions differently. The site is a dual climate of consumption and curation, as most users navigate it absorbing posted items for pleasure but also claiming these items for their own active use as reblogs. On Tumblr, more so than on other social media sites, the content one reblogs is a crucial means of self-definition, particularly for the large portion of users who rarely or never upload their own content, running accounts solely as engines for reblogging. Click on the home page of one of these and your field of vision fills with a sprawling, bottomless expanse of reblogged images and GIFs (and, less often, text). The scrolling accumulation of these will give you a strong impression of that user's visual style and how they want to be seen by other Tumblr users.

In this environment, GIFs are expected to do more than quote snippets of pop culture to react to something, and artistic GIFs are an extremely valuable commodity. When reblogged, they become visual tools that help users prove their good taste and establish the "brand" of their Tumblr accounts and identities (even as the hip denizens of Tumblr might vehemently disidentify with the corporate language of branding). As Colin Beckett writes, "the animated GIF is one of the tools by which social media users seek tribes and distinguish themselves."¹⁶ On Tumblr, GIF utility goes well beyond declarations of fandoms and speaks to the site's deeper concern for aesthetic taste. Art, including the art GIF, circulates and succeeds on Tumblr in part because artsy visuals have a special commodity value there (just as, in parallel, qualities like a frenetic pace and maximally visible spectacle have a special commodity value on YouTube). The perfect reblogged artsy GIF for one Tumblr might be a rough animation with retro 16-bit video game graphics and garish, highly saturated colors; for another, it might feature HD footage of two pairs

of entwined bare feet on a bohemian beach blanket, framed against a pale sunrise that gradates smoothly from Pantone Rose Quartz to Serenity. The particular aesthetic could be anything from blog to blog, but that aesthetic will communicate a specific something about the user's visual taste.

GIF ARTISTRY ON TUMBLR BEYOND THE ART WORLD

The less cynical side of Tumblr's fixation with aesthetics, though, is that the site has formed communities that seem to genuinely support artists of all kinds and appreciate a wide variety of GIF art beyond the output of established professionals. The GIF Connoisseur models this openness within the 417 GIFs selected for its title figure to view. Alongside art GIFs from well-known makers like David Szakaly and Cory Arcangel and cinemagraph creators Jamie Beck and Kevin Burg, The GIF Connoisseur trains his gaze on work from novice animators and a range of live-action GIFs: dancing chimneysweeps from *Mary Poppins*, a child reacting to a viral video, old footage taken from a moving roller coaster (figure 34.2), or rain drops rustling the leaves of a plant. The GIF Connoisseur's agenda, thus, comes into focus. The blog does not single-mindedly seek admission for GIFs into the halls of Art by showcasing the format's most highbrow creations, which the blunt gesture of inserting the connoisseur figure might initially imply. It argues instead for the endless artistic potential of the GIF across all its forms, including its most approachable and populist.



Fig. 34.2. Three-frame sample of GIF #384, The GIF Connoisseur

Tumblr is the place to find this potential, starting with the humble frame-capture GIF, those that extract short moving image sequences from film and television. As previously noted, the quotation culture of frame-capture GIFs on the wider Internet pays little mind to their quality, but Tumblr has incubated more aesthetically minded frame-capture GIFs within fan communities. Fans make GIFs in appreciation of their media source material, not solely in a reaction GIF mode. They thus commit more to production value and composition, drawing from the large, pre-existing toolkit of fan art techniques and evolving new GIF-specific ones. As Ödül Akyapi Gürsimsek writes, for fans, “GIF making is often more than slicing a single shot into a looping image with text juxtaposed over it.”¹⁷ Gürsimsek demonstrates that “quality” GIFs are about a lot more than resolution, involving graphic design choices about “point, line, typography, color, figure/ground, transparency, texture, and motion.”¹⁸ Makers edit together multiple shots within a GIF, change tonal values, design elaborate mattes, and so on. On the sparser side, a special variety of GIF called the cinemagraph allows makers to pare sequences down to barely moving images. These GIFs are altered to animate only a small part of the frame, encouraging viewers to focus intently on subtle details of movement within the source text. This type of GIF art reached its apex with the mesmerizing Tumblr blog *If We Don't, Remember Me* (2010–2015, Gustaf Mantel), whose content showed in three museum exhibitions.¹⁹

And with the added dimension of multiple loops displayed together, the popular Tumblr form of the GIFset takes the aesthetic possibilities of GIFs to a new plane. As Louisa Stein has observed, GIFsets can be as contained as a few looping moments of a single scene in sequence, often set to inaudible, implied music with the addition of text lyrics from popular songs.²⁰ Or they can be as temporally sprawling as the subgenre of film GIFsets I’m developing an article about, which combine disparate moments from across a film’s running time in grids of up to a dozen loops.²¹ These dense compositions of multiple GIFs add all the possibilities of collage aesthetics to the realm of GIF art, with the complex collisions of each unit’s own compositional qualities, loop timing, and motion.

Last and most obviously, the type of Tumblr GIF that has been most readily accepted as art is the original animation GIF, in which the GIF maker is an animator creating the image rather than an editor excerpting it from pre-existing content. Original animation GIFs form a thriving galaxy of work on Tumblr and often express a subtle confidence in their art status that remediated film and television GIFs rarely possess, perhaps because the skills and time required to create original animations are obvious to viewers, securing

greater respectability. The confidence I see in them manifests, ironically, through their freedom to reject markers of quality by purposefully degrading their images. A popular aesthetic among original animation GIFs on Tumblr simulates damage to the image. As if they sourced their material from an old and unloved reel of celluloid or VHS tape, these GIF makers layer scratches and lines of analog video distortion over their carefully crafted looping images. Argentinean artist Gustavo Torres's GIFs on his Kidmograph Tumblr are emblematic here, regularly featuring simulated damage, often from several different media forms at once. His GIF "SVN 3" imagines itself as a scratched-up strip of celluloid animation of tree branches, then transferred to a now-damaged VHS tape that reveals itself in a quick burst of lines of distortion (figure 34.3); "The Journey is the Destination" and "TVNNNNEL" mimic early computer animation overlaid with celluloid film scratches and what appear to be smudges around the edges of a dirty monitor through which the GIF is viewed.²² Having less to prove about their art status, such GIFs are able to participate in digital media's highbrow nostalgia for old media's vulnerable materiality and to benefit from its surprising aesthetic capital.

That so many kinds of artistic GIFs at so many levels of production complexity flourish on Tumblr speaks to the unusual aesthetic curiosity and generosity of its community. As much as I have advocated for the GIF as an art form and for a greater attention to quality in discourse on GIFs, I am also wary of how this rhetoric can build barriers to participation. YouTube's evolution provides a cautionary tale, as a growing fixation on professionalism and production value among its video makers (especially vloggers) and viewers gradually changed this once-democratic platform. Unable to compete with a new generation of glossy, commercialized content, the messy, wild, and sometimes wonderful videos that characterized YouTube's early years



Fig. 34.3. Three-frame sample of "SVN 3," Kidmograph

have trickled off. It would be a shame, indeed, to see the famously democratic format of the GIF similarly evolve to a technical plane out of many Tumblr creators' reach.

CONCLUSION

As much as Tumblr has done for the GIF's image as more-than-reaction, promoting the artistry of this format can be a difficult task requiring a gesture of reframing as blunt—as almost satirical—as *The GIF Connoisseur's*. The thoughtful subtext of this series is that in the onscreen connoisseur's silent insistence on affirming each GIF's artistry through his presence, he must occupy the center of each frame. His body blocks a large portion of the animation and becomes each piece's inevitable, repeating focal point, just as Norman Rockwell's original connoisseur obscured the modernist painting he contemplated. These blockages subtly comment on the way that some forms need such a blatant framing as art to find their footing.²³ And they demonstrate that sometimes that framing adds not just legitimacy but new layers to the art itself: the clash of a gallery setting with a bicycle wheel sculpture, or the new graphic compositions born in the superimposition of the connoisseur figure onto existing GIFs.

Why has the GIF struggled to find wide recognition for its artistry? Because of its approachability, because "anyone" can make a GIF. On a technical level, this is equally true of Duchamp's style of experimental sculpture or of Pollock-style abstract painting, evoked in *The Connoisseur*. A reminder of these lofty forms' actual accessibility is, in fact, is hidden within *The Connoisseur*. The painting the balding man admires was a separate composition created at full scale by Rockwell himself—a populist painter decidedly not admitted to the elite art world—allegedly with a contribution from a worker painting Rockwell's studio windows, whom he invited to add some splashes to the canvas.²⁴ Rockwell's work in this highbrow style then merged with his more approachable iconography in the completed canvas of *The Connoisseur* and found its audience not in a gallery, but on a cover of the widely circulating *Saturday Evening Post*.

In the 1960s high-art world, then, even a professional like Rockwell who wanted to give Pollock's style of painting a try had to do so almost in secret, to hide his abstract work in the background of the type of image he was expected to produce. Even though utopian dreams of how the Internet would be a pure democratizing force have not come to fruition, it *has* created

spaces like Tumblr that loosen up art cultures and create environments of experimentation, places where young forms like the GIF mature and non-professionals gain recognition. Tumblr didn't even exist when GIFs became art, but its intervention has nevertheless been essential. The site has helped a wider public see (and make) GIFs that do more than quote and react. Echoing Rockwell's gesture in *The Connoisseur*, Tumblr has taken the art GIF out of the gallery and put it on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* . . . or at least the *Saturday Evening Social Justice #Johnlock Shippers Post*.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Grace Oliver, my undergraduate research assistant, for her invaluable help in finding and archiving the art GIFs I write about here, as well as Smith College for the grant that funded her position.

2. For Brandt's own interpretation of the Rockwell painting he remediates, see <http://thornebrandt.com/posts/gifconnoisseur>.

3. Untitled post, The GIF Connoisseur, January 8, 2014, <http://thegifconnoisseur.tumblr.com/post/72683395834/try-not-to-ever-come-out-of-the-frame-of-mind-in>.

4. Sally McKay, "The Affect of Animated GIFs," *Art and Education* (2009), <http://www.artandeducation.net/paper/the-affect-of-animated-gifs-tom-moody-petra-cortright-lorna-mills/>. While the GIF can be used for still images, I will be using the term to reference animated GIFs, unless otherwise noted.

5. For more on GIFs and quotation culture, see Michael Z. Newman, "In the Gif Space," *Flow*, October 2, 2017, <http://www.flowjournal.org/2017/10/in-the-gif-space/>; and Kate M. Miltner and Tim Highfield, "Never Gonna GIF You Up: Analyzing the Cultural Significance of the Animated GIF," *Social Media and Society* 3, no. 3 (August 17, 2017), <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2056305117725223>.

6. Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," *e-flux* 10 (November 2009), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.

7. Jason Eppink, "A Brief History of the GIF (So Far)," *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (2014): 300.

8. Paddy Johnson, "A Brief History of Animated GIF Art, Part 3," *ArtNet*, September 2, 2014, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/a-brief-history-of-animated-gif-art-part-three-88928>.

9. Quoted in McKay, "Affect."

10. Johnson, "A Brief History of Animated GIF Art, Part 3."

11. Though Verizon's 2017 acquisition of Tumblr and new algorithms may change the democratic spirit of the Dashboard.

12. Eppink, "Brief History," 302.

13. Johnson, "A Brief History of Animated GIF Art, Part 3."

14. Louisa Stein, "The Limits of Infinite Scroll: Gifsets and Fanmixes as Evolving Fan Traditions," *Flow*, January 25, 2016, <https://www.flowjournal.org/2016/01/the-limits-of-infinite-scroll-gifsets-and-fanmixes-as-evolving-fan-traditions/>.
15. Instagram, also known for its aesthetic sensibilities, was slow to include GIFs, giving users limited abilities to post GIFs in 2018, after my initial writing of this chapter.
16. Colin Beckett, "The Rhetoric of the Loop: Animated GIFs and Documentary Film," *Flow*, October 1, 2016, www.flowjournal.org/2016/10/the-rhetoric-of-the-loop/.
17. Ödül Akyapi Gürsimsek, "Animated GIFs as Vernacular Graphic Design: Producing Tumblr Blogs," *Visual Communication* 15, no. 3: 345.
18. Gürsimsek, "Animated GIFs," 333.
19. If We Don't, Remember Me, <http://iwdrm.tumblr.com/>.
20. Stein, "Limits of the Infinite Scroll."
21. Jennifer Malkowski, "Spatial Montage, in Miniature: Movie GIF Sets on Tumblr" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, Chicago, Illinois, March 22–26, 2017). For examples of these GIFsets, see the earlier pages of All Movie GIFs, <http://allmoviegifs.tumblr.com/>.
22. Kidmograph, <http://kidmograph.tumblr.com/>. see also ZOLLOC, <https://zoloc.tumblr.com/>, and Street Art GIFs, <https://street-art-gifs.tumblr.com/>.
23. Brandt himself expresses cynicism about the likelihood that GIFs will be widely recognized as art and sees his blog less as advocating for that framing than as "a reluctant surrender to the age of the aggregator." Thorne Brandt, "The GIF Connoisseur: A Reluctant Surrender to the Age of the Aggregator," <http://thornebrandt.com/posts/gifconnoisseur>.
24. Diane Denny, "Rockwells That Don't Look Like Rockwells," *The Saturday Evening Post*, April 12, 2013, <http://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2013/04/12/art-entertainment/norman-rockwell-art-entertainment/rockwells-that-dont-look-like-rockwells.html>.

Gallery

#Original Art

Curated by Indira Neill Hoch

For our Original Art Gallery, we chose to focus on the way in which Tumblr art reflects the distinctiveness of the platform and its users, both in its variety of forms and in the artists' motivations. As these artists testify, they shaped their work in relation to the particular sense of self and community they developed on a platform that provides a home for a range of non-normative expression. For many, their art is grounded in aspects of their own identities, often marginalized or not visible, that they were able to express and find support for on Tumblr. Asian American photographer Vivian Fu, for example, felt an intimacy and kinship with her Tumblr community that allowed her to develop her style of personal photography. Elaine Tipping developed their graphic comic style, featuring nonbinary characters, in direct relationship to their growing understanding of their own nonbinary and queer identity on Tumblr. Ruby Elliot made her struggles with mental health visible by creating drawings that resonated strongly with other users dealing with similar concerns. Julian Miholics explored an aspect of his Hungarian identity by transforming the human participants of a Hungarian festival into a symbolic supernatural creature.

These artists were both inspired by their Tumblr communities and, in some cases, created their work in direct response to feedback from others in those communities: Because of Finn Alpin's commitment to portraying under-represented body types, they solicited the Tumblr community to help decide the appearance of their characters, and artist Valin Mattheis both sought inspiration from and served his Tumblr community by soliciting ideas for his art through Tumblr "Asks." Some artists, like nimehime, have developed Tumblr art as merchandise and sold it to their Tumblr fans; nimehime's graphic style and slogans of femme rebellion have often been adapted into

wearable art by community members. Being Tumblr artists has also shaped the professional lives of many artists here, who began as hobbyists on the platform and are now pursuing careers that, as they indicate, were either begun or strongly impacted by their time on and with Tumblr.



Fig. G7.1. Bad Girls do it Well, art and text by nimehime

This piece is an homage to M.I.A.'s song "Bad Girls," the lyrics being "live fast, die young, bad girls do it well." The whole idea behind the soft-pastel vs. grungy-girl-gang appeals to me and to a femme aesthetic encapsulated on Tumblr. While this aesthetic isn't exclusive to Tumblr, I find that pieces like this one are particularly popular there. I really love using bright punchy colors, and then I mix that with a heavily anime-inspired style. Imagining this "bad girl" persona feels empowering in a way, because it's strong and bold but also unapologetically feminine.

When I shared this artwork on Tumblr, I was hoping that girls (and maybe even not-girls?) could be inspired by the style and rebellious feeling of the work and perhaps purchase the merchandise too, which I sell as a hobby, both through my online shop and at conventions in Australia. In the arty and

alternative community, people usually like short, relatable, and catchy slogans and don them on their clothes or as accessories. People who have purchased my merchandise send me photographs wearing pieces I've designed. While sometimes I set out to make a button or pin, other times it's not until after I've finished that I can see the piece as wearable art. I love the idea of self-expression through clothing. It inspires me to see people dress their best without worrying about external pressures from society.

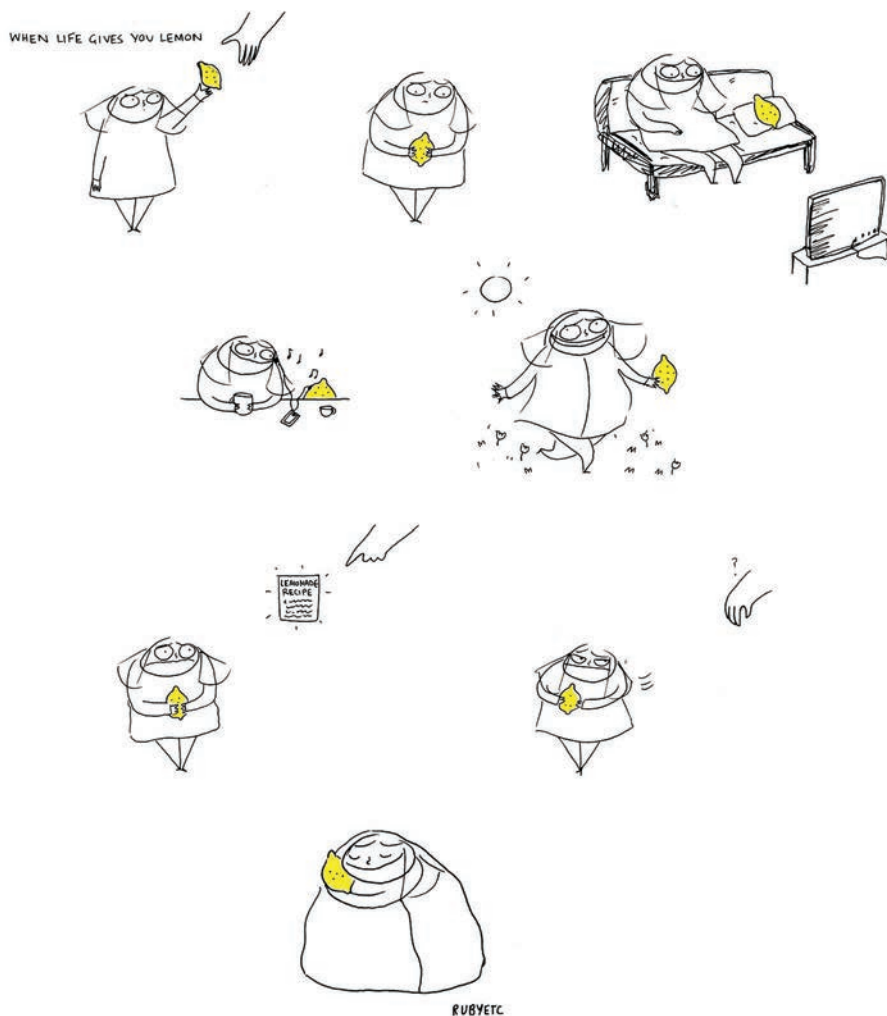


Fig. G7.2. When Life Gives You Lemon art and text by Ruby Elliot | rubyetc

I have been sharing my work on Tumblr since 2012 (rubyetc.tumblr.com). Between 2013 and 2016 I posted avidly, sharing everything I was drawing and being particularly open about my struggles with mental health. Before illustration became my career, I used blogging as an emotional outlet and way of communicating with an audience who I felt would understand what I was up against. For those three years, my impression was that Tumblr was the go-to

for young artists, both amateur and professional, who made work depicting inner struggles, social awkwardness, and general existential angst, packaged as relatable memes.

I watched which pieces went viral and garnered the most attention and comments, which was not always a positive experience. Often the objective artistic value of the piece had little to do with popularity, and going viral was much more dependent on whether the gag or sentiment could capture a common emotion quickly and clearly enough to make people stop when they were scrolling through their feed. I think this did subconsciously shape the way I created work, trying to mold my art around trends for certain types of humor or memes to benefit from an increasingly enigmatic algorithm. The environment on social media is not always ideal for those sharing creative content, however platforms such as Tumblr have enabled artists like myself, who lack formal training, to reach hundreds of thousands of people and launch a career.

This piece titled “When life gives you lemon . . .” was a comic I drew and posted online in November 2015. At heart, the drawing is simply a very silly take on a familiar proverb. I enjoy playing with words and construction of language, so in making the lemon singular I imagined adopting it as some sort of citric friend, which made me laugh. I think the comic hit on the silly, wholesome side of humor popular to Tumblr, a little bit cute but also nonsensical with anthropomorphosis of everyday objects. I used the caption, “What is this? Lemon Sympathy? Lemonpathy?” and a good handful of people later reblogged it and commented underneath, “lempathy” (a far better portmanteau than I had been able to come up with). It’s a good example of how humor takes on a very dynamic role on Tumblr, with meta-jokes developing under original posts in the comments. A later version of this drawing appeared in my 2017 book, *It’s All Absolutely Fine*, a compilation that includes some of my most popular art from Tumblr.



Fig. G7.3. Busós
art and text by
Julian Miholics |
jomadraws

This piece holds its origins in Busójárás, aka Busó-walking, a Hungarian festival that has roots in scaring away the invading Turks of the Ottoman occupation, and a deeper meaning: scaring away winter itself. A loud celebration of life and birth.

Being half Hungarian, I gave my creative take on the Busós (people wearing traditional horned masks, sheepskin hides) and turned them into living animals that are elusive and enigmatic. Initially, I was unsure how to present them on Tumblr since my version no longer depicted people, but retained the aesthetics of wool and horns. I tentatively described them as a “new chara/species” and tagged “#inspired by busójárás,” as I wasn’t sure if the work was a valid depiction of Busós, a silly anxiety from being half- Hungarian with limited cultural knowledge.

The aesthetic of monsters and supernatural has always been with us, as seen in paleolithic and neolithic art of half-human figures. It’s a human fascination that’s utterly unbreakable, the interest in the unknown and uncanny, and projecting ourselves onto other living animals. Tumblr is incredibly visual and continues in this folkloric tradition; anthropomorphic creatures have a sprawling fanbase.

Other Hungarians recognized the creatures as Busós and enjoyed the nod to the culture, while non-Hungarians asked about the Busós via Inbox messages. Tumblr's formatting and tagging systems allow for niche interests to grow into fandoms. The positive feedback boosted my confidence and I made sure to tag "Busójárás" in all existing artworks, as well as officially name them "Busós."

I hope to continue creating art of Busós. I can easily see them adorning a ceramic vessel or as a sculptural piece. As an interdisciplinary artist working in ceramics, painting, and illustration (digital and traditional), I work in forms of media that often overlap. However, digital art, discernible from a single perspective, is the most effective media to publish on Tumblr.

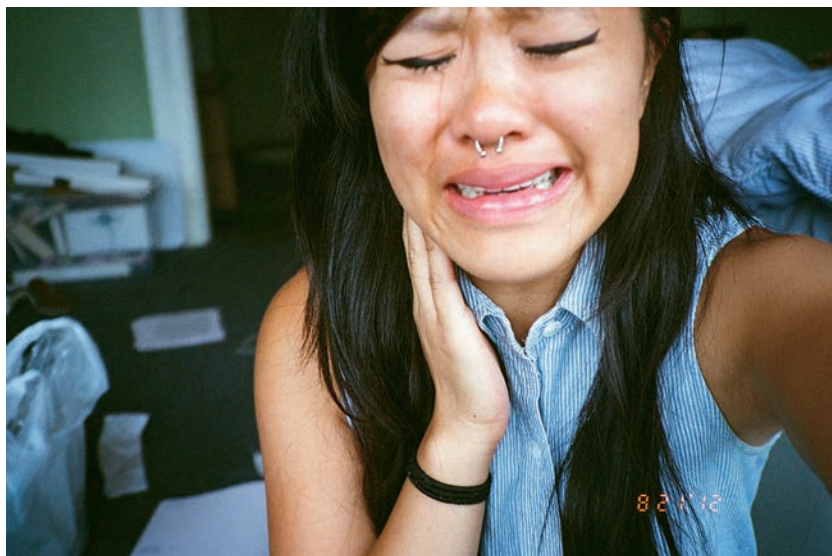


Fig. G7.4. Self Portrait Crying, San Francisco, 2012 art and text by Vivian Fu

My approach to photography is what I call “personal documentary photography,” meaning I photograph my life in a contemporary vernacular style. For example, I’m very interested in the usage of cameras with time stamps, to help ground the images in a specific time in my life, while also utilizing it as a tool which connotes the concept of “truth” within photography. I photograph a wide range of moments: happy ones, sad ones, mundane ones. This includes my photograph, “Self Portrait Crying, San Francisco, 2012,” which I included on my Tumblr at the time. The vagueness of this image, and its inclusion in my series *Me and Tim*, was the source of many anonymous Asks on Tumblr, inquiring about the story behind it. In some ways, I feel that the strength of the photograph is that the viewer is specifically *not* given a story or explanation. Instead, it asks to be read and contextualized within the larger series, and my larger body of work. I include myself in my photographs as a means of exerting my authorship and inserting myself into the narrative. I believe that “Self Portrait Crying,” and my photography in general, demands that Asian American women be viewed as fully formed subjects, subjects that cry, subjects that enjoy sex, subjects that love.

Tumblr is a very dear and important space to me, and I believe that Tumblr really helped push me and my photography forward in a way I was not anticipating. On Tumblr, people are unable to see how many people you fol-

low or how many people follow you, and psychologically, I believe that was part of the reason why it felt like such an intimate space and ideal for sharing intimate thoughts or intimate photographs. It is inherently diaristic. Additionally, the pockets of Tumblr that I fell into were very engaged in feminist conversations on topics including representation, racism, sex, and the intersection of all of these things, which my photography touches upon. Tumblr opened the world up to me; I connected with a community of artists, which was something I had not strongly felt, even during my time at university. These artists were primarily women and people of color, and deeply passionate about their work and the politics that their works engaged with. We discussed the tools we used, our favorite artists, and our least favorite artists. I was exposed to many photographers who were not part of the canon taught to me during my time at school, and I had honest and personal conversations about diverse life experiences that I would never have otherwise.



Fig. G7.5. Gianna Dating Sim Headshots art and text by Finn Alpin | twitter: @mojavemeat

I've been using Tumblr to post my art since I began using the site in 2011, when I was fourteen. I previously used other sites such as DeviantArt, but when many of the popular artists whose work I followed moved to Tumblr, I did too. As a third-year university student currently studying Games, Art, and Design, I've often found it valuable to post work from my university projects on my blog in order to get feedback. I enjoy using Tumblr for this purpose because I know the feedback is going to be coming from a variety of people, and I strive for diversity in my character design work. Getting input from people of different races, genders, sexualities, etc. helps ensure I am portraying experiences that differ from my own in a correct and respectful manner.

For this project, I designed four characters for a hypothetical dating simulator type game and focused on presenting a cast diverse in gender presentation, race and body type. I had conceived this character, Gianna, as fat, mixed race, and nonbinary, but other details of their appearance were not set in stone. Because Gianna was a redesign of an already established character of mine, it was especially important for me to eliminate personal bias. Allowing other people on Tumblr—both other artists and users—to see my work and judge which hairstyle they preferred helped me set aside my own preferences,

and I ended up choosing design 4 over my preferred design 6. This feedback allowed me to compromise on their appearance without having to change their design fundamentals. As a creator going into the games industry, my goal is to boost the voices of marginalized people and build up more representation for people other than straight, cis, white men. I take pride in the fact that all my work reflects this core belief.

Anonymous said: How about a forest God and his human daughter? Love your blog!



Fig. G7.6. Forest God and his Human Daughter art and text by Valin Mattheis | strange-gods

As can often happen to anyone following a creative impulse, sometimes I hit a wall. Whether the result of benighted curse or garden-variety failure, anyone who finds themselves artistically becalmed can tell you that it is an utter misery. My Ask series on Tumblr, where I request that other Tumblr users send art prompts via Tumblr Ask, was devised as a method of coping with exactly this stagnation, and for me it has been a fairly grand success.

Tumblr forms an important part of my social media exposure because I find it facilitates the strongest connection between people. Likely because it has long been a bastion for wandering strays and a seething bed of opposing tensions. I've never tried something similar to my Ask series on other social platforms, where I don't feel the same affinity with my audience.

What usually blocks my artistic output isn't necessarily a lack of inspiration, but a lack of focus. I will be a boiling cauldron of ideas without the ability to fix onto one long enough to drag it into the world. I comb through Asks I receive, skimming for something vague enough that it seizes upon something in my brain. I realize that I'm not painting something that isn't already there, I am waiting for the words to coalesce something from the disparate ingredients wandering through the fog. The ideal request strikes some thread

between vagueness and suggestion, sometimes a certain turn of phrase can bring an image so forcefully to mind that I can't do anything until I've painted it, in this case, a Forest God and his human daughter. At the end of the process I generally have a few sketches to turn into finished work, such as the one presented here, which in turn can determine my trajectory for many months to come.



Fig. G7.7. Pathways:
Chronicles of
Tuvana art and text
by Elaine Tipping |
Triaelf9

I've been making and sharing webcomics since 2005, and joined Tumblr in 2012 as another platform to share my art. I ended up following quite a few people who posted an eclectic range of things, not just art. Then I stumbled across a post about asexuality, and that was the beginning of the domino fall of realization; "I'm asexual," and then, "I'm also biromantic," and finally, "I'm nonbinary." As I neared thirty, I realized I was queer. I mean, I'd always been queer, but I'd never had a name to put to any of it, before Tumblr.

At that time, I was planning my newest comic, *Pathways: Chronicles of Tuvana*. I knew I wanted to create a high-fantasy story like *Lord of the Rings* (which I loved), but something a lot less straight, white, and male, than most high-fantasy comics. Listening to people's feelings, reading their posts, and observing their interactions on Tumblr, I learned a lot about how other people experienced the world. I learned about tropes to avoid when it came to

race, sexuality, and gender, and I listened to people talk about what stories they'd love to see.

I knew *Pathways* would have a queer cast, but exploring my own queerness sharpened my focus. I wanted to show queer people living their lives in a fantastical world, acting like everyday people, like graduating from school and getting a job. I also really wanted an asexual-aromantic character, Taria, who was open and caring and loved her best friends with all of her heart. Commonly, ace and/or aro characters are stereotyped as cold, unfeeling, or robotic, so I really wanted to show a character who broke those nasty tropes.

I created a world where anyone could see themselves as possibly existing, especially those who find many existing fantastical worlds alienating, and Tumblr's influence helped me in developing the *Pathways* world. Unlike other sites, people on Tumblr were able to speak more and be better heard.

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