Abigail De Kosnik and Keith P. Feldman, Editors

#IDENTITY

HASHTAGGING RACE, GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND NATION

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University of Michigan Press • Ann Arbor

Published in the United States of America by the
University of Michigan Press
Manufactured in the United States of America
Printed on acid-free paper
First published April 2019

A CIP catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data has been applied for.

ISBN: 978-0-472-07415-0 (Hardcover : alk paper)
ISBN: 978-0-482-05415-2 (Paper : alk paper)
ISBN: 978-0-472-12527-2 (ebook)
ISBN: 978-0-472-90109-8 (ebook Open Access)

This title is freely available in an open access edition with generous support from the Library of the University of California, Berkeley.

Acknowledgments

Centering questions of race, gender, sexuality, and nation in this book has been as much a reflection of the topics of scholarly inquiry as it is an intentional way of coproducing knowledge across axes of power and difference. *#identity* reflects several years of collaboration and community-building among the faculty, postdoctoral fellows, and doctoral students who make the Color of New Media working group what it is. The book is one outcome of a shared desire to create the scholarship we want to see in the world and an orientation toward collaboration and co-mentorship that we consider foundational to interdisciplinary work. We want to thank all of the students, faculty, and staff who have made the Color of New Media working group their own over the years.

UC Berkeley's Center for Race and Gender, especially Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Leti Volpp, Alisa Bierria, and Pamela Matsuoka, and the Center for New Media, particularly Greg Niemeyer, Nicholas de Monchaux, and Lara Wolfe, have generously provided necessary institutional support for this project. We are grateful to the Berkeley Research Impact Initiative at the Library of the University of California, Berkeley for supporting the production of an open access version of the book. Nic Chang, Monica Khachatrian, and Lida Zeitlin Wu demonstrated consummate professionalism and care in formatting our chapters and preparing the final manuscript, and we thank them from the bottom of our hearts for their time, dedication, and labor. Rachel Nishan at Twin Oaks Indexing was a dream to work with. The team at the University of Michigan Press has been generous and supportive throughout the long gestation of this book. Susan Cronin fielded countless questions from us and helped our manuscript enter the production process as gracefully as possible, and Mary Hashman was an outstanding production editor. Mary Francis saw

possibilities in this project in its earliest glimmers and has guided it into the world with patience, enthusiasm, and many excellent ideas. We owe Mary a million thanks for her crucial role in making manifest our dream of a collaborative original publication. (In case anyone reading this is wondering how and why a UC Berkeley working group's project ended up at the University of Michigan Press, the answer is that Mary first expressed interest in *#identity* while she was an editor at University of California Press—and her initial input was so crucial to this undertaking that we decided that the book should follow her to her new professional home!)

Finally, to our family members and friends—all those who have helped to give this book life by sustaining and nurturing the people whose names are printed on its pages—thank you, thank you, thank you. This book is the product not only of work but of love.

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Introduction

The Hashtags We've Been Forced to Remember

ABIGAIL DE KOSNIK AND KEITH P. FELDMAN

In August 2017 the Bay Area ensemble Campo Santo performed "Ethos de Masquerade," an original theater and dance work about the HIV/AIDS crisis and the Black Lives Matter movement, at the A.C.T. Strand Theater in San Francisco. Before the performance began, assistant director Ashley Smiley led the audience through some breathing exercises as a means of helping us achieve the proper orientation of mind, body, and spirit necessary to receive the experience that was about to transpire. She encouraged us to inhale, to dwell for a moment on "the hashtags you've been forced to remember," and then to breathe them out and release them. This book is about the hashtags that we've been forced to remember. Its pages contain our meditations on those hashtags, our coming to terms with them, our processing their contexts and meanings, and our releasing them into the world—not as a means of forgetting or erasing them but as a way of sharing the understandings we've come to about what these tags mean, individually and together, and how they have served as labels, metadata, organizing ideas, and rallying cries for the last several years of our lives.

#identity was collectively produced by a working group called the Color of New Media, which is based at the University of California, Berkeley, and is sponsored by the Center for Race and Gender, with additional support from the Berkeley Center for New Media (BCNM). In September 2013 Abigail De Kosnik, a Berkeley faculty member, and Paige Johnson, then a PhD student, decided to launch the Color of New

Media as a response to a question that they had been asking each other for some time: "Is the color of new media studies white?" Both women of color, De Kosnik and Johnson wanted to create a space on the campus in which nonwhite, non-male, non-straight people as well as white, male, or straight people who were seriously interested in difference and inclusion could gather and discuss the multifaceted ways that minorities are, and have been, actively engaging with, shaping, and expanding new media, inclusive of desktop computing, the "blogosphere," mobile culture, social media, UGC (user-generated content), IPTV (Internet Protocol television), gaming, and other emergent or transitional media forms. One of the two dozen or so people to attend our first meeting was Keith Feldman, a Berkeley faculty member in the Department of Ethnic Studies, and soon after, De Kosnik asked Feldman to sign on as the co–faculty organizer of the Color of New Media, to which he agreed. Today the Color of New Media meets monthly in the BCNM Commons (the center's seminar room), and between five and fifteen people attend each meeting. Anyone who attends one meeting, or emails one of the organizers to express interest in the group, is considered a "member" and is added to the group's mailing list. As of this writing, our mailing list currently has seventy-six members, with the following demographics: 21 percent African American, 32 percent Asian American, 10 percent Latinx, 37 percent white, 70 percent female, 27 percent male, 3 percent nonbinary gender, and 11 percent LGBTQ. In contrast, the demographics of UC Berkeley's graduate student population are 5 percent African American, 23 percent Asian American, 5 percent Latinx, and 50 percent white (with the remainder reported as "Other/Unknown" [Graduate Division 2016–2017]), and 46 percent female (Office of the Vice Chancellor for Equity and Inclusion at UC Berkeley 2013).

As a group, the Color of New Media has always been interested in sharing and popularizing scholarship by or about minoritarian users and makers of digital culture, but early on the group expressed enthusiasm at the possibility that we might also *produce* such scholarship. *#identity* constitutes our first collaborative publishing project and demonstrates the kind of academic work that we wish to see more of in the world. The essays contained in this volume foreground how people of color, female, and queer people, and people outside the United States have navigated and developed digital networked spaces; how they have used these spaces to protect and defend themselves and others and advance their causes; and how they have been erased, discriminated against, and targeted in these spaces. As Sarah Florini writes, "Users of color are often

invisible in academic (and popular) considerations of social media," as the user of social media is "generally presumed to be white" (2013, 225). Florini continues, building on the work of Lisa Nakamura (2008): "In a social media context, where race could be hidden if a user so desired, the act of performing race constitutes an important mode of resistance to marginalization and erasure" (Florini 2013, 225). The same could be said of other aspects of identity and difference in digital culture. Gender, sexuality, nationality, and other traits can be elided or masked in networked participation, and when they are announced—or as Florini says, performed—it is often because users have made a deliberate, conscious choice to assert that they do not exist simply on the shadow side of a digital divide, but that they *can* and *do* participate in networks and will use their access and facility with digital communications to make their perspectives and experiences known.

At the same time, race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, location and nationality, can all be elided or avoided by new media studies. Historians and theorists of digital technologies can easily place white male inventors and business leaders (Vannevar Bush, Norbert Wiener, Doug Engelbart, Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk, and so on) at the center of their narratives, or assume the "default whiteness and maleness" (Nakamura 2008) of internet users. To do otherwise, to write scholarship that centers on network innovators, makers, leaders, and users who are Black, Latinx, or Asian American, who are queer or trans, who are African and Indian, who are girls or women, and many other identities besides, makes a statement that they exist, are relevant and significant, and form the core of an inclusive new media studies. To create and publish such scholarship is, to cite Florini, "an act of performing" identity and "constitutes an important mode of resistance to marginalization and erasure" (2013, 225). This is the statement, the action, the performance, the resistance, that the Color of New Media makes with this book.

From the time we began meeting as a working group in 2013, our topics of conversation have ranged far and wide, but threaded through our discussions have been Twitter hashtags founded and popularized by minorities. #BlackLivesMatter (or #BLM) was launched by Patrisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi in summer 2013, just a few months before our group first convened that fall. In our first two years, many of our meetings started with group members collectively sharing and narrativizing the latest responses to police violence against African Americans, and the US legal system's unacceptable response to this violence, includ-

ing #BLM, #ferguson, and #icantbreathe, as well as the on-the-ground protests that these hashtags supported and helped organize.

Additional objects of our collaborative analysis and interpretation included the Twitter accounts of Asian American hashtag activist Suey Park, Nigerian American novelist and poet Teju Cole, and African American blogger and social worker Feminista Jones (Michelle Taylor); the apparent generational divide between feminist activists who understood how to do political organization work on Twitter and those who did not; April Reign's invention of #OscarsSoWhite to call attention to the pressing need for more diversity in Hollywood productions in 2016; rapper and musician Q-Tip's forty-plus tweets delivering lessons in hip-hop history in 2014 (Williams 2014; Joyce 2014); the tweet-storms inspired by Drake's "Hotline Bling" video in 2015, Kendrick Lamar's 2016 Grammy performance, and Beyoncé's 2016 Super Bowl halftime show (which dovetailed with the release of her album *Lemonade*); the #GamerGate controversy in 2014; and the increasing visibility of white supremacists and antifeminists from #GamerGate onward, which spiked with the launch of Donald Trump's presidential campaign in mid-2015. Twitter was not the sole focus of our meetings for those years, but its constant recurrence in our conversations made the platform a clear choice for our organizing topic when we decided to embark on a group publication effort.

#identity: Hashtagging Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Nation thus emerges from the inquiries and debates about Twitter that took place in the Color of New Media working group between 2013 and 2016. In this book, we ask these questions: How are social difference and diversity articulated on Twitter? How are communal minoritarian identities performed, articulated, and defined on Twitter? How does Twitter serve as a political platform on which users seek to advance issues related to social justice? And how do Twitter-based social justice campaigns relate to other forms of political action, such as community organizing and participation in reform movements?

Before describing the essays contained in this volume, it may be useful to review Twitter's history of use for social change and minoritarian representation. Twitter was launched in 2006 as a social media microblogging platform that limited users' posts to "tweets" of 140 characters. In August 2007 tech designer Chris Messina proposed the use of the "#" sign, or "hashtag," to "group" tweets (Edwards 2013). In Iran in June 2009, large-scale protests against the fraudulence of the country's presidential election erupted, with media accounts focusing on the centrality of Twitter for Iranians in the diaspora sharing details about the country's

so-called Green Revolution. As Negar Mottahedeh writes, "#iranelection was the first long-trending international hashtag in Twitter's history" (2015, 17). In December 2010 an uprising in Tunisia sparked a series of civil insurgencies in North Africa and the Middle East that became collectively known as the "Arab Spring." Studying the intensive use of Twitter and Facebook by protesters in these countries, new media scholars formulated a wave of theorizations of social media as a facilitator of revolution. Notable among these are Yousri Marzouki and Olivier Oullier's concept of a "virtual collective consciousness" that can manifest via social networks and give rise to significant change; Carne Ross's idea that in the twenty-first century, massive shifts in power will result from "leaderless revolutions"; and Manuel Castells's notion that emerging technologies of "mass self-communication" help counter-hegemonic forces create new public "networked spaces" that comprise digital and urban spaces. Zeynep Tufekci calls Twitter's role in the 2011 uprisings in Egypt "an ecology-level effect" (2017, 118). Then, in September 2011, when the Occupy Wall Street protest began in New York's Zuccotti Park, and Twitter users around the globe began commenting on events as they unfolded with the hashtags #OccupyWallStreet and #OWS, Eric Augenbraun of *The Guardian* coined the term "hashtag activism" (2011). Ever since, Augenbraun's term has been applied by participants and supporters, as well as critics, to the practice of raising awareness, fostering a sense of collectivity, and expressing solidarity in relation to political causes via hashtags on Twitter (and other media platforms that make use of hashtags, such as Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram).

Taken together, the Green Revolution, the Arab Spring, and Occupy form one origin story of Twitter's use for political change. A parallel origin story is that of "Black Twitter." The preponderance of African American users on Twitter started attracting notice in 2009, when a Pew Internet report (Fox et al. 2009) found that African Americans "used Twitter disproportionately more than other demographic groups" (Brock 2012, 530). The following year, *Slate* published an article by Farhad Manjoo (2010) called "How Black People Use Twitter," which noted that many of Twitter's "trending topics" were initiated by users with Black avatars. "Black Twitter" quickly became the widely accepted name given to the phenomenon of African Americans launching trending hashtags on Twitter, though many were quick to note that Black Twitter was neither homogeneous nor representative of all African Americans, and not all African Americans online participated in Black Twitter (Hilton 2010). Information scientist André Brock states, "Manjoo's column signaled

Black Twitter's 'arrival'" (2012, 545)—that is, the moment when white users, who had constituted the "default" (Nakamura 2008) population of the internet for so long, noticed that Black users were present and active online in large numbers and were communicating on a social media platform in their own vernacular.

For the first few years of Twitter's existence, Black Twitter hashtags tended to be humorous or ironic, replete with insults and jokes that indirectly conveyed social commentary: #ifsantawasblack, #DumbRoastJokes, #lilmamasweave, and #onlyintheghetto were a few tags analyzed by Sarah Florini (2013) and Sanjay Sharma (2013), early scholars of Black Twitter. This first wave of Black Twitter scholarship interpreted the rapid-fire responses posted in Black Twitter hashtags as examples of "signifyin'," a theory of the multilayered purposes and meanings of African American vernacular wordplay and call-and-response group communication first proposed by Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1989). Brock argues that to read Black Twitter exchanges as signifyin' means to understand them as "the articulation of a shared worldview, where recognition of the forms plus participation in the wordplay signals membership in the Black community. Black discourse, from this perspective . . . become[s] communal commentary upon political and personal realities" (2012, 533). Brock's framing of Black Twitter as signifyin', when hashtags mostly had comic intent, worked to give the phenomenon weight and importance: while signifyin' may appear to be all "disses" and puns, it also allows African American users to make themselves known to one another in an online space where ethnicity is not de facto visible and to express and reinforce perspectives that are unique to their community. As Florini writes, signifyin' enables "multiple modes of participation. Even serving as the target of a diss can function as a viable means of inclusion" (2013, 231). Another way that Black Twitter constituted a digital version of signifyin' was in its speed. Florini, referencing the work of Geneva Smitherman (2000), asserts that "timing is key to signifyin'," and that, similar to the way that verbal signifyin' games depend on near-instantaneous responses, "Twitter moves at an extremely rapid pace with hundreds of thousands of tweets being posted every minute. With many users tweeting simultaneously, there is always activity in the timeline, making the overall pace of the [textual] competition move quite quickly" (Florini 2013, 233).

Then, in 2013, the aspects of Black Twitter that Brock and Florini had proposed made it a new form of signifyin'. Its ability to build feelings of community and shared sensibilities among African Americans online, and to generate hashtagged conversations that quickly scaled up into

tweets numbering in the thousands or more, were deployed by Black users to different ends. In July 2013 the acquittal of George Zimmerman in Trayvon Martin's murder sparked the creation of hashtags such as #nojustice, #RIPTrayvonMartin, and, most significantly, #BlackLivesMatter. Other tags protesting systemic racism and violence against African Americans followed, each incited by its own series of events.

#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, in August 2013, was launched by Mikki Kendall in response to the purportedly feminist writer Hugo Schwyzer, who had been praised and supported by several prominent white feminists, admitting that he had targeted women of color. #ferguson and the related tag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown were both initiated in August 2014, after the Ferguson, Missouri, police officer Darren Wilson fatally shot eighteen-year-old Michael Brown (Wray 2014; Bonilla and Rosa 2015). #icantbreathe began trending in December 2014 after a Staten Island grand jury decided not to indict NYPD officer Daniel Pantaleo after he choked Eric Garner to death and the video capturing the homicide showed Garner repeatedly telling officers that he could not breathe. #SayHerName was coined by the African American Policy Forum in February 2015, which trended heavily after the suspicious death by hanging of Sandra Bland in a Waller County, Texas, jail (Khaleeli 2016). Black Twitter became known primarily as a means of expressing solidarity, sharing information, and organizing politically for African Americans and their allies. Through hashtag after hashtag, Black Twitter raised awareness of the prevalence and danger of racism and sexism occurring throughout the United States.

While the events that activists tweeted about were profoundly disturbing and often evoked emotions ranging from sorrow to rage, the uses to which Twitter were put between 2009 and 2015 raised hopes that the platform, and social media networks more generally, was aiding campaigns and movements for sociopolitical reform and revolution. In a 2015 essay on #ferguson, digital ethnographers Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa wrote:

> Twitter affords a unique platform for collectively identifying, articulating, and contesting racial injustices from the in-group perspective of racialized populations. Whereas in most mainstream media contexts the experiences of racialized populations are overdetermined, stereotyped, or tokenized, social media platforms such as Twitter offer sites for collectively constructing counternarratives and reimagining group identities. (6)

Although Twitter is a corporate enterprise that has no explicit commitment to politics of any kind, it appeared that the platform was frequently serving as a political networked space (to reference Castells 2015), in which real-world people and movements intersected with online avatars and hashtags, a space in which actual and virtual change agents made common cause and mutually reinforced one another. In 2011 Alice Marwick and danah boyd described Twitter as a space of "context collapse," "in which multiple audiences, usually thought of as separate, co-exist in a single social context" (145). While Marwick and boyd use this idea to comment on the interactions of celebrities and fans on Twitter, from 2009 to 2015 it seemed that Twitter effectuated numerous instances of context collapse between citizens, community organizers, politicians, mainstream news reporters, and official representatives of institutions such as police departments, government agencies, universities, and corporations. The co-presence of this variety of actors in a single network yielded continual rearticulations and calibrations of community toward particular aims, what Zizi Papacharissi calls "disruptions [that may] become contagious and thus pollute established hierarchies of order" (2015, 133).

Bracketed by #iranelection and #BlackLivesMatter, we conceived this book in the rare moment of general scholarly optimism about the political potential of Twitter. When we met as a working group between 2013 and 2015, we discussed the difficulties of the work being done by activists on the ground and online; the shocking frequency of violence being done to people of color, women, LGBTQ people, and immigrants; and the ways that hashtag activism alone would never be sufficient to end entrenched bias, discrimination, and violence. We did not routinely talk about seeing white supremacism, virulent misogyny, hatred of LGBTQ people, and toxic xenophobia being on the rise on Twitter, in the US, or in the world.

And then, in June 2015, Donald Trump officially began campaigning for president of the United States. Our sense of Twitter changed. Twitter was Trump's favorite platform for making boasts and accusations, and it increasingly became a stage for the performance of ethnonationalism and antipathy to all groups that had gained civil rights since the 1960s. At a meeting in October 2016, we noted that earlier incidents of prominent women in tech and entertainment (such as Kathy Sierra, Anita Sarkeesian, Felicia Day, and Leslie Jones) being trolled and harassed on Twitter, their personal information widely disseminated (doxxed), some of which transpired during the 2014 #GamerGate controversy, were not

anomalies or independent events but showed a pattern of use of the platform on the rise. Large numbers of people were expressing racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, and anti-immigrant views on Twitter. Some of these expressions were couched as jokes, while others were framed as serious political opinions, and yet others were issued as threats. We said that we needed to shift our focus to "White Twitter," which was apparently growing, at least in part as a backlash against and challenge to Black Twitter. The next month, Trump won the presidential election.

The election cycle revealed the emergence, alongside progressive minoritarian uses of Twitter's affordances, of mobilizations of Twitter from deeply embedded centers of power or those seeking the authority of such centers of power. Discourses that regulated and conserved particular formulations of the "national popular," often articulated in an antagonistic relation to minoritarian discourses, proliferated on the platform. These discourses were not absent before Trump began his ascent to power—they were rampant in #GamerGate and other instances in which minorities and women had been targeted—but 2015 was the year that, as one magazine headline announced, "the alt-right took over Twitter" (Singal 2017).

In mid-2017, as we completed this book, it became apparent that the executive branch of the US government was running on "Twitter time." That is, the rate of the Trump White House's release of executive orders; hirings and firings of cabinet members and spokespeople; provocations and condemnations directed at the press, the public, other countries' leaders, and supposed "leakers" inside the administration; and proposed rollbacks on the rights of immigrants, women, and LGBTQ people, were occurring at a faster clip than even a daily news cycle could seem to process. Hourly updates regarding the president's tweets and his administration's announcements were necessary. Trump had long used Twitter as a favorite podium for his proclamations, and after his January 2017 inauguration, the nation had to learn to ingest information at the rate that new tweets appear in a user's "feed." The lightning-fast speed with which Trump or his White House issued executive orders and various proclamations regarding Trump's wish to shrink or eliminate the legal rights of various groups, including women, immigrants, and trans people, over the first seven months of his presidency led many to note the stark contrast in temporality when Trump did not immediately condemn the white supremacists who demonstrated at Charlottesville, one of whom drove into a crowd of counterprotesters, killing paralegal Heather Heyer. The events at Charlottesville took place on August 11,

2017, and it was not until August 14, 2017, that Trump denounced the "KKK, neo-Nazis, and white supremacists" who marched in the rally as "criminals and thugs" (Graham 2017). Television producer Danny Zuker noted the difference between Trump's Twitter time (the fact that he responds to critics with alacrity on Twitter) and the fact that it took Trump three days to explicitly come out against racists who had incited violence in this tweet:

> I once challenged @RealDonaldTrump's ratings & he tweeted me in 15 minutes. It took him 3 days to say the KKK is bad. Sorry, it's too late.

The value of Twitter as a media platform for the Trump presidency has been compared to prior American presidents' uses of popular media—Franklin Roosevelt and the radio, John F. Kennedy and the television. Trump has called Twitter his "own form of media" (quoted in Levingston 2017), a way to evade the structures of legacy media and address people directly. And he has attributed, at least in part, his presidential victory to the platform. Trump's exceptional use of the platform has spurred on questions about the archive of presidential communication. Formal institutions like the Library of Congress have committed to the inclusion of presidential tweets, and the US Congress has sought to codify that commitment in law.[1] Semiformal institutions, like trumptwitterarchive (http://www.trumptwitterarchive.com), automatically archive Donald Trump's tweets, including those that are subsequently deleted, and make them readily accessible, searchable, and primed for analysis. Informal programs, like the @RealPressSecBot account on Twitter, take the words posted by @realDonaldTrump (President Trump's personal Twitter username), and reframe the format to mimic a White House press release, including the use of official letterhead. Twitter now must be reckoned with as a site of presidential proclamations and as a network populated by masses of Trump's supporters who, often with the help of social bots (Bessi and Ferrara 2016),[2] spread pro-Trump, or anti-anti-Trump news (Singal 2017), much of it "fake," not "in the sense of wholly fabricated falsities, [but] as disinformation" (Benkler et al. 2017). As Yochai Benkler and his colleagues write of the "fake news" phenomenon, "What we find in our data is a network of mutually-reinforcing hyper-partisan sites that revive what Richard Hofstadter called 'the paranoid style in American politics,' combining decontextualized truths,

repeated falsehoods, and leaps of logic to create a fundamentally misleading view of the world."

This "network of mutually-reinforcing hyper-partisan sites" and users operates, for the most part, on Facebook and Twitter. And the activity of participants on these sites is not limited to the virtual realm. The conflicts between alt-righters and those opposed to them that took place across the country in 2016 and 2017—especially those on the campuses of public universities such as the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, the University of Washington in Seattle, and the University of California in Berkeley that resulted in violence—have shown that a feedback loop links hate speech online and hate speech in the "real world." Ideas articulated online fuel real-world actions; demonstrations on the street are organized via social media and are physical expressions of the thoughts consolidated and spread on those networks. Online spaces cannot be regarded as separate or distinct from the spaces in which fleshly bodies meet and do harm to one another. The recent clashes on US streets originated on internet platforms, and their results have fed back into online discussions that will subsequently feed back into the physical world in new manifestations.

It is ironic, then, that when developing this book between 2013 and 2015, members of our working group periodically brought up the possibility that Twitter, like so many social networks before it, would soon fade into irrelevance and that by the time *#identity* reached publication, the platform would be all but forgotten. We wondered if this project would stand as an archive of "Peak Twitter," which would have long passed by the time it saw print. The 2016 election removed this concern. Twitter had already entered the annals of history with #ArabSpring, #Occupy, and #BlackLivesMatter, but beginning with Trump's election, it became a battleground between a federal government that has set itself against identity-based civil rights and the #Resistance against that government. For the moment, Twitter lives on as a significant site of US public debate, especially around questions of how diverse bodies, languages, cultures, worldviews, orientations, and experiences are being recognized or denied, included or ignored, honored or despised, welcomed or denied by this nation.

Collectively, the essays presented here offer new modes of critical analysis of both minoritarian politics and new media technologies. Our authors position "new media" as a concept and discourse that simultaneously disavows and stages the ongoing, daily renewal of identity and difference. We regard Twitter as a form of internet infrastructure that en-

ables a broad range of collective expressions from (and against) groups that insist on the power of specific identity categories and structural, historical inequities, and that refuse neoliberalism's tendency to discount the relevance or even the existence of social difference.

We argue not only that Twitter serves as a stage on which users constantly perform race, gender, sexual orientation, and nationality but also that Twitter, like all new media networks, is structured by the historically sedimented logics of identificatory classification. After all, race, gender, sexual orientation, and nationality are among the oldest and most persistent metadata, or "tags," assigned to and organizing human relations. While class is not a distinct or stand-alone category of analysis in our project, the affective and material relations between social media and globalized capitalism, neoliberalism, and localized/embodied forms of identity and sociality are of significant interest. The importance of hashtags on social networks foregrounds the stickiness of axes of difference—of sorting and filtering and assigning types—as methods of perceiving and understanding humanity in an era that many call post-racial, postfeminist, post–gay rights, and global. Race and other categories of identity persist despite neoliberalism's wish to cast them as wholly residual or as signifiers of market-based demographic valuation. Wendy Chun (2009) writes that race is always a technology of mediation and that race and technology must be seen as inextricably intertwined. Following Chun, we claim that it is crucial to understand how new media has inherited, and continually displays, legacies of race-, gender-, sexuality-, and nationality-based epistemologies and regimes of truth.

In affixing a hashtag to the term "identity," this book builds on scholarship that recognizes identity as iteratively constructed, something that emerges out of and in relationship to the social (Butler 1990). Hashtagging identity conveys that discourse on Twitter is not simply a transparent reflection of the material, embodied lifeworlds of minoritarian subjects; nor is such discourse wholly autonomous from the worlds of social difference out of which it arises. While it often becomes affixed to individual subjects, the performance of identity is situated at the interface between the individual and the social, suggesting also that the meanings that accrue to identity are shaped by the affordances of the media through which they circulate. Those media are both contingent reflections of the worlds in which they have been produced and give shape and meaning to the worlds around them. The articulation and rearticulation of identity politics leverage Twitter's affordances, reflecting a wider set of political circuitries that congeal power around particular formulations of identity (Omi and Winant 2015).

Chapter Overview

Immediately following this introduction, Abigail De Kosnik's chapter "Is Twitter a Stage?" outlines two major strands of thought, one originated by Erving Goffman and the other by Marshall McLuhan, which enables us to think of social media participation, and internet communication more generally, as performance. McLuhan's premise that global telecommunications networks constitute a "global theater," in which all are actors and none are merely spectators, offers the hope and the challenge that constantly performing with one another is changing us individually and collectively—that social media platforms are serving as sites of large-scale social transformation.

Part I, "Black Twitter Futures," elaborates some of the various ways people leverage social media platforms to claim the histories and futurities of blackness in the United States. With #BlackLivesMatter and the emergence of the Movement for Black Lives as a backdrop, authors move from individual verbal and visual utterances affirming the lives of Black women to the storytelling surrounding a Black woman's death, and from the vernacular and quotidian to the strategic expression of organizational and institutional campaigns. Malika Imhotep offers a rich genealogy of the expression "on fleek," uttered first by Kayla Newman in her six-second video posted to Vine. Drawing from queer and Black feminist theorizing, Imhotep explores the uptake of Black Femme aesthetic indulgence to consider how large-scale value-inscribing processes attempt, and persistently fail, to fully capture meanings encoded in the Black vernacular. Paige Johnson examines the hashtag #YouOKSis launched by Feminista Jones to combat both street harassment and online harassment, both of which African American cis and trans women suffer in disproportionate numbers. Johnson discusses ways in which the hashtag has been used to share stories of experiences of harassment, as well as strategies for intervening in, or otherwise de-escalating, such incidents, and argues that Jones has thus created an important network, which Johnson calls a "technocultural assemblage," for documenting violence, spreading information about safety tactics, and memorializing the lives of women who have been murdered on city streets.

Mixing critical discourse analysis and digital ethnography, Aaminah Norris and Nalya Rodriguez explore the differentiated ways high-profile stories about the deaths of Black women under police supervision are taken up across different social media platforms. Their analysis of one social media campaign developed by the African American Policy Forum surrounding the death of Sandra Bland reveals how Twitter was a more

effective platform to convey and amplify the narrative details of Bland's death than Facebook, which was more readily used to derail or dismiss the narrative. Grace Gipson explores the hashtag #Afrofuturism, which is not only used to reference science fiction or technology-themed works by African American musicians and writers but also to showcase university instructors who are teaching courses on Afrofuturism, academics who present innovative theories of Afrofuturism at conferences, community activists who are building tech-rich community centers in African American neighborhoods, and African American science and engineering students who are developing new technologies. Gipson argues that the myriad uses of #Afrofuturism are facilitating a new conception of "digital blackness," which positions African diasporic peoples at the center of stories of contemporary digital culture rather than imagining them to only exist in the margins, or fictions, of new media. This section is rounded out by our conversation with chaplain, activist, and musician Reverend Osagyefo Sekou, who spoke with the Color of New Media working group in the fall of 2015. Reverend Sekou draws extensively from the blues to think through the local and transnational manifestations of social networks such as those that materialized around Ferguson, always with a critical eye on questions of authenticity and agency, style and spirit, poetics and political economy.

The chapters in part II, "Mediated Intersections," delve deeply into the intersections between digital networked communication and various groups: feminists and postfeminists, survivors of relationship violence, queer, Latinx, and queer Latinx people. Lyndsey Ogle studies the hashtags #WomenAgainstFeminism and #ConfusedCatsAgainstFeminism and proposes that the content posted in both tags participates in what Ogle calls "postfeminist performance," which she defines as performances that conflate feminist and anti-feminist ideas and modes. Ogle argues that while some feminists dismiss postfeminists as "confused" about what feminism means and what feminists wants, and some men mock the opposition between women at different points on the political spectrum as an ongoing catfight (or a #ConfusedCats fight), the relationship of postfeminists to feminism is more complicated and confusing than many assume. For example, as Ogle points out, women who disavow feminism online do so as part of an identity performance that asserts their individuality and makes visible their life experiences as women. Ogle argues that autobiographical construction and publication is a feminist tactic inherited from earlier waves of the women's rights movement, even if the tactic is now being used by women to distance themselves from that

movement. Julia Havard focuses on the hashtags #WhyIStayed, which she describes as a "survivor-centered space" in which survivors of partner violence share with others their reasons for staying in abusive relationships and, in that sharing, describe how transformations of thought and feeling can happen even in "stillness," in "states of immobility," in periods of "incarceration." Havard argues that the "activist labor" done by contributors to #WhyIStayed is not often recognized as activism, because it is done in the realm of emotion, reflection, and imagination.

José Ramón Lizárraga and Arturo Cortéz explore the pedagogical work of the San Francisco–based Latinx drag queen Persia, elaborating how Persia's "digital queer gestures" traverse actual and virtual spaces. Persia's campy music video "Google Google Apps Apps," and the hashtag it generated, contributed to critical debate about the ways gentrification generated by the tech industry wears away at San Francisco's longstanding queer Latinx lifeworlds. These local and embodied forms of digital pedagogy are juxtaposed with the rise of what Renée Pastel, in her chapter, calls "Hashtag Television." Pastel traces the official (as opposed to fan-generated) hashtags on *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Jane the Virgin*, two network television shows that prominently feature hashtags in their broadcasts. Pastel reads how these hashtags contribute to identity formation and political consciousness for minoritized communities.

While the first two sections of the book study a range of progressive, affirmative, and critical expressions of identity and difference on Twitter, part III, "Disavowals," considers the reactionary deployment and effects of social media intent on securing white and heteronormative forms of identity. Kyle Booten theorizes the production of what he terms "post-racial affect" across a corpus of about 150,000 tweets, utilizing both micro-rhetorical and statistical forms of analysis. Booten effectively shows how #AllLivesMatter produces what he terms "white noise" in the broader signal of antiracist demands. Abigail De Kosnik's essay on #CancelColbert analyzes the racist and misogynistic backlash against that hashtag's originator, Suey Park. De Kosnik proposes that the alt-right has co-opted the tactic of performing outrage online that was developed and promulgated by counter-hegemonic, leftist activists such as Park and participants in the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, and that this co-optation has given rise to a new kind of persona: the "divo citizen." Bonnie Ruberg examines the #nohomo hashtag, a tag and phrase ("no homo," meaning "no homosexuality") that, Ruberg states, appears approximately 5,000 times each day on Twitter, usually at the end of tweets in which a male poster praises a male celebrity, or reports

about having engaged in some activity (such as dancing, self-grooming, or having feelings) that might be construed as homoerotic or feminine. Ruberg argues that #nohomo "functions as a tool for performing and self-policing straight masculinity" and offers numerous examples of uses of the tag to show how narrowly many Twitter users define "acceptable" straight masculine behavior.

The fourth section of the book, "Twitter International," highlights some of the insights that emerge when researchers examine uses of the social network outside of the United States. While Twitter and other social media sites have been vaunted as platforms that catalyze broad and horizontal democratic participation, Neha Kumar's qualitative, interview-based investigation of an urban, lower-, and middle-class setting in India reveals how such claims are hardly universal. Twitter's very limited use among Kumar's informants contrasted with their active participation in other online communities (Facebook, Telegram, WhatsApp, etc.), an expression, Kumar argues, of agency and freedom to choose whether and how to participate on the platform. Two chapters focus on an array of cases involving the African continent. Reginald Royston and Krystal Strong diagnose what they term Africa's "social mediascape." They surface the vibrant uses of the resolutely local hashtag #dumsor to protest Ghana's ecology of infrastructural breakdown, alongside the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls, which, while circulating broadly across US American social networks, was also thoroughly articulated to local Nigerian activism. Building on the productive tensions among the local, national, and transnational scales of Twitter activism, Naveena Karusala, Trevor Perrier, and Neha Kumar explore the circulation of the 2015 hashtag #IfAfricaWasABar. Their research reflexively considers how "outsider" status problematizes how we come to understand the coherence, meaning, and effects of hashtags and the movements and communities they cohere. Built on over twenty-three hundred original tweets, the researchers reckon with the challenge of at once relying on the rich data sets that Twitter makes available while at the same time recognizing what may be elided or obscured through such forms of research. The section concludes by bringing the book full circle, in Kimberly McNair's "Beyond Hashtags," which considers the ways Black Twitter operates alongside, through, and in relation to off-line international social movement building. McNair's point of entry is the cross-border interface between the United Kingdom and the United States in the struggle against police violence, underscoring the confluence of discursive activism and political activism to confront racism.

The closing section, "Notes from the Color of New Media," consists of transcripts of two meetings of the working group that produced this book. "The Color of New Media Enters Trumplandia" is a transcript of our group meeting on February 2, 2017, which was twelve days after the inauguration of Donald Trump as forty-fifth president of the United States, and the same day that alt-right agitator Milo Yiannopoulos was scheduled to visit the UC Berkeley campus. "The Color of New Media Responds to UC Berkeley's 'Free Speech Week'" is a transcript of our meeting on September 1, 2017, after Berkeley's new chancellor, Carol Christ, announced that 2017–2018 would be the "Year of Free Speech" on the Berkeley campus, and student organizations invited a number of alt-right spokespeople to the campus. Both transcripts serve as records of how the events of 2017, in the physical and online worlds, at the national and hyperlocal level, elicited dismay, dread, pain, and fear, as well as critical thinking, moments of humor, and proposals for future action from our members.

Notes

1. See the June 2017 "Communications over Various Feeds Electronically for Engagement or 'COVFEFE Act,'" proposed by Illinois Representative Mike Quigley, https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/115/hr2884/text.

2. Bessi and Ferrara define social bots as "algorithmically controlled accounts that emulate the activity of human users but operate at much higher pace (e.g., automatically producing content or engaging in social interactions) while successfully keeping their artificial identity undisclosed."

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ONE | Is Twitter a Stage?

Theories of Social Media Platforms as Performance Spaces

ABIGAIL DE KOSNIK

In this essay I identify two major strands of thinking of internet platforms as performance spaces, and of online participation as performance. The theorists who originated both strands predated the rise of the World Wide Web and social media. The first strand was initiated by Erving Goffman and his arguments about performance, or "presentation of self," in everyday life; the second strand was launched by Marshall McLuhan and his idea that new telecommunications media were bringing into being a "global theater."

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1956) proposes that every human being performs roles in everyday life. He writes that an individual has "many motives for trying to control the impression" that they make on others. The "pattern of action" (8) which is "presented or played through" on multiple occasions "may be called a 'part'" (8–9). An individual aims to sustain such impressions (that is, to perform their "part" and keep the performance of that part consistent over time). "Dramaturgical problems," "stage-craft," and "stage management" all "occur everywhere in social life" (8), states Goffman. Note that Goffman is not concerned with the specific content of any particular performance; his interest lies not in *what* is performed, but in *the fact that performance takes place*, and *how performance works*, in social interaction. Goffman proposes that "when an individual or performer plays the same part to the same audience on different occasions, a social relationship is

likely to arise," and "we may refer to those who contribute to other performances as the audience, observers, or co-participants" (9).

Goffman's definitions of performance in everyday life can be used to articulate how "we"—by which I mean people in the early twenty-first century with regular internet access—perform every day in our uses of digital media, particularly social media platforms. The "impressions" (that we make) or the "parts" (that we play) described by Goffman are, in a social media setting, our online identities. The continuity of our performances—the fact that, as Goffman tells us, we perform our parts consistently over time (though we typically play different parts to different audiences)—translates to social media in our constant uploading of new content and our continually posting updates to our accounts. The "techniques" of performance preparation that Goffman claims we all employ on a daily basis, such as "dramaturgy," "stagecraft," and "stage management," are also evident in our social media use: in how we thoughtfully prepare and craft our posts in advance; how we create content to share; how we strategize (even if only with ourselves) about the timing and impact of the release of our content (in other words, we ask ourselves when would be the *best* time to post a particular piece of content to attract the greatest possible response); how we launch and participate in hashtags; and how we work to attract clicks, views, likes, reblogs, retweets, and upvotes. Goffman claims that performances in everyday life constitute social relationships, that audiences and observers can also be considered co-performers and co-participants. Similarly, social media use is defined by relations, interactions, and encounters between co-participants. All of Goffman's key arguments that everyday life is filled with, and defined by, performance also apply to social media.

A number of social media theorists have built on Goffman's idea that identity is performance—that is, the idea that who we are is the persona(e) we perform, day to day, with repetition and continuity. For example, in their essay "Public Displays of Connection" (2004), Judith Donath and danah boyd propose that on social networking sites, users display their networks (their connections, or friends) in order to signal a number of traits, such as social status, political beliefs, or cultural tastes. In his essay "Social Network Profiles as Taste Performances," Hugo Liu (2007) similarly argues that listing one's cultural interests in one's social network profile functions as a type of "taste performance." For example, one can indicate a preference for the ironic over the straightforward, the dystopian over the utopian, or the sincere over the satirical, simply by naming, in one's online profile (or, to expand on Liu, showing through

the posts in one's social media feed) what one likes: the kinds of bands, foods, fashion, restaurants, films, television series, video games, outdoor sites, and so on that one prefers. "Lists of interests," writes Liu—and, again, we can elaborate on Liu to include pictures of one's interests on Instagram or Pinterest or text posts about one's interests on Twitter or Tumblr—"might actually be more useful as an indicator of one's aesthetics than as a factual declaration of interests" (273). In other words, people might get to know you, or at least your online identity, far better through your online "taste performances," through the content that you post and the cultural references with which you tag yourself, than through any self-descriptive statements you make (such as "I love old movies" or "I love hiking in nature").

The Goffmanian approach to conceptualizing digital networks as performance emphasizes the individual's experience of those networks. A McLuhanesque approach to digital networks as performance spaces calls for more attention to be paid to performances by collectives. As I have written about elsewhere (De Kosnik 2015), McLuhan published an essay in 1974 in which he proposes his concept of the "global theater," a theater that came into being with the advent of global telecommunications: "Simultaneous man [is] living in a world whose center is everywhere and whose margin is nowhere. . . . Instead of specialized jobs he prefers role-playing, with its flexibility and diversity. Indeed, at the moment of Sputnik the planet became a global theater in which there are no spectators but only actors" (1974, 50). In the same essay, McLuhan reaches for analogies to explain how the global theater operates, or will operate in the future, and latches onto a communications technology with which all of his early 1970s readers were already familiar: the newspaper. McLuhan explains that a newspaper is produced collectively by multiple authors; at rapid speeds, with many people contributing or "speaking" (seemingly) at the same time; and a newspaper lacks a unifying "story line"—that is, it consists of "an assembly of unconnected items in abstract mosaic form" (50). A newspaper also offers too much information to take in, to be comprehensively consumed or understood. McLuhan quotes novelist Robert Louis Stevenson, who said, "I could make an epic from a newspaper if I knew what to leave out" (51). More than forty years after the time of McLuhan's writing, we can readily replace "newspaper" with "social media platforms" in McLuhan's description of how the global theater, enabled by telecommunications, operates: *social media* is produced collectively by multiple authors; at rapid speeds, with many people contributing or "speaking" simultaneously; and *social media* lacks a unifying

story line and seems to consist of "unconnected items in abstract mosaic form." *Social media* also offers too much information for any one user to take in as a totality. Perhaps a contemporary novelist could "make an epic from a *social media platform* if [she] knew what to leave out."

Another way that McLuhan attempts to describe the rise of the "global theater" is by drawing a distinction between what he calls "old journalism" and "new journalism." "Old journalism," McLuhan argues, was about *figures*—that is, important or prominent people or events. "New journalism," in contrast—and I suggest that we can add or substitute "social media" for this term—is concerned with "ground" rather than "figure" (McLuhan here uses terms borrowed from Gestalt psychology), in that newer ways of reporting on events are invested in *being on the ground*, reporting on the experiences, opinions, and perspectives of the mass or crowd. McLuhan writes that "new journalism" (and, again, I view this term as equivalent, in our current moment, with "social media") consists of "immersion in situations which involve many people simultaneously" (1974, 51). McLuhan argues:

> The "old journalism" had sought objectivity . . . by giving "both sides" at once. . . . To give both sides, however, tends to ignore the possibility that there may be many more sides than two, and as the means of access to information improved and as the means of processing information speeded up, the mere chiaroscuro of the light and the dark, the pro and the con, has tended to yield to . . . depth involvement in total situations. (51)

McLuhan holds up Norman Mailer's accounts of the 1968 Republican and Democratic national conventions, at which large anti–Vietnam War protests took place (Mailer published his reports as *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* in 1968), as exemplary of the "new journalism." Mailer, claims McLuhan, "is less concerned with the policies and the parties than with the experience of the hurly-burly of the conventions" (51). #ferguson, the hashtag used for the protests in Ferguson, Missouri, that took place following the August 2014 fatal shooting of Michael Brown, an African American teenager, by police officer Darren Wilson (and more protests erupted after the November 2014 announcement that a grand jury would not indict Wilson for the killing), operated according to the logic of what McLuhan called "new journalism" in that #ferguson was not a chronological list of events, nor was it primarily about *figures* (individual people or isolated occurrences); rather, #ferguson presented thousands

of people's experiences of, and perspectives on, the demonstrations against racialized police brutality. #ferguson was about the *ground*.

Statistician Emma Pierson (2014) collected two hundred thousand tweets tagged with "#ferguson" (or #Ferguson) that were posted in the days just before prosecutor Robert McCulloch's announcement on November 24, 2014 that the Ferguson grand jury would not indict Officer Darren Wilson for the shooting of Michael Brown. Pierson grouped the tweets into two categories, conservative and liberal, or "red" and "blue." Below are lists of what Pierson found to be the most retweeted "red" tweets and the most retweeted "blue" tweets:

Most Common Retweets for Red Group

#Ferguson I would feel safer, any day, to encounter #DarrenWilson on the street, than to meet #MichaelBrown or half of those now protesting!

Yeah I posted it #ferguson I am not into mob justice on media lies #justsaying http://t.co/Fk9EsPtV1P

Autopsy report: Not only did Brown not have his hands up he was going4 Gun: http://t.co/6pdv9UL0gx #Ferguson http://t.co/pFsa6GfGOJ @MaydnUSA

#Ferguson in case you were wondering, police officers are also citizens, with full constitutional rights. Rights aren't just for criminals!

If #Ferguson isn't race baiting, why are THEY there? http://t.co/9ZznN1FsBT

Hard to blame Governor Jay Nixon for declaring a state of emergency when the president himself dumps gasoline on the #Ferguson fire. Smh

Officer #DarrenWilson Supporters Crowdfund "Pants Up, Don't Loot" Billboard http://t.co/5Bb7VkCeMh #Ferguson http://t.co/xxHOCnX7E5

Most Common Retweets for Blue Group

Governor calls State Of Emergency. National Guard waiting. FBI giving warnings. KKK issuing threats. What 'effing year is this? #ferguson

My mom in '63, while the police were "just doing their job." Break the internet? Break the system. #Ferguson http://t.co/qXd6sZoo2U

State of emergency in #Ferguson must not be used to violate human rights, including the right to peaceful protest. @GovJayNixon

Despite a State of Emergency remember the #Ferguson cop is innocent until proven guilty. As opposed to, say, an unarmed guy he shot 6 times.

Please understand the legal ramifications of a State of Emergency. Individual rights can be taken away. This is his "heads up". #Ferguson

Please notice that even though this #Ferguson police officer was arrested for rape 5 days ago, the St. Louis Post Dispatch said NOTHING.

America: Where just the fear of Negro anger, not actions, can lead to a State of Emergency. And you wonder why cops shoot so fast. #Ferguson

In these tweets, Governor Jay Nixon, Officer Darren Wilson, and Wilson's victim Michael Brown are central figures, yet #ferguson, meaning the swarm of events (legal actions, official and unofficial statements, press reports, demonstrations, debates, and controversies) discussed in that hashtag, some of which were organized and facilitated through that hashtag, was not only or even mainly about Nixon, Wilson, and Brown. Rather, #ferguson was about the ground: the interpretations, viewpoints, and sentiments (the diversity of which is evident in the contrast between

the "red" group's retweets and "blue" group's retweets), as well as calls to action and circulation of facts, that hundreds of thousands of people shared and performed online in response to what took place in Ferguson, Missouri, in the summer and fall of 2014.

After marking out a movement from the "old journalism" of print culture (which centered on figures) to the "new journalism" of global networked culture (which centers on—or, we could say, was *de*centered by—an emphasis on ground), McLuhan takes up the Xerox (photocopier) machine as an emblem of the nascent new media era. He writes, "Xerox comes as a reverse flip at the end of the Gutenberg cycle; whereas Gutenberg made everybody a reader, Xerox makes everybody a publisher" (1974, 52). Xeroxing, or making many copies of a work that one has typed, "is so decentralized, accessible, and inexpensive that it results in making the ordinary person a publisher, if he so chooses" (52). Xerox facilitates "uniform briefing" (53)—that is, espionage, leaks, surveillance, public calls for government accountability (here, McLuhan references the Pentagon Papers, which Daniel Ellsberg photocopied before leaking them to the press). McLuhan says, "The electronic form of information service"—he calls Xeroxing "electronic publishing" (54)—"permits not only decentralization of organizations but a wide diversity of products without additional expenditure" (54). Remarking further on the photocopier as a publishing tool, McLuhan claims, "Xerox completes the work of the typewriter. A poet composing at the typewriter is 'publishing' his work, as it were, while composing. Xerox gives to this fact a new meaning" (54), because the "typescript" can easily be "multiplied," as the poet can give away copies of his work to his friends.

If we replace "Xerox" with "social media," or, indeed, with "the internet," in McLuhan's sentences, we find an apt description of the way that digital networks have led to a proliferation of publishing, or, we might say, sharing, both ideas and information. The internet and social media have made "everybody a publisher," or at least made it possible for everyone with access to computing technologies to make public a wide variety of content on various networked platforms. The internet and social media have facilitated numerous leaks of government secrets and calls for government accountability, as exemplified by the cases of WikiLeaks, Edward Snowden, and Chelsea Manning; internet and social media use often conflate the act of composing and the act of publishing so that a user can post whatever they compose with a click of a digital button. The internet and social media also allow the composer of content to share "copies" of their work with friends instantaneously, as they

can "multiply" their "typescripts" ad infinitum by sending their compositions rapidly through networks and onto web pages or into their connections' social media feeds.

Thus, McLuhan may be describing 1960s and '70s phenomena such as the Pentagon Papers and zine culture in his analyses of "new journalism" and Xeroxing, but he also anticipates the many-to-many communication format of web and social media culture, which has made "everybody" (with access) a "publisher," in the sense that anyone can create (or appropriate) and post text, image, sound, and video content on their own blogs; on WikiLeaks; on numerous fan sites and piracy sites; on Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube, and so on. The "global theater" may have been inaugurated at the time of Sputnik, Norman Mailer, sci-fi zines, and the Pentagon Papers leak (a period spanning 1957–1974), but digital platforms have more fully realized McLuhan's vision of a world in which all can perform to all, in which no one is merely a spectator, but all are actors. (In a mediascape rich with platforms for sharing content, all users are actors, because even what seems like *in*action—*not* publishing text, images, sound files, or video files on these platforms—is a deliberate choice. Lurking, opting out, withholding, refraining, or hiding are all actions in the network as much as posting, retweeting, reblogging, and commenting are.)

Though McLuhan's "global theater" essay is populated by multiple print technologies, theatrical metaphors also appear prominently throughout the piece. "At the moment of Sputnik the planet became a global theater in which there are no spectators but only actors" (1974, 48) is not only an argument in the essay; it is also the title of the essay, which puts theatricality—a *becoming-theatrical*—at the heart of McLuhan's claims about how global telecom is changing society. It seems likely that McLuhan's idea of the global theater was influenced by cybernetic theory, with its focus on instantaneous feedback loops. (The concept of cybernetic systems was introduced to the public in Norbert Wiener's 1948 book *Cybernetics* and penetrated large areas of social science, business culture, and consumer culture after the Macy Conferences on cybernetics [1946–1953].) Both theater and many-to-many telecommunications systems (such as telephony or digital networks) are constituted by high-speed exchanges of information—feedback loops—between audiences and actors, between readers/viewers and posters. Another probable influence on McLuhan's global theater was the 1950s and '60s experiments in performance art, especially Allan Kaprow's happenings (indeed, in his book *Take Today*, McLuhan (1972) uses the phrase "perpetual hap-

pening" as a synonym for "global theater"), which sought to thoroughly blur distinctions between audiences and performers and to make all attendees into actors.

Another theatrical reference in McLuhan's 1974 essay is a popular 1960s Broadway play. McLuhan declares that "the 'You are there' immersion approach in [new] journalism" is "natural" in the medium of television (51). "Television brings the outside into the intimacy of the home, as it takes the private world of the home outside into the forum" (51–52). McLuhan proposes that new journalism's motto is "A funny thing happened to me on the way to the forum" (52). This mention of the 1962 stage hit by Stephen Sondheim, Burt Shevelove, and Larry Gelbart, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, in combination with a reference to television, resonates with the argument by television historians such as Lynn Spigel (1992) that early US television was largely a mediatization of theatrical events, as television broadcasts brought plays, concerts, and other live performances into ordinary Americans' living rooms so that they no longer had to commute to city centers to access high-quality entertainment, an argument that itself recalls McLuhan's (1974) famous concept that the content of any new medium is an older medium. (McLuhan claims that the content of films is novels, and Spigel claims that the content of television, when it was new in the United States, was theater.)

McLuhan's use of "A funny thing happened to me on the way to the forum" to characterize television and the "new journalism," both of which take a "'You are there' immersion approach," indicates how characteristics of theater attendance—including co-presence and interaction between audience and actors, and the audience's feeling of being immersed, of being *there* in the environment presented on and by the stage—are, for McLuhan, the defining characteristics of the new world being made by 24/7 instantaneous communications networks, which is why he deems that rising world a "global theater." That world, that theater, now includes social media, which, even more than 1960s television or journalism, depends on participants having a sense of co-presence and interaction with one another and feeling as if they are *there*, immersed in the multiple simultaneous performances taking place on social platforms. McLuhan seems to predict that theater has already been mediatized once (by television) and that global telecom will be the next great mediatization of live performance. He appears to anticipate that digital networks will make distant events more present, public events more intimate, and intimate experiences more public, just as television

brought theater into the home and made private, domestic occurrences into social dramas.

A third theatrical metaphor that McLuhan incorporates into his "global theater" essay is the "mask." McLuhan employs this metaphor seven times in describing the operations of media production and reception, arguing that a medium is "put on" by its users like a mask so that they can extend their perceptions, and the users are "put on" by the maker so that the maker can anticipate their reaction and give them what they want. When a technological device is put on as a "mask," be it a newspaper, a television set, a laptop, a mobile phone, or a VR (virtual reality) headset, it allows its user to see differently, to see through new perspectives or lenses, and to access experiences that they could not have without the prosthetic. The media maker, conversely, uses not the technological device or medium, but the prospective user, as a mask, as a kind of *feedforward* mechanism (see Logan 2015) that allows the maker to craft their production (or, one might say, performance) in order to evoke a specific audience reaction. For McLuhan, then, masks do not cover or hide reality; masks *generate* realities, or make possible the production and reception of realities that diverge from, modify, or augment, the ordinary real (however reality is experienced sans media).

That McLuhan wants the image of masked players to stand in for both media producers and media users reinforces his concept of a global theater in which all perform and none are merely spectators, even if the style of the performances differs for different "roles" being played in the media ecosystem. In social media, for instance, participants move from the role of content producer to the role of content receiver quite fluidly; thus they might be thought of as swiftly, frequently, exchanging the maker's mask for the user's mask and back again, over and over.

Recent scholarship has built on both the Goffmanian and McLuhanesque lines of thought about social media sites functioning as performance spaces. For example, in "Interaction in Digital Contexts," Annette Markham (2012) draws on McLuhan when describing how the internet shifts *distance*. Markham writes, "The Internet extends our senses in McLuhanesque fashion, allowing us to see, listen, and reach well beyond our local sensory limits" (282) and "Having a sense of presence without actually being there is a hallmark of Internet-mediated communication. . . . Presence becomes a more complicated concept because it is determined by participation more than proximity" (282). Markham here stresses, as McLuhan does in his "global theater" concept, that telecommunications networks bring people into a relation

of simultaneous feedback and co-presence, a relation that in earlier eras defined live performance against media such as books and films and radio, which more clearly demarcated a physical distance between producers and consumers.

When Markham notes that the internet shifts time, however, she turns to Goffman. She asserts that "now, we not only have to manage various presentations of self . . . but also the presentations of selves from the past that collide with selves of the present" (283). Markham here argues that Goffman's concept of impression management, and his study of how, in everyday life, all members of society work on various presentations of self (presenting oneself at work, a different one at family gatherings, and another self to friends, for instance), increase in complexity in the social media era, for in addition to people having to labor to present different selves in different settings, we also have to reckon with the fact that our social media accounts may preserve past selves, and those may not merge in desirable ways with present selves. The graduating college student who must take down images of themselves as partygoers from social media platforms as they prepare to present themselves as hard-working responsible future employees at job interviews understands well Markham's claim that different temporalities of selfhood can clash on digital platforms.

Elsewhere in the same essay, Markham combines McLuhan and Goffman. She claims that the internet demands that presentation of self must be "deliberative" (2012, 284). She writes, "In online environments, we write self into being" (284), a notion that strongly adheres to Goffman's worldview, which holds that everyone must deliberately present themselves, must perform a self (or many selves), in order to be seen and known in society. "Then," Markham continues, "to recognize our own existence in any meaningful way, we must be responded to" (284). This argument bears strong similarities to McLuhan's conceptualization of telecommunications networks as spaces in which all perform for all, which, as I argued above, was probably influenced by cybernetics and performance happenings. Markham frames digital sites as driven by feedback loops between "writers"/posters and responders, and underscoring her framing is the logic of the stage actor, who believes that his work is not meaningful, and indeed may not even truly exist, without the presence of an audience. Both stage actor and social media participant depend on the reactions of their audiences, whether that consists of applause and sighs in the theater or likes and retweets/reblogs online.

Another useful application of Goffman and McLuhan's ideas to social

media can be found in Erika Pearson's 2009 essay, "All the World Wide Web's a Stage." Pearson's key proposition is that social media functions like a "glass bedroom," in which there is no clear split between backstage and front stage, private and public, and thus, social media takes Goffman's idea of identity as performance to "another level." Writes Pearson:

> Inside the [glass] bedroom, private conversations and intimate exchanges occur, each with varying awareness of distant friends and strangers moving past transparent walls. . . . The glass bedroom itself is not an entirely private space, nor a true backstage space as Goffman articulated, though it takes on elements of both over the course of its use. It is a bridge that is partially private and public, constructed online through signs and language.

Goffman emphasized the separation of what he called "regions" of performance (for instance, in a restaurant, a server gives a very different performance in the front stage of the restaurant, constituted by the seating area, than in the restaurant's backstage, constituted by the wait staff's break room), but many or most social media users do not maintain a sharp distinction between the realm of private behavior and the realm of public behavior. In fact, it is the ongoing blending of front stage and backstage, the public posting online of one's ostensibly private life, that constitutes a great deal of the appeal of social media performance; hence, Pearson argues, in social media use, the metaphorical wall separating private and public is made of glass, transparent and meant to be seen through. Although Pearson does not cite McLuhan explicitly, her glass bedroom metaphor echoes McLuhan's claims that in the telecommunications revolution what is intimate becomes more exposed, and what takes place on a large scale is more often experienced as intimate. If social media works as a glass bedroom, as Pearson asserts, then social media manifests what McLuhan called the "'You are there' immersion approach" even more strongly than the examples used by McLuhan, namely, television and the "new journalism."

In McLuhan's emphasis on new media communication systems as spaces of constant performance, we can detect his hopefulness that these systems will facilitate more civic participation and collective political action. When McLuhan writes about his idea that both media users and media makers put on "masks," he describes "the great increase of the sense of power on the part of both the maker and the user" (1974, 56).

In other words, when consumers put on media technologies as masks that afford new perceptions and experiences, they experience an expansion of inputs, as they receive more information more frequently. When producers put on media audiences as masks that allow them to predict what to post or publish in order to affect those audiences most powerfully, they experience an expansion of outputs, as they can craft their content and time its release in order to maximize its reach and influence. Social media participants, who rotate between the role of maker and user often, thus experience both types of expansion when they use digital social networks. Ideally, then, people become both well-informed and influential through their participation in social media and could use their heightened "power" on social networks to make impactful political interventions.

Here is another statement in which McLuhan phrases his optimism about new media and political participation in the language of performance:

> The mysterious thing about this kind of speed-up of information [facilitated by new communications technologies] is that the public begins to participate directly in actions which it had previously heard about at a distance in place or time. At instant speeds the audience becomes actor, and the spectators become participants. . . . They seek to program events rather than to watch them. (57)

This is a technologically deterministic argument: McLuhan assumes that because people *can* communicate faster ("at instant speeds") in the new global telecom systems than before, they *will* become actors and participants instead of (merely) audience and spectators. He anticipates that this "public" will thus become active rather than passive and will "program events"—will *make* historical moments—rather than only "watch[ing] them." The image one derives from McLuhan's deterministic prediction is that of a stage overrun by theatergoers who are no longer content to quietly witness whatever is presented to them on a given evening but seize control of the theater, collectively devise a show, and enact it. Thus McLuhan imagines the rise of new media communications technologies (which now include social media platforms) as akin to the transformation of a traditional proscenium play into a Kaprow-esque happening. McLuhan foresees that the global telecommunications technologies rising in the 1960s and '70s (which eventually yielded the public internet in the 1990s) will lead to a more robust, more lively, more

inclusive form of democracy, and the easiest way for him to explain his prophecy is by describing a democratized style of performance-making.

Of course, there are many objections to McLuhan's technological determinism. New media does not necessarily lead to new social movements. If it seems that they do (as it did in the cases of #ArabSpring and #Occupy), we must keep in mind that it is users' choices about how to use new platforms, not the platforms themselves, that bring such movements about (Tufekci 2017a). Digital networks can, and do, facilitate conservative or reactionary movements as easily as they can facilitate reformist or social justice movements. Search engine algorithms can reinforce racism (Noble 2018), and social media sites can be swarmed by "fake news and other forms of misinformation" (Tufekci 2017b, 266). There are many constraints on our digital actions in the form of protocols (Galloway 2004; Chun 2006)—that is, the way that digital technologies are programmed to operate, which do not offer users choices about how they wish to interact with those technologies but simply make certain moves necessary and preclude other moves entirely. When people do seek to use new media to push for large-scale social, political, economic, or cultural change, they can be subjected to large volumes of surveillance, trolling, harassment, and threats from other network users (see my essay on #CancelColbert in this volume) or from government entities. Social media may allow users to access more information, but users are likely to access only information that reinforces their already existing beliefs, causing an "echo chamber" effect (Pierson 2014).

However, by framing global telecommunications—what we call digital media, which includes social media—as performance, McLuhan asks us to think of new media participation as "making, not faking" (Turner 1982, 93); as collaborative production; as a set of tools, sites, and practices for putting hidden realities, alternative worlds, and difficult problems before publics of whatever size, for however short a time, thereby calling upon that public to change. In other words, thinking of digital networks as constituting a "global theater" allows us to perceive those networks' potential for working as theater works (whenever theater *works*). The new media of which McLuhan wrote was an early wave of the many technologies that constituted the information revolution that continues today. For him, this revolution signaled a new age of virtual, networked performance that could change the world, because he believed that performance *can* change the world. At the least, he believed that those who perform are changed by the act of performance, and he believed that emerging technologies would make more and more people into per-

formers. It follows that he predicted or hoped that through the transformation of masses of receivers/consumers/audiences into actors, change can sweep the world. McLuhan's thinking of new media as sites of performance is crucial for understanding what he sees as new media's possible impact on society and culture. Since, for McLuhan, the medium—not the content—is always the message, then, for McLuhan, the message of new media is global theater.

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PART I

Black Twitter Futures

TWO | #OnFleek

Authorship, Interpellation, and the Black Femme Prowess of Black Twitter

MALIKA IMHOTEP

On June 21, 2014, Kayla Newman (@peaches_monroee), a seventeen-year-old Black woman from Chicago, posted an anecdotal video to her Vine account. Within five months, the video she posted that day gained over 20 million plays, 492,000 likes, and 411,000 re-vines.

This particular video captured Newman bragging about her immaculately arched eyebrows. "We in dis bitch," she says to the camera angled up from her lap toward her face. "Finna get crunk. Eyebrows *on fleek*! Da fuq." In this moment of Black Femme *bravada*, Kayla Newman "gave the world a word" (St. Felix 2015). While Newman's "on fleek" is not the first Black colloquial turn of phrase to find itself appropriated by "urban marketing" campaigns or incorporated into *Dictionary.com*'s digital archive, it is one of the few whose origins can be definitively traced to a single individual and whose prevalence is indebted directly to its social media spread. I posit that the raced, classed, and gendered "senselessness" of "on fleek!" kept Newman's authorial ties relatively intact despite such wide digital spread.

This essay situates Newman within a larger conversation that explores Black Twitter as a complicated ground for the politico-cultural salience of Black Femme aesthetic indulgence. I use "Black Femme" to evoke a combination of tropes from queer theory and Black feminist studies. By naming offline and online performances of Black women who may or may not identify themselves as queer "femme," I assert, following

Hortense Spillers (1987), that there is an inherent queerness to (un)gendered Black performance. This theorization of inherent queerness is not intended to eclipse or circumvent the particular orientation, narratives, and experiences of femme-identified Black queer and trans women. It is instead meant to destabilize projections made about what gender signifies and can be made to signify by the performative processes of Black bodies. Spillers' seminal assertion of "ungendering" as part of the process through which the captive Black body becomes flesh is mainly concerned with the impact of systemic violence on Black selfhood and sociopolitical (im)mobility but offers itself as a "praxis and a theory, a text for living and dying and a method of reading both through their diverse mediations."[1] Through this praxis I assert that gender, as enfleshed by blackness, as performed by Black folks, is inevitably (a potentially liberatory) negotiation of deviance, of queerness. "Femininity" was not constructed in a vacuum. It is informed by the histories of raced and gendered violence that Spillers exhumes. Thus, Newman as @peaches_monroee, an amalgamation of Southern sweetness (or the name of Nina Simone's bitter daughter of slaves in "Four Women") and classic Hollywood glamour (Norma Jeane Mortenson's Marilyn Monroe), performs a disidentification in both her act of online self-naming and in her assertion of feminine aesthetic mastery.

Newman's "on fleek!" resonates with hashtags such as #BlackGirlMagic (or #BlackGirlsAreMagic) (Thomas 2015) and #ClassicallyBeautiful (Stanley 2014) in signaling an emergent trend of Black women utilizing Twitter to publicly assert delight in their appearance, in the face of their pervasive marginalization by mainstream media and most of the beauty industry. For these women, Twitter serves as a venue for protest coded in celebration. I use the term *aesthetic indulgence* to describe these intentionally overt performances of delight.

To theorize this genre of online performance, I engage with Steve Biko's foundational theory on "black beauty" (1976) in concert with the more recent work of Shirley Tate (2009), which focuses explicitly on Black female aesthetics and stylization in the Black diaspora. My discussion of "on fleek" as a distinctly Black contribution to language draws from the work of Geneva Smitherman on "black talk" (1977) alongside Paul Gilroy's definition of the "profane black vernacular" (1993). To analytically support my claims, I turn to data from Google and Twitter as harvested through online digital analytics platforms.[2] Resituating Newman's "on fleek!" as exemplary of language's function as an articulation of identity—in this instance a performative raced and gendered

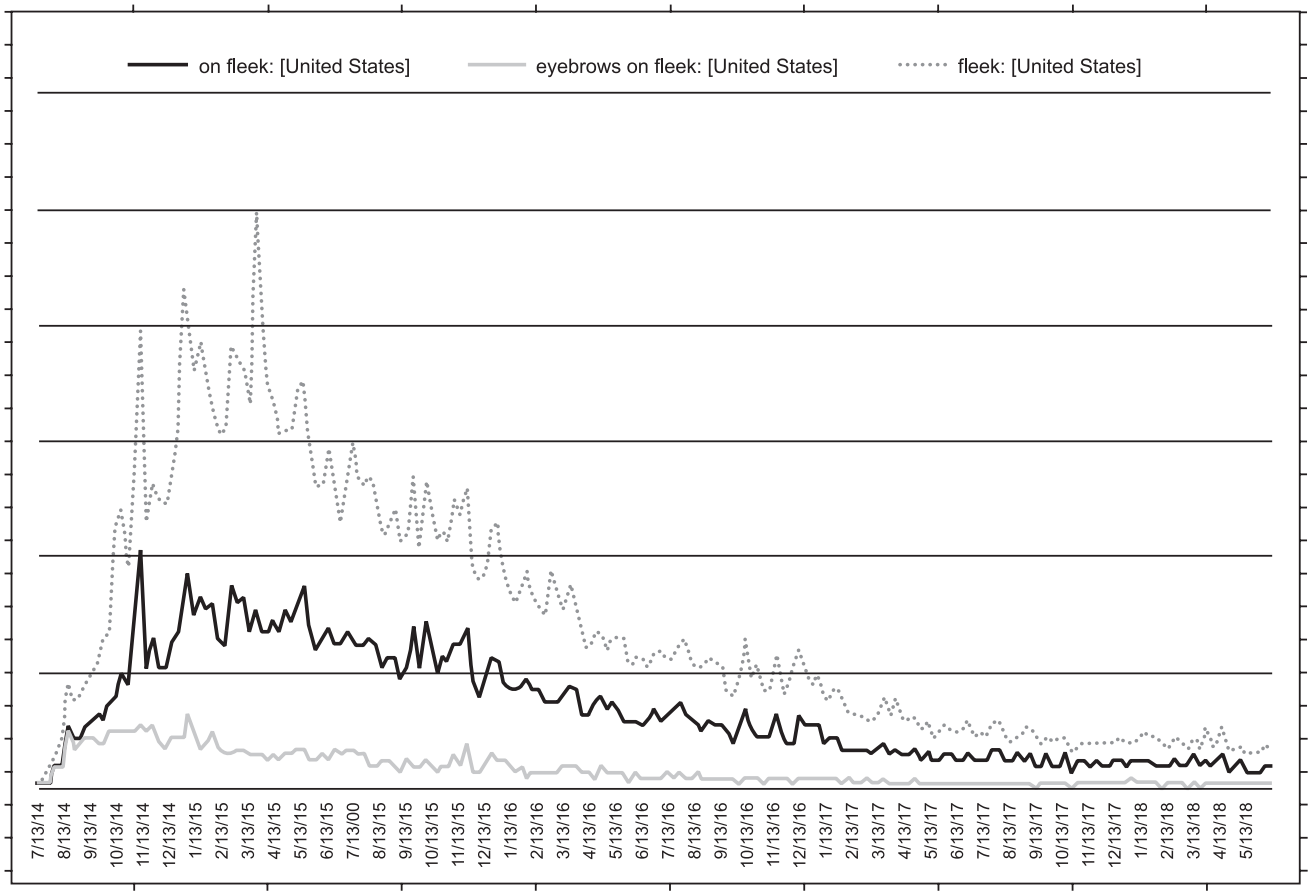

Figure 2.1. Google Trends "On Fleek," 2004–2016.

break with standard English—I consider the prevalence of linguistic appropriation as symptomatic of Black Twitter's function as a microcosm of Black popular culture at large. In the conclusion, I theorize how the act of hashtagging allows for the real-time enactment of radical politics that utilize communal acknowledgment and celebration pitched inward while exposing the pervasive surveillance of (online) Black social space.

"We in dis bitch": Validating Black Twitter

A turn of phrase with no clear linguistic or cultural forbearer,[3] "on fleek!," or #OnFleek (the popular hashtag that Newman's invented idiom quickly became), springs forth from the mind of its creator in a quotidian moment of personal media content sharing. Legitimized through rapid and wide social media spread, the term is rendered a trendy parlance upon its official induction in the *Oxford English Dictionary* just over a year after it is first captured.[4] A Google Trends analysis of the terms "eyebrows on fleek" and "on fleek" (fig. 2.1) shows that by May 2015 "on fleek" had hit peak search popularity relative to the number of searches conducted globally between July 2014 and February 2016.

In a tweet posted in December 2015,[5] Newman appends a screenshot of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) entry for "fleek" with a score of celebratory emojis in commemoration of the year she made a word, thanking everyone who still uses it (fig. 2.2). The example sentences given in the *OED* entry—"OMG the music is on fleek"; "have you ever seen anything so fleek in your life?"—seem awkward and forced, attesting to the aural materiality of "fleek" that seems stifled by print. However, the content under "Origin" in the *OED* definition is my point of interest. It reads: "Apparently an arbitrary formation popularized in a 2014 video post on the social media service Vine by Kayla Newman." This description points to the linguistic peculiarity of "fleek," the way the exclamatory string of syllables has no direct aural resonance, rendering it outside of a normative, "standard English" historicization.

The phrase "apparent arbitrary formation" pulls into relief the limits of the *OED*'s commonsense authority on language. Emerging from outside, or beyond, this "sense," "fleek" elicits its own archive. The *OED* entry continues to foreground the importance of social media platforms designed to host communal interactions with content. The fact that Newman is named as the author of the term, as opposed to the dictionary giving attribution to the social media phenomena of a given time period or to a broad geographic region, illustrates plainly that

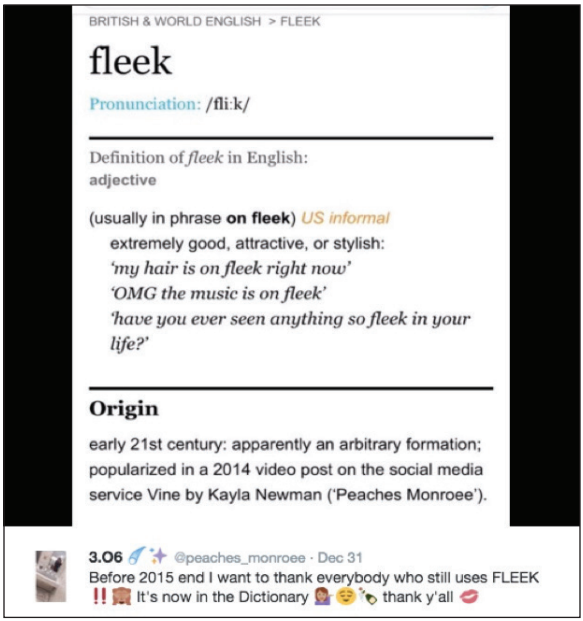

Figure 2.2. Tweet from Kayla Newman (@peaches_monroee) on the addition of "on fleek" to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. December 31, 2015.

Black cultural products do not just materialize from an imagined vastness, some broad unnamed Black populace, for popular and commercial use. When distinctly Black cultural products enter the mainstream, often the Black author, and their authorial moment, gets effaced and erased, while the product (the word/phrase/idiom, the dance, the sartorial or musical style, etc.) appears to be un-authored and authorless. That the *Oxford English Dictionary* links Newman's name to her creation, "fleek," asserts that blackness is not merely a fecund well, endless and abstract in its opacity, that the bucket of mainstream culture can dip into again and again.

The persistence of Newman's authorship demonstrates one of Black Twitter's most generative contributions to popular cultural discourse. "Spread," proposed by Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green (2013), is a concept that affords the consumer an active role in the dissemination of media (to replace the implied passivity of the earlier notion that videos and memes "go viral" without any agency on the part of users). In this context, spread allows us to think about participatory culture as a means to understand online Black sociality. "Participatory culture" was initially coined by Jenkins (1992) as a means to distinguish the social interaction of fan communities from that of other groups of spec-

tators. I am interested in what it would mean to consider Black Twitter a fan community—not one rallied around a specific show or character, but one collectively invested in a wholesale appreciation of (the necessarily varied interpretations of) blackness. John Fiske defines "fandom" as "a common feature of popular culture in industrial societies," in which elements of mass-mediated cultural products are modified through their engagements with a particular subset of the popular audience (1992, 30). Fiske further asserts that fandom is typically associated with "cultural forms the dominant value system denigrates" (30). If this assertion holds, then its application to the distinctly urban Black millennial cultural nexus to which @peaches_monroee (Kayla Newman) belongs seems apt. In the same article, Fiske apologizes for not considering race at length as a principal axis of discrimination that impacts the distribution of culture, stating that he has simply "not found studies of nonwhite fandom" (32). While this may have been accurate for him in the early 1990s, at the onset of fan studies, it is certainly no longer the case (Wanzo 2015). Taking Black Twitter seriously as a site of fandom engaged in participatory practices of content sharing offers an explanation for the spread of "fleek" that speaks (or tags) against the trope of authorial erasure that has continually plagued Black cultural production.

As a part of the fandom of blackness, Newman is recognized as a valid, contributing member of the peer group afforded "the social prestige and self-esteem that go with cultural capital" (Fiske 1992, 33). Within this paradigm, the act of recording and uploading a video of oneself in performative celebration of one's eyebrows and plans for the evening becomes an act of community engagement invested less in the potentiality to birth language and more in that of recirculation. Here it is important to gesture toward the particular function of Vine as a social media platform noted for its "distinctly younger—blacker and browner—user base" (Chow 2016). Twitter purchased Vine in 2012 and announced on October 27, 2016, that it would be shutting down the app. Social media response to this loss has focused on the displacement of amateur Black and brown comedic talent and performance art on the web. In contrast to mediums like YouTube, Vine offered a casual immediacy of dispersal and consumption. Ranging from Ferguson protest footage to the adorable Black ballerina who taught us how to "Do It For The Vine!," the six-second video platform opened up a channel for social, cultural, and political recognition at the pace of a finger scroll. Interfaced with Twitter's user base, Vine played a crucial role in the legibility of Black Twitter by allowing users to see (each other) and be seen (by broader audiences).

The particular valuation of acknowledgment from one's peer group—in this case, defined as the online community of intended distribution—subverts the dominant cultural system by prioritizing the time and engagement of Black youth without a predetermined capitalist aim. There is the urge, felt by me as I write, and expressed by various Black Twitter users and retrospectively articulated by Newman herself[6] to demand remuneration citing the various products and marketing ploys her phrase has appeared in as exploitative commerce. On February 19, 2017, Newman launched a crowdfunding campaign with a goal of one hundred thousand dollars toward "starting a website, getting this project on legal papers with a good team of lawyers, etc and making sure my dreams come true as far as this 'Fleek' thing."[7]

But it is important to acknowledge that in recording the video, Newman is not selling anything; she does not express interest in any kind of monetary return. While the absorption of Black vernacular culture in the United States often unevenly appends material profit to sociocultural values; her online content is intended to circulate outside of a straightforward capitalist exchange within the shared field of communal enjoyment.

Even when conceptualized as a fandom, Black Twitter itself is a space of constant context collapse (Marwick and boyd 2010). Within the boundaries of this online community engaged in the making, remaking, and distribution of media content marked as Black, there are various genres indexed by the hashtag praxis of each individual user. As a Twitter user myself, I often marvel at the ways my account shifts genre. On any given day, there will be moments where my tweets align themselves with my academic interests and may be marked as an entry into #BlkGradChat. Later that same day, I may retweet commentary on the latest antics of the cast of VH1's #Love&HipHopAtlanta between calls for action and solidarity concerning the issues of #BlackLivesMatter. The convergence of these contexts within the space of a single "timeline" is then compounded by the accounts of the 22 percent of Black internet users (40 percent of Black users ages eighteen to twenty-nine) that were recorded as Twitter users in a recent Pew Research Center report on African American tech usage (Smith 2014). As a microcosm of Twitter's broader user demographics, Black Twitter functions as a site of context collapse that is itself collapsed into (and retweeted onto) various other contexts. By focusing on the various distinct and intersecting genres of discourse that materialize into Black Twitter, I center an understanding of "signification's discursive constitution of Black identity" (Brock 2012,

533). Offering a "technocultural" exploration of Black Twitter's key features and utility, André Brock offers the evolution of the hashtag—from curational feature to expressive modifier—as what substantiated Black Twitter as a co-constituted social public (534).

These various genres of discourse, often aggregated by Twitter as "trending topics," are just a few of the composite contexts woven into the mosaic of Black Twitter. In my view, Black Twitter's most distinct commonalities are its investment in public representations of blackness, the enjoyment of reciprocal communication, and the cultural and political utilities of social media. In positing the argument that "on fleek" in its inception is representative of a moment of what I call Black Twitter's "Black Femme prowess," I argue that "fleek" is an utterance pitched to the assumed social interest and aural aesthetic pleasures of a specific subset of Black Twitter. It is a string of syllables meant to resonate with a Black audience who may have not heard it before but knows exactly how to use it.

I mobilize "fleek" as an expression of Black feminist bravery in political-cultural battle in order to open a conversation surrounding Black Twitter's Black Femme prowess. Indeed, Black Twitter operates as both venue and occasion for Black Femme rebuttal to mainstream denigration. The creative genesis and subsequent commercial hailing of "fleek" pull it into the metanarrative surrounding performativity and Black language, while its digital materiality lays bare the raced and gendered politics of participatory culture.

Tweetin' and Testifyin': Language as an Articulation of Identity

Returning briefly to the screenshot of the dictionary entry that accompanies Newman's commemorative tweet, I want to think again of the awkwardness of the featured example sentences. Read alongside the rash of articles published by mainstream and corporate media outlets, they signify attempts to further inscribe the meaning of "fleek" outside the context of Black Twitter. The question "have you ever seen anything so fleek in your life?" has probably never been asked. Not only is the sentence missing the prepositional accompaniment "on," but it also lacks the foundational cultural moorings and linguistic structures of Ebonics or African American Vernacular English (AAVE) that would keep the phrase true to the language of its creator. The sentence reflects the forced assimilation of a distinct language system described by Dr. Geneva Smitherman as "an Africanized form of English reflecting Black

America's linguistic-cultural African heritage and the conditions of servitude, oppression and life in America" (1977, 1). "On fleek" carries with it "Euro-American speech with an Afro-American meaning, nuance, tone and gesture" (1).

Notable for explicating the Africanist origins of contemporary Black language and speech patterns, Smitherman's seminal sociolinguistic breakdown of what is now commonly referred to as AAVE, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* focuses on the overlapping dimensions of language and style. As much about *how* you say a phrase as *what* you are saying, AAVE is performative by design. A system of speech that can be plugged into by the informed speaker to convey effect and purpose, AAVE is interwoven within Black spaces of entertainment and community engagement. Recognizing "on fleek" within a Black linguistic lineage serves to connect the phrase to the larger project of Black identity making through language. This performative breaking of English conventions into its own lyrical sense can be thought of as an articulation of "Afro-American poetics." Of these distinct poetics, Houston Baker writes, "It has always been necessary for black people in America not only to comprehend the space of their identity-in-difference but also energetically to refigure this space by employing expressive counter-energy" (1988, 7). This reconfiguration of identity-in-difference through expressive culture speaks to the context of content sharing in which Newman participates.

Understanding language as a location of identity making in Black diasporic communities allows us to engage Black Twitter as a mass-mediated site of Black sociality. In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy writes of "the profane black vernacular" as

> a means to think black sociality outside of patterns derived from either family- or church-based forms of kinship and community. They build on the old patterns of talk about sex, sexuality, and gender-based antagonisms that Richard Wright identified as "the forms of things unknown." This profane dialogue between black women and men operates by strict genre rules. It establishes the priority of the personal, intimate, and non-work rhythm of everyday living and uses that focus to institute a community or constituency of active listeners (1994, 203).

Here, Gilroy is writing specifically about the profane elements of Black music throughout the African diaspora, but the gender-coded profane

Black vernacular creation of community he describes correlates to the workings of Black Twitter. Black Twitter becomes the host to these "personal, intimate, non-work rhythms" that are taken up, responded to, and shared among a community of participants, or "active listeners." Reading Black Twitter as a site from which to think Black sociality outside of normative patterns locates "on fleek" as an instance of this profane Black dialogue, so personal and intimate that it resists a smooth extraction from the Black counter-public into the mainstream.

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Pancakes on *fleek. (@IHOP, 21 Oct 2014)

Taco Bell on fleek. (@tacobell, 17 Oct 2014)
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This translational barrier spurns an air of anxiety in mainstream white usage of "on fleek." Around the end of 2014, several articles proclaimed to know "the real meaning" behind "on fleek" (Muenter 2014). These articles find their authors reaching into and through the cultural anomaly to offer their readers a definitive inscription of the inescapably popular term. The majority of the cultural commentators who pondered the definition of "fleek" cited its appearances in the Twitter marketing campaigns of corporate brands such as IHOP and Taco Bell. One writer considered "on fleek" as part of current "teen tech speak" (*Pure Wow* 2015). A writer for the feminist blog *Bustle* described the phrase as a phenomenon "no one really understands but keeps saying [it] anyway . . . 'fleek' is not a word. And it doesn't even really sound like a word," writes the white woman who relates to her readers with references to Cara Delevingne and Kim Kardashian, "It just . . . exists" (Muenter 2014). Framed by the writer's own markedly narrow cultural competency, Kayla Newman is rendered a minuscule part of a confusing origin story. Even as the authors of these articles are forced to return to the original video as the only trusted point of reference from which to gauge the term's definition, any mention of race or African American Vernacular English is left out.

As Stuart Hall points out in the essay "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?," popular culture—and, by millennial extension, Twitter culture—has "always contained within it, whether silenced or not, black American vernacular culture" (2009, 105). While Hall writes from a Black British perspective, the markedly global flow of engagement with and within Black popular culture paired with the diasporic reach of Twitter's online community make his analysis germane to Newman's

hailing. Newman performs language as a young Black woman typically read as "urban" or "ghetto," but as her word takes flight outside of the Black Femme fan community, it takes on a kind of post-racial popularity. Blackness propels "on fleek" into the mainstream while simultaneously preventing its legibility to that same public. Concerning the lingua franca of Black life, Toni Morrison states, in a 1981 interview with the *New Republic*, "The worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language." Echoing Smitherman's sentiments and anticipating Gilroy's, Morrison asserts that "there is a level of appreciation that might be available only to people who understand the context of the language. The analogy that occurs to me is jazz; it is open on the one hand and both complicated and inaccessible on the other" (1981). The online circulation of Newman's six-second video clip was the virtual "open hand," the language particularity and Black Femme cultural engagement signified by #OnFleek, "complicated and inaccessible." Black Twitter brings the participatory linguistic structures of Black language to digital relief as part of its function as a "strategic contestation" (Hall 2009, 109). Black Twitter, like Black popular culture, has "enabled the surfacing . . . of other forms of life, other traditions of representation" (109).

Serving Looks: Black Femme Aesthetics #OnFleek

The device that allows "on fleek" to transcend its aural particularity is the hashtag. Engaged textually, one does not need to know how to pronounce or even how to use it in context. The phrase can be incorporated as part of a sentence (Outfit #onfleek!) or on its own in a stream of captions (#newoutfit #OnFleek). As a hashtag, #OnFleek's textual function is explicitly tied to a celebration of what I read as Black Femme aesthetic mastery—one aspect of Black Femme prowess. Despite being abstracted and divorced from its origins, in its various marketing applications, #OnFleek still resonates predominantly within the realm of "urban" Black femininity. Here I want to hearken back to my opening provocation that seeks to "queer" what is meant by Black femininity through the use of the appellation "Black Femme." Black Femme aesthetics are a deliberate play in and against conventional ways of being and seeing the feminine. As Cathy Cohen wrote in 1997:

> As we stand on the verge of watching those in power dismantle the welfare system through a process of demonizing the poor and young—primarily poor and young women of color, many of whom

> have existed their entire lives outside the white, middle-class heterosexual norm—we have to ask if these women do not fit into society's categories of marginal, deviant and "queer."

Thus I interpolate the methods of adornment and signifyin' produced by @peaches_monroee and her worldwide contemporaries as outside of normative modes of gender performance. As excessive and indulgent displays of blackness and femininity, Black Femme aesthetics are culturally, politically, and economically disruptive.

Despite (and perhaps because of) this disruptive nature, Black Femme aesthetics can be said to have a commercial viability separate from that of the Black bodies that initially make them visible. Many white women, from pop starlets and socialites to masquerading former NAACP president Rachel Dolezal, barter their aesthetic proximity to blackness by way of hairstyles, spray tans, clothing choices, and surgical body modifications.[8] But as explicated in Shirley Tate's *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics* (2009), there is political value to the assertion of Black beauty for Black women and their respective communities throughout the African diaspora. Tate's survey of Black women's antiracist stylization across time and national boundaries emphasizes the political imperative for what she calls "black beauty citizenship" (151). For Tate, the idea of Black beauty citizenship is not invested in an essentialism or the idea of an authentic "Black look" or legal discourse that appeals to surveillance mechanisms of the nation-state, but in "what everyday stylization can tell us about black beauty inclusions/exclusions as we go about our daily lives using objects, rituals, technologies etc. to naturalize our ideological views and value systems about beauty" (151). By engaging an explicitly gendered and diasporic infrapolitics,[9] Black Femme aesthetics become a means through which antiracist ideologies can be expressed and rallied behind. We see this on Twitter through cumulative public aggregation of given hashtags.

Two notable examples of hashtags serving an antiracist political agenda informed by Black Femme aesthetics are #ClassicallyBeautiful and #BlackGirl[sAre]Magic. Both tags gained peak popularity in 2014, contemporaneously with Newman's #OnFleek. Attending to both a direct instance of marginalization and a more implicit trend in Black women's (mis)representations in the media, the aforementioned hashtags enact Black beauty citizenship by encouraging femme-identified members of the Black Twitter-sphere to mark their content (most often selfies) in

solidarity. #ClassicallyBeautiful was started in September 2014 by Black actor Anika Noni Rose (@AnikaNoniRose) following a *New York Times* article covering the debut of the Shonda Rhimes–produced show *How to Get Away with Murder*, which cast Viola Davis as its lead. In the article, writer Alessandra Stanley referred to screenwriter/producer Shonda Rhimes as "an angry black woman" and described Davis as "older, dark skinned and less classically beautiful than [Kerry] Washington [the star of another of Rhimes's television series], or for that matter Halle Berry" (2014). With this comparison, Stanley cleaves Davis from her peers, citing Davis's distance from the iconicity of white beauty standards. In response to Stanley's implication that some (thin, younger, lighter-skinned) Black women are legitimately beautiful while others are not, Rose issued a call for the enactment of Black beauty citizenship. Twitter became the site for Black female actors and fans alike to rebuff the racialized beauty standards implicit in Stanley's description. Through the use of #ClassicallyBeautiful, Black women on Twitter demonstrated a collective appreciation of a range of Black Femme aesthetics. #ClassicallyBeautiful directly countered the dichotomy presented by Stanley and rejected narrow conceptualizations of acceptable and authentic Black beauty by becoming an unmoderated space for the digital appreciation of Black women's varied looks, styles, skin tones, and ages.

#BlackGirlMagic is a hashtag of transformed functionality. Attributed to CaShawn Thompson (@thepbg), who began using the hashtag "#BlackGirlsAreMagic" in 2013 to highlight positive achievements of Black women, #BlackGirlMagic moves between associations with news clips showcasing Black women's achievements to portraits and selfies and the space in between where Black women are photographed in highly stylized celebration of their accomplishments. Thompson says that she uses the word *magic* "because it's something that people don't always understand. . . . Sometimes our accomplishments might seem to come out of thin air, because a lot of times, the only people supporting us are other black women" (Thomas 2015). #BlackGirlMagic responds to a more general sense of Black women's displacement in mainstream media. Carving out a space within Black Twitter that focuses specifically on positive images of Black women, #BlackGirlMagic coalesces Black Femme aesthetics as a politico-cultural project. Amid the prominence of other, more patent politically oriented hashtags (#BlackLivesMatter, #SayHerName, #BringBackOurGirls), #BlackGirlMagic is sometimes thought of as escapist. To evoke #BlackGirlMagic is to step outside the realm of Black

Twitter's political current and into a space of aesthetic indulgence. What I wish to make plain is the political utility of that space of indulgence.

South African student leader Steve Biko coined the term "Black is beautiful" as part of the Black Consciousness movement in the mid-1970s. In 1974 Biko and other members of the South African Students Organization and the Black People's Convention (SASO/BPC) were detained under charges of terrorism as a result of their anti-apartheid activism. In court transcripts from the SASO/BPC trial the first week of May 1976, Biko explains to defense lawyer advocate David Soggot:

> When you say "black is beautiful" what in fact you are saying [to Black folks]: man, you are okay as you are, begin to look upon yourself as a human being; now in African life especially it also has certain connotations; it is the connotations on the way women prepare themselves for viewing by society, in other words the way they dream, the way they make up and so on, which tends to be a negation of their true state and in a sense a running away from their colour. . . . They sort of believe I think that their natural state which is a black state is not synonymous with beauty and beauty can only be approximated by them if the skin is made as light as possible. . . . So in a sense the term "black is beautiful" challenges exactly that belief which makes someone negate himself. (1978, 104)

Biko's statement undergirds Tate's findings that the everyday stylization practices of Black folks, specifically Black women, operate as an antiracist assertion of humanity. Stylization functions outside of the realm of the logocentric—the written word, the esteemed Western philosophical canon, the traditional archive—that has in many instances been predicated on the literal and theoretical displacement of Black folks. As Hall writes, within "the black repertoire, style—which mainstream cultural critics often believe to be the mere husk, the wrapping, the sugar coating on the pill—has become itself the subject of what is going on" (2009, 109). There is always style within Black political movements (Ford 2015; Gill 2015; Mercer 1987). One could argue that one of the most prominent facets of Black struggle is its iconicity within the racially stratified representational economy of global media. Through the conventions of Black Twitter, #BlackGirlMagic and #ClassicallyBeautiful digitize Black stylistic engagements with politics by allowing quotidian expressions of self-esteem to function as public critiques of mainstream media.

Conclusion

In closing *Black Beauty*, Shirley Tate asks, "What would a black feminist anti-racist aesthetics for the 21st century look like?" (2009, 155).

As evidenced by "#OnFleek," "#ClassicallyBeautiful," and "#BlackGirl Magic," the Black feminist antiracist aesthetic of the twenty-first century as articulated on Twitter is not one that promotes a set standard for Black women's fashion or hairstyles. (Beauty, like culture, is a living, changing thing.) Rather, a political mechanism is at play in the tagging of varied articulations of Black beauty: an assertion that Black Femme presence is deserving of public space. Sometimes these and similar hashtags speak directly to a deficit, and other times they are used just for the sake of sharing publicly, of joining in the "personal, intimate, non-work rhythm" of belonging to a community of "active listeners," and as such, they may seem apolitical. In six seconds of self-indulgence, @peaches_monroee gave the world a word, and the world, in turn, gave her a hashtag, an entry point to digital notoriety. Kayla Newman's self-captured linguistic innovation operates much like the well of blackness and performative Black femininity from which it springs—puzzling, hard to pin down, yet lazily absorbed by mainstream consumer culture. But while the outside, the white mainstream, continues to launch attempts at decoding what it is the Black Femme knows, of awkwardly adopting and attempting to rename and recast Black Femme cultural ingenuity, the metalanguage of Black Twitter persists and proliferates to level its coded #clapback.

Notes

1. Focusing specifically on the condition of the captive Black female body reduced to flesh as the seminal figure of contemporary Black women's societal positionality, Spillers writes, "The African female subject, under these historic conditions, is not only the target of rape—in one sense, an interiorized violation of body and mind—but also the topic of specifically externalized acts of torture and prostration that we imagine as the peculiar province of male brutality and torture inflicted by other males. A female body strung from a tree limb, or bleeding from the breast on any given day of field work because the "overseer," standing the length of a whip, has popped her flesh open, adds a lexical and living dimension to the narratives of women in culture and society. This materialized scene of unprotected female flesh—of female flesh "ungendered"—offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations." (Spillers 1987, 64–68).

2. Namely, GoogleTrends, Hashtagify.me, TWUBS.

3. *UrbanDictionary.com*, "a satirical crowdsourced online dictionary of slang and phrases that was founded in 1999 as a parody of *Dictionary.com* and *Vocabulary.com* by white male Aaron Peckham," reports some variants of "fleek" meaning "smooth" and "awesome" as early as 2003. UrbanDictionary can be taken as a tongue-in-cheek attempt to penetrate the Black in Black popular culture. While the website's definitions are not limited to inscriptions of African American Vernacular English, I read the appellation of "urban" to signify blackness in a way that lends itself to the platform's satirical aims. In order to posit the opposite of standard, Peckham employs "urban" as a way to utilize the slippage between urban as "of the city" and urban as "of Black origin."

4. Searchable on *Dictionary.com* and *oxforddictionaries.com*; profiled by Merriam-Webster as part of "Words We're Watching" series. (Merriam-Webster 2015). Accessed March 30, 2016, http://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/fleek-meaning-and-history.

5. Search popularity for "on fleek" decreased by only 15 percent within the seven months after its peak popularity, illustrating the ways the digital shelf life of Newman's idiom was extended by both the mainstream frenzy around its meaning and the phrase's broad utility among its intended urban audience.

6. One and a half years after posting the initial video, Newman is quoted as saying, "I can't explain the feeling. At the moment I haven't gotten any endorsements or received any payment. I feel that I should be compensated. But I also feel that good things happen to those who wait" (St. Felix 2015).

7. As quoted from her gofundme campaign in a write up on pop cultural news site The Fader: http://www.thefader.com/2017/03/09/peaches-monroee-beauty-industry-interview.

8. Examples include socialite Kylie Jenner's temporary cornrows and lip fillers and Australian rapper Iggy Azalea's fake Southern affect and rumored butt implants.

9. Defined by James C. Scott and employed by Robin D. G. Kelley as "'the circumspect struggle waged daily by subordinate groups . . . like infrared rays, beyond the visible end of the spectrum. That it should be invisible . . . is in large part by design a tactical choice born of a prudent awareness of the balance of power'" (Kelley and Lipsitz 1996); (Scott 1977).

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THREE | "You Ok Sis?"

Black Vernacular, Community Formation, and the Innate Tensions of the Hashtag

PAIGE JOHNSON

> On June 7, 2014, I had an experience intervening in #streetharassment that sparked a global movement, #YouOkSis (@FeministaJones, June 9, 2015)

In July 2014 social worker, activist, and blogger Feminista Jones launched the hashtag #YouOkSis.[1] The phrase itself refers to the moment when passersby witnessing street harassment of women might potentially intervene by speaking to the victim and asking if she is "okay." The inclusion of the "#" transforms the phrase into a hashtag, which allows it to serve as a rallying cry and gathering place for a larger movement combating harassment arising on the street and across various web spaces. When the hashtag first launched, it spread quickly, accumulating a trail of personal testimonies, strategies of support, and real-time interventions with regard to online harassment that were shared with thousands of internet users.

Feminista Jones says that she launched #YouOKSis in order to bring a number of voices to bear on the topic of street harassment and to generate and share possible solutions. In an interview with *theGrio*, Jones explains, "I define street harassment as any unwanted attention from strangers that makes a person feel uncomfortable." The idea for

#YouOkSis was born when Jones intervened in a street harassment situation on behalf of a young mother pushing a stroller. Jones recalls, "She was probably 20 or 21, pushing a stroller with a newborn. I just went and asked her, 'Are you okay, sis?' and she said she was fine, and so I kept walking." Jones notes that this was her first time intervening in such a way when seeing an incident of street harassment and says that no one has ever intervened on her behalf in that manner, though she comments in the interview that, on average, she experiences harassment on the street at least five times a day (Irwin 2014).

In 2014 the nonprofit Stop Street Harassment (SSH) published a commissioned national street harassment study conducted from 2012 to 2014. Sixty-five percent of the approximately one thousand women surveyed and present in the focus groups of the study reported being harassed in the street by men. Fifty-five percent of participants reported being verbally harassed, and forty-one percent noted the addition of physical assault. Holly Kearl (2014), author of the study and founder of SSH, explains that "street harassment, as an academic subject, is in its infancy" and that "few comprehensive studies on the issue have been conducted." Scholarship has shown that online and offline are far from distinct spheres and are, in fact, deeply imbricated and infinitely porous (Carey 2005; Hine 2005; Jones 1997).

In the light of such statistics, it is unsurprising that users collapse the boundary between the digital and "actual" worlds and take to Twitter to express their experiences with street harassment. Hashtags such as #StreetHarassment, #EndSH, #YesAllWomen, and #NotJustHello catalyze a dialogue about persistent public victimization across the platform. #YouOkSis counts on and cultivates this imbrication not only to coalesce a networked community online but also to prompt interventions outside the platform as well. Kearl (2014) notes that what is known so far about street harassment is that there is no set profile of a harasser: the act of harassment isn't statistically related to race, nor does it have a direct link to any economic class. As Kearl explains, "Street harassment does seem to cut across all economic spectrums, from the man on Wall Street to [men in] lower-income areas."

> Revisit my explanation for why there is a "sis" in #YouOkSis. It is specific to Black womanhood. Same idea. (@Feminista Jones, December 27, 2016)

As gestured to in the quote above, harassment directed toward femme-presenting persons is ubiquitous across the porous boundaries

of virtual and actual spheres. #YouOkSis bridges these dual spaces to address harassment in both. Although Kearl asserts that harassers are not statistically linked to specificities of socioeconomic class or race and instead cut across all spectrums, more often than not, in a US American context, white women become centered as the predominant victims of male-directed harassment. Across interviews, Jones clearly expresses why her focus is on Black women when she explains, "A lot of the conversations about street harassment in the mainstream media only show white women as the faces of victims. Rarely do you see Black women as the face of the victim" (Irwin 2014).

Journalist Terrell Jermaine Starr notes that "the online assaults against Black women are particularly harsh and seem coordinated," especially in the case of high-profile accounts such as Jones's, which currently has 158,400 followers. For example, he notes some examples of the rhetoric aimed toward Black women, which include these tweets:

> ain't no one aggressively approaching these fat, ugly ass, bitter Black women in the streets. I've seen y'alls avis. Lying, b (@JusKeem, July 8, 2014)
>
> another divisive HT to get a rise out of BM for the negro bed wenches social and political benefit please BM do not participate #YouOkSis (@1blackcrayon, July 8, 2014)
>
> It's sad how far black feminist will stoop to prove their hatred for black men #YouOkSis (@KingQuawn, July 9, 2014)
>
> @Russian_Starr @tariqnasheed Really? Brothers are now cosigning this fake Street Harrasment Stuff?!!? (@bigkdc, June 19, 2014)

Within Feminista Jones's own tweet, seen above, concerning the use of "sis" and her subsequent statements on the matter, one can discern a clear sense of authorial intent. The hashtag is meant to perform the specific function of intervention and highlight the often-devalued voices of Black women in the process. Jones hoped that #YouOkSis would inspire people of all genders to intervene in harassment situations—not only on the streets but online as well—by engaging with the victim of said harassment. As Jones states, "If you just talk to the person who is the focus of

the harassment, you're placing yourself in that moment and giving that person an out. It's something that breaks up the situation and diverts attention from the victim." Given the fact that the #YouOkSis campaign launched online, and the fact that Black women on Twitter receive a disproportionate volume of harassment compared to non-Black Twitter users, Jones explains that "#YouOkSis is absolutely for online situations too. Sometimes people will come into my mentions and start tweeting the people who are attacking me. People will re-tweet positive things or cute animal pictures, things like that" (Irwin 2014).

There has been much debate on and off of the Twitter platform about what it means to "author" a hashtag. These conversations are laden with implicit or explicit expressions of concern about whether a systematic erasure of the labor of Black women, who have originated many popular hashtags, is taking place on Twitter. April Reign, who started #OscarsSoWhite, and Feminista Jones, who launched #YouOKSis, for instance, have taken great pains to assert their authorship of these hashtags, and they call for widespread acknowledgment and attribution of their authorship outside of the "Twitter-sphere" in publications about these hashtags. While I recognize the value of Black women asserting their role as progenitors of well-known hashtags, it seems necessary to put pressure on the assertion of a single user's ability to maintain authority over a hashtag's intent and narrative.

#YouOKSis falls into the broad category of activist or social justice tags, but unlike most tags in this category, it has been in daily use almost continuously since its introduction. In the subsequent years that #YouOKSis has remained active, the tag has spread throughout the Twitter platform, expanding beyond users who are directly engaged in Feminista Jones's timeline. Although hashtags are sometimes understood by users as having individual authors, to a large extent each user of a hashtag feels as if they, too, are the author of that hashtag—because they can use the hashtag however they want to. For example, in a twenty-four-hour time span in early January 2017, a search of the #YouOKSis hashtag yielded tweets that either recounted direct personal accounts with street harassment or memorialized women and femmes lost to gender-based violence:

> I was supposed to have lunch w/ a friend. She asked to reschedule b/c a man followed and tried to grab her last night. #YouOkSis (@GloriaMalone, January 5, 2017)

> Shout out to the chick and two dudes who #YouOKSis'd me tonight when a dude wouldn't leave me alone downtown ATL tonight (@Dammit_Woman, January 5, 2017)

> we're not even 1 week into the new year and Mesha Caldwell has been murdered. Black trans women's lives matter #youoksis (@oxcmoron, January 6, 2017).

More often than not, the hashtag is currently used as a type of metacommentary or citational practice, flagging and archiving retweeted articles concerning violence against women:

> "forcing sex on girl" [thinking face emoji] the 4 letters you're looking for is RAPE #youoksis (@GeauxBayouBabe, retweeting @NOLAnews: Man, 26 accused of forcing sex on girl, 13, at New Orleans motel, January 6, 2017)

> #youoksis (@Trenai_, retweeting @Adamferrise: Cleveland man accused pouring gasoline in wife's home, lighting it on fire @clevelanddotcom, January 6, 2017)

> #youoksis (@SoualiganAmazon, retweeting @BlackInformant: Officials In India Are Blaming Women After a "Mass Molestation,"[2] January 6, 2017)

Beyond the initial goals of sharing experiences of, and strategies for, intervention and de-escalation of street harassment scenarios, these tweets demonstrate how uses of #YouOkSis have expanded since 2014. At present the tag, often in combination with #SayHerName, serves as a mechanism for signal-boosting information about missing women and girls, for documenting state violence against Black women, and for informally archiving the lives—and violent deaths—of murdered trans and cis Black femmes. As seen in recent tweets surrounding the disappearance and death of teen Kenneka Jenkins in Chicago:

> STOP TREATING BLACK WOMEN AS DISPOSABLE OBJECTS #Black Lives Matter #SayHerName # YouOkSis (@scib0rg,

> retweeting @BreeNewsome: #KennekaJenkins disappearance & difficulty in getting authorities to respond reflects pattern of disregard 4 safety of black women & girls. . . , September 11, 2017)

As demonstrated above, #YouOKSis is frequently coupled with other well-known hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter, #WhyIStayed, #EndSH, and #MasculinitySoFragile.

The varied uses of #YouOkSis seen above and on Twitter can be understood through a framework proposed by Ganaele Langlois (2011) for discerning the meanings and cultural logics of digital environments. Langlois focuses on the conditions within which internet user expression is possible, analyzes the "regimes of the production and circulation of meaning," and acknowledges "the techno-cultural dimension of meaning as constituted by a range of heterogeneous representational and informational technologies, cultural practices and linguistic values." (1) Langlois argues that these "representational and informational technologies" coalesce into "technocultural assemblages": the networked connections, informatics flows, and affects that constitute online participatory media platforms (10). If conceptualized as a "technocultural assemblage," the very nature of the hashtag as a performative mode of doing gestures back to Deleuze and Guattari's original concept of the "assemblage," or that which "is a becoming rather than a being" (1987). Hashtags depend on the participation cultivated on media platforms in order to fulfill the full role of hashtag where their "potential or 'meaning' becomes entirely dependent on which other bodies or machines it forms an assemblage with" (Malins 2004, 85). These networked connections, potentials, and subsequent meanings—in essence, what a hashtag will become—while potentially conceived with a fixed intent by a singular author, ultimately defies authorial control as it spreads across the platform.

This is especially clear when looking at the ways #YouOkSis has been taken up outside of the street harassment narrative. The scope and topics of #YouOKSis have grown over the past few years to include not only expansions on Jones's anti-harassment program but also jokes and insults that seem to dismiss or undermine that program. For example:

> y'all girls are too much. And when i say girls i mean you bitch ass men. #YouokSis? (@KynDough, January 5, 2017)

> #YouOkSis (@Artistikk, retweeting @Princess_Hokage: When he say you can't lick his gooch, December 31, 2016)

> #YouOkSis (@MafiosoRo, retweeting @ sfreynolds: Tall folks stay tall standing on hate-inch heels, don't they?, December 31, 2016)

From the hashtag's emergence in 2014 to March 2017, @topflightdj has used the hashtag for comedic effect across various tweets, including the results of college football bowl games:

> Watching WNBA all Star game and all I can say is #youoksis? (@topflightdj, July 19, 2014)

> #youoksis? RT@S_C/-: The iTunes Store wasn't built in a day. It took Spotify 9 years to be successful . . . (@topflightdj, April 26, 2015)

> #youoksis @OhioStateFB (@topflight[dj], December 31, 2016)

> @uscfootball #youoksis (@topflightdj, January 1, 2017)

> Anybody ask that NYPD officer who got in trouble for tweeting "Black lives matter" #youoksis? (@topflightdj, March 30, 2017)

> Pepe le Pew was violating that cat. Somebody needed to ask that cat #youoksis (@topflightdj, retweeting @LogicalHater: Cartoons definitely influence kids behavior. Pepe Le Pew had me walking up to girls on some gorilla pimp/harassment shit. As a KID. Not cool., March 2, 2017).

These strategies emerge as a part of the implicit nature of the hashtag. In 2015 the children's dictionary writers at Oxford University Press (OUP) named "#," or "hashtag," the UK Children's Word of the Year. It was found that children under thirteen years old are using the word creatively, as a form of emphasis or commenting in stories. The

OUP writers state in their Word of the Year announcement, "Children are not tweeting and using Twitter, but they are using the word 'hashtag' and the symbol '#' for dramatic effect, a heightening of tension." Above, we see how Twitter users can refashion a tag, ostensibly for social justice, to punctuate jokes or heighten dramatic effect around their commentary. Linguistics professor Vyvyan Evans (2015) told the *Guardian* that the hashtag "has . . . moved across discourse genres: as a linguistic marker of emphasis it is evolving a new life, punctuating and so nuancing the meaning of language in written narratives. . . . This raises interesting questions about the nature and role of digital communication for language and human communication more generally."

Such tweets work less to structure a singular, coherent content message and more as the multiplicitous offshoots endemic to the hashtag itself—meaning that while one person may author a hashtag, it is all but impossible to say how that tag will move, grow, and change due to the desires of other users. Hashtags are essentially multiplicities characterized by principles of connectivity and heterogeneity; they always have multiple entryways, ruptures, and lines of flight. Thinking with Langlois, I argue that hashtags, then, function as (technocultural) assemblages due to how they network people together across virtual and actual worlds. Tweets such as those cited above do not structure a singular, coherent content message. Despite our ability to trace hashtags such as #YouOkSis to a single origin point (in this case, Twitter user @FeministaJones), hashtags do not follow an unproblematic, hierarchical linearity. Instead hashtags are clusters (jokes, awareness campaigns, virulent trolling) that spawn further clusters. Because the hashtag multiplies infinitely—in that it can be taken up and used for almost any purpose that aligns with the hashtag originator's intent or greatly deviates from that intent—a dynamic tension with linearity serves as a fundamental for thinking through the innate nature of the hashtag. Framing hashtags as multiplicitous (technocultural) assemblages provides a way to think through the various strategies users implement to shape engagement with hashtags they have authored or to cultivate certain parameters of use around hashtags on their own timelines.

Feminista Jones's use of "Sis" serves as one such strategy. On Twitter, Feminista Jones has come to be recognized as a pillar of "Black Twitter." Although the tag was started by Jones, a Black woman, I argue that #YouOKSis does not exist as a racialized hashtag or what Sanjay Sharma (2013) calls "blacktag." Sharma explains that "blacktags" are hashtags

which zero-in and identify singular Black experiences and as a result help to constitute Black Twitter identities. For example, hashtags such as #DuragHistoryWeek, #BlackGirlMagic, #CosplayingWhileBlack, and #BlackExcellence all gain momentum and popularity through either pinpointing shared points of Black American experience gained through immersion in Black American culture or by cataloging the achievements of Black people. However, I seek to instead claim that no hashtag can be inherently racialized (or gendered, or queer, etc.). Users have a wealth of ways to convey racialized uses of a hashtag, as seen in the examples above. However, the power of the hashtag, where any point can be connected to any other, lies precisely in its openness. Even as we talk about spaces such as Black Twitter and the wealth of connections and experiences these identitarian commons on the platform provide, the hashtag itself as a device seems to constantly evade an identitarian foreclosure.

As Jones herself has written and tweeted, the hail of street harassment knows no singular geography, demographic, race, or age:

> As I spoke, I looked into the audience and saw that nearly every woman there could relate to being street harassed, disrespected . . . smh (@FeministaJones, March 17, 2016)

> We have to look out for each other. We have to make the effort to ask #YouOkSis? Let each other know we're not alone (@FeministaJones, March 16, 2016)

Users, however, can and do invent and spread tactics for asserting specific positionalities on Twitter, such as those linked to race, gender, class, sexuality, or the intersections between them. Feminista Jones has noted in subsequent writings and interviews that the use of "Sis" as a tactic to cultivate space for Black women's voices and stories within the wider street harassment and gendered violence narrative. Yet this explanation is not immediately apparent or intrinsic to the hashtag itself in the way of many blacktags. "Sis" itself can potentially be read as vernacular call to second-wave feminism's use of "sisterhood" as a means of coalition building. However, as noted previously in Jones's own tweets and interviews (two explicit strategies for attempting to capture authorial control), the use of "Sis" was intended to speak directly to Black women, and Black women heard its implicit call.

> #YouOkSis culture is so real. And it's one of the many wonderful things about black women, and also being a black woman (@audria_lb, August 31, 2017)

The hashtag, then, straddles the Black Twitter line through Feminista Jones's own cultural competence of "Sis" and its uses with US American Black vernacular. "Sis" then becomes a tactic of "signifyin'," a genre of linguistic performance and long-standing practice within Black American oral traditions, "[serving] as an interactional framework that allows Black Twitter users to align themselves with Black oral traditions, to index Black cultural practices, to enact Black subjectivities, and to communicate shared knowledge and experiences" (Florini 2014,2). The recent proliferation of "Dem" and "Dey" constructions for Twitter TV-viewing parties gestures to the power of this vernacular hail. Hashtags such as #DemThrones for *Game of Thrones*, #DemDreadz for *Penny Dreadful*, #DatBot for *Mr. Robot*, and #DemClones for *Orphan Black* are of course open to all Twitter users, especially those seeking out communities in which to engage with popular television programming. Yet the vernacular call within these tags also offers space specifically to Black consumers of this media, which becomes especially significant, given that such hashtags index programming not often associated with Black viewership within mainstream media.

#YouOKSis does not necessarily call out to a group of preconstituted users. Rather, it produces networked subjects, some of whom see the call of identity within the tag. It offers a way to perform blackness as identity and to answer the hail of "Sis," to open a space for the often underreported and over-harassed community of Black women while maintaining a space of participation for a wider array of women. Unlike tags such as #BlackLivesMatter or #NotYourAsianSidekick, #YouOKSis never explicitly hailed a single racial demographic, or communities of color in general. However, responses to the hashtag (which remains in use today, more than two years after its debut) have been dominated by voices from the Black Twitter community. These responses have come from individuals across the gender spectrum and take place both on the Twitter platform and offline. Users such as Jones invent explicit and implicit strategies to articulate racial, sexual, gendered, and transnational identities and community boundaries on Twitter. Feminista Jones's use of the Black vernacular "Sis" acts as one example of a category of implicit strategies that resist hashtagging's own strategic non-identitarian affinity while simultaneously tapping into the medium's desire for heterogeneous engagement.

Notes

1. This formatting reflects Feminista Jones's initial composition. I have changed capitalization and composition of the hashtag to reflect the tweets of individual users when quoted.

2. @blackinformant's tweet is taken from the title of a *Teen Vogue* article that was published on January 5, 2017.

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FOUR | #SandraBland's Mystery

A Transmedia Story of Police Brutality

AAMINAH NORRIS AND NALYA RODRIGUEZ

In May 2015, the African American Policy Forum (AAPF) launched the "Say Her Name" campaign to bring attention to police brutality inflicted upon Black women and girls and to call for racial justice for all Black lives. The campaign, which occurred both online and offline, involved the use of the hashtag #SayHerName in conjunction with multiple participants retelling stories of Black women and girls who had fallen victim to police brutality. According to the AAPF's policy brief, "Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women," the campaign "sheds light on Black women's experiences of police violence in order to support a gender-inclusive approach to racial justice that centers all Black lives equally" (AAPF 2015, 4). The campaign advanced the notion that racial justice for Black lives must be meted out in the form of radical changes to the policies and practices of the criminal justice system, which can be achieved with the support of mainstream audiences.

Two months after the Say Her Name campaign was launched, Sandra Bland, an activist in the Black Lives Matter movement, was found dead in her jail cell. Texas state troopers announced that Bland had committed suicide three days after being stopped and later arrested for failure to use her turn signal. This essay examines how users of the social media platforms Twitter and Facebook told a transmedia story of Sandra Bland's death using the hashtags #SayHerName and #SandraBland. A *transmedia story* is one that is told "across multiple platforms, preferably allowing audience participation" (Pratten 2011, 2). This essay evidences

how users of two different social media platforms interacted to tell the story of #SandraBland as an exemplar for the #SayHerName campaign. Thus, we examine the affordances of transmedia storytelling for converging activism on and offline.

Our interpretation of the transmedia storytelling that took place using #SandraBland draws on an interview of transmedia activist Lina Srivastava (Jenkins 2016), who said, "We have to recognize that agency and self-representation are crucial to social change[,] and people's perspectives of their own situations matter." Srivastava discussed the importance of communities telling their own stories in order to inspire and motivate activism for and by their constituents. Sandra Bland's transmedia story was told by thousands of different users across social media platforms. This chapter investigates how a nonfictional tale of police brutality against a Black woman was constructed by thousands of people on digital networks with the purpose of engaging audiences in social change during their daily lives.

The AAPF's intent in launching the Say Her Name campaign on Facebook and Twitter was to encourage users to "lift up the intrinsic value of *all* Black lives" (2015, 5) by telling the stories of Black female victims and memorializing them as individuals. This online collective remembrance follows a tradition in the African American community of speaking and honoring the names of ancestors (Cleage 2005). As a result of the Say Her Name campaign, thousands of storytellers continued to tell Sandra Bland's story long after her death. Using the #SandraBland hashtag, a murder mystery without a clear villain was collaboratively authored through distinct narratives that built upon and contradicted one another. In the attempt to create loyalty among users to demand justice for all Black lives, AAPF failed to realize that there would be user divergence (Bolin 2007). Göran Bolin describes user divergence, in the context of multifunctional technological appliances, as the varying ways people can use media and technology even though we all have equal access to the same services and functions (2007, 241). Applying user divergence to social media activism, we see how a hashtag can be commodified to further a message or to derail from the intended message of the hashtag's creator. Our essay analyzes how some Twitter and Facebook user-storytellers characterized the message of the AAPF by holding police officers guilty of police brutality and as villains in Sandra Bland's story. Other storytellers shifted the focus of Sandra Bland's narrative to criminalize Black victims of police brutality and to hold them, in general, and Sandra Bland, in particular, responsible for the violence inflicted against themselves.

We discovered that storytellers using #SandraBland could be categorized as either "Messengers," who repeated the AAPF narrative of unwarranted police aggression toward African Americans, or "Derailers," who emphasized the criminality and culpability of the Black victims of law enforcement officers. We found that most of the Twitter users we studied were "Messengers," while many Facebook users functioned as "Derailers."

As soon as the AAPF's policy brief (2015) was released, it became a significant text for outlining how stories of police brutality against Black women should be told, asking users to post narratives that

- hold law enforcement meaningfully accountable for Black victims' deaths;
- offer "exemplars of the systemic police brutality that is currently the focal point of mass protest and police reform efforts" (1);
- reveal how specific Black women and girls have been "profiled, beaten, sexually assaulted, and killed by law enforcement officials" (3); and
- reveal how these "experiences with police violence are distinct—uniquely informed by race, gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation" (1–2).

We found that Messengers related #SandraBland's story following the blueprint set out by AAPF, because they elevated her as an exemplar of police profiling and violence and portrayed Texas state trooper Brian Encinia as responsible for Bland's untimely death. In contrast, Derailers' stories of #SandraBland were antithetical to AAPF's blueprint, because they blamed Bland for her own death. Thus, the story of #SandraBland, as it was transmediated, was an unresolved narrative. Users of Twitter and Facebook revealed their own perceptions, histories, and beliefs in their varied iterations in the unfolding mystery of #SandraBland's death.

Relevant Literature

Before we offer our analysis of how #SandraBland's story was transmediated, we elaborate the theory of transmedia storytelling. We then review the scholarly literature on online activism that employs hashtags, with a focus on activism around issues of race and gender, so that we might explore ways that hashtags have been used to promote social change.

Lastly, we discuss how narratives change as a result of user divergence across media platforms.

To understand the concept of transmedia, we turn to the work of Henry Jenkins. Jenkins (2007) theorized that transmedia stories unfold across multiple media channels. He argued:

> Most often, transmedia stories are based not on individual characters or specific plots but on complex [fictional] worlds, which can sustain multiple interrelated characters and their stories. This process of world-building encourages an encyclopedic impulse in both readers and writers. We are drawn to master what can be known about a world, which always expands beyond our grasp. This is a very different pleasure than we associate with the closure found in most classically constructed narratives, where we expect to leave the theater knowing everything that is required to make sense of a particular story.

Jenkins described reading and writing one transmedia story across differing platforms that unfold building "complex [fictional] worlds." #SayHerName differs from Jenkins's theorization in that it is a nonfictional, multifaceted, transmediated story told by a multitude of authors who described instances of police brutality inflicted against Black women from different backgrounds and lived experiences.

Sandra Bland is one such woman whose transmediated story was both read and written by thousands of users from different perspectives whose versions of the story inform the larger #SayHerName narrative. Therefore, #SayHerName was not simply about #SandraBland. Rather, like many other transmedia stories, it was about a multitude of individuals. In the numerous #SandraBland posts on Twitter and Facebook, incidents of police brutality were often interwoven with racial and gender discrimination, making a complicated "world" that we, the readers and writers, must attempt to understand. The transmediated world of #SandraBland is composed of highly diverse elements: listings of the known facts surrounding Bland's murder; opinions about police forces, Bland, and her family; conjectures as to who was ultimately responsible for her death; grief over the loss of life; suspicion of the motives and actions of both police and the victim; and affirmations of the resilience of activists protesting Bland's slaying. Our examination of the case of Sandra Bland's death illustrates how social media users attempt to "make sense" of the events of her death, and other incidents of police brutality

in the United States, by recounting those events from their individual perspectives. #SandraBland's story forms just one section of a much larger narrative of Black women being victimized by police. We call this enveloping transmedia narrative the #SayHerName story.

Additionally, we are interested in how #SandraBland's transmedia story unfolds in accordance with hashtag activism. Other researchers have examined hashtag activism on social media platforms, especially Twitter. Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa (2015) contend that social media platforms are a powerful means of contestation against police brutality. The authors point to platforms such as Twitter as "sites for collectively constructing counter narratives and reimagining group identities" (6). They argued that Twitter has temporal affordances by providing emergent data on protests as they occur, aggregating activism, and allowing for activists to involve themselves in digital campaigns using hashtags including #Ferguson and #BlackLivesMatter.

We concur with those researchers who contend that social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat have been used as sites for the circulation of counternarratives to official narratives about brutality inflicted by police on Black people (Clark 2016). At the same time, the question of the presumptive audience for such counternarratives is a pertinent one. André Brock argues that Black Twitter users engage in cultural discourse online, stating, "Black Twitter hashtag domination of the Trending Topics [has] allowed outsiders to view Black discourse that was (and still is) unconcerned with the mainstream gaze" (2012, 534). This chapter complicates the idea that Black Twitter is "unconcerned with the mainstream gaze," because the goal of the Say Her Name campaign is to demand racial justice and gender inclusivity, both of which require support from mainstream (non-Black as well as Black) citizenry, including Twitter users.

We examined the importance of both race and gender in hashtag activism on racial injustice and so build on the work of Susana Loza, who explains that hashtags like #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen function as a response to "digital feminists" who "defend white feminism by putting down women of color" (Loza 2014; under "Issue 5"). Loza discusses the ways that women of color (WOC) use social media to challenge and change mainstream American feminism by emphasizing the importance of intersectionality. Through the creation of hashtags specific to certain issues, a new narrative can be explored. Loza argues that women of all backgrounds are currently creating hashtags that highlight their intersectional experiences to speak up about "trans issues (#GirlsLikeus), sex-

ual exploitation of Black girls (#FastTailedGirls) and racial stereotypes (#NotYourAsianSidekick)" (2014; under "Issue 5"). The use of hashtags similar to those named above offer ways for users to create an intersectional approach to feminism. #SayHerName is another example of how users engaged in intersectional dialogue about police brutality against Black women. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), a cofounder of AAPF, coined intersectionality theory in order to reframe the traditional views of experiences based on race and gender, specifically how Black women's multifaceted experiences are shaped when faced with discrimination. This chapter examines how the intersectional framework AAPF has set forth influences the online discourse about police brutality on Black women.

Kitsy Dixon (2014) continues Loza's idea that hashtag feminism is redefining feminism. Dixon examined the online activity of women who identify as hashtag feminists and described ways they have reshaped the dialogue around internet activism. Dixon defines hashtag feminism as a space that gives voice to the "controversial" opinions of WOC on feminism and everyday life (34–40). Through hashtag feminism, WOC are able to bring awareness to their lived experiences of having intersectional identities. Dixon explains that hashtag feminists use Twitter to start discussions around living in a patriarchal society and the varying intersections among women's experiences, which are then developed through the use of Facebook, blogs, or subtweets.[1]

Dixon describes how WOC use Twitter and Facebook in complementary ways, engaging in different but related dialogues about feminism on the two platforms; WOC treated Twitter and Facebook as interconnected aspects of a single social media network rather than as distinct networks. Similarly, we argue that the transmedia story about a WOC, Sandra Bland, is collaboratively and collectively generated on both of these platforms through the use of hashtags.

Bolin (2007) discusses the increasing nature of media convergence as a result of technological advances that make accessing different mediums easier. Not only is terminal convergence of technological capabilities influencing how people use media, but, Bolin argues, social and institutional structures also have a role in how technology is used. Digitization affects three key points in the consumption of media: production, distribution, and reception. Because of the variability in how people use media, this creates user divergence. User loyalty thus becomes the key to successful transmedia storytelling, because texts are promoted over various platforms. In this chapter, we argue that the hashtags #SayHerName and #SandraBland used over both Twitter and Facebook are important

to the narrative construction of Sandra Bland's death, by creating loyalty among some users, "Messengers." We also saw the divergence of users, "Derailers," who used the hashtags to divert the narrative example of ways police brutality affects African American women and, more specifically, the death of Sandra Bland.

Methods

This study employed digital ethnography and critical discourse analysis. Over the course of eight months, we collected data from Twitter and Facebook by downloading articles, videos, photographs, and memes that were posted using the hashtags #SandraBland and #SayHerName. We then identified the public profiles of both Twitter and Facebook users who posted or commented with these hashtags. We analyzed their profiles to uncover demographic data that was publicly available. We were unable to determine gender, race/ethnicity, or age from most of the profiles. However, other data, including occupation, area of residence, and number of friends or followers was collected. Some Facebook users had private accounts, which did not allow us to access any information about them. We were unable to ascertain with certainty users' rationales behind their support or criticisms of Sandra Bland and the Say Her Name campaign. Rather, we relied on critical discourse analysis as a tool for understanding what the posts of users suggested and indexed. In *Language and Power*, Norman Fairclough writes, "Language is both a site of and a stake in . . . struggle, and those who exercise power through language must constantly be involved in struggle with others to defend (or lose) their position" (2001, 29). As we closely analyze the posts of Twitter and Facebook users, we examine how storytellers use language in their struggle to transmediate #SandraBland's story.

We identified four roles that were taken up by Twitter and Facebook storytellers. These are "Messengers," "Derailers," "Fragmenters," and "Resolvers." The four roles can easily be divided into two distinct categories. Messengers and Resolvers relayed #SandraBland following the blueprint provided by AAPF's policy brief (2015), while the approach of Derailers and Fragmenters was antithetical to AAPF's blueprint, offering differing versions of the narrative with different emphases and investments. Below is a more detailed definition of each role (also see tables 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 for examples):

- Messengers told #SandraBland's story in a way that made her an exemplar of police profiling of African American women. Messengers'

posts made visible the unique ways in which Bland's death occurred as a result of her race and gender. Therefore, Messengers' posts followed the guidelines set forth by AAPF. These individuals evinced their support for all Black lives, especially for Black women victims of police violence, by contributing to the narrative of #SandraBland.

- Derailers are users who did not feel compelled to follow the blueprint of transmedia storytelling set forth by AAPF. Instead, they offered alternative narratives about Bland's death that criminalized her and other Black victims of police brutality. Derailers refused to identify police brutality as the cause of Bland's death. They expressed a shared reluctance to assign blame to the police.
- Fragmenters' ambivalent perspectives were reluctant to either denounce police brutality or blame the police. For example, although they expressed empathy, they were less likely to post names of victims. Additionally, they, like the Derailers, held neither police officers nor the police force accountable for Bland's murder. In many cases, Fragmenters qualified statements made by Derailers, expressed remorse over Bland's death, but also characterized Bland and other Black victims of police as criminals. Thereby they continued to derail the message.
- Resolvers responded to the Derailers' posts and attempted to reemphasize the initial message (in line with the AAPF's goals). Resolvers offered summarizing statements that tended to be conclusive and to redirect the hashtags' narrative back to their original intent.

The tables that follow provide examples of each of the four roles described above. They include excerpts from data we collected from both Facebook and Twitter. We gleaned the data from articles posted by the *Huffington Post*, CNN, and *Democracy Now* about either #SayHerName or #SandraBland. We tracked public posts by individuals who follow the official accounts of the aforementioned news organizations. All users have been provided pseudonyms. We analyzed engagement with the initial posts made by users who commented, liked, tweeted, or retweeted responses to the news articles posted.

Table 4.1 shows Facebook comments that were written in response to Lilly Workneh's (2015) article "Say Her Name: Why We Should Declare That Black Women and Girls' Lives Matter Too." The original article—which discusses the importance of including the lives of Black women and girls as victims of police brutality—was seen by 6,600 users on Facebook and received 16 comments.

For example, Walter Reed, a sports editor with 4,000 Facebook

friends, took up the role of Messenger by reinforcing the AAPF's perspective. He pointed out, "Black women's deaths should never be ignored or minimized." Although Reed's comment that "all lives matter" appeared to be off message, he qualified it by focusing attention on the importance of Black women's victimization. He received 51 likes, indexing that his point of view was well received (Workneh 2015). While Reed affirmed the AAPF's message, Gene Michaels, a project manager with 172 friends, derailed the message of the Say Her Name campaign by applying the label "criminals" to the Black victims of police brutality referenced in Workneh's article. Michaels contended that by treating criminals as heroes, supporters of Say Her Name set a poor example for their chil-

Table 4.1. "Say Her Name: Why We Should Declare That Black Women and Girls' Lives Matter Too" Responses

User	Comment	Role	Online Response
Walter Reed, Sports Editor, 4K Friends	Yes all lives matter, and most certainly Black women's deaths should never be ignored or minimized.	Messenger	51 Likes
Gene Michaels, Project Manager, 172 Friends	I still don't understand why anyone would hold criminals up as heroes and have their children look up to them and idolize them. . . . isn't that just asking for your children to commit similar acts and results? What parent teaches their children this is ok?	Derailer	23 Likes
Clark Pearson, Self-Employed, 118 Friends	We teach our children to look up to criminals all the time. Like George Washington, and the other leaders of the Revolution. They were criminals, in the crown's eyes. Like Harriet Tubman. Like Rosa Parks. Like the leaders of the French Resistance. Who is and is not a criminal largely depends, in a civil rights context, on who's doing the viewing.	Fragmenter	17 Likes
Christopher Anderson, Studied at University, 251 Friends	Anyone who thinks that everyone killed by the police is a criminal is living in complete denial.	Resolver	9 Likes
Christopher Anderson, Studied at University, 251 Friends	The deaths of Black women by the police certainly don't get as much attention as the deaths of men. I support these protests 100%.	Resolver	15 Likes

dren. Michaels' response received 23 likes (Workneh 2015), which shows that approximately half the number of users who appreciated Reed's perspective approved of Michaels' point of view.

Additionally, Clark Pearson, with 118 friends, whose Facebook profile stated that the individual was self-employed, took on the role of Fragmenter. Pearson argued, "We teach our children to look up to criminals all the time," thereby reinforcing Michaels' argument that the Black victims of police brutality were criminals (Workneh 2015). By providing examples of individuals who were historically viewed as criminals and who were also taken up as heroes, Pearson's fragmented perspective continued to derail the conversation from the focus on Black women's rights proposed by AAPF. As this user argued that criminality is heralded in society, Pearson further delegitimized Black female victims of police brutality. Christopher Anderson, a University of Georgia graduate, made two comments that attempted to resolve the conflict made by Pearson (a Derailer) and reinforced the narrative articulated by Reed (a Messenger). Anderson began by stating that it was "complete denial" to believe that all individuals killed by police were criminals. He seemed to shift the focus of the conversation back to the AAPF's desired narrative by discounting Michael's argument. Anderson's statement received 9 likes and did not receive support from readers who agreed with Michaels' derailment. Anderson concluded his responses by reiterating the initial message of the AAPF and affirming this message by writing, "I support these protests 100%." His final comment received 15 likes (Workneh 2015). Notably, Anderson's comments received less likes than both Michaels' and Pearson's. The clear message that Black women and girls' lives matter and how their stories should be told became derailed because they and all Black victims of police brutality were named criminals.

Another incident where individuals took up differing roles in transmediating the #SandraBland story on Facebook occurred when *CNN.com* published "Breaking News: No Indictments in Sandra Bland Case" (Ford and Payne 2015), announcing that there were no indictments against Officer Encinia. Table 4.2 shows comments made. The initial post received 4,100 likes, one love, 1,800 comments, and 4,000 shares.

In table 4.2 the storytellers took up three roles. Jessica James, a student with a private Facebook account, served as a Messenger by expressing grief over the lives lost in police custody. This post received 570 likes and 158 replies. However, Richard Martinez, a high school graduate from Texas with 66 friends, made four points that derailed the narra-

Table 4.2. "Breaking News: No Indictments in Sandra Bland Case" Responses

Participant	Comments	Role	Response
Jessica James, Student, Private Facebook Account	This is just sad. Too many ppl are ending up dead in police custody.	Messenger	570 Likes, 158 Replies
Richard Martinez, high school graduate, 66 friends	For everyone saying this was racism and the cops in Texas are all KKK, you do know Democrats started the KKK in Tennessee right? Just making sure, god forbid a Black hangs themselves now, they can't even get verbally and physically combative with police then commit suicide without an FBI investigation. Now that's racism. Not to mention she had a history of suicide attempts. It's called evidence. And it proved in this case she hung herself because the family that was so quick to get paid after she died didn't care enough to bail her out when she begged them on the phone and it mattered. She lost hope, she killed herself. Happens every day in jail. End of story. Sorry it don't fit the narrative.	Derailer	466 Likes
Adam Milton, Private Facebook Account.	In other words, there was a grand jury. Grand juries rarely return indictments in these cases, against the police. A grand jury is what the state decides to go with when they don't want the police to be indicted. So, the state took a side. The outcome was predetermined. They tend to know each other and yes, it's somewhat corrupt. At that point, as soon as you hear "grand jury", you're free to give up hope. I have been watching these cases enter and leave the news for years now, and grand juries end this way 90% of the time. It's a deliberate strategy. Shame on anyone insulting this woman in her death. If there's a hell, you're going there. The list of the people this is surprising to: Absolutely no one.	Fragmenter	46 Likes

tive. First, the user argues that racism didn't start in Texas, a claim that sought to shift the blame away from the Texas police officers accused of unjustly killing Bland. Second, Martinez blames victims of police brutality and their supporters for overreacting to the news about the Bland case by stating, "god forbid a Black hangs himself now, they can't even get verbally and physically combative with police then commit suicide without an FBI investigation. Now that's racism." Thereby, Martinez contends that investigations of police brutality constitute "racism." Third, Martinez blames Bland for landing in police custody by accusing her of mental instability. Fourth, this user blames Bland's family, "who were so quick to get paid" after failing to bail Bland out of jail before she attempted suicide. Here, "getting paid" refers to the fact that Bland's family filed a lawsuit against the police unit involved with Bland's death. Martinez characterizes Bland, and all Black victims of police brutality, as being combative and racist and characterizes Bland's family as being selfish for caring less about her well-being than their own. As a Derailer, Martinez shifts the narrative and offers up alternatives to the AAPF story of #SandraBland, pointing to "evidence" that "she killed herself." Martinez expressed pride at the derailment, as the final line of the post states, "Sorry it don't fit the narrative." Martinez makes clear that the goal was to shift the narrative of the #SandraBland story. Ramirez's response received 466 likes.

Adam Milton, a Facebook user with a private account, demonstrates empathy for Sandra Bland while at the same time qualifying the notion that the police are at fault. Instead, this user suggests, grand juries were to blame. This storyteller argues that a "somewhat corrupt" criminal justice system was responsible for selecting a grand jury when "they don't want the police to be indicted." Milton even points out that "90% of the time" grand juries fail to indict police officers. Since Milton qualified the statements with "somewhat" and "90%," this individual is not a Messenger. Also as a storyteller, Milton neglects to state Sandra Bland's name in closing remarks; Milton refers to Bland as "this woman" while criticizing the Derailers who have insulted her. By using the anonymizing phrase "this woman," Milton places distance between his narration and Bland herself. Milton points out that it was unsurprising that no indictments were brought forward. As a Fragmenter, Milton is able to find fault with the system and the Derailers but does not further the AAPF narrative.

We found that, unlike users on Facebook, the majority of storytellers on Twitter were Messengers. Every tweet that we collected in the

Table 4.3. Twitter Responses to Brian Encina's Indictment

Participant	Tweets	Role	Response
Clark Thomas, 1578 Followers. Reporter, Texas transplant, native Virginian, husband, father of a busy one year old	"indictment issued for the reason he gave for pulling Bland outside of her vehicle." special prosecutor #SandraBland	Messenger	101 retweets and 81 likes
Sara Daze, 449 Followers. Future stylist. Beautiful, Valued, Loved.	I'm pleased that #SandraBland and her family received some justice today.	Messenger	53 retweets and 87 likes
Kevin Short, 238K followers. Senior Justice Writer, Husband; Father of 5; Writing a book;	The officer who arrested #SandraBland was indicted on perjury charges. Not good enough, but progress.	Messenger	1K retweets and likes

#SayHerName and #SandraBland tags either summarized or affirmed the AAPF narrative by assigning guilt to the police and expressing satisfaction that Sandra Bland was in some way vindicated by Encinia's indictment. For example, Clark Thomas, a reporter with 1,578 followers on Twitter, tweeted a summary of the *Democracy Now* article. Thomas' tweet garnered 101 retweets and 81 likes. Sara Daze, an aspiring stylist with 449 followers, tweeted, "#SandraBland and her family received some justice today." Daze invoked Sandra Bland's name by using the hashtag and expressed support for Bland's family in this tweet. The post was retweeted 53 times and received 87 likes. Kevin Short, senior writer for the *New York Daily News* who has 238,000 followers, also affirmed the narrative by offering support of #SandraBland with a tweet, which stated that Encinia's indictment is "Not good enough [as a form of justice for Sandra Bland's slaying], but progress." Short garnered 1,000 retweets and likes. As Messengers, Twitter users expressed clear support of Bland and blamed the police in the #SayHerName and #SandraBland tags. Their tweets repeatedly pointed out that the indictment for perjury was not what Encinia deserved and argued that he should have received harsher punishment for his mistreatment of Bland.

Conclusion

Multiple Facebook and Twitter social media users narrated #SandraBland's transmedia story. As storytellers they took on the roles that we call Messengers, Derailers, Fragmenters, and Resolvers. Twitter

was used primarily by Messengers as a space for their affirmations, expressions of grief, retellings of #SandraBland's story, and support for Bland's family. Derailers on Facebook were more apt to shift the focus of the narrative of #SandraBland, by characterizing Black victims of police violence as "criminals" and calling protesters of police brutality "racist." In Jenkins's (2016) interview with Lina Srivastava, she contended that the problem with nonfictional transmedia stories was "the ability to let go of control, and hand back the narrative over to communities." We found Srivastava's comments useful, as they provided a framework for researching a nonfictional transmediated story. Further, we found the notion of community among Facebook and Twitter users to be complicated, because as storytellers garnered support for their framing and reframing of the #SandraBland story, their community of supporters grew. For example, Martinez had 66 friends on Facebook; however, nearly 500 people liked his version of #SandraBland's story. The goal of the Say Her Name campaign was to shift consciousness broadly in mainstream audiences and to build a community of supporters who were aware of the continuing need for racial justice. Unfortunately, as a result of user divergence and the inability to garner enough loyalty among the general population, it appears that the consciousness of the mainstream is slow to shift, as some social media users demonstrated a strong commitment to reinforcing anti-Black narratives and perspectives. Moving from real life to the internet to tell a story offers an alternate way to engage in social activism and allows stories to reach a larger audience, regardless of divergence. Perhaps as Sandra Bland's story continues to be transmediated along with the larger #SayHerName narrative, Black women and girls like Sandra Bland will be held as exemplars who help us "make sense" of police brutality and the complicated "worlds"—both the real world and the world created in and through media—in which such violence all too frequently takes place.

Note

1. Subtweets are responses to an original tweet that engage in dialogue/critique with the original poster.

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FIVE | Creating and Imagining Black Futures through Afrofuturism

GRACE GIPSON

The African diaspora has historically been deeply invested in the future, from Sun Ra's use of Egyptian iconography to imagine leaving Oakland, California, for a future destination in Saturn; to musical artists like Parliament and Outkast taking us on the "mothership" experience; to writers and scholars Octavia Butler, Nalo Hopkinson, Walidah Imarisha, and Kodwo Eshun creating academic bridges from Africa to America to space. Many of the conversations among key figures in Afrofuturism have taken place in real time on the digital spaces of social media. Over the past five years, social media has fueled a palpable hunger and desire among African diasporic internet users to know more about Afrofuturism as a lens to better understand our lives and possibilities beyond our present circumstances. Twitter, in particular, introduces a space for contemporary digital commentary to create Afrofuturistic archival platforms and mechanisms for studying objects or for developing new spaces and communities of learning.

Afrofuturist writer and artist Ytasha Womack states, "Afrofuturism is an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation" (Womack 9). The intersection that Womack describes is not solely the domain of artists, musicians, authors, and scholars; in the 2010s, with digital technologies, numerous people are identifying as Afrofuturists and are using Afrofuturist ideas and concepts to educate, share stories, fight oppression, and help build communities in need. While some may argue that Afrofuturism is a narrow field or genre, social media networks such

as Twitter are engaging with Afrofuturism and widening its scope. Twitter offers millions of users many opportunities to learn and engage with Afrofuturism from several perspectives, and on the platform users can encounter Afrofuturism numerous times within a span of minutes. This essay argues that academics, artists, and social activists are using Twitter to raise awareness about, and expand the horizons of, Afrofuturism. Thus, through this essay I suggest the following modes of analysis: (1) the idea of *flame keeping*—through the preservation, continuation, and reclamation of African diasporic knowledge; (2) through exploring the relationship between Afrofuturist arts and scholarship[1]; and (3) through broadening the geographical boundaries of the Afrofuturism movement—to accomplish a creative engagement with the various entry points of Afrofuturism and Twitter as a social media platform.

This essay uses tweets as its primary object of analysis. For Afrofuturist practitioners, theorists, and teachers, Twitter serves more than entertainment and social purposes; it also facilitates community organization and the education of others. Afrofuturists use Twitter as a time machine to bring the past into the present and to hail possible future scholars who will ensure the future of Afrofuturism. An uncanny and positive temporality and spatiality operates in these tweets, which, for example, puts nineteenth-century African American writers (such as Sojourner Truth and W.E.B. Du Bois) and scholars at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in conversation with Black college-age millennials in Nigeria. Thus, Afrofuturism on Twitter is digitally omnipresent and is not confined to a specific location or time. Additionally, many tweets using the #Afrofuturism tag explicitly seek to open up new conversations and projects that can take place in real-world sites such as classrooms, local community centers, or one's private reading space. I argue that every tweet that uses the hashtag #Afrofuturism in a meaningful way should be considered a new addition to the body of Afrofuturist scholarship. After analyzing a number of #Afrotuturism tweets, I will explain how Afrofuturism serves as a form of digital blackness,[2] a method of rethinking blackness in the age of digital technology.

"Flame Keeping": Preservation and Continuation of Afrofuturist Knowledge

Afrofuturism has always been concerned with creatively telling the histories of those from the African diaspora while also designing new narratives. Both novices and longtime participants in Afrofuturism also seek to

Figure 5.1. An introduction/starter kit of texts for newcomers to the field of Afrofuturism.

reclaim and preserve the genre's existing texts and voices. I use the term "flame keeping" to describe these acts of preserving the existing cultural productions and body of knowledge of Afrofuturism and building upon Afrofuturism's established foundations. The following case illustrates how one scholar used Twitter to perform flame keeping.

The tweet from @MelanieCoMcCoy (fig. 5.1) is an introduction to and "starter kit" for newcomers to the field of Afrofuturism. The photo that McCoy has posted shows two piles of Afrofuturist books. Several genres are represented: novels, autobiographies, edited collections, scholarly monographs, and comic books. Ytasha Womack's landmark book *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* lies atop Deborah E. Whaley's *Black Women in Sequence: Re-Inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime* and beneath Greg Tate's 1992 essay collection, *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America.* The majority of the books are authored by Black science fiction writer Octavia E. Butler. McCoy also includes less canonically Afrofuturist texts, such as Sojourner Truth's 1850 *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth,* and through this inclusion, McCoy expands the boundaries of Afrofuturism, indicating that historical Black texts can be read as documents of how thinkers from different eras envisioned Black futures.

These texts are aimed at different demographics and employ diverse methods of and approaches to Afrofuturism. McCoy's tweet is important because it shows that Afrofuturism is not limited to one type of reader or media user and is not defined by one methodology. McCoy's proposed texts could easily be used as the basis for a syllabus of a college course on Afrofuturism; they could also just as easily be used by a nonacademic reader who simply wishes to begin learning, or to know more, about Afrofuturism. Additionally, the people who take up McCoy's invitation to

read these texts will be able to create an array of interpretations and definitions of what Afrofuturism means. McCoy's set of books casts a wide net that encourages users to understand how they might fit into Afrofuturism: perhaps they will become students or theorists of Afrofuturism as a scholarly field; perhaps they will become fans of Afrofuturism as a popular subculture; perhaps they will become Afrofuturist artists, or novelists, or nonfiction writers, or comic book illustrators and envision their own works appearing on a shelf of Afrofuturist texts one day. An additional reason McCoy's tweet is important is because it demonstrates how Afrofuturism incorporates numerous academic disciplines. While her list could potentially be taken up as a "canon," McCoy's diversity of texts reflects Afrofuturism's resistance to canonicity. This resistance can be viewed through the amalgamation of different genres and disciplines versus one central theme under one discipline to define what Afrofuturism is. However, the image in figure 5.1 also potentially demonstrates Octavia Butler's work as primary texts of Afrofuturism and the readings on the right as secondary. Nevertheless, this formula could be contested due to placing a certain hierarchy on Butler's body of work.

In this tweet I consider McCoy to be doing the work of a digital curator. She selects an exemplary group of Afrofuturist works and displays it to both novices and initiates. I also interpret McCoy's tweet as itself a work of Afrofuturism: by speaking to Twitter's millennial user base, McCoy brings the history of Afrofuturism into the present, calling forth the next generation of Afrofuturists and facilitating the field's continuation and expansion by those new contributors.

Several historical moments coincide in McCoy's list—Truth's *Narrative* was published in the mid-nineteenth century, Butler's novels were published in the late twentieth century, and Tate's and Womack's books appeared in the early twenty-first century. At the same time, another set of twenty-first-century temporalities speak to creative social justice practices in the past, present, and future through Walidah Imarisha and Adrienne Maree Brown's edited short story and essay collection titled *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*; the future of race and gender in comics through Deborah Whaley's *Black Women in Sequence: Re-Inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime*; and Sheena Howard and Ronald L. Jackson II's *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation.* Each of the texts embodies the future in some fashion and describes the evolution of Afrofuturist work. For example, Imarisha and Brown's *Octavia's Brood* speaks to an overall theme of "visionary fiction" that is being applied not only to the early literary works (i.e., Octavia Butler and

Samuel Delaney) of Afrofuturism but also to the way social justice and community organizing play a role in forecasting Black futures. The collection also offers another entry point of engagement into Afrofuturism. In *Black Women in Sequence* Whaley creates a platform to recognize and acknowledge the existence of numerous female characters and creators (past and present) of the African diaspora within the anime and comic book/graphic novel field. Much like how those of the African diaspora, more specifically women, have been marginalized and seen as nonexistent within the future, Whaley offers creative examples that dispel this myth. And Howard and Jackson's *Black Comics*, similar to Whaley's collection, engages with comics, graphic novels, and manga from the Black perspective and their significance, but it also recognizes the need for more critical engagement and understanding of their "political, social, and cultural implications" (Lyn 2015). McCoy, in effect, preserves all of the temporalities in a single tweet and does what she can to ensure that all of these times of Black imagination continue on into the future.

I have suggested that McCoy's tweet offers a starter kit for the budding Afrofuturist and that her list could serve as the beginning of a syllabus for a college course. It is important to note that this idea that McCoy's tweet might generate a syllabus is more likely than not. because as Afrofuturist literature and arts evolve and grow, more university courses devoted to them are being created. In many colleges and universities in the United States and internationally, Afrofuturism is studied as an artistic aesthetic, as a tool for critical cultural analysis, as a platform for analyzing the impact of modernization on cultural production, and as an exploration of Black identity. Here is a tweet from an instructor at UCLA about her Afrofuturism class:

> The first two works I teach in my #Afrofuturism class are W.E.B. DuBois's short story "The Comet" and Octavia E. Butler's novel Dawn. (@TananariveDue, September 10, 2016)

The author of this tweet, Tananarive Due, engages deeply with African and African American fantasy, science fiction, and historical fiction in her scholarship. In her tweet Due makes students (hers and others), and the broader public of Twitter users, aware of a well-known, often-taught Afrofuturist novel (Octavia Butler's *Dawn*) and helps them discover a story by an earlier, extremely famous African American writer that only recently has been recognized as a work of Afrofuturism (W.E.B. Du Bois's "The Comet," first published 1920). Due's putting Du Bois's

story on her syllabus and McCoy's including Sojourner Truth's book in the previously discussed tweet exemplify how texts from the Black literary past can be retroactively understood as Afrofuturist.

Through her choice of these two works, Due shows that Afrofuturism is not a narrow genre. By teaching "The Comet," Due shows students that Du Bois's interests stretched beyond sociology and social activism and encompassed speculative genre fiction; it also foregrounds Du Bois's investment in envisioning a different future for Black people than what white society proposes for them. By teaching *Dawn*, Due points out the radical hybridity of one of Afrofuturism's most important texts. In *Dawn*, Butler mixes science fiction, postapocalyptic communities, relationships between human and aliens, and queer sexualities. Due and McCoy thus both offer an initiation into the Afrofuturist movement that encourages new followers to grasp the wide range of themes and genres that make up that movement.

Due's tweet may serve the students in her class, but it also makes the texts on her syllabus accessible to users online who may not be familiar with Afrofuturism. Like McCoy, Due uses Twitter as a platform to teach beyond the walls of the academy. In addition, Due uses the spaces of the academy to platform Afrofuturism. During her tenure at Spelman College in Atlanta from 2012 to 2014, Due pioneered the now annual festival "Black to the Future: The Octavia E. Butler Celebration of the Fantastic Arts," which honored the legacy of Octavia Butler. Due invited established Afrofuturist writers such as Nalo Hopkinson, Sheree Renée Thomas, Nisi Shawl, Steven Barnes, Brandon Massey, Jewelle Gomez, and Samuel Delaney to speak at the event. Many Afrofuturist creators rely on the organizational labor of scholars such as Due to increase their public visibility and reputation, strengthen their cultural legitimacy, and expose younger readers to their work. Due's and McCoy's work on Twitter parallels the ongoing work they do to promote and support Afrofuturism in real-world spaces by organizing and leading live events, such as their coordination of festivals on college campuses and their teaching university courses, and by their growing the Afrofuturist network, such as bringing artists, novelists, and scholars to campuses and introducing them and their cultural productions to one another and to students.

"Tapping into Afrofuturism's Creative Innovations": Exploring the Relationship between Afrofuturist Arts and Scholarship

Sharing the wealth of themes and elements regarding Afrofuturism likely proves valuable to Black academics' students and social media fol-

Figure 5.2. A tweet from @iafrofuturism linking to an article in *The Root* on social entrepreneur Emile Cambry.

lowers. However, Afrofuturism also comprises multiple elements and themes not traditionally highlighted. Historically, scholars and cultural critics have focused on the aesthetic genres of Afrofuturism, such as the arts (i.e., paintings, sculptures, photography, music) and literature, as primary objects of study. Many scholars and cultural critics who have written about Afrofuturism have so far ignored the technology sector, leaving that sector's contributions understudied and undervalued. The tweet in figure 5.2 offers some insight as to how Afrofuturism motivated a tech entrepreneur.

In this tweet, @iafrofuturism links to an article in *The Root*, a popular news blog, about social entrepreneur Emile Cambry. Cambry founded a technology center called BLUE 1647 in Chicago in 2011. BLUE 1647 organizes and hosts classes in which people from underserved communities learn how to code, make apps, and solve technical problems. Cambry seeks to bring technological access to the residents of Chicago, specifically to neighborhoods that historically have lacked technological training and resources. He says, "Too many times technology comes to the south and west sides of Chicago after it's been old" (Dallke 2014). Cambry explains that BLUE 1647 serves as an incubator and alternative learning and working space for adults and youth; the center's offerings and events include "Creating New Java Files," "Coding and Minecraft Game Development," the "Code Blue Hackathon" series, and the "Re-

Connect Employment Assistance Program." At BLUE 1647 students learn how to not only use technology but also build technology.

Afrofuturist narratives and artwork often depict Black people building communities, innovating new technologies, rewriting dominant narratives, and escaping oppression. @iafrofuturism's tweet is no different. It characterizes Emile Cambry's project, BLUE 1647, as a technological revolution within a Chicago community and explicitly links the project to Afrofuturism by using #Afrofuturism in the tweet. Emile Cambry and BLUE 1647 are not fictional or artistic constructs but function in ways that actualize and embody Afrofuturist ideas and themes. Not only does Cambry imagine the building of communities, but he has also actualized his imaginings to some degree. It is notable, too, that where Cambry has founded his center in Chicago, a city rooted in violence, liberation struggles, blue-collar living, musical and visual artistic expressions, in recent years Chicago has seen an increase of work attached to the Afrofuturist movement, such as "The Second City" comedy club (comedy with a conscience), where this social and political venue combines the Black experience from a Black-centered science fiction stance using stand-up, sketch, music, and performance. Another example of the Afrofuturist movement's presence in Chicago can be found in the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), a nonprofit organization/collective that comprises "versatile and innovative musicians performing original creative music" (AACM 2015). In addition to their cutting-edge musicianship, AACM is also well known for their painted features and for costuming that adds a level of mysticism and fantasy to their multigenerational jazz performances. A final example of the Afrofuturist movement in Chicago is exemplified in the Center for Afrofuturist Studies (CAS). CAS is an initiative to "re-imagine new futures for marginalized peoples by generating safe work spaces for artists of color" (CAS 2011). Through this institute, artists from all backgrounds are able to serve as "visiting artists" or "artists-in-residence" and are able to construct imaginative and innovative work that addresses such topics as visibility of racialized and gendered bodies in space, Afro-surrealism, mythmaking, and the complexity of memory and ritual. CAS provides not only a safe space for artists but also a venue for community engagement through their public lectures, workshops, and forums. Ultimately, @iafrofuturism's tweet is a celebration of Black uses and deployments of technology, a promotion of Black media innovation, and a positive engagement with underserved but deserving communities. It promotes Afrofuturism as a vehicle for change, a tool for teaching and learning, and a method of community building.

Figure 5.3. A tweet from @WeAreWakanda linking to an article celebrating the Spelman College Spelbots robotics team.

Tweets about Afrofuturism and real-world tech projects include reports about the relationship of Black women and girls to STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math). In 2004, on the campus of historically Black Spelman College, a group of young undergraduate Black women founded the Spelbots. This team of future Black women STEM leaders was created by Dr. Andrew Williams to encourage Spelman students to study robotics and mathematics. In a short amount of time, the Spelbot team designed and built eight four-legged robot soccer players to compete in the 2005 International RoboCup robot soccer competition, which made history by qualifying as the first all-Black undergraduate girls' team to compete in this competition. The Spelbots group started as a way to encourage Spelman students to engage with humanoid robots, observe programming demonstrations, and obtain mentorship and guidance, but ultimately the group has become an important fixture at the Atlanta college. In the tweet in figure 5.3, @WeAreWakanda makes the Spelman technologists objects of attention of the interconnected social network of Twitter, promoting their accomplishments to users from both academia and the tech industry. @WeAreWakanda thus not only praises the efforts of these Black women college students but also depicts them as creators and inventors in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and math in the United States, which is significant given how often Black women have been excluded from STEM jobs and narratives about STEM innovation in the country.

By using the #Afrofuturism hashtag, @WeAreWakanda makes the Spelbots a new object of Afrofuturist scholarship. @WeAreWakanda simultaneously highlights the real-world technological manifestations of

Afrofuturism and advances the ongoing conversation about the need for greater equity and inclusion of diverse races and genders in the tech field. Just as @iafrofuturism frames Cambry as a leader in tech education for Black communities, @WeAreWakanda draws attention to the Spelman roboticists as models for Black girls and women who might enter the fields of tech research or production. Additionally, the work of the Spelbots team in a way continues a conversation from Donna J. Haraway's "The Cyborg Manifesto" regarding reconstructing the tools that women use as well as their supposed natural role in society. Although not identifying as cyborgs, these women construct their own identities, capitalize on technological tools to create humanoid robots, and seize the opportunity to go beyond the expected possibilities of young Black women. Ultimately, in reenvisioning society the Spelbots highlight the technological aspect of Afrofuturism and serve as another example of how Afrofuturism is much more than science fiction and fantasy.

The photo that @WeAreWakanda tweets depicts the Spelbot team holding their creations of robot babies, which indicates that Black women do not have to be mothers literally in order to be creators—they can choose to be engineers and inventors of future technology. These young Black women are equipped with the tools to create and develop technological futures, hence @WeAreWakanda's caption of the photo, "Giving Birth to the Future." As inventors of future technology, these students are afforded an opportunity of motherhood (again, in this case, their progeny are robots, not humans) that historically was not granted or reduced to Black women. One is reminded of Hortense Spillers's assessment of the role of the Black female body in her 1987 essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in which Spillers notes how Black motherhood was historically sexualized and how Black womanhood in the Americas was long characterized by structural captivity and a reduction to property and flesh. Thus, @WeAreWakanda's provocative message that the Spelman students are "giving birth to the future" points to alternate modes of Black women's creation and future-making that diverge from their historical position of abjection and victimization. The Black women on the Spelman team do not merely exist as flesh commodities; they also have the education and ingenuity to "birth" new technologies, thereby fostering the generation of new Afrofuturist stories. Thus, @iafrofuturism's and @WeAreWakanda's tweets make the case that the Afrofuturist conversation must go beyond the bounds of fiction to include real-world Black technologists.

The Digital Entrance of #Afrofuturism

Before the #Afrofuturism tag was launched on Twitter, Afrofuturism gave rise to a robust early online community. In 1998 sociologist Alondra Nelson and multimedia artist Paul D. Miller (also known as DJ Spooky) created the Afrofuturist Listserv, whose numerous subscribers included scholars, authors, musicians, and artists. Then, in 2000, Nelson and Miller launched the website www.Afrofuturism.net. Both Nelson's and Miller's online communities laid the foundation for their editing a special issue of the academic journal *Social Text* on Afrofuturism in 2002.[3] However, the activity on Nelson and Miller's Listserv began to decline in the early 2000s, and for several years Afrofuturists did not have an internet platform on which they could communicate routinely about their research and productions. Therefore, I consider 2002–2011 to be a dormant period for internet-based Afrofuturism. In 2011, however, Afrofuturism was officially reintroduced to the digital networked space, in the form of a hashtag. The tweet below, from @fugitivephilo, was the first to use the tag #afrofuturism, and gestures to how that movement blends issues of gender, race, sexism, and Black humor.

> #XLR8 on #AngelaDavis & #DJ Venus—black humour & sexism hit a new low? (and yes, the quotes are BS) http://bit.ly/htPx9D #afrofuturism (@fugitivephilo, April 2, 2011)

Since @fugitivephilo posted this first #Afrofuturism tweet, the tag #Afrofuturism has become a social media conversation thread, a way to amplify and express concerns about blackness and technology, and a space in which experts in and novices of Black speculative genres can come together and form a community. Not only does this tweet mark an official social media entrance, but it also becomes attached to an April Fool's joke gone bad. The day before (April 1) this tweet came into existence, XLR8 (pronounced "accelerate") blindly entered into a twitter feud with queer Latina DJ VenusxGG and an infamous producer, known for his cultural appropriation antics, named DJ Diplo. In short, the feud circles around problematic issues of imperialism, white male privilege, and sexism mixed with musical appropriation. The tweet becomes even more problematic when Angela Davis is inadvertently inserted into the feud. Although confusing upon first read, when all the details are explained the tweet becomes more clear. In essence, @fugitivephilo is sparking a discussion that is very familiar within Afrofuturism. The mis-

placement and trivialization of Black women and other women of color even in the social media landscape must be examined, revised, and rewritten.

Historically, US academia is not always receptive to Black and African diasporic studies such as Afrofuturism; thus, Twitter and #Afrofuturism have become an alternative discussion site with a wide reach. Scholars, critics, students, artists, musicians, STEM workers, and others who are doing work on blackness and technology, social justice and Black futures, and Black fantasy are afforded a welcoming space to share their work on Afrofuturism. Scholars within African American/African Diaspora/Black Studies frequently share news about academic conference, symposia, and colloquia in the #Afrofuturism tag and are thereby using Twitter to create and foster Afrofuturist academic communities. Through #Afrofuturism, the dissemination of Afrofuturist scholarship evolves and expands and research opportunities are announced and spread. An example of how Afrofuturist scholars network and share news from conferences in the #Afrofuturism tag can be found in this tweet:

> Yaszek looking at covers of Amazing Stories next to covers of the Crisis magazine #afrofuturism symposium @CAU (@b_rusert, February 22, 2016)

Here, Britt Rusert, assistant professor in the W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, tweets about her experience at the 2016 Clark Atlanta University Afrofuturism Symposium. Through this tweet, Rusert reports on how fellow Afrofuturist scholar Lisa Yaszek, in a talk at that conference, drew parallels between the covers of American science fiction magazine *Amazing Stories* and the influential *The Crisis*,[4] the official magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (whose founder and first editor was another Afrofuturist, W.E.B. Du Bois).[5] By bringing these publications into conversation with each other, Yaszek employs a common Afrofuturist method of foregrounding the relationship between history (nonfiction) and science fiction—that is, between the real past and the imagined future. Rusert's tweet referencing Yaszek, *The Crisis*, and *Amazing Stories* thus executes a threefold agenda: (1) it increases awareness of historical media from the Black community, (2) it acknowledges historical texts as part of the lineage of Afrofuturism, and (3) it showcases how Afrofuturist academics network with one another and learn from each other's work at academic symposia and conferences.

Here is another academic tweet in #Afrofuturism that connects the African American past to a possible future:

> #Mississippi was a giant gulag for #Black people. That's why they shouted for #BlackPower. #afrofuturism #PlanetDeepSouthJSU (@Hardcore888, February 27, 2016)

@Hardcore888 is the Twitter pseudonym of Reynaldo Anderson, associate professor of communication at Harris-Stowe University. Anderson tweeted this during the "Planet Deep South Colloquium: Speculative Cultural Production and Africanisms in the American Black South,"[6] which took place in February 2016 at Jackson State University, and his tweet suggests a linkage between Southern Black identity, the 1960s Black Power movement, historical slavery, and Afrofuturism. Anderson re-presents Mississippi (where Planet Deep South was held) as a "gulag," which is a Soviet term for a forced labor camp. "That's why they shouted for Black Power" is a reference to how Black people in Mississippi fought for their civil rights in the twentieth century through such efforts as the Freedom Riders and the desegregation of the University of Mississippi. By tagging this sequence with the #Afrofuturism tag, Anderson shows the movement of African Americans from enslavement, to fighting for their civil rights, to a future that is undefined but will be grounded in Black liberation. Thus, Anderson's tweet turns Mississippi from a rural agrarian state haunted by a past of brutal slavery into a launching pad of radical new imaginative thinking about the future of Black America. Anderson's tweet also illustrates the multiple temporalities of Afrofuturism: his tweets create lightning-fast connections between himself, other colloquium attendees, and people who could not attend the live event, and also underscore the long history and durability of Black Power.

#Afrofuturism tweets at conferences and colloquia also serve as back-channel conversations. Not only are Rusert and Anderson physically present at their respective events, but they also expand the conversations taking place at those live events by participating with audiences online through their tweets. The fact that numerous online users interact with scholars at academic conferences on Afrofuturism confirms a growing interest and investment in Afrofuturism. These off- and online conversations within the larger Afrofuturist community also qualify as a form of networking, through which members of that community become familiar with one another's work, which can lead to future citations, invitations to perform or speak, and mentoring relationships.

Figure 5.4. A tweet from @iafrofuturism bringing attention to an article addressing the city of Detroit's past and future.

Eliminating the Borders and Creating New Spaces: Broadening the Geographical Boundaries of the Afrofuturism Movement

Afrofuturism as a movement is ascendant outside of the arts and humanities. In this section I will illustrate the connections between Afrofuturism and social justice. The following tweets discuss three metropolitan cities with significant Black populations and how organizers and activists there draw on the themes and imaginaries of Afrofuturism to find hope and healing, to rebuild communities, and to seek justice. The first tweet (fig. 5.4) brings attention to Detroit's past and future.

In this tweet @iafrofuturism says, "The future was here . . . ," implying that Detroit is very much familiar with the future. The city of Detroit acts as a kind of time machine in that it has always been a site rich with ideas about Black futurity, and different eras of Detroit's history have proposed different futures. For example, in June 1963 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave a speech in Detroit at Cobo Hall (now known as Cobo Center) titled "The Great March in Detroit," which served as a dry run for his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, which he gave just two months later (several passages appear in both speeches).[7] King's overall message in his Detroit speech was that it was urgent and important to continue the civil rights movement's forward momentum; King emphasized that Detroit, and later Washington DC, and the entire nation, had to be future-oriented with respect to racial equality—and Detroit was the

first place to be hailed into King's vision for the future. Detroit was also strongly associated with futurism through its being the site of the first Black-owned record label, Motown Records, and by having the status throughout much of the twentieth century as the "world's automotive center" (Woodford 2001).

Afrofuturism may have had a long history in Detroit, but since the decline of the US auto manufacturing industry, Detroit has had to redefine its future. According to Aaron Robertson, author of the Metrotimes.com article linked to in @iafrofuturism's tweet:

> Often the work of Afrofuturists, whether they are artists or engineers, is performed in a metaphorical underground. It tries to make abstract and material technologies relevant by giving blacks opportunities to understand, use, critique, resist, and design them. It reimagines technological processes and the economic and political systems that created them. (Robertson 2016)

Robertson argues that Detroit can possibly imagine a new future for itself using the lenses of Afrofuturism. One example of Detroit residents' efforts to reimagine their city is the O.N.E. (Oakland North End) Mile Project, a collaborative community development effort that works to uplift Detroit's Oakland Avenue and North End neighborhoods through cultural production and socioeconomic activity. This is done through the promotion of local North End businesses, a community garden and arts program (Oakland Community Gardens), seasonal musical performances showcasing North End talent, and the launching of its corresponding magazine of the same name. Similar to Emile Cambry's BLUE 1647 center in Chicago, the O.N.E. Mile Project is creating a network of people who seek to redefine and redesign the technical and cultural legacy of Detroit. Through local businesses, artists, and residents (past and present) sharing their stories/experiences, new ideas, and resources, Oakland North End benefits from the revenue and is able to build more networks and cultivate more public spaces into this once abandoned community. A community rich in history is able to maintain its nostalgia while also creating a future sustainable environment. The O.N.E. Mile Project is meant to catapult projects and programs that create new avenues of production, whether technically or culturally, while also sparking present and future conversations and updating past ones. This redefinition allows the people to question the possibilities or even resist the system that housed built-in exclusions, thus finding other ways to survive

and thrive. Robertson and other residents see Detroit as a place of forward, moving transition.

Although @iafrofuturism's tweet depicts Detroit as already futuristic, it makes clear that this futurism has also had severe consequences by including the phrase "#Detroit's Afrofuturist enclaves." This phrase potentially invites discussion of Detroit as a modern-day dystopia. Since the late twentieth century, Detroit has suffered from economic devastation, gentrification, and generational, institutionalized oppression. In a way, @iafrofuturism calls for an understanding of Detroit as not just a city but also as a character in a story of hope and survival against desperate odds. However, despite calling attention to the historical and emotional horrors suffered by Detroit's residents, @iafrofuturism also frames Detroit as a city of reincarnation and renaissance by linking to Robertson's article on the O.N.E. Mile Project (Hammel 2016). While the tweet is not specifically making its own argument, what is notable is that it references legacy media reporting on Afrofuturism and points to longer stories about Afrofuturism.

Another tweet, from the United States Department of Arts and Culture (USDAC) (@usartsdept) offers an informational bridge that incorporates art, community engagement, and Afrofuturism while simultaneously demonstrating the need to rebuild and maintain a community and a sense of Black political, social, and cultural identity for the Black residents within the North Philadelphia neighborhood of Sharswood/Blumberg. The USDAC, which is a nongovernmental organization (NGO), acts as a nationwide grassroots action network that actively seeks change and promotes programs and organizations that focus on creativity. Philadelphia, like Detroit, is a city struggling with redevelopment and fighting various issues threatening minority communities, including displacement and gentrification. Thus, USDAC on the local level works as a partnership that supports communities like the Sharswood/Blumberg neighborhood to help support the articulation of their cultural needs and imagining their own futures.

According to Rasheedah Phillips (pictured in the tweet in figure 5.5), an Afrofuturist artist, author, and attorney for the Landlord-Tenant Housing Unit of Community Legal Services, practices such as digital zine brunches, yoga classes, and housing resource workshops help to preserve the Sharswood/Blumberg neighborhood. Phillips calls these practices Afrofuturist because they serve as a safe space for the residents to "share their memories, hopes and dreams for their rapidly changing community through various visual, vocal, written, and physical medi-

Figure 5.5. A tweet from The USDAC exploring an informational bridge that incorporates art, community engagement, and Afrofuturism in North Philadelphia.

ums" (Simpson 2016). Another example of an Afrofuturist community effort in Philadelphia is the Community Futures Lab (CFL), which is a workshop space, gallery, studio, think tank, and resource library also located in the Sharswood/Blumberg neighborhood. The CFL was created in response to a $526 million dollar redevelopment project that began in the summer of 2015 and forced more than five hundred families out of their homes in Philadelphia claiming eminent domain. As an Afrofuturist project, CFL becomes a place to heal some of the wounds and pain caused by the housing instability. Historically, Afrofuturism has always been seen as a liberating practice for Black people within the African diaspora, as they are able to use the fantasy, science fiction, and Afrocentrism to not only preserve the existing cultural legacy but to also reimagine and recreate Black futures. Much like the BLUE 1647 and the O.N.E. Mile Project, the CFL works to ensure that the local community does not have to be dependent on larger corporations, that it invokes a sense of pride and empowerment, and, most importantly, that the local residents personally reap the benefits and play a significant role in its present and future developments.

According to Phillips, "The Afrofuturist landscape lends itself well to exploring notions of institutional liberation, unearthing our true histories, mapping our futures, understanding our present conditions in the flow of time and through a speculative lens" (Simpson 2016). This "Afrofuturist landscape" can be seen as a redevelopment and reclama-

tion project for the residents of the Sharswood/Blumberg neighborhood. Although the neighborhood is making a transition to becoming "The Gallery at Market East," the CFL and the Black Quantum Futurism Collective still seek to uphold an Afrofuturist landscape within the community so that a part of the community and its residents still remains regardless of the gentrification. Thus, according to Phillips, the CFL has become a site of institutional liberation by the way it functions as a "living gallery." With all of the stories, collected materials, images, essays, and interviews the community residents and nonresidents are able to see their own experiences reflected and acknowledged while also learning about another person's journey. This collective memory has also become important as an archive in that Phillips has been able to capture the such materials to create "BQF Theory and Practice Vol. II: Community Futurism," a follow-up to her original anthology, "Black Quantum Futurism: Theory Practice Vol. I." The @usartsdept tweet about Afrofuturism in Philadelphia together with the tweets about Afrofuturism at work in Chicago and Detroit showcase Afrofuturism's relevance and importance to black urban community projects.

I Continue to See a Black Future in Afrofuturism

For each of these sites—Chicago, Detroit, and Philadelphia—Afrofuturism is rooted in the Black people who have inhabited the space in the past and present and who seek better futures for themselves on their own terms. Ultimately, Afrofuturism as a movement and a tool for freedom, self-determinism, and equality is hopeful in that it looks to overcome the ways that society remains unequal. The creative methods discussed in each of the tweets presented in this chapter are prescriptions for a promising future. Although Afrofuturism is often about literary fiction with regard to technologized Black futures, or Black musical artists working with advanced sound technologies, the incorporation of Twitter affords a new arena for interrogating and exploring additional conversations. This chapter has shown that as #Afrofuturism circulates through Twitter, it also encompasses Black students and workers engaging with and making digital technologies. Through Twitter, Black scholars are also connecting with one another at academic events, and Black communities are using a wide range of ideas and grassroots practices that help imagine new futures for themselves in response to, or defiance of, structural economic and social inequities. According to graphic artist John Jennings, "Afrofuturism is not science fiction, but about imagin-

ing different spaces of creative thought that doesn't put your identity in a box" (Hardison 2016). All in all, this box that Jennings speaks of is a constant battle that Afrofuturists continuously fight to not become trapped by or in. From the examples and conversations put forth here, Afrofuturism proves to be a convincing identity, network, safe space, and artistic expression that dismantles the box and opens up a plethora of imaginary spaces of creative thought.

Notes

1. Most essays focus on the arts and literature as primary and how scholars use and continue to use digital platforms as theoretical.

2. While this essay is primarily concerned with conversations of Afrofuturism on Twitter, I want to acknowledge that Afrofuturism has a longer online history than the Twitter platform.

3. Nelson and Miller coedited a 2002 special issue of *Social Text* dedicated to the topic of Afrofuturism. In this special issue, Nelson, Miller, and their contributors sought to demonstrate and share the diverse range of thinking that had arisen around the concept of Afrofuturism and to open new areas of scholarly inquiry. Nelson and Miller wrote that the task of Afrofuturism is to "explore futurist themes in Black cultural production and the ways in which technological innovation is changing the face of Black art and culture."

4. *The Crisis* publishes work toward the present and future, serving as "a quarterly journal of civil rights, history, politics and culture and seeks to educate and challenge its readers about issues that continue to plague African Americans and other communities of color." http://www.thecrisismagazine.com.

5. The founder and editor of *The Crisis* was W.E.B. Du Bois, who many have labeled the original "Godfather of Afrofuturism" with his contribution of his 1920 science fiction short story "The Comet."

6. In its first year, Planet Deep South examined the creative and intellectual work of Afrofuturism through the inquiry of a centered Southern Black cultural production, historical, and speculative lens.

7. Cobo Hall, now Cobo Center, is a convention center located in downtown Detroit, named after former Detroit mayor Albert Cobo (1950–1957).

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six | Ferguson Blues

A Conversation with Rev. Osagyefo Sekou

TRANSCRIBED BY LIVIER LARA

EDITED BY KEITH P. FELDMAN

In the fall of 2015, as the Color of New Media proceeded with its explorations of Twitter as a locus of social identity and political mobilization for minoritized communities, the urgency of the Black Lives Matter movement became of utmost concern. We were honored to engage a central organizer and activist from St. Louis, Missouri, the Reverend Osagyefo Sekou, in a wide-ranging conversation about connections between Black aesthetics, authenticity, capitalist markets, and the virtual and embodied networks that sustain political community. Reverend Sekou met with the Color of New Media on the UC Berkeley campus on October 28, 2015.

Born in St. Louis, Reverend Sekou grew up in rural Arkansas. He attended high school in St. Louis and was ordained at Friendly Temple Baptist Church, taught alternatives to gang violence at local middle schools, and directed a community center at the city's Cochran Gardens housing project. A widely respected and widely traveled organizer, cleric, and musician in the service of justice, Reverend Sekou has been involved in struggles against the U.S. war in Iraq, the occupation of Palestinian territories, climate change, homelessness, and more. In 2014 he was a visiting scholar at Stanford University's Martin Luther King Education and Research Institute. After Michael Brown Jr.'s killing, he traveled to Ferguson, Missouri, to organize alongside local and national groups on behalf of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. He trained and served as a

coleader for hundreds of people involved in militant nonviolent actions in Ferguson, and subsequently trained clergy in advance of the so-called "Unite the Right Rally" held in Charlottesville, VA in 2017.

Reverend Sekou had the idea to record this conversation about five minutes after it began, so the transcription starts in the middle of a discussion about the importance of maintaining a public commons.

ABIGAIL DE KOSNIK. We talk a lot about preserving the commons, but I wonder if [Stefano Harney and] Fred Moten (2013) would say something like, "No, we want to preserve the undercommons, its againstness, its refusal to making oneself available for co-opting."

REV. OSAGYEFO SEKOU. One of my mentors would say it this way: "If you live in a cesspool, everybody smells like shit." So I reject notions of certain forms of purity, and question certain forms of authenticity, while holding on to them for dear life. Take blues music. I'm a blues musician, and so when you think about the blues, someone like Robert Johnson who was part of the undercommons . . .

DE KOSNIK. Mhm.

SEKOU. Black cultural production was fomented within both legal and psychic structures. Given that a people had fleeting political victories, the existential became the way in which people resisted. Part of that resistance plays itself out in various forms of what Bernard Williams would call thick and thin opposition. Whether it be through Black style or how we walk in time and space, Black naming—Trayvon, Shaniqua—these are part of this undercurrent epistemic framework and set of cultural artifacts. The blues is a kind of musical formation that emerges out of the underbelly of the American democracy, a brilliant, eloquent rendering [of] Black suffering visible even in a privatized space. Is this an undercommon?

DE KOSNIK. Yeah, yeah.

SEKOU. Then when we get the consumption primarily of blues by white audiences, one could argue that it loses a certain form of authenticity because it's often place-bound. It's not played in a juke joint, it's played in Carnegie Hall. But I . . . what is the brother's name again? The undercommons brother?

DE KOSNIK. Fred Moten.

SEKOU. Fred Moten, I doubt if he would say that B.B. King wasn't a genius until the day he died.

DE KOSNIK. Mhm.

SEKOU. All right, so I'm curious about that. Take a genius like James Baldwin, whose writing is saturated with the culture of Black working-class poor people living in the underbelly of Harlem, his life buttressed between two riots. The way he deploys the parlance of Black holiness and sanctity is thoroughly grounded in the tradition of the people that produced him. The language of the church is saturating through it, but he becomes one of the most important writers in the world, in my estimation, the greatest English-language essayist of the twentieth century.

Once Baldwin's book hits the editor, does it stop being authentic? Do we just want Baldwin reading church-based texts in Harlem or in the West Village in Greenwich Village? I dare say not. But because I'm a religious creature, I still am willing to make the Pascalian wager predicated on the possibility that we can change this.

I'm not saying that there's not always going to be countercultures. There's gonna be some cool kids doing interesting stuff wherever you are in the world, even in the most revolutionary governments, which may or may not tend toward repressive. This idea that once it gets up, it stops being authentic and that kind of thing is just interesting. I mean does music quality change? Do marketing forces impinge? Those market forces are always at work even in the subterranean. Certain market forces, bare minimum pay, the worst of society is at work even in these communities, and oftentimes in so-called undercommon communities. In undercommon communities there is also a need for outside intervention.

DE KOSNIK. Everything is subject to critique.

SEKOU. Yeah.

DE KOSNIK. I mean, there aren't spaces about which we should be totally uncritical.

SEKOU. So even in the undercurrents where you have the most authentic Black musical production, women are often the object of the arbitrary violence of men in those spaces. What we must grasp is a kind of permeable undercurrent space in which one is trying to hold on to certain forms of culture and tra-

dition that bend towards thriving democratic sensibilities and that sense of the existential democrats, small "d." We want to keep track of the ways in which people make meaning in those spaces. But if somebody come in and say, "What y'all doing to girls is not cool," I think that's an important intervention.

DE KOSNIK. Mhm.

SEKOU. At the same time, don't throw the baby out with the bathwater. My grandmother was deeply homophobic, but she knew about love. In that sense, I'm suspicious of these kind of reified notions—but at the same time it's what produced me. I was raised in a rural Southern village with eleven houses and thirty-five people, and everything I knew about the world comes from them. There was intervention, right, I was offered other alternative space, people coming in, exposed. But who I am isn't how I experienced a certain form of authenticity. I think what's at stake in the undercommons discourse is a notion of what is authentic and what is not. For me, I just know it when I hear it, like when you hear Aretha say "respect," and you just know it. When Gardner C. Taylor preached, you just know it. Britney Spears—not so much.

DE KOSNIK. I'm Filipino, and a mestizo culture like the Philippines is racially the result of many colonizations. By now the culture and the biology of the people is extremely mixed. To be Filipino means you can be anything at any one time. It is so fluid, it's so flexible. But this kind of flexibility is problematic in the way that echoes neoliberalism. There's something that neoliberalism wants which is spread—flexibility, fluidity, permeability. I would say, from my background, that that kind of pivoting is crucial to survival. It's necessary. It's also a talent and a gift that I feel lucky to have, an ability to code-switch between so many languages, cultures, and nations. I think of all of those parts of my real culture that's a good thing. But at the same time there's this weight. When I start to talk about it, the postmodernity of the Philippines, it sounds exactly like what neoliberal capital wants for everybody. For everybody to be that flexible, for all cultures to be that permeable, for everything to be able to be transformed into something else.

So I don't fly the flag of "the authentic" night and day. But at the same time, I don't feel like I have the language to describe . . . [the] permeability that happens when Robert John-

son's music travels to the white North, when Black culture travels into white spaces. That permeability so often favors the market, as opposed to favoring this other polyphony or multiplicity of identity. All the good things that could come out of that permeability, they're part of the undercommons, but they also get co-opted so quickly by these market moves.

SEKOU. In addition to authenticity, I want to raise the question of agency. I mean, clearly, Black musical production and Black cultural production and Black people have agency. Even with the market coming in and out, somehow they hold that integrity and that dignity. Robert Johnson had a level of agency in the music that he sang. He was not the best blues musician, not widely accepted among his peers, but he had dignity. He was sharp all the time. He dressed well. There's a certain professionalism among Black blues musicians who were understanding the market. They got babies to feed.

DE KOSNIK. Mhm.

SEKOU. All right? So it's not just simply that they're victims of the market. There are moments when whatever they can carve off of the market for themselves puts them in a situation whereby they can be able to make some sense of the world in their own image and get their music out to the world. How do we honor and name that agency? How are folks taking chitlins and making a meal? To me, there's a level of artistic beauty and dignity in that that I want to keep track of . . .

DE KOSNIK. Regardless of the market.

SEKOU. Regardless of the market.

DE KOSNIK. And including the market for chitlins.

SEKOU. Yeah!

DE KOSNIK. There's a market for chitlins.

SEKOU. Clearly, there is, there's a market for chitlins, there's no question. You can go to some hipster restaurant and get you some for about thirty dollars. That's just the market being the market. The market commodifies anything, it's going to be itself. You can take individual heroic acts, the individual artist who says I'm not gonna do that, I'm gonna be authentic. I'm going to be pure, I'm not going to change my lyrics, I'm not gonna do whatever, right. But it's gon' get commodified regardless. The market is gonna be the market. The question is, How do we not flatten out even those things we see as primarily

market driven so that we don't lose track of the agency of the people?

DE KOSNIK. Right, right.

SEKOU. I keep coming back to music, because African Americans, two things we produce—great music and some great preachers. Entire countries have not produced musical genius that Black folks have produced, right? I mean in my own state alone, Arkansas, we have Maya Angelou and James Cone, the greatest living theologian. You know, Uzbekistan ain't produced nothing like that yet. So when you look at the cultural production of the folks, always keep track of the agency, always keep track of the way in which they're making moves inside of it. Because, you know, my grandmother would say, "You can't live in a whorehouse and not turn a trick." This is not to diminish sex workers; I think they should have a union. I just can't organize them 'cause it don't look right, the clergy man organizing 'em sex workers. But you understand what I'm saying?

DE KOSNIK. The whorehouse is global capitalism, and everybody, even the most undercommons cultures, are in the same house.

SEKOU. Yeah.

DE KOSNIK. Yeah.

SEKOU. So I think we have to acknowledge that those same neoliberal values get reproduced in social movements; they get reproduced in academic circles. I mean even if I'm in an undercommon and I've made a decision that I'm a part of a queer collective of Black dudes with dreadlocks, that's who we are. But we're gon' get a Twitter account. We still subject to the market.

The question is, how—what are the ways in which you're going to use those tools? I actually think there's a popular reading of Audre Lorde's essay that's wrong . . . [Audre Lorde's coments at the Second Sex Conference in New York on September 29, 1979, were published in the 1981 anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* as the essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House".] Lorde's not talking about technology, she's not talking about the academy. The letter is written in response to a panel of white women isolating Black women, thereby reproducing the spirit of the empire. What she's talking about is a more spiritual phenomenon. I'm not talking about spiritual

phenomena in terms of connecting to a holy Other. I'm talking about zeitgeist. The zeitgeist of the empire we can't use. We're supposed to be in solidarity with the sisters, but if there ain't no Black women, you're just like the white dude down the street.

DE KOSNIK. She's talking about a more philosophical concern.

SEKOU. It's at a philosophical level, and I would argue a spiritual level, too, because it's about constitution. She knew those women. It wasn't just about some abstract women on the—those are folks she knew who claimed to be her allies.

DE KOSNIK. She's saying, you can't reproduce patriarchy's own tactics within feminism and claim it to be antipatriarchal . . .

SEKOU. Yeah.

DE KOSNIK. That's not gonna diminish patriarchy.

SEKOU. So you're going to have an academic panel, which is going to be an elite space for this working-class Black woman, you can do all of that. Just don't do that, just don't be them.

PAIGE JOHNSON. So I've got a question that comes back to thinking about new media's overdetermination by neoliberalism . . .

SEKOU. Mhm.

JOHNSON. One of the ways I've been thinking a little about that is the ways in which neoliberalism is also about this flattening of space. Happy-looking subjects move swiftly across cultural borders, move smoothly across a kind of smooth space, one that, in reality, is actually super-stratified by power and by violence and differentiated histories and levels of access. Part of the neoliberal attraction to new media is that, at least in the Twitter moment, it seems to have the capacity to move horizontally, to capitalize on this sort of horizontality that neoliberalism loves. But one of the things I heard in your early remarks, and a bit in what you were saying more recently about the blues, is that place really matters. Place matters in substantive ways for the articulation of social movements. Something particular is happening in Times Square; something particular is happening in, you know, Madison, Wisconsin, in 2009, 2010, 2011; and something particular is happening in an actual place called Ferguson, even as social media can almost instantaneously turn Ferguson into a metaphor.

SEKOU. Mhm. But, no, see I would actually push back.

JOHNSON. Yeah, great.

SEKOU. I would actually say that social media at its best . . . If there is to be an authentic subterranean narrative articulated about Black suffering in the context of the American empire much like the blues . . . The reason why the blues works is that you can walk into any juke joint and somebody's singing about "the man is taking, I work all day I still ain't got no money, my woman done left me, this man is treating me . . ." These are local specific things that are happening that reflect a universal condition. What Ferguson does is that social media allows to render visible subterranean narratives that have a universal quality because it's happening all over the country, all over the world. And so whether we be in Sweden, in Amsterdam—I covered the London riots for *Vibe* magazine, in any of these spaces, the story is the same. And so it's not about the way in which hegemony functions, for hegemony is not that imaginative. We got about five things it does: hypersexual stereotypes, legislative repression, vigilante violence, state-sanctioned violence, outside of the state lynchings, Matthew Shepard, Emmett Till. It's real limited, it's not that imaginative at all. Because we're talking about a global crisis. The global economy is collapsing, attacking a people, using the same methods. And people resist in similar ways through the new technology of social media and the new technologies of warfare. In Ferguson, the same tear gas company that makes the tear gas took a shot in Palestine when I was there in Palestine. Yeah, that's right, and there were some Palestinians who were tweeting to us in Ferguson. This was an organized effort by the St. Louis Palestinian Solidarity Committee. Those tweets didn't just emerge out of nowhere.

When you look at the way in which new technologies of warfare are being mediated combined with the way in which new technologies for moving capital have caused global crisis, we must function differently with the use of these tools. This is the discourse that emerges out of the Old Testament tradition of beating swords into plowshares. This happens all over the world, with people locally bound by time and space, region, land, political landscape, geographical location, physical landscape, et cetera. This is the case at the same time as the universality of neoliberalism is becoming more fluid.

DE KOSNIK. There's so much in what you both are saying. What you two are generating is this idea that Ferguson serves as a

particular node in a network of collapse, with the caving in of certain parts of global capital. What's interesting about social media is that they are built as networks. But what #Ferguson is able to surface is another network, a lived network of being subjugated by global capital, a real network that people live in their bodies every day but isn't always perceived as such, as a global phenomenon.

SEKOU. Mhm.

DE KOSNIK. [That a] hashtag like Ferguson can travel so quickly across an established capital-funded network is a co-opting of sorts, making that network not exactly more substantial, but perhaps more physicalized in the body, a network to make that more real.

SEKOU. And to be sure that realness gets manifested only with masses of people in the street.

DE KOSNIK. Right. You can't just be a node in a network.

SEKOU. No, it has to have bodies. That's the trick, because one of the tendencies of neoliberalism is efficiency.

DE KOSNIK. Yeah.

SEKOU. You in the academy hear this all the time.

DE KOSNIK. Yeah.

SEKOU. What is the most efficient way is not the most efficacious. Five years and you out. It's about efficiency. And so while it may be more efficient to tweet, it's more efficacious to organize. The challenge becomes how do we not allow the spirit, the zeitgeist of neoliberalism, to commodify for the market the low-technology labor-intensive organizing and connecting with people. That's a critical question for us, because it can take it—this is it and this is it, this is all we do. But what Ferguson does is that—when you look in Sarajevo and they're doing "hands up," I don't even know if there's Black people in Sarajevo, right? You know what I'm saying? I'm just saying, people who have a condition of blackness.

DE KOSNIK. Right, right.

SEKOU. Look at Ethiopian Jews in '48 doing "hands up." It's different than the West Bank, but in the context of '48, it looks like America. Sell a colonial project, oppress a minority, racialize and inscribe access to rights in the US Constitution and in the framing of the very institution itself.

DE KOSNIK. Sure. Empire, not capital.

SEKOU. Yeah.

DE KOSNIK. Capital as part of a larger project of empire.

SEKOU. That's regardless of what your position is on Israel. You can't argue them facts. It's inscribed second-class citizenship, differentiated schooling, differentiated options on health, differentiated options on housing, differentiated options—differentiated treatment, differentiated treatment in the courts. Ethiopians inside '48 look on TV and say that they look like us, "hands up." I've been thinking about Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* [1993], where he talks about the ship. The World Wide Web is that same kind of ship in the context of neoliberal and global capital. The ship was a feature of the market.

So what does the net, what does that infrastructure, what does the reproductions of those nodes look like and what are various ways in which we can engage in disruption? In the Movement for Black Lives a primary political tactic has been disruption, which is at one level mirroring the way in which hackers interact.

DE KOSNIK. One term that another theorist of the slave ship, Édouard Glissant [1997], a Caribbean poet and author, used, is *errantry*. The errant might just go off and do her own thing. There's the path of the open boat, as he calls it, there's the way it's supposed to go, but then there's the way it goes or the way it can be made to go. A lot of what he tries to valorize in Caribbean discourse is this errantry that doesn't look like anything to somebody that expects grids or set paths. But if you're not looking at paths that are already carved, if you're just looking at agents or actors that are just transversing the field however they can think to do that, then something else emerges, something which is almost like a genre of errantry. That's happening all the time. We just don't always see it, but it's also not concealed. I mean it's happening in full view.

SEKOU. Mhm. But I would also want to add to that, that even in the well-worn past, there's a certain way you can walk down it and it looks a lot different.

DE KOSNIK. Sure, yeah.

SEKOU. Because, in part, the difference between Caribbeans and African Americans is that there is a well-worn infrastructure.

DE KOSNIK. Mm, yeah.

SEKOU. We inside the empire and we done snatched all they resources to build this out, and so this treads in their paths. The question is how do we walk down them. That's the difference between the spirit of the masters, too.

DE KOSNIK. Stuart Hall [1993] was wrestling with this question of the global postmodern in the early 1990s. He's already wrestling with this question that I'm trying to articulate around Filipino-ness—which is the question of whether we are okay with Black culture just being wholesale appropriated and sold all over the world, as with the great era of hip-hop flourishing as a global music. How are we going to receive that? He tries to divorce style from the economy. The commodities are sold, but style proliferates. Those two forces spread, and one of them is monetized, but the other one is not divorced from the market. There's something powerful and important about style reproducing itself in different bodies all over the world.

SEKOU. Yeah, plus Black people, we just cooler. I think we just cool, that's all. I mean you gotta be. It's no wonder mass killings about Black folks in the USA every other day. Gotta be cool is a certain kind of political armor, a social protection in the face of vicious onslaughts. Turn on the TV and they're coming for you. You walk down the street, they're coming for you. Go get into the university—the average African American's SAT scores probably ten percent higher than them average white student here. But you here on affirmative action, and some race question come up and you gotta speak for 33 million African Americans. So cool is a way in which this style is being reproduced in a certain kind of public decorum which is not necessarily connected to a respectability.

DE KOSNIK. In fact, I think it's counter to a politics of respectability.

SEKOU. Yeah.

DE KOSNIK. Because I think that is what makes hip-hop attractive all over the world, that sense of young people especially not wanting to play in the politics of respectability but wanting another path.

SEKOU. But one can be nonrespectable and thoroughly capitalist.

DE KOSNIK. Mhm.

SEKOU. Like Mark Zuckerberg, he can throw on a sweat suit and come here and be like, "Look it here, I'm about to make a billion dollars, ya'll want some of this?"

DE KOSNIK. Yeah.

SEKOU. In fact part of the cover given to the massive class warfare which I believe we've lost in the Bay Area is that in part, that the public discourse is about cool.

DE KOSNIK. Yeah.

SEKOU. Well, it's beards, it's tattoos, it's the right brand. I think Apple is perhaps the greatest commodifier of cool ever. Right, right.

JOHNSON. Yeah, they've done it for decades.

SEKOU. Right, right, so you see that. Subaru is catching up if you look at some of the advertising now. These are market forces. Market, right. But it's the articulation of cool that is ultimately about commodification.

DE KOSNIK. That's the argument Emma Watson pulled.

GRADUATE STUDENT 2. That's what Old Navy was doing. They had hip-hop artists advertising, particularly when the Christmas season came around. I was more focused on who was in the commercials than what Old Navy was trying to sell. You get distracted, and I don't know if that necessarily helps Old Navy 'cause it's like, I'm not buying your product, I'm just looking at who's in the commercial.

SEKOU. The question again I'm concerned about is the zeitgeist, the spirit. This has to do with my own religious sensibilities as a Pentecostal. We'll obsess over signs and wonders and continued revelation and the spirit of something. It's a metaphor Cornel West uses. What you get when African souls play European instruments, you get jazz. Coltrane plays it a little different than Kenny G. And so I am authentic when it comes to jazz; Kenny G is not jazz.

DE KOSNIK. But, you know, Western philosophers are also deeply concerned with spirit. At the heart of Hegelian philosophy, of which Heidegger is sort of the most recent proponent, is the idea of spirit and the unconcealing or concealing of world spirit.

SEKOU. I have a certain affinity for Heidegger even though he was a right wing.

DE KOSNIK. Nazi.

SEKOU. Nazi. I mean, you know, and Miles Davis was a genius but extremely abusive.

DE KOSNIK. Sure.

SEKOU. Both to his band members and his women in his life.

DE KOSNIK. Sure.

SEKOU. So where would you situate [Jean-Paul] Sartre on this spectrum of authentic and non-authentic jazz musicians?

DE KOSNIK. I think existentialism offers a real alternative to Western philosophy that I think we've almost surrendered. It's like we've given up on existentialism.

SEKOU. Mm.

DE KOSNIK. I often wonder whether it's too nihilistic for neoliberalism. Neoliberalism prefers optimism. I just had my seminar that these guys are in. We read Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* [2011]. That's a very existentialist work, because if you embrace existential philosophy, you're saying things and believing things that are not optimistic. They're not telling you there's a light at the end of the tunnel—you're just looking at the tunnel. You're telling people you need to see the whole tunnel that you're in, and you're constantly the person that's like, "Do you see the tunnel now, do you see it now? It's huge and it goes all day long." Even today, people don't like that kind of philosophy. They like a philosophy that at least has the potential for some kind of solution at the end of it. I'm not sure that Sartre . . . I'm not sure what he does.

SEKOU. I think in light of our conversation that is interesting, because there's a difference. In Western civilization, particularly at the end of the age of Europe, nihilism and optimism are branches on the same tree.

DE KOSNIK. That's the Nietzschean part in Sartre. I can definitively say Sartre would say it, too; he's coming out of the Nietzsche tree for sure.

SEKOU. But they were just born on the wrong part of the world to the wrong people. Spend some time with my grandmama. This has to do with luck and circumstances, right? I'm an existentialist. If you haven't heard it, it's all over my writing and my thinking and my talking, 'cause I'm trying to make meaning out of this. Hopefully with a bit of style. To me the tragic flaw of the French existentialism that emerges between 1933 and 1968 is materiality. It's obsessing with the material, because at one level it's a child of Marx. Camus, Sartre, even Simone de Beauvoir, all of them come through the communist and then socialist traditions. There's an obsession in which matter is sold both primary and soul. It's the only thing we're concerned about,

the material conditions. Ain't nobody come and save you, you gotta put your head down and deal with this. That's one part of the way in which African Americans—I'm just talking about Black folks I'm suspicious of—I suspect that folks from other parts of the world across racial lines got something for it, but I just got what my grandmama gave me. That's because of Camus's meditation on suicide. If you base it on the pure logic, the analytical stuff is all in it, you know. His meditation on suicide makes sense. They right. I might as well go on and kill my damn self.

They sold you on the material conditions. Europe is bombed out. Germany, you know, had been obsessing with enlightenment. You know, for what, eight hundred years, Germany dominates the philosophical mind and for two hundred years of the American project Germany dominates the philosophical project, so this idea of right thinking leads to right behavior, which is essential to the Enlightenment. And then Hitler pops the fuck out. It's a death knell. We thought we had beat the Church. We got significant ruptures in the Church with Martin Luther, and then the present rebellions, right? So we breaking away from the Church, we breaking away from these masters and gods, and the next thing we know, Hitler pop up. Europe in all of its grand glory and of all of the self-referential creations of itself throughout the continent devastated, millions upon millions killed. Grand architecture standing for a thousand years is destroyed, and there's white folks killing white folks. It's not savages from the Philippines and Africa.

And when you look at that, at one level Europe has the blues, but it doesn't have the intellectual and cultural weaponry to combat the blues. That's because of the material question. The European elites throw out discourses about the unholy other by virtue of the fact that because the Catholic churches dominated so much, so you want to get away from it. We not doing none of that magic spooky shit. So where's that in terms of the African American existentialist tradition is to look at the material conditions and call them a lie.

DE KOSNIK. So metaphysics is the branch of the tree that answers that nihilism.

SEKOU. Yeah, I think it's my grandmama's kitchen table, but I'll give you metaphysics.

DE KOSNIK. Yeah.

JOHNSON. I wonder where Césaire and Fanon fit into this conversation.

DE KOSNIK. I mean [Aimé] Césaire, [Frantz] Fanon, and Sartre all endorsed and advocated for what we would now call terrorism. I mean, it's a colonial resistance in Fanon's case, but even then the imperial forces would've called that terrorism.

SEKOU. In fact, the word "terrorism" emerges out of the French cafés in their response to the French Revolution.

JOHNSON. Right, right. But Fanon's response is that Europe doesn't have answers to the problems it's created in the world. Nazi genocide is in a certain way a kind of chickens coming home to roost for colonial powers. Also, thinking about a sort of a wholesale transformation of subjectivity that's articulated to what he's describing as the total disordering of the colonial world. That decolonization is a total scramble. The first movement may be a movement that is an anticolonial counter. But the first move in that is a psychic transformation, a psychic decolonization.

DE KOSNIK. Yeah, free the mind.

JOHNSON. Yeah, right.

SEKOU. I work with the fellowship of an interfaith peace organization. The more I work with the org and the more I've seen nonviolence work in the street, now, in the context of some constitutional restraint, like at least we got the myth of the US Constitution. They may violate it, but at least we can go to court and the lawyer's gonna make an argument. I might get my charges reduced a little bit. Now, that's a different context than Palestine, where there's a different relationship to the colonial project. Because in the context of the US, Black people are wondering what that political project is and how it plays itself out as it relates to questions of violence at the first stage. Because the first stage you did describe in terms of a psychic break.

JOHNSON. Mhm.

SEKOU. A rejection of the psychic violence of the colonial project is the first move, which for me doesn't necessarily move unequivocally to the question of what Fanon calls revolutionary violence.

JOHNSON. Right, right, right.

SEKOU. 'Cause my concern is . . . I grew up with guns. My concern is that the tool itself is a tool of conquest. That the history and the making of the gun, its sole purpose is for the conquest of

other humans. That technology is only useful in those terms. We don't need it to hunt. People hunted [during] the vast majority of human experience without it.

DE KOSNIK. Yeah, it's for people, not animals.

SEKOU. And so given the history of that technology of weaponry, there's something about it. When you hear when people talk about picking up weapons . . .

DE KOSNIK. Or they carry.

SEKOU. I mean, in terms of soldiers on the battlefield—how they talk about their relationship to the weaponry, where the gun becomes more human than the person they're shooting at.

DE KOSNIK. Mhm, right.

SEKOU. It gets anthropomorphized. That lends up a question for me. Now, the bourgeoisie conference of the interior of the American empire predicates where I have access to constitutional restraints, that there is in some form a valid, if not mythological or perceived use of revolutionary or nonviolent protests to transform society. Jury is still out on it, but it's still at least in the air in the discourse . . .

DE KOSNIK. Perhaps that jury is working similarly on whether social media has that element of performing out something that isn't particularly foolproof but becomes relevant, becomes something foregrounded, becomes something that hinges on people's realities as opposed to be something that happens in an isolated way. I don't want to claim too much for social media, but there is this tactic, this tactical use of it. I think it does work sometimes in some cases.

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PART II

Mediated Intersections

SEVEN | Confused Cats and Postfeminist Performance

LYNDSEY OGLE

In the summer of 2014, Twitter newsfeeds were bombarded with images of cats. A play on benign LOLcat memes that juxtapose cute felines with humorous captions, #ConfusedCatsAgainstFeminism was a parody of the photo hashtag campaign #WomenAgainstFeminism. Employing the cue card confessional trope (K. Hall 2015), young (primarily white) women used the hashtag #WomenAgainstFeminism to reject feminism and to refute digital feminists' claim to speak for them, particularly through the hashtag #YesAllWomen. Through selfie-style photographs, the women combined analog and digital modes of autobiographical storytelling, posing with handwritten signs, most expanding on the phrase "I don't need feminism because . . ." For its part, #ConfusedCatsAgainstFeminism reenacted these images, posing anthropomorphized cats with signs that parodied what contributors saw as the confused and confusing logic of #WomenAgainstFeminism. The images ranged from the satirical to the absurd, with messages like "*I don't need feminism because* . . . I like to clean myself and everyone knows feminists don't bathe"; "*I don't need feminism because* . . . I think dogs are nice even though some try to kill me"; and "*I don't need feminism because* . . . I'm a cat and I don't know what feminism is." These images served to reinforce the narrative that women who reject feminism are either willfully ignorant or incapable of acting in their own best interest.

Taken together, #WomenAgainstFeminism and #ConfusedCatsAgainst Feminism participate in the online circulation of *postfeminist performance*—

interdependent narratives and representations that conflate feminist and antifeminist ideologies and forms. In seeking to articulate and subsequently reject the perceived position of the opposition, these postfeminist performances essentialize the complicated (and confusing) intersectionality that makes feminism a productive political endeavor. Instead they recreate the neoliberal conditions of precarity and its demands for the continual reinvention and display of the gendered self. They simultaneously foreclose the possibility of any fixed and stable reference point from which to demarcate the beginning and end of a digital feminist exchange.

While the exchange between #ConfusedCatsAgainstFeminism, #WomenAgainstFeminism, and #YesAllWomen is but one trajectory through which to map the rise of postfeminist performance online, it does highlight the increased emphasis on the visual and performative in all areas of social media, including Twitter. Where it was once argued that we must "write" ourselves into existence online (Sundén 2003), the notion of disembodied identity performance on Twitter (widely rejected by performance theorists, critical race scholars, and feminist media scholars, to name a few) has been increasingly dispelled in mainstream media discourse by the prevalence of memes, selfies, videos, and emojis standing in for textual performance, even within the confines of political debate. Further, this particular exchange uniquely demonstrates the degree to which modes of identity performance thought to be gendered are regularly dismissed, even within feminist discourse.

Social movements and their countermovements have never existed as discrete entities defined solely in opposition to one another. Women's groups have always responded to, appropriated, and transformed the messages and techniques of countermovements against feminism—that is, antifeminism has constantly informed and altered the trajectory of feminist discourse and activism. Therefore, these adversarial agents, feminism and antifeminism, must be conceptualized together as engaged in a "dialectical process" (Steuter 1992) that, in its combination and mutual antagonism, shapes broader understanding of postfeminism. If as Stuart Hall (1991) argues, identity is part narrative and part representation, we might consider how postfeminist identity is formed in relation to contradictory performance. In other words, if postfeminist identity is defined in terms of what it is not, how can both the narratives circulated and the modes of representation employed by self-identified feminists *and* antifeminists help us understand the conditions of postfeminist performance today?

The Postfeminist Narrative

Women Against Feminism was launched on Tumblr in the summer of 2013 and gained a Facebook presence in January 2014 but did not begin to trend on Twitter and across mainstream media until it was used as a response to the feminist hashtag #YesAllWomen. Placing #WomenAgainstFeminism in direct conversation and conflict with #YesAllWomen allowed the hashtag and its users to reach a level of visibility that might not have been possible otherwise. Twitter user @gildedspine created #YesAllWomen in May 2014 after Elliot Rodger's misogynistic killing spree near the University of California, Santa Barbara. Women deployed the hashtag to share their stories of violence, harassment, and sexism, arguing that while #NotAllMen practice these behaviors, all women do in fact experience them. While #YesAllWomen was intended to capture the struggle of all women, it was quickly criticized for erasing the voices of many, including that of @gildedspine as a Muslim woman of color. Queer feminists and feminists of color responded with hashtags like #YesAllWhiteWomen and #EachEveryWoman, critiquing what they perceived to be white feminism's continual erasure of race, class, sexuality, and ability in its privileging of gender above all else. At the same time, the women who participated in #WomenAgainstFeminism defied #YesAllWomen's assumption that it could speak for them, citing, among other things, conservative values, religious beliefs, and views about gender roles.

While some of the #WomenAgainstFeminism contributors did deploy stereotypes of feminists as "man-haters, lesbians, and radical activists," most, I argue, used the hashtag to articulate postfeminist anxieties related to what Angela McRobbie (2004) has called a "double entanglement" or forward movement in sexual and economic freedoms for women that coincides with a "patriarchal retrenchment" of social conservatism (xi). The assumption that feminism has already succeeded and is thus no longer necessary is taken up by postfeminist discourse alongside a backlash of rhetoric that condemns feminism as an impossible quest to have it all or a tyranny of political correctness. We see this articulated frequently throughout #WomenAgainstFeminism in posts like "*I don't need feminism because* . . . I like it when men say compliments about my body." "*I don't need feminism because* . . . God gave us different skills. That is not male oppression." And, "*I don't need feminism because* . . . I enjoy my role as a supportive wife. I love that my man is the head of the household and I value being a stay-at-home mom over slaving for a corporation while

neglecting my family." In these posts, women do not address the political dimensions of feminism but rather focus on personal relationships and identities.

Rosalind Gill argues that feminism can best be understood as a "sensibility" in which a neoliberal emphasis on empowerment, individualism, and choice displaces notions of the social or political such that individuals resist any idea of being "subject to pressures, constraints, or influences from outside themselves" (Gill and Scharff 2011, 7). More often than not this is manifested in #WomenAgainstFeminism as calls for humanism, egalitarianism, and the belief that women are already equal. As one contributor writes, "I don't need feminism because I don't need others to fight my battles for me . . . I believe in earning things for myself . . . I believe in proving that I am worthy of what I want and not expecting them to be handed to me because I feel entitled." Here again the focus is on personal responsibility and a rejection of representations of women as victims or oppressed.

The postfeminist narrative serves not just as a way to refute feminism or to argue that it is no longer needed but also as a way for mainstream media and digital feminists to counter the rhetoric of groups like #WomenAgainstFeminism by offering a picture of feminism that is simple, un-confusing, and as Jessalynn Keller (2013) writes, "nonthreatening to the status quo." In 2015, following the major mainstream media coverage of #WomenAgainstFeminism, the *Huffington Post* released a video featuring reporters Zeba Blay and Emma Gray titled "What Saying 'I'm Not a Feminist' Really Means." In it, the two fashionable young women perform a dialogue in which they seek to distance the movement (and themselves) from stereotypical portrayals of feminists as "hairy, man-hating lesbians" and reframe feminism as a choice, in principle if not in practice. They alternate between proselytizing to the Women Against Feminism and dismissing them en masse while relying on familiar postfeminist narratives. They remind viewers that feminism simply means equality between the sexes and that—thanks to the work of first- and second-wave feminists—women have the freedom to choose to identify in any way they like. By associating equality with choice, they obscure the problematic function of equality as the aspirational directive of feminism within a neoliberal framework that uses it as a rationale for public austerity measures, anti–affirmative action practices, and normative identity politics (Duggan 2003). Additionally, by enacting the narrative of choice through a performance that signifies that to reject

feminism is to be rendered ridiculous and ignorant, they dismiss the productive potential of disidentification for marginalized people who neither embrace nor reject the racial or sexual mainstream outright but appropriate particular aspects of it to serve their own practices of empowerment (Muñoz 2009).

Blay and Gray's video was only one of dozens of op-eds, blog posts, and "listicles" created during the summer of 2014 in response to #WomenAgainstFeminism. The outpour was unsurprising. In an age when questions over one's stance on or identification with feminism are regular fodder for tabloids, gossip sites, and entertainment news shows, feminism is no longer just a political stance but has become a highly valuable and regularly traded commodity. To claim or reject feminism, in name or in practice, is to situate oneself within a neoliberal framework that demands we continually reflect upon and perform our identities in ways that contribute to their commodification and consumption. The demands of neoliberalism are decidedly gendered. "To a much greater extent than men," Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (2011) explain, "women are required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen" (7). This self-management extends beyond a woman's identification with feminism (or not) to the continued appraisal of her self-performance in relation to gendered practices of representation.

Postfeminism and Autobiographic Performance

The women of #WomenAgainstFeminism construct their identities in relation to feminism not just through the production of postfeminist or antifeminist narratives but also through the "staging" of online identities through what Deirdre Heddon (2008) calls "autobiographic performance." Like "postfeminism," the term "autobiography" harbors a history of contradictory meanings, in this case tied to the gendering of the form. As a practice of the male bourgeoisie, autobiography was associated with the exemplary if unusual life that was thought to offer insight into the essence of humanity (Felski 1989). As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2002) observe, men were ascribed with "the intellect and aesthetic command to make their lives richly self-reflexive, to assess the problematic nature of self-knowing and self-telling" (12). On the other hand, it was argued that "women could not transcend but only record the concerns of the private self" (Stanton 1984, 132, cited in Smith and

Watson, 12). While male autobiography was concerned with the extraordinary, women were thought to be narrowly preoccupied with the quotidian, the domestic, and the personal.

In the 1960s and 1970s, second-wave feminists appropriated the autobiographical form specifically for its ability to connect the personal to the political, and everyday experiences to the collective reality of women. Personal experience was used as evidence of political and structural inequalities, but as Heddon contends, the "authenticity" and "authority" attributed to these accounts often presented an "unproblematized truth" that essentialized all women (2008, 25) As the critiques of #YesAllWomen demonstrated, such representations tend to prioritize and recirculate the same voices, the same truths—namely, that of middle-class white women.

The mode of autobiographic performance enacted by #Women AgainstFeminism closely aligns with what Ruth Felski calls the "feminist confession" that "foreground[s] the most personal and intimate details of the author's life" (1989, 87). The feminist confession is defined by a tension between the need to demonstrate the unique authenticity of the individual and the desire to locate that subjectivity within a communal experience that links all women (93). It is an embodied form of self-disclosure that seeks to claim and make visible a subjectivity that has been repressed by dominant culture. Thus, even while #WomenAgainstFeminism uses the confession to enact antifeminist and postfeminist ideals, the form still serves to articulate agency within common systems of representation, in this case Twitter and, more broadly, social media.

As a mode of autobiographical performance, the feminist confession is directed at both the self and the Other. It assumes a complicit audience of women that will reaffirm the performance of identity. It is both a longing for and enactment of intimate connection with a "projected community of female readers who will understand, sympathize and identify with the author's emotions and experiences" (Felski 1989, 110). Felski argues that the written feminist confession encodes the audience as female through "a tone of intimacy, shared allusions, and unexplained references" (99). #WomenAgainstFeminism encodes its audience through the juxtaposition of visual, textual, performative, and digitally rendered modes of representation thought to be gendered female—the selfie, the handwritten text, and the phatic exchange. These forms are often criticized as being narcissistic and self-indulgent while also being assumed to be more authentic and intimate than the performances of men.

Rather than simply reading these forms as "'tools' for rendering a preexistent self," I draw on Smith and Watson's exploration of "automediality" to consider the degree to which "the materiality of a medium is constitutive of the subjectivity rendered" (2010, 168), and thus how these forms shape our understanding of postfeminist performance. It is the relationship between the embodied confessor and the materiality or mediation of the confession, what Smith and Watson (2002) call the "relational interface," that stages the subject in relation to feminism. It is also what reveals her interpellation within a postfeminist performance that makes use of feminist forms to exert agency against the demands of neoliberalism.

As previously mentioned, the majority of images circulated on Twitter and on the Women Against Feminism Tumblr take the form of selfie-styled photography in which a young woman poses with a handwritten sign that reveals a private aspect of her identity—in this case, her relationship to feminism. Kimberly Hall (2015), drawing on the work of Michel Foucault (1978), argues that key to this cue-card confessional trope is the "centrality of the handwritten account" (Hall 2015, 230). The idiosyncrasies of each handwritten sign—from the spelling, punctuation, color, and format, to the materiality of ink on paper—assert an indexical authority over the affective narrative produced by each image that challenges the ephemerality of digital circulation "as a marker of a particular moment that survives in its specificity" (231). The artifice often associated with digital modes of self-representation is displaced by the authenticity of each crossed-out word or error. This intimate and gendered aesthetic (historically associated with the letter or diary) allows the viewer to feel "as if [they were] able to access the producer's innermost thoughts" (232). It reinforces the sense of an embodied one-on-one encounter and shifts our understanding of the #WomenAgainstFeminism meme from a static image to a performative speech act.

In most of the photos, women hold their handwritten signs near or partially obscuring their face. Often the words are placed directly in front of the mouth in a manner that seems to indicate that the words should be experienced as the embodied *voice* of the confessor. "Voice" is not just a metaphor, James Phelan (2010) argues; rather, it is "a learnable kind of synesthesia: as we see words on the page we can hear sounds" (2, cited in Smith and Watson 2010, 79). The #WomenAgainstFeminism meme can thus be read as a "trace" of the "performance of communicative action" (Frosh 2015, 1610). This image, Paul Frosh argues, "says not only 'see this, here, now,' but also 'see me showing you me'" (1610). Frosh's view of

the selfie form upends assumptions about a woman's agency within the social field of image production and image consumption and challenges previously established beliefs about the gendered power dynamics in viewing in which "men act and women appear" (Berger 1973).

Derek Conrad Murray (2015) offers a productive counter-reading of feminist self-portraiture, and the selfie specifically, that reasserts the representational agency within these forms and demonstrates how #WomenAgainstFeminism can operate as a mode of feminist confession within the neoliberal framework of postfeminism. Murray identifies a gaze that is "unapologetically female. In other words, it aggressively asserts a specifically female visual experience and aesthetic point of view" (500). Murray provocatively poses the selfie not as an acquiescence to the demands of neoliberalism but as "an instinct of self-preservation: a survivor-ship reflex" (512). It is a way for women to assert control over their own image and experience within the dehumanizing conditions of neoliberalism, which, regardless of political intent, can be read en masse as "a revolutionary political movement—a radical colonization of the visual realm and an aggressive reclaiming of the female body" (490). The significance of this reclamation is not solely in the enactment of individual self-performance, or even in the personal revelation that is associated with the confession, but in the connection with others that results from these acts of self-expression—the fostering of what Zizi Papacharissi (2011) calls "the networked self."

The repetition, appropriation, and circulation of the selfie and card confessional trope demonstrate an extension of "phatic exchange" that Paul Frosh explains "stage[s] sociability as a binding affective energy transferred between individuals in impersonal settings" (2015, 1623). Phatic exchange not only invites response; it demands it. This response is always embodied whether through the performance of gesture—a liking, retweeting or typed reply—or, as Kimberly Hall (2015) maintains is more often the case with social media tropes, a restaging of the initial image.

Postfeminism and Parody

Just as #WomenAgainstFeminism is suffused with feminist and antifeminist practices, David Futrelle's blog *Confused Cats Against Feminism*, and its attendant hashtag #ConfusedCatsAgainstFeminism, purports to be a feminist intervention but repeats many long-standing sexist tropes. Futrelle says that, through #ConfusedCatsAgainstFeminism, he in-

tended to offer feminists a space of "catharsis" from the exhaustion of dealing with what he describes as the "myopic" and "ignorant" views of #WomenAgainstFeminism (Davis 2014). A closer examination of the blog reveals a more complicated and, well, confusing paradigm. By examining both the discursive framing and visual/performative tropes employed by Futrelle and his contributors to #ConfusedCatsAgainstFeminism, I argue that Futrelle resurfaces familiar characterizations of women as ridiculous, ignorant, and unable to advocate for their own best interests, in no small part because they are blinded by the constant in-fighting from within their own ranks.

Futrelle says he was inspired to launch #ConfusedCatsAgainstFeminism in late July 2014, a few days after he read a blog post by noted memoirist and blogger Jenny Lawson. In the post, Lawson writes, "Some of the reasons [the women who tweeted in #WomenAgainstFeminism] give for not needing feminism almost seem like a parody ("How the fuck am I suppose[d] to open jars and lift heavy things without my husband?") and some ("I don't need to grow out my body hair to prove I'm equal to men") just make me wonder where in the world they got their definition of feminism" (Lawson 2014). Over the course of a meandering analogy in which she attempts to explain feminism through sharks, bees, and other bothersome yet beneficial creatures, Lawson articulates the many complexities and confusions within postfeminism that led the author to place herself in the ranks of "Women Who Are Ambivalent about Women Against Women Against Feminism." Yet, when this idea was appropriated into meme form by Futrelle, much of Lawson's nuance—her internal debates and sense of being conflicted about the apologists for, and antagonists of, contemporary feminism—was lost in Futrelle's parody.

In describing the project, Futrelle was careful to distinguish his tactics in relation to women from the tactics he used with men's rights groups on his earlier blog, *We Hunted the Mammoth*. He makes a problematic distinction when he describes the need to be "gentler" with the women of #WomenAgainstFeminism than he had been with men's rights activists; Futrelle claims that the participants in #WomenAgainstFeminism are politically ignorant or disengaged but not necessarily driven by ideological agendas (Davis 2014). He goes so far as to say that "it just seemed right to do a parody reaction to [#WomenAgainstFeminism] that involved cats because cats are the ultimate representation of being clueless and self-absorbed and not particularly embarrassed to be clueless and self-absorbed" (quoted in Figuero 2014). Such assertions trigger a need to evaluate #ConfusedCatsAgainstFeminism beyond its claim to be a femi-

nist project to consider in what ways silence feminist debate by disembodying, thus disassociating, the claims of #WomenAgainstFeminism from the women who exert their agency (and privilege) in making those claims.

Cat imagery has a history in feminist discourse that dates back to the suffragette movement, when postcards featuring anthropomorphized felines were created by opponents of suffrage to portray the women as "silly, infantile, incompetent, and ill-suited to political engagement" (Wrenn 2013). Cartoons of cats also appeared in newspapers during the same period to highlight the disturbing behavior of wives who ventured outside of the home and into the political sphere. The unhappy animals were featured as the thoughtless victims of "bumbling, emasculated" fathers, abandoned by their wives, and left to care for home and family (Wrenn 2013). In these mass-distributed media, cats represented the domestic sphere and were invoked to demonstrate a threat to traditional family values and gender roles.

These tropes continue in contemporary gender humor. Limor Shifman and Dafna Lemish contend that contemporary humor construction extends beyond a "conservative/sexist" or "subversive/feminist" binary to include "post-feminist humour" (Shifman and Lemish 2010, 872). Sexist humor establishes male superiority and makes women the target of ridicule. This type of humor relies on stereotypical portrayals of women as "stupid, illogical, ignorant, or irresponsible" (Shifman and Lemish 2011, 254) and as "nagging sexual objects" (Shifman and Lemish 2010, 873). Feminist humor can be identified as challenging or subverting traditional gender stereotypes and constructions of femininity, often by targeting men. Shifman and Lemish argue that postfeminist humor emphasizes the biological and cultural differences in men and women, but without the hierarchization found in sexist humor. Inasmuch as both men and women become targets for ridicule in postfeminist humor, both "different but equally defective," the authors caution against reading such texts as liberating and empowering for women in that much of the "popular Internet gender humor focuses on the 'different' while totally ignoring the 'equal'" (886).

#ConfusedCatsAgainstFeminism extends the feline metaphor in a visual play on the always already sexualized image of the female catfight. Media catfights often pit the domestic, conservative woman against the sexually liberated working girl. Harnessed by the news media in the United States since the 1970s to detract and diminish the significance of feminist debates, the catfight has served to foster a reductive and du-

alistic image of feminist discourse (Hammer 2002, 21). Susan Douglas argues that a key tactic used to paralyze the feminist movement in the 1970s was to leverage and publicize the antifeminist sentiments of disenfranchised women in press reports:

> Women with no economic or political power were used as stand ins for men who opposed feminism. Through this tactic, male journalists could ask why men should support changes even most women didn't want, and they could smirk over one of their favorite events, the catfight, while smiling knowingly and maintaining that women were different from men, and weren't those differences cute and delightful. (1994, 186)

The language of the catfight has been redeployed by both men and women to describe the way in which online "feminist debates often turn into seemingly never-ending processes of calling out and blaming for offensive terminology and the ignorance of various groups" (Thelandersson 2014, 528). This critique of heightened debate not only reads to many as "tone policing" or as a way to silence marginalized voices who are rightfully angry, but it also acts as another layer of complication in the circulation of postfeminist discourse.

Postfeminism and Eventfulness

As we have seen, the "pattern of interdependence" (Steuter 1992) between feminist and antifeminist narratives and representations manifests itself through an intertextual/intermedial call-and-response format in which users appropriate, modify, and recirculate the form, content, and rhetorical stance (Shifman 2014) of oppositional memes in order to make postfeminist claims about female subjectivity. For Samantha Thrift, users who participate in these hashtags, be it to catalog everyday acts of sexism and misogyny, debate feminist issues, or to participate in "ironic activism," as in the case of #ConfusedCatsAgainstFeminism, render their subjects "eventful—that is, worthy of documentation, of remembrance, and of public and political discussion" (2014, 1091).

This eventfulness, I argue, is the distinguishing characteristic of postfeminist performance online, which, thanks to the rhizomatic proliferation of content through Twitter and across the web, prevents any performance from ever solidifying as a "proper object-event" (Caduff 2014, 39–40), forcing the gendered subject to continually reevaluate and reper-

form her relationship to feminism. Carlo Caduff (2014), building on the work of Lauren Berlant, proposes that eventfulness (or eventualization) should actually be imagined as "the enactment of impossibility," and as such, a postfeminist performance might be read as always incomplete.

I argue that it is this sense of incompleteness that most closely encapsulates the precariousness of postfeminism, with its multiplicity of meanings and contradictions and its complicating layers of intersectionality and mediation. The affective linkages generated through social media's feedback loops—which may appear to be nothing more than confusion, a series of confused and confusing exchanges—constitute the conditions of postfeminist performance. Such affective linkages extend beyond the life of any particular hypertext. As Jodi Dean explains, "[Affective networks] enable mediated relationships that take a variety of changing, uncertain, and interconnected forms as they feed back each upon the other in ways we can never fully account for or predict. So while relations in affective networks merge and diverge in ways resistant to formalization, the circulation of intensities leaves traces we might mark and follow" (2010, 22). We might see these episodes of intertextual propagation, as postfeminist performance, whether they claim to be post-, against, or with feminism, distinguishing this moment of diffuse, multivocal and multimodal discourse from previous moments of feminism.

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EIGHT | #WhyIStayed

Virtual Survivor-Centered Spaces for Transformation and Abolishing Partner Violence

JULIA HAVARD

The 2014 hashtag #WhyIStayed created a virtual survivor-centered space that forged new approaches to online activism and abolishing partner violence. #WhyIStayed models a unique approach to anti–sexual violence activism, one that unravels the complex question of why people who experience relationship violence stay with abusive partners. In unpacking the embodied resonances of #WhyIStayed, we unravel an alternate "hashtivism" that lifts up the possibility of change without visible action, the transformation that occurs within the act of staying that makes leaving possible. By "leaving" I mean both leaving an abusive relationship and leaving behind the ideologies that encourage our complicity in violent systems. #WhyIStayed centers feeling, reflecting, expressing, naming, creating, and imagining as forms of activist labor, all acts that can be done surreptitiously or in confinement. #WhyIStayed teaches us that a still body is capable of vast interpersonal and social change.

I argue that #WhyIStayed's centering of survivors' bodies, experiences, narratives, and feelings links liberation from intimate violence to liberation from systemic violence and points to *survivor magic*, the unique resources that survivors have because of the experience of trauma that allow us to develop alternative models of justice that disrupt both interpersonal cycles of violence and the violence of the criminal justice system. I ask the question "Why *we* stayed" versus "Why *they* stayed," situating my position as a white queer survivor of relationship violence in

an understanding that my liberation is bound up with the liberation of all survivors. It benefits every survivor to understand how systems only built to benefit some of us fail all of us. Or in the words of Twitter user @egafify in a recent hashtivist movement to free survivors from criminalization, "Im a survivor / I was not criminalized / All of us or none #decriminalizesurvival" (May 22, 2017).[1]

#WhyIStayed's Origins and Context

#WhyIStayed originated when Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice and his then fiancée, Janay Rice (née Palmer) were arrested and each charged with assault on February 15, 2014 (CNN 2014). On February 19, 2014, TMZ released security footage of the incident leading to their arrests, which showed Ray Rice dragging Janay Rice out of an elevator (Hill 2014). Atlantic City police stated that they had obtained more footage showing Ray Rice hitting Janay Rice and Janay falling unconscious in the elevator (CNN 2014). On March 27, Ray Rice was indicted on a charge of third-degree aggravated assault and the charges against Janay Palmer were dropped (CNN 2014). The two, who had been together for seven years and engaged for two, were married the next day (Hill 2014). Ray Rice was suspended for two games and entered a twelve-month intervention program on May 21, 2014 (Bien 2014). When TMZ released additional footage of Ray Rice hitting Janay on September 8, 2014, there was an escalation of media controversy (Clark 2016). Fox News broadcasters questioned why Janay Rice went through with her marriage and argued that she was setting a negative example for other women (Clark 2016). In response to criticisms of Janay Rice, Beverly Gooden, a writer, activist, and survivor of domestic violence, joined a number of other survivors in tweeting her experience of domestic violence and why she stayed in her abusive relationship, using the hashtag for the first time: "I stayed because I thought it would get better. It never got any better. #WhyIStayed" (Clark 2016). Use of the hashtag subsequently exploded: a study by a team of computational linguists counted fifty-seven thousand tweets posted using #WhyIStayed within one month of the hashtag's launch (Schrading et al. 2015).

The reasons for staying given by those who posted in #WhyIStayed varied, ranging from surfacing the complexities of loving an imperfect partner to the financial circumstances that impede leaving an abusive relationship. When @DrHLove5 tweets, "#WhyIStayed I thought I could heal their wound" (September 8, 2014), it raises the point that

relationship violence involves mythologies between staying and healing. @DearArtemis tweets, "Because before you know it, everything is in his name and he can take it away when he's mad. #WhyIStayed" (September 8, 2014), referencing the impact of economic injustice as a tool of manipulation in relationship violence. @MetaHashtivism tweets, "#WhyIStayed Because I thought that it had to be physical assault to be abuse" (September 9, 2014), citing a common misunderstanding of the multidimensionality of abuse. @NanGMbj writes, "#WhyIStayed Because he kept track of the mileage on my car and it had to match where I had been" (September 9, 2014). @MsDaneToYou writes, "He was everywhere. He stalked me online, at work, and at home. I felt like no matter what I did he would find me anyway #WhyIStayed" (September 8, 2014). These last two users both make reference to the logistical impossibility of escape.

Below are several tweets describing the hopelessness, fear, isolation, anger, gaslighting, and manipulation involved in relationship violence with various levels of complexity. Examined next to the easily defensible practical, economic, logistic, and physical violence-based reasons for staying mentioned above, these more feelings-based reasons for continuing an abusive relationship craft #WhyIStayed as not only a catalog of personal answers to the question "Why did you stay?" but also an archive of feelings.

> #WhyIStayed, because I thought if I were just a little bit nicer she'd stop hitting me (@PoderosaAna, October 20, 2015)

> #WhyIStayed I had alienated the majority of my friends and family. They were all that I thought I had left in this world (@divinenoise, September 9, 2014)

> As a Blk queer radical feminist activist I was afraid 2 tell community I was living the reality I was trying to dismantle #WhyIStayed. (@BerlinThatcher, September 8, 2014)

Anne Cvetkovich's 2003 *An Archive of Feelings* considers cultural texts as repositories of encoded emotions and practices. Because trauma is often difficult to represent, she notes that finding records of trauma requires creative archival search work. Employing Cvetkovich's strategy of min-

ing cultural texts for the feeling of trauma allows us to see these short records as encoded practices and to think creatively about how these tweets exist in relationship to larger cultural phenomena, such as the racist and sexist criminal justice system.

Rosemary Clark's 2016 analysis of #WhyIStayed unpacks the social mechanisms behind its content, visibility, and impact. The hashtag had multiple functions and took different forms. Most tweets in the hashtag were framed as an answer to the question "Why did you stay?," beginning with "Because" and offering an explanation. Clark found that the major content areas of the tweets fell into several main categories: personal stories of experiences with violence, analysis of how partner violence exists in relationship between broader systemic violence, tweets from observers calling attention to the hashtag's work, tweets addressing survivors, and tweets that comment on stories of violence in the news. Despite this range of forms, Clark argues that, collectively, the #WhyIStayed tweets shifted blame from the survivors to those who enacted the violence, a sentiment initially voiced by the hashtag's originator, Beverly Gooden (Cornish 2014), and echoed across the expansive archive of #WhyIStayed: @JMarjarie8765: "It's beyond frustrating that society continues to ask me #WhyIstayed instead of demanding of abusers #WhyDoYouAbuse #DVAM #DV @IFloridaFrowned" (October 27, 2014); @_nanyap: "The reason Beverly started #WhyIStayed was to change the conversation from 'why did she stay?' to 'why did he abuse?' #fresheyes" (October 27, 2014).

Survivors are often seen as responsible for our own trauma by educational and health care institutions as well as by media and the legal system. Blame for our own abuse also affects eligibility for disability benefits and accommodations. This perception impacts medical, psychological, and community care, as well as criminal justice processes. In October 2015 the cofounders of Love and Protect (previously the Chicago Alliance to Free Marissa Alexander) launched the project #SurvivedAndPunished, which demands the immediate release of survivors of domestic and sexual violence imprisoned for actions necessary for their survival. In a live-tweeted conference on October 24, 2015 titled "#SurvivedAndPunished," cosponsored by the Center for Race and Gender at the University of California Berkeley, a panel discussion broke down the way that survivors of sexual violence are criminalized as a result of the imbricated oppressive forces of sexism, racism, and transphobia. Windy Click, an activist and survivor of prison, described the case of a criminalized survivor who is still incarcerated. She discussed the conversation that ensued in the courtroom as the judge tried to reason why the survivor didn't leave her

abusive partner. The judge ultimately decided that she "must have loved the abuse and that's why she stayed." Due to the judge's survivor-blaming framework, the survivor was punished by the court system for not leaving her husband, and the myth of prison as a simultaneously rehabilitative and punitive space was deemed an appropriate legal response to survival. As shown in this case, unpacking this question of why survivors stay has vast implications, down to decisions surrounding survivors' fates within the criminal justice system.

The kinds of narratives deemed acceptable in answering this question often simplify survivors' experiences, validating answers that have to do with physical and economic violence and minimizing answers that involve more complex reasons that could jeopardize a survivor's image as a "good victim." Alisa Bierria asserts that the question about why survivors stay evokes a "different kind of politics of respectability," that in order to avoid victim blaming when answering this question, "survivors would have to present as sympathetic as possible" (2011–2012). Bierria argues that in not exploring this question, we minimize survivors' agency, further objectifying them. According to her, "Stigmatizing the question ultimately dis-positions survivors' subjectivities and actions, leaving little room to be frank and public about the complexity of our choices." #WhyIStayed made a clear public intervention into the stigmatization of this question, carving out space in the public sphere for honest and complex unpacking of the "less respectable" reasons survivors stay, including reasons involving love, care, community, and intergenerational trauma, among others.

This hashtag's swell of popularity resulted in large-scale shifts across media. By the end of September 2014 (the hashtag's first month in existence), news outlets across the United States, including Fox, the network that originally aired the survivor-shaming comments, adopted the premise that survivors should not be blamed for our abuse. In addition, the national hotlines often distributed with the hashtag experienced an increase in reports of relationship violence (Clark 2016). As part of the hashtag's structure, these facts were also tweeted out as reflective metacommentary on the hashtag's efficacy: @ChicagoTrust tweeted, "After the #WhyIStayed hashtag launched calls to domestic violence hotlines went up by 65%. @bevtgooden #SMWsoulinsocial #whatyoudomatters" (November 18, 2015).

Along with shifting the national narrative, #WhyIStayed fueled activists' work outside of the formal organizations that often invisibilize, reduce, or ignore the narratives of survivors who are queer, people of

color, disabled, or otherwise marginalized. Clark details the way that this hashtag, through its ability to link so many individual stories, forges a kind of networked power that grew into digital collective action. I would add that by working outside of the nonprofit industrial complex, this hashtag was able to create a survivor-centered space for individual and collective narratives that intervenes in white cis straight women-centered antiviolence work and carves out a space for more complex intersectional stories and response, especially responses that engage with the ways that the criminal justice system fails survivors.

What is a survivor-centered space?[2] According to the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, a survivor-centered approach is a way of working to end partner violence that prioritizes the "rights, needs, and wishes of the survivor" (2012). This approach applies a human rights–based approach to designing programming that ensures survivors get to actively choose the course of action in dealing with violence. Beyond a rights-based framework, a survivor-centered space is developed by and for survivors of sexual violence and stems from a respect for the fact that every survivor's experience is unique and deserves its own schema for healing. It means that methods for accountability and justice come directly from a survivor, not our advocates or allies, but from what we explicitly identify as a need in order to heal. This process can require space for personal reflection, reframing, and other support in order for a survivor to locate needs in the frame of recovery. Twitter-based survivor spaces like #WhyIStayed can fill this need, unpacking the particularity of survivors' narratives, manifesting the ways that institutional and nonprofit support fails most survivors, and simultaneously creating a space to hold these multidimensional stories and embodied experiences. These necessary spaces work to carve out public arenas for a multiplicity of survivor stories and build a movement by and for survivors. #WhyIStayed documents a movement toward and need for public spaces for discourse around intimate partner violence.

From archiving moments of transformation to sharing stories and sharing resources, #WhyIStayed is a single cultural object that plays a multitude of roles. A critical component of #WhyIStayed that has remained undertheorized is the powerful criticism of state violence and how it reinforces interpersonal violence. #WhyIStayed asks why social services fail most survivors, why survivors can't call the cops, and why the legal system does not provide the kind of justice that will serve survivors. Understanding and unraveling the content behind #WhyIStayed not only opens up questions about how intimate violence is linked to

and perpetuated by state violence; it also provides a model of collective action that centers survivors and imagines different worlds where justice is possible. In their complicity in the criminal justice system, most institutionalized and funded sexual violence response efforts have inherently cissexist, heterosexist, and racist barriers that prevent people of color, especially Black people and trans people from receiving care. Black survivors are disproportionately impacted by the anti-Black racism of these statewide systems. So it is meaningful that an African American woman, Beverley Gooden, developed and implemented #WhyIStayed. In the midst of victim support systems that were not built for her, she created her own survivor-centered organization, buffered by the press coverage and success of #WhyIStayed, the Ella Mae Foundation.

Racial and gender violence, both interpersonal and state-based, has deep historical roots, as do the survival strategies of women of color. I note this to ground #WhyIStayed as both an expressive, emotive phenomenon and simultaneously a strategic gesture that has evolved from a long lineage of activist work. Women of color have been subjected to disproportionate partner and sexual violence for centuries in the United States, beginning with violence against indigenous and enslaved people, with rape employed as a tool of political control (Collins 2005). Women of color have also performed some of the earliest anti–sexual violence activism, speaking out about systemic rape in slave narratives, post-emancipation South, and protests. "Deploying their voices as weapons in the wars against white supremacy," Black women built movements, employing their narratives in the service of civil rights and collectively working toward racial and gender justice (McGuire 2011). #WhyIStayed can be thought of as a tool with a historical lineage of leveraging personal testimony in the service of movement building, a strategy developed by Black women far before the white feminist movements of the 1970s.

#WhyIStayed as a cultural text deploys a diversity of tactics. Survivors using this hashtag express a strong discontent with the systems in place for handling partner violence cases, an aspect of this hashtag that received far less media attention than the tweets working toward destigmatizing survivors, though destigmatizing surviving and working to undo unjust systems are, of course, efforts that are integral to one another. If we listen to survivors, we find a powerful link between the need for destigmatization and decriminalization. The tweets cite the complicity of police and the criminal justice system in perpetuating partner violence, framed through a survivor's personal narrative and analysis. This analysis includes observations about how calling the police often exacerbates

physical threat and violence, how the police sometimes have an inability to listen to survivor narratives, how officers' can sometimes be cruel and unresponsive to survivors, how partner violence is more common in families of police, and, lastly, how the police tend to blame and criminalize survivors for their abuse. The tweets below reveal powerfully rendered reasons as to why the criminal justice system is ineffective and call for a different type of justice and a dismantling of the current justice system:

> #WhyIStayed because the justice system couldn't make me feel safe with a piece of paper that my abuser (and law enforcement) ignored (@MedSchoolMommy, September 9, 2014)

> #WhyIStayed so before judging victims of domestic abuse, maybe you should take a good hard look at our justice system + lack of support (@Loudina09, September 9, 2014)

> #Domesticviolence survivors are being imprisoned. This isn't justice. #waronwomen #yesallwomen #WhyIStayed (@BeatnikSolstice, January 29, 2015)

This less publicized aspect of #WhyIStayed was all but erased in the media surrounding the hashtag's spread, and this powerful work of challenging those in positions of power deserves to be raised up alongside the other important roles of this hashtag.

The Work of #WhyIStayed: Survivor Magic and Leaving Abuse

In the world of anti–sexual violence activism, which is so overwhelmingly structured by a punitive framework, imagining a future where response to sexual violence does not breed more violence demands creative labor and spaces for creative thinking, art making, and envisioning alternatives are essential. My colleague Tonika Sealy-Thompson described survivors' creative work in the midst of trauma as "transformation of trauma into alchemy" (2016). Embedded in this theory is the idea that trauma, like alchemy, can be a process of significant change, where one substance is transmuted into another. There must indeed be a trauma alchemy that makes survivors dangerous to the systems that attempt to control them;

otherwise why would survivors who defend themselves be so routinely incapacitated by the justice system? #WhyIStayed explores the resources and spaces necessary to channel life-changing, life-saving survivor magic.

#WhyIStayed, in its link to its partner hashtag, #WhyILeft, makes the act of staying ripple with the imagined and realized possibilities of escape. The tweets linking #WhyIStayed to #WhyILeft were some of them most retweeted, a reflection of their collective power (Clark 2016).

> #WhyIStayed because I thought love conquers all #WhyILeft because I was right . . . love for my son gave me the strength to protect him (@crowfeather202, June 14, 2017)

> "No one will ever love you like I do" #WhyIStayed No one should ever be "loved" like that . . . #WhyILeft (@ifthetiarafits, June 21, 2017)

> #whyistayed my son #whyileft my son (@HannahAmbuchen16, May 21, 2017)

> #WhyIStayed—he had me terrified. #WhyILeft—he had me terrified (@TearsofStars, March 2, 2017)

In the first two tweets, the users have constructed specific narratives to explain why they stayed and left. @crowfeather202 notes a kind of strength through love for their son and a desire to protect him, and @ifthetiarafits shows an evolution of how their conception of the stakes of "love" shifted. But the second two users cite the same reason for #WhyIStayed and #WhyILeft, a formula not uncommon in this archive. These users were able to manifest a story of transformation using the same phrase for each act associated with the hashtags (staying and leaving). In these two tweets, the change happens through a shift in the feeling of the account, the work happening through and beyond the language in the tweets. Often the exact tipping point between staying and leaving is narratively excised from these Twitter stories in a productive ambiguity. In the multiplicity of #WhyIStayeds and #WhyILefts, it is impossible to reduce why we stay or leave to a single reason. We have no "correct" response to "Why did you stay?," no single answer that others can be compared to for the sake of deciding who receives services and who is criminalized. This

openness shows survivors in process, occupying multiple temporal and imagined positions at once. We can think of this ability to be in multiple places at once as another element of survivor magic.

#WhyIStayed encourages us to ask, How do bodies of different movement capacities protest? From the immobilization of a partner's threats to the immobilization of incarceration, how does vital work for social change happen in moments when the body is still? Somewhere in the process of staying in an abusive relationship, the dream of a different world, or escape, is crafted from injury. @TheyDoExist__ writes, "I'm making my great escape this week. I have no idea where I'm going but I'm getting out of here. #WhyIStayed #DomesticViolence" (June 2, 2017). @didipuppy85 tweets, "Tomorrow is the day. I can't believe this is happening. 4 years #whyistayed and now I'm leaving. Up and away" (April 4, 2017). Users on the cusp of escape express a different genre of feeling for this archive—one of hope, excitement, disbelief. As each of these tweets suggests, #WhyIStayed not only contains an explanation of why survivors stay; it also provides space for the feelings of survivors on the edge of leaving. These users' tweets show that in creating space for complexity, #WhyIStayed acts as an archive of moments of life-changing transformation in the midst of immobilization, suffering, or injury.

When I first witnessed #WhyIStayed and #WhyILeft, I experienced its collective resonance in my body. As I read the tweets, I felt a knowingness in my bones, a tightness around my diaphragm, and a sense of coming home. These stories expressed feelings and experiences I had never seen shared publicly. I remember watching the swell of tweets that September and feeling my own history rise up. My experiences with relationship violence were present in my body, but not in a familiar way, like when I would have flashbacks or panic attacks. Rather, I felt my own #WhyILeft present with my #WhyIStayed, and I experienced a sense of togetherness with the thousands of other survivors sharing our stories. My body was heavy with my story of surviving that I had carried alone for so many years, and it was also held in connection with thousands of other bodies that carried different resonances of surviving across vastly different experiences. I felt an abundance of power in our collective #WhyILefts. This was my first experience with survivor magic, the feeling that if we can survive such impossible situations, we have the power to destroy impossible systems and build something new.

#WhyIStayed functions as a space for suffering, pain, hurt, inaction, or stillness. It is simultaneously a space for feeling, believing, reflecting, and imagining, and it allows us to think of these immobile, often

invisible acts as forms of change making that can result in large-scale cultural shifts. One of Gooden's more recent uses of the hashtag was a call for donations for the Bolt Bag Project, an initiative of her organization, the Ella Mae Foundation. This project fills bags with necessities survivors may need upon leaving an abusive partner, such as toiletries, grocery store gift cards, and diapers, providing the opportunity for a speedy escape. Gooden communicated their availability and calls for donations via Twitter using #WhyIStayed and #WhyILeft. In addition, Gooden's Bolt Bag site contains an "escape" button that allows users to swiftly exit the Bolt Bag website and automatically redirects the page to *weather.com.* This functions as a protective and defensive mechanism for a person in a violent home situation, where their computer usage might be observed or tracked. The boundaries between escaping and staying are blurred in the realm of the virtual where closing a window is a form of escape, linked to the desire for a larger-scale escape from a relationship. Gooden's work provides support for multiple modes of care, understanding that they're linked: she initiated #WhyIStayed to facilitate the sharing of emotional support among survivors but has also shipped out nearly one thousand Bolt Bags to people escaping violence (Obie 2017).

Rethinking the relationship between these different scales of action, survivors imagine and desire different worlds even as we stay in violent relationships. When we consider desire itself as doing powerful work, we are thinking queerly about the futural possibilities of a body that stays, a body full of small gestures and feelings, vibrating with potential movement, which changes assumptions about the impact, size, mobility, and speed of agency. Laurence Ralph (2014) theorizes the power of dreaming in the midst of injury in his work with residents of Chicago's Eastwood neighborhood. He discusses dreams as the material of change that reimagine how life could be, a future-oriented perspective where survivors of violence dream up alternatives to the ways things are, informed by past narratives of injury. He writes, speaking of physical disability caused by gang violence, "Dreams keep people moving in spite of paralysis" (8), suggesting that immobilized bodies have a great capacity for radical, defiant, community-building dreaming work. Our language for social movements contains an ableism that #WhyIStayed challenges when it presents staying as a space where desiring, dreaming, and hoping can create radical change.

This challenge to ableism in antiviolence movements is essential, since survivors' bodies and minds are often permanently affected by the trauma they have experienced and the disabilities they may suffer as a re-

sult of trauma. In addition, the experiences of survivors with disabilities are often underreported and underdiscussed in sexual violence activism. People with disabilities experience violent crime at three times the rate of people without disabilities (Bureau of Justice 2012), and when they attempt to seek help or accommodations, the resources available are often not equipped to meet their needs (Scully 2016). Disability and queer studies scholar Alison Kafer offers a theory of how trauma-based disabilities impact the embodied experience of time. She suggests that people who have post-traumatic stress disorder, which often accompanies experiences of trauma, live in a kind of "anticipatory time," constantly scanning for future events that might contain a trigger. This relationship to time involves a projection of one's body into the future while still inhabiting one's body in the present. This theory offers a parallel to Ralph's description of history-informed dreams of the future, survivors' bodies holding the capacity for experiencing a multiplicity of time frames. I write this with care, noting that seeing disability as a resource does not discount the challenges of living with a disability or the experience of the oppression of an ableist world. This ability to hold multiple experiences of time appears virtually in the space between #WhyIStayed and #WhyILeft, the body in each of these hashtags stretched across temporal moments. The futural glance of the hashtags, which point to a journey toward leaving, a state of having left, or a desire to leave, suggest another aspect of anticipatory time. Along with its debilitating aspects, it is possible that experiences of anticipatory time give survivors a perspective into the future. This unique sense of time may exist as a resource that allows us to experience time in a different way, where we see things others do not and anticipate alternatives.

In the service of embodying the act of staying, I'd like to address something obvious yet often unspoken in academia: writing about surviving violence as a survivor is physically, emotionally, and mentally exhausting. Often in academic settings we write and teach as if we can escape our bodies. Staying with this space of trauma and envisioning trauma as transformative takes work—grueling, painful, tedious, personal work that is unpaid and unacknowledged. The only spaces where I have felt held enough to do this work have been survivor-centered spaces, writing with other survivors of relationship violence whose care, thoughtfulness, and encouragement has made entering into this archive possible, especially as my own relationship with physical disability has shifted. I have deep love and gratitude for my survivor babes and mentors who have allowed me to show up as my whole self, my broken pieces valued as

resources. The quality of this writing may feel fractured, disjointed, and this broken quality is a bodily relic of my writing process. It's likely that fissures in this writing, such as the need for vastly more work on disability and sexual violence, are openings for further connective work.

#WhyIStayed's archive of feelings does political and personal work on a multitude of levels. It clearly shifted media representation of survivors and shifted blame from survivors to perpetrators. It creates a survivor-centered space for a vast diversity and complexity of experiences with partner violence to coexist, moving away from one specific model of "respectable" survivor stories. This hashtag encourages a vigorous critique of the systems currently in place for responding to sexual violence, as systems that perpetuate cycles of violence. Lastly, the hashtag constructs "staying" as a space of potential transformation, lifting up moments where staying becomes leaving, where survivors are able to manifest our magic and to dream different futures for ourselves. Staying with #WhyIStayed reveals how this hashtag works on multiple cultural levels, using a multitude of strategies to shift narratives and assumptions surrounding staying with an abusive partner. #WhyIStayed works to take down the systems and frameworks that do not serve survivors and to build new ones by and for survivors in their place, and it manifests how survivors do this work in the midst of scarcity and trauma, surfacing the complexity and possibility within the act of staying.

Deep gratitude to Naomi Permutt, Erica Cardwell, Tonika Sealy-Thompson, Kenly Brown, Malika Imhotep, Clare Stinchcombe, Katrina De Wees, Beezer de Martelly, Natalia Duong, Rosalind Diaz, and Abigail De Kosnik for their invaluable feedback and support in the writing of this chapter.

Notes

1. Though tweets are publicly available, because of the deeply personal content of these tweets, users have been made anonymous.

2. My use of this term evolves from the Survivors' Symposium held at UC Berkeley in April 2016. This event was cocreated by students, workers, activists, and artists responding to a lack of administrative response around multiple cases of gender-based violence on campus. We wanted to create a space that responded across institutional hierarchies, taking into account the relative power and precarity of survivors' positions on campus, from the janitorial staff to tenured faculty. This symposium, which evolved from collaborations with local and national organizations such as BAWAR (Bay Area Women Against Rape),

Force: Upsetting Rape Culture (a national art activist organization aiming to upset the dominant culture of rape and promote a counter culture of consent), and Disclose (a queer Oakland-based art collective addressing sexual violence), as well as the UC Student-Workers Union, aimed to move activism away from a punitive dependence on the criminal justice system and university policy and toward raising up the diversity of tactics that we use to recover from sexual violence and strategies of accountability and response that can be implemented through grassroots action.

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NINE | #gentrification, Cultural Erasure, and the (Im)possibilities of Digital Queer Gestures

JOSÉ RAMÓN LIZÁRRAGA AND ARTURO CORTÉZ

At a San Francisco memorial for Juan Gabriel, Latinx drag queen Persia took the stage to lip-synch Gabriel's "Amor Eterno" while wearing a nude-colored bodysuit and black sombrero, all of which conjured a classed queerness and Latinidad.[1] Persia is a mainstay in the vanishing Latinx queer scene in San Francisco, and her online activism and drag performances, including this tribute to Juanga, are part of her larger repertoire that explores the relationship between gentrification, race, class, and Latinx pop iconography. While people gathered at this public event to grieve Juanga's recent passing, Persia's performance challenged the audience to expand their feelings of loss to include the displacement—indeed, the erasure—of San Francisco's Latinx queer community.

Broadly, Persia's performances centralize how the recent expansion of technology-related industries have advanced spatial, cultural, and demographic shifts across the San Francisco Bay Area (Hutson 2015). Specifically, she foregrounds how the city of San Francisco—like cities around the world (Gulson 2011)—is promulgating social and spatial projects of displacement, dispossession, and gentrification in ways that are racialized, classed, sexualized, and gendered. In this respect, the city is increasingly being organized to serve the social and economic interests of its white, wealthy residents and the newly arrived technology workers. However, Persia invites us to consider how race, class, and sexuality converge to amputate, evict, and discipline the depraved and perverse practices of San Francisco's Black and Brown queers, in order to create sanitized gay homonormative subjects (Duggan 2002) of the city.

Of relevance to this chapter, we examine how Persia's work across digital and analog stages stimulates collective resistance practices against the deep entrenchment and advancement of the homonormative project already under way in San Francisco. In particular, we make visible the collective imaginings percolating across Persia's Twitter network as her fans, audience, and students engage in practices that are simultaneously dignity-affirming (Espinoza and Vossoughi 2014) and challenge the dominant order. On Persia's Twitter network we pay special attention to those practices and artifacts—what we have to come to call *digital queer gestures*—that move across and between the digital and physical domains as queer Latinxs imagine and organize for new futures. While we illuminate the practices of Persia, we further examine how her queerness is taken up, hybridized, and remixed to expand a collective understanding (indeed the learning) of the effects of gentrification from a racialized, sexualized, and classed perspective.

We highlight Persia's digital queer gesture as public pedagogy (Reid 2010; Savage 2010), or the learning that occurs in public spaces, popular culture, and political movements. We regard Persia as what Paulo Freire (2005) would call a *cultural worker*: one who actively resists the binaristic division of the personal and professional identities of a teacher and brings her engagement with social issues to bear in her daily work with learners. We claim that Persia is a teacher who engages in the political cultural work in ways that Henry Giroux describes as mobilizing "knowledge and desires that may lead in minimizing the degree of oppression in people's lives" (2005, 5). In our view, she is a teacher who, as Diaz and Flores (2001) propose, understands the histories of the practices of her students and knows how to imagine something new with them, a queer future. The work we explore here follows the same logic; it resists providing an answer and seeks to catalyze new conversations, practices, and subversions that gesture toward the unknown. Like many queer encounters, "Google Google Apps Apps," the digital queer gesture we feature, begins with a glance that turns to the horizon, perhaps hoping to find the secret meeting place that leads to a long, sweaty, and intense night of corporeal, linguistic, and aesthetic boundary crossing.

"Google Google Apps Apps": A Digital Queer Gesture

In the following, we present Persia's music video "Google Google Apps Apps" (2013)—a protest of the erasure, eviction, and extermination of queer Latinxs in San Francisco—as an example of a digital queer ges-

ture. As a queer gesture, building on the work of Juana María Rodríguez, the video "inspire[s] intense feeling rather than reproduction; it is multisensory, asynchronic, polysemous, perverse, and full of promise" (2014, 1). In effect, "Google Google Apps Apps" jars you out of time and space by offering a dystopically utopian, racialized, classed, and sexualized rendering of gentrification in the city. The video names the pain, the grittiness, and the sexiness that queer Latinxs are experiencing in San Francisco. It is in this affinity that Persia invites us to build toward the not-yet-here (Muñoz 2009).

By blending the semiotic affordances of video, audio, and text in the digital realm, the queer gesture is animated, hybridized, and revived across time and space to inspire queer Latinxs to disrupt taken-for-granted normative practices and discourses. In this respect, the digital character of this queer gesture extends the shelf life of its influence and amplifies, while also interrogating, a racialized and queer telos rather than offering a concrete solution. We see the practices and artifacts that emerge on Persia's Twitter network as the residue of a queer Latinx community learning to heal and transform the present conditions. And in this learning we examine the pedagogical potential of a digital queer gesture as queer Latinxs make use of the affordances of such digital practices to imagine a new world.

Persia identifies the intended audience of the music video within the first few seconds by deploying images, sounds, and lyrics familiar to queer Latinxs. Accompanied by a pulsating electronic musical score, the piece opens with Persia dancing in front of rapidly disappearing and pixelated Google Map street views across the San Francisco Bay Area (fig. 9.1, frame 1). Queer Latinxs are figuratively and literally lost in space as they try to find their footing on an unstable, shifting landscape. Persia invokes this feeling of forced migration and instability by calling out to her audience, "Queers. All the queers. Queers. We're on the move! Hey gurl, where the fuck are you moving to?" The ensemble responds to this *queery* with "Moving to the East Bay, living like a broke *güey*. S.F. [San Francisco], keep your money. Fuck your money!" In the universe of the video, queer Latinxs are experiencing displacement such that their only option is to move to the East Bay—understood as the Blacker, Browner, and poorer side of the Bay Area, the non-desirable space. Even in this movement to find stability, however, queer Latinxs remain "broke." As such, this video functions as a rallying cry for displaced Black and Brown queers while simultaneously, in our view, excluding the white homonormative subject (Duggan 2002). For example, we note Persia's deploy-

Figure 9.1. Selected frames from *Google Google Apps Apps* video.

ment of the colloquial Spanish word *güey* to serve as a reminder that Latinxs are the intended audience of this digital queer gesture.

By connecting the expansion of whiteness across cultural, social, and spatial domains to the rise of technology industry, "Google Google Apps Apps" examines how Black and Brown bodies, the corporeal geographies, are being disciplined. Persia offers queer Latinxs two choices as the wave of whiteness crashes ashore in San Francisco: engage in the corporeal displacement of Brown and Black skin or live in exile. For example, as stories unfold across multiple sites in the city, Persia turns to a toy store, where a Latinx character begs on her knees for whiteness: "I wanna be white, Daddy. Daddy, please. Daddy, please." Persia replies with "For Christmas, gurl. For Christmas," while throwing a computer-generated Christmas tree atop the supplicant (fig. 9.1, frame 3). The impossibility of becoming white is indexed in Persia's response, "for Christmas, gurl," as she redirects the child to wait until a distant future, whereby the child's request will hopefully be forgotten—a common strategy employed by parents. In addition, "Google Google Apps Apps" is suggesting that the desirability of whiteness demands that queer Latinxs engage

in self-disciplining practices: in order to live in San Francisco, we must trade in our skin color, our culture, and, indeed, our self-worth. This is further exemplified later in the video. In a scene set in a hair salon, two supporting characters have a discussion about how one becomes white, with one saying, "A little bleach might do the trick." The second actor responds, "I bleach my asshole, does that count?" To fulfill the promise of normativity and to remedy the feeling of being lost in space, whiteness must be purchased and consumed. In this sense whiteness becomes a commodity and a seductive force that demands corporeal and spatial displacement of Blackness and Brownness.

As a queer gesture, Persia's music video challenges her audience to reconcile two undesirable options. This is punctuated in the latter part of the video when we see Persia and the others applying swirls of white makeup on their faces (fig. 9.1, frame 4) as they sing, "Gentrify me, gentrify my love." The desire to become white by the nonwhite protagonists of the video offers an absurd solution to the damaging effects of the technology industry, with the white makeup obfuscating and cleaning the proverbial undesired dirtiness of the Black and Brown skin. It offers a false hope for survival in a violently transforming city. Is becoming white the only escape? The audience must perpetually confront this question as the refrain repeats, "Google Google Apps Apps. Google Google Apps Apps. Gringa Gringa Apps Apps. I just wanna wanna be white."

We contend that "Google Google Apps Apps," as a queer gesture, is deploying campy and raunchy aesthetics to illuminate the absurdity of such a proposition of escape while simultaneously inviting queer Latinxs to imagine and articulate an unsanitized futurity. Following Vargas (2014), *lo sucio*—that which is dirty—is an aesthetic instantiation of "lewd, obscene, offensive hypersexual undisciplined bodies" (716) that aids in "cultivat[ing] a presence and lingering perseverance of queer sex and joy within neoliberal hetero- and homonormative violences" (715). By exalting queer dirtiness and raunchiness, lo sucio, the video decenters and nuances dominant critiques of gentrification by exploring how queer Latinxs contend with the technology industry corporeally, spatially, and culturally. To overcome these constraints, the video demands that queer Latinxs engage in disidentification (Muñoz 1999) in order to "tactically and simultaneously work on, with, and against a cultural form" (12)—that is, an active refusal to either identify or not identify with dominant cultural norms.

Living up to its queer sucio aesthetics, the video does little to offer a concrete or normative solution—an approach that we see as pedagogical—

to the damaging effects of a racialized, sexualized, and classed spatial project. Conversion to whiteness, though presented insouciantly as an object of longing in the lyrics, cannot be seen as a proposed solution. Rather, the absurdity of this wish highlights the limitations to searching for remedies through a white heteronormative and homonormative conception of time and space. Persia and her collaborators instead offer an opening to resistance and resilience in the face of such circumstances by deploying and developing a Brown queer temporal and spatial analytic. This digital queer gesture travels across vast digital and physical terrains to inspire members of Persia's ecology to imagine a new possible future, toward the "not yet queer" (Muñoz 2009, 22).

A Permeating Gesture: Queerness as Pedagogical across Ecologies

The queer gesture of "Google Google Apps Apps" lives on ephemerally, as residue, a trace or a glimmer (Muñoz 2009). In this respect, queer gestures are distinctly material but possess a malleability, a dynamism that resists stasis and permanence as queer people transform fleeting moments into queer futurities (Muñoz 1996, 12). José Esteban Muñoz contends that queer art and memoir, material artifacts, engage queer subjects with and in queer world-making tools and practices to disrupt and glitch normative time and space (2009, 131). "Google Google Apps Apps," one such queer artifact, has inspired individual and collective learning across and within queer Latinx communities experiencing spatial, cultural, and social gentrification. We document this learning by examining how one such member of the community– a Twitter user– blends genres and texts to heighten, expand, and broaden the public narrative around gentrification and displacement in San Francisco. In addition, we look to Persia's experiences in the classroom to examine how the queer residue of "Google Google Apps Apps" traverses the boundaries of the digital and physical contexts of Persia's vast ecology.

Twitter, Public Pedagogy, and Queer Residue

The queer residue of the music video manifests as #googlegoogleappsapps, as well as the deployment of digital media practices across Twitter. In this respect, Twitter, as a digital tool, gives us an opportunity to trace the movement of an idea—in this case, a digital queer gesture—as it is taken up, reshaped, and spread across and into the world. For example, the hashtag #googlegoogleappsapps, reveals how Persia's campy

manifesto is deployed and taken up across the network. Between July 2, 2013, when the video was first posted on Twitter, and the writing of this chapter in summer 2017, #googlegoogleappsapps has been paired with other digital content (e.g., images, news articles, and live performances), including the following hashtags: #gentrification, #iwannabewhite, #stopbeingpoor, and #duhbye. We pay special attention to such digital media practices—that is, the hybridizing and remixing of various content—as a window into the individual and collective learning reverberating throughout Twitter as a result of the deployment of "Google Google Apps Apps" and #googlegoogleappsapps.

For example, one of Persia's followers uses the hashtag—hearkening to the campy, sarcastic, raunchy critique—along with a link to a news article detailing a family's recent experience with displacement (Fagan 2013). This tweet combines the genres of journalism and pop culture, perhaps to underscore the racialized, classed, and sexualized advances of gentrification, of which the article was particularly tone deaf, in our opinion. In San Francisco public discourse around the recent expansion of the technology industry tends to portray displacement and evictions as incidental to "urban renewal"; in other words, Black, Brown, Asian, poor, and queer bodies are collateral damage to a city undergoing "beautification," indeed sanitization. This tweet highlights the pedagogical potential of "Google Google Apps Apps" as a way to shift and broaden larger normative discourses around gentrification that tend to be deracialized and desexualized.

In this respect, the tweet in figure 9.2 serves as critical public pedagogy that juxtaposes visuals and texts (and their respective semiotic affordances) in order to amplify a "robust dialogue, challenging [the public] to think critically about received knowledge and energizing them to recognize their own power as individual and social agents" (Giroux 2005, 25). As Alex Reid (2010) has argued, Twitter and other digitized networks have enhanced our ability to engage in a kind of bricolage (de Certeau 1984), a tinkering and remixing, that allows us to construct alternative narratives against those of dominant institutions.

From a literacy and learning perspective, we see the above example of combining genres as a form of *intertextuality* (Briggs and Bauman 1992), a device that attends to the interrelationship between texts (e.g., words, images, sounds, etc.) and focuses on the new ever changing meaning that emerges through hybridization and remixing (146–47). Following scholars of sociocultural literacy (Gutiérrez, Bien, Selland, and Pierce 2011; Gutiérrez and Jurow 2016), we see these practices as the creation

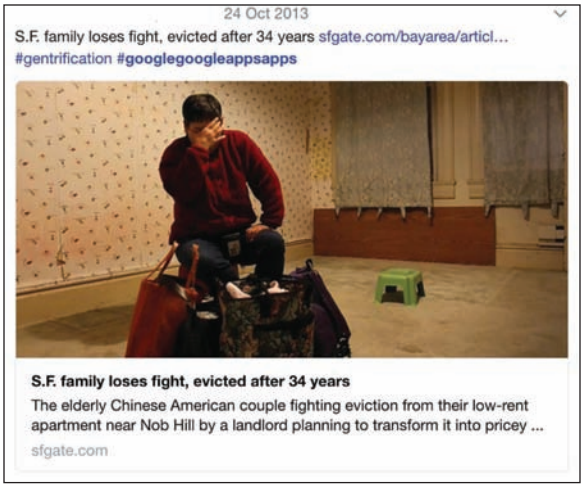

Figure 9.2. Tweet posted on October 24, 2013, using #googlegoogle-appsapps.

of collective *syncretic texts*, reflexive artifacts organized toward the development and imagining of new futures. Occurring on the public digital stage, we see such practices and remixed artifacts as representative of the individual and collective learning—that is, the queer residue of a public pedagogy. In the following section, we further expand on the pedagogical potential of the digital queer gesture's ephemera as it permeates the physical context of Persia's school.

Crossing Borders: Twitter, Queerness, and the Classroom

Persia maintains a relatively public social media presence, which is unusual for most educators, as they tend to maintain strict boundaries between their online personas and their professional, in-school identities (Davis 2016). The openness of Persia's social media presence (particularly on Twitter), however, makes it possible for the ephemera of her queer gestures to permeate the various contexts of her ecology, including that of the school where she works. In this section, we purposely use our participant' names and associated gender pronouns, of Socrates and Persia interchangeably. Doing so highlights the fluidity of their identity and how the deployment of her queer gestures permeates the various virtual and physical contexts that she navigates. We believe, as illustrated above, that Persia adeptly uses digital tools to deepen a historical engagement with broader social issues in the school, sometimes with the help of other mass media outlets.

In March 2015 (two years after the viral "Google Google Apps Apps" video was published), the online magazine *4U Mag* published a bilingual article written by Persia titled "Gurl, Bye: A San Francisco Drag Queen Teaches Fourth Graders About Gender." This article, to which she linked on her Twitter and Facebook networks, documents his experiences as an educator and daytime persona of Socrates. In the piece, Persia speaks of her openness about his gender fluidity in a context where students, faculty, and staff have accepted him for all her gender nonconformity and where he feels love and appreciation. Socrates/Persia describes an environment where, as she says, "I don't hide who I am. . . . I don't want them [students] to hide who they are" (interview, April 15, 2015). The article details Persia's unabashed and unabated queer gestures that manifest in outfits that she describes in her article as consisting of "leopard coats and sequins on everything—pants, jackets and scarves," and through her use of "gurl" when addressing both her male and female fourth-grade students. According to Persia, this latter gesture had long been part of her lexicon as a nightlife performer, but in this context it was deployed to concertedly counter the ubiquitous use of "guys" in her school. In her article she explains, "I've realized that when you use queer lingo, like 'GURL' and 'GURL, BYE,' it gives kids a chance to think about sexism within our language."

In her interview with us, she explains how the travel of her digital queerness is indexed by the reaction of one of her students to the article. Persia recounts this interaction: "And, she said . . . 'I read your article . . . Gurrl Bye.' (laughs). I was like, 'ugh.' I was so embarrassed. It was just so funny. And a lot of parents from other grades were thanking me for exposing myself in such a way" (Interview, April 15, 2015). In her interview, Persia speaks of initially feeling nervous about parents and other adults recognizing her from the clubs and her very public presence online, her out-of-school digital queer gestures. The online viral spread of "Google Google Apps Apps," however, made this compartmentalization impossible. Recently, in 2017, Persia posted the following on her social media accounts:

> When you're on a field trip with the kids and suddenly they start singing, "Google Google Apps Apps, I just wanna be white. For xmas Gurl. Where the fudge are you moving to?" I CANNOT!

Without prompting, the ephemera of Persia's famous music video manifested unexpectedly in the physical context of her ecology. The lyrics

were cleverly adapted, undoubtedly, to conform to norms of comportment expected from elementary school–age students. However, the primary message remained and was powerfully ventriloquized by young voices.

By adopting a figurative definition of gestures, we contend that activities in digital environments constitute what Rodríguez refers to as gestures that "register the actions of the body politic" (2014, 4). The deployment of a text, an intentional digital connection, the posting of a picture, can suggest one's queerness as much as a swish of the hip, a limping of a wrist, or a lisping of a word. And in her physical interactions those gestures are even more concrete, modeled, and taken up by the young people in her ecology. Persia's digital and embodied queerness coalesce here, and her students take them up and consequently begin expressing *queer Brown futurities.*

Concluding Thoughts/Future Directions

In this brief introduction to Persia and her digital queer gestures, we learn how she and her network repurpose Twitter to act against a threat to their identities. Through her analog and digital performances, Persia is able to reframe the past and present for the future, to contribute to the social imagination, toward prolepsis (Cole 2006). Rodríguez reminds us that "Identity is about situatedness in motion: embodiment and spatiality" (2003, 5). This statement speaks to the dynamic nature and perpetual shakiness of identity, particularly for Black and Brown queers. In her interview, Persia explains how she is learning how to reconcile her place in history and living in what Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) has called the borderlands. She sees herself/himself as being *ni de aqui ni de alla* (nor from here or there). Her conscious liminality allows her to leverage her everyday identities and deploy queer gestures across her digital and analog domains of practice, unabashedly. In effect, this diffusion of her identities and political activism blurs the boundaries between her professional identity as an educator and her very important activist work against dispossession.

Taking a sociohistorical, ecological, and equity-oriented stance on teaching and learning, as we have done here, requires scholars to look at the role of digital social media use anew. This is an especially important consideration in a culture where educators typically close off their digital selves to the rest of their ecology, as Janine S. Davis (2016) reminds us in her work with preservice teachers and their use of Twitter. In this respect,

Persia appears unconcerned with "collapsed contexts"—where multiple audiences might intersect in unexpected or unintended ways (boyd 2014). All of her audiences, including youth, have access to the complex nature of her identities, serving as openings to new conversations, new individual and collective practices, and to new queer world-making.

In keeping with our humanizing, future-oriented, ecological commitments, we counter overdeterministic views of the role of tools and people as they engage in sociocultural phenomena. We contend that it was not solely Twitter as a tool or Persia as an exceptional node in a network that facilitated learning. Alternatively, we see learning emerging and expanding as people engage in joint activity, across time and space, as they repurpose digital tools to transcend everyday contradictions. Of consequence to transformative learning practices and pedagogy, "Google Google Apps Apps" does not identify a specific protocol or recipe for revolution. It humanizes opportunities for individual and collective learning by inviting queer Latinxs to build on their culture in order to overcome a dilemma that has meaning in their everyday lives.

Embedded in Persia's expansive oeuvre, we see how the pedagogical intersects with digital media, with very important applications for consequential learning (Gutiérrez 2008). We believe that digital tools can help us look at the past. However, we are compelled to examine—perhaps because of the applied nature of education research—how our own work and view of the past can be used toward transformative ends in the future. We believe digital tools can be leveraged to interrogate power in order to dismantle systems of oppression, as we have seen Persia and her network begin to engage in such practices here. This can be especially generative for the teachers, cultural workers, and mediators who desire, hunger, and yearn for equity.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank Dr. Kris D. Gutiérrez for her guidance throughout the writing of this essay.

Notes

1. Alberto Aguilera Valadez, better known by his stage names Juan Gabriel and Juanga, was a Mexican composer and singer whose career spanned more than forty years. We utilize the gender-neutral term "Latinx" to describe Persia, as it was self-reported. However, we use the terms "Black" and "Brown" to describe the specific nondominant communities that were part of our study to pur-

posely index the practices inscribed in the racializing projects, which promote whiteness, examined herein.

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TEN | Hashtag Television

On-Screen Branding, Second-Screen Viewing, and Emerging Modes of Television Audience Interaction

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After only approximately a decade of existence, Twitter is one of the most widespread internationally used social media platforms (Guest 2016). In June 2017 *Adweek* noted, "More than 2.9 billion social interactions across Facebook and Twitter were recorded during the just-concluded 2016–2017 TV season, according to Nielsen's Social Content Ratings" (Main 2017), a use promoted and encouraged by shows and the networks on which they air.[1] Since the great success of Comedy Central's application of the on-screen hashtag #trumproast throughout the *Comedy Central Roast of Donald Trump* in 2011 (Schneider 2011), television producers have tried to make Twitter hashtags, and the new genres of conversation that they facilitate, a routinized part of television viewing. Various series now have official Twitter accounts, and many series' writing teams, actors, and even fictional characters have their own official Twitter accounts as well.[2] Much of the existing scholarship on Twitter and television analyzes how fans are affected by the ability to interact with television producers via hashtags and how second-screen viewing shifts viewers' understanding and sense of audience participation.[3] This chapter does not focus on the hashtags that fans create for television programs but instead examines "official" hashtags—hashtags created by networks and shows and displayed on-screen while a show airs or streams. I am not suggesting that official hashtags have replaced fan-produced hashtags but rather that official hashtags serve functions beyond mere promotion. In

other words, I argue that official hashtags can be deployed for multiple ends—importantly, including sociopolitical ones—and that the assumed dichotomy between fan hashtags as "authentic" representations of audiences' responses to a show and official hashtags as mere marketing ploys is not at all a clear divide. By analyzing the unusual and effective uses of hashtags by television shows *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Logo 2009–2016; VH1 2017–present) and *Jane the Virgin* (CW 2014–present), I question the perceived passivity usually associated with "hashtag activism" and propose an important community-building function for a shared television experience using official hashtags.

Official hashtags are integrated into the visual frame of the viewing experience itself and help to thematically organize conversations on and across social media platforms.[4] An official hashtag for a series is usually simply the name of the series, or an abbreviation thereof, with a pound sign preceding it—for example, #PLL for the ABC show *Pretty Little Liars*, #Survivor for the CBS show *Survivor*. Occasionally, a network's or series' social media team devise a hashtag that summarizes or highlights particular diegetic events (such as #WhoShotFitz for ABC's *Scandal*, displayed on episodes that followed an assassination attempt on one of the main characters, President Fitzgerald "Fitz" Grant). Official hashtags usually appear in semitransparent type in the corner (usually the lower-right corner) of the frame of every episode, either intermittently (appearing and disappearing throughout the episode) or persistently (remaining visible throughout the entire episode); the frequency and duration of each hashtag's appearance varies among different series. Networks must balance the desire to encourage audiences' social media engagement against the potential irritation some viewers might feel if they find hashtag displays obtrusive or distracting.

Donatella Selva notes that "social television is a practice of audience engagement resulting in interactions more than participation. . . . Social television practices legitimate television as a central front stage (more than a source of information) where politics actually happens" (2016, 170). This chapter asks how official hashtags shape the types of engagement that Selva describes and how these hashtags can foster a deeper sense of community among viewers by encouraging *socially conscious viewership*, by which I mean a viewing practice that enhances awareness of topical issues and their impact on underrepresented minorities. In order to consider how official hashtags can perform a progressive political function, I now turn my focus to my two case study television shows,

RuPaul's Drag Race and *Jane the Virgin*, and how each employs social media, particularly Twitter.

Niche Markets and Hashtag Communities around Brands

One of the primary reasons for television shows to craft official hashtags is to encourage appointment viewing—that is, to incite second-screen tweeting during live broadcasts and to inspire FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) in regular viewers who fail to participate in real-time Twitter discussions about a series. Hye Jin Lee and Mark Andrejevic write, "The second-screen promise is to reassemble audiences around viewing-as-shared-event and to thereby reconfigure a version of television viewing as social ritual—not because viewing cannot be time-shifted, but because doing so would mean losing out on a proliferating array of interactive affordances and the forms of social networking they enable" (2013, 43). While the rise of official hashtags since 2011 can be viewed as a mercenary attempt by networks to regulate the temporality of viewers' engagement with the show in a way that financially benefits them (high live viewing ratings generally correlate to high ad revenues), hashtags also serve viewers, both as time markers and as facilitators of fan conversation. Hashtags are time sensitive. Although a hashtag often continues on after the live premiere and subsequent online premiere the day after, the effectiveness of hashtag use for participating in the community declines rapidly. Beyond this mainstream use of hashtags to encourage appointment viewing, shows aimed at narrower demographics use hashtags to draw on and draw out an expanded imagined viewer community through Twitter. In his work on imagined communities, Benedict Anderson claimed, "An American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his 240,000,000-odd fellow-Americans. He has no idea of what they are up to at any one time. But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity" (2006, 26). David Morley, tracing this idea of "anonymous, simultaneous activity" through the nightly broadcast news as a unifying medium, predicted in 1992 that as channel options multiplied, this reliably social (if separated) audience experience would be shattered: "In a world of niche marketing and narrowcasting, many of us will have less and less broadcast experience in common with anyone else. Our communities may, to that extent, be imagined along more fragmented lines" (1992, 256). In the late 2010s, when "niche marketing and narrowcasting" have become the norm for a great deal of

media distribution, social platforms such as Twitter can counteract fragmentation by helping communities to form online and by helping users find communities to which they want to belong. Hashtags, then, become an organizing tool for virtual communities; they solidify imagined communities into visible ones and enable them to be found and easily joined. While there is much to be said about the ways that narrowcasting divides societies, one of narrowcasting's prosocial benefits is its promotion and facilitation of communities organized around niche interests and the subsequent increased visibility of those constituencies, which may have been rendered marginal and invisible in the period when broadcasting was dominant.

The official hashtags of *RuPaul's Drag Race* (*RPDR*; 2009–present) offer one notable example of how community-building takes place via Twitter. The show's use of social media, particularly of Twitter, demonstrates its producers' investment in advancing the mainstream awareness and appreciation of drag culture and the creation of fandoms for drag performers, alongside their commitment to building and promoting the RuPaul brand. *RPDR* has evolved its use of on-screen hashtags over the course of its seasons. The show is a reality competition with approximately fourteen drag queens (the contestants are referred to simply as "the queens") competing each season for the title of "America's Next Drag Superstar." In early seasons, #DragRace was codified as the show's official on-screen hashtag; what is unique about the show is the self-aware brand and community building through social media. Then, in season 3, RuPaul began to "speak in hashtag," concluding the final reunion episode of that season with "And if you still can't get enough, follow me on Twitter, and we will become Life. Long. Friends. Hashtag Friends Forever." The season 4 premiere instituted the title of each episode, or the name of the main challenge of the episode, as a promoted hashtag, rolled out on a pink banner from the lower-left corner of the screen—for the first episode of that season, the rolled-out tag was "#RuPocalypse." In that hashtag and all subsequent tags customized for each episode, the show constantly promoted RuPaul's brand humorously, tongue fixed firmly in cheek. In addition to these title-based hashtags, season 5 introduced hashtags that invited comment on the proceedings of the episode (#DoubleElimination, for example, for the first double elimination in *RPDR* history), as well as particularly comedic throwaway comments (#CaftanCollection, for example, to accompany a montage sequence of one queen who wore only caftans for her runway looks). While the official on-screen hashtag, #DragRace, is intermittently displayed, these

other official hashtags that occasionally pop up on the screen help to attract and guide the audience's attention to the "hashtaggable" nature of the spoken dialogue on the show, its major events, and its quips and jokes, both visual and verbal.

In addition to the show displaying myriad official tags on the screen and RuPaul occasionally "speaking in hashtags," individual contestants also promote themselves by coining hashtags for themselves. These "spoken word hashtags" help the queens found and build their own brands, just as the series' hashtags and RuPaul's verbal hashtags contribute to the popularity of *RPDR*'s and RuPaul's brands. By "spoken word hashtags," I mean the vernacular catchphrases that the queens coin and frequently repeat over the course of the competition. Some notable examples include season 8 contestant Bob the Drag Queen's "Walk into the room purse first," which became #PurseFirst and the title of his first pop music single, and season 8 and 9's Cynthia Lee Fontaine's "Have you seen my cucu [butt]?," which fans immediately rendered as #cucu and used as the basis for variations, including #MissCucugeniality. Since season 5 or 6, when contestants began "speaking in hashtag," it has seemed evident that a key component in having a successful run on *RPDR* is to make quips that are immanently "hashtaggable." While queens are not permitted access to social media while filming—common on reality television shows—each queen nevertheless uses her time on the show to craft a strong identity that will attract fans. RuPaul, as host and mentor, encourages the contestants to speak, as he does, in catchphrases meant to be quoted and spread, with an awareness of the potential for audience social media interaction. For example, in season 7, episode 10, contestant Pearl describes herself and her dance partner as "flazéda," and in episode 11, Pearl comments, "Flazéda: it's the new hashtag. It's spreading like wildfire!" This term sparked a discussion among the judges in episode 10 as to whether Pearl meant "laissez-faire" or some mix of "blasé" and "la-di-dah" and became a callback and statement for Pearl's fans, despite its lack of on-screen text marking. The downside to the lack of screen text was that fans were not certain how to spell this neologism. The most popular accepted spelling seemed to be "flazéda," and this is the spelling that appears on Logo's website. *Urban Dictionary* also has an entry for "flasé dah," with alternate spellings including "flahsay da," "flase da," "flasay dah," "flasay da," "flase dah," and "flahsay dah" (alrightalright 2015; Iamtheother 2015). Regardless of the absence of a visual hashtag that literally spelled the new term out, viewers were primed to hashtag what they heard. And although the season ended in June

2015, "flazéda" remains an active hashtag on Twitter, mainly in reference to Pearl. #Flazéda became Pearl's brand for the remainder of her season on *RPDR* and is now officially her brand name, with the release of Flazéda, her unisex fragrance, just after her season finished airing in summer 2015.

Once the show hit a level of popularity that came to more mainstream attention, glossaries of terms used on *RPDR* began to appear online, such as *Buzzfeed's* "A Beginner's Guide to Drag-Speak" in 2013 and *Vanity Fair*'s video "100 Years of Drag Queen Slang" in 2016.[5] Nathaniel Simmons uses speech codes theory to analyze how the speech and vocabulary on *RPDR* is structured, concluding, "It is plausible to assume that contestants on *RPDR* may be viewed as drag celebrities who influence dominate [*sic*] drag rhetoric" (2014, 645). He expresses the hope that "examining how this particular reality TV show has influenced the speech codes within the LGBTQ community will increase scholarship regarding the influence of media on collective identities of marginalized groups" (646). Particularly catchy episode title and spoken word hashtags remain in circulation long beyond the relevant episodes or even seasons, and tweets nodding to this community online often string many *RPDR* hashtags together, both in reaction to relevant news about the show (as in Davie's tweet reacting to the announcement of UK Netflix streaming the show):

> "Yas! #Hieeee #GentlemenStartYourEngines #YouBetterWork #PurseFirst #Sickening #ShanteYouStay #LetTheMusicPlay #LipsyncForYourLife #Flazéda" (Davie 2017),

and in more general use, as in Abhik B.'s Instagram-linked tweet about cake:

> "'Love in the time of calories' #condragulations #nottodaysatan #flazeda #sashayaway #sunshine . . . instagram.com/p/BUlSPSNDlcE/"(2017).

The building of such hashtag strings, taken from a growing vocabulary of catchphrases from the show, and the range of applications function as an indicator of both the strength of the community and of the influence and shaping of rhetoric the show performs.

The community created and presented by *RPDR* is one focused on self-love, acceptance, and playful snark, as exemplified by RuPaul ending

each episode with the admonition "And remember, if you can't love yourself, how in the hell are you going to love somebody else?" The *RPDR* fandom evangelizes the gospel of "Ru," focusing on spreading this message of love and self-love, and fans' involvement and importance are constantly acknowledged by the show. Fans are not individually named, but *RPDR* often refers specifically to its fan base, offers hashtags for the fans, and invites fans to contribute, once even basing a mini-challenge on fan art.[6] For example, as of summer 2017, *RPDR* fans on Twitter are still employing the tag #NoRuPaulogies, which the show debuted in 2013 (season 5). Tweets such as "Being my creative over the top self, looking like what I look like and being at peace with it. #ThingsIWontApologizeFor #NoRuPaulogies" (2FikOrNot2Fik 2017) and "#socialmedia w/ 3.4 billion Internet users (2016), the only person I need to please & convince is myself & maybe a handful. #NoRuPaulogies" (bluebay700 2016) illustrate how fans use *RPDR* to assert their self-acceptance and reject feelings of shame or self-recrimination that heteronormative society constantly encourages in LGBTQ individuals.

At the same time that *RPDR* hashtags are taken up by fans to express their resistance to the ideologies of straight, or "mainstream," society, the show has also become immensely popular with non-queer viewers. Matthew Goldmark, citing the *New York Times*, notes:

> *Drag Race* leads Logo's strategy to sell "gay culture" to a mixed audience of gay men and heterosexual women. (Logo terms this "gay-streaming.") . . . Subsequent broadcasts of Season 1 on the Viacom subsidiary VH1, a cable channel that does not espouse a particular relationship to sexuality, corroborates the program's imagined appeal beyond an LGBT audience. (2015, 504–505)

If the transition from Logo to VH1 in March 2017 marks the moment when the show begins to intentionally court a mainstream audience, the question is whether the show can maintain its strong LGBTQ fan base while appealing to an audience beyond its initial target demographic. In an interview on *Dateline NBC*, RuPaul argues for the inability of *RPDR* to ever truly go mainstream: "Drag is the antithesis of the Matrix. You know, the Matrix says, 'Pick an identity and stick with it. Because I want to sell you some beer and shampoo and I need you to stick with what you are so I'll know how to market it to you.' Drag is the opposite. Drag says, 'Identity is a joke'" (Volkert 2016). But more than that, *RPDR* suggests that identity is a brand and an attitude that hold the potential for organizing

an audience into a community with shared values. Although drag is often used to accentuate the performativity and potential levity of identity, as RuPaul suggests, *RPDR* encourages the establishment of strong individualized identities as brands, which hashtags then strengthen. Furthermore, those identity-based brand hashtags are then used by viewers to express and celebrate their own performances of identity by making identity about joy, individuality, and nonconformity. The hashtags also help viewers find one another, furthering the messages of community and self-love that RuPaul promotes on the show.

Breaking the Fourth Wall with Television Hashtagivism

The case study of *RPDR* illustrates how on-screen hashtags facilitate brand building (the show's, host's, and contestants' brands) and, at the same time, foster self-expression and feelings of community among queer viewers. In this section I turn to another series that heavily employs official hashtags, the CW's *Jane the Virgin* (*JtV*; 2014–present), which uses tags to encourage viewers' awareness of, and engagement with, contemporary politics. Loosely adapted from a 2002 Venezuelan telenovela airing on RCTV, *JtV* focuses on a twenty-something Latina woman in Miami, Jane Gloriana Villanueva, who has been saving her virginity for marriage at the urging of her grandmother but becomes accidentally artificially inseminated by a distraught and distracted gynecologist. The series centers on three generations of Villanueva women—Alba, Jane's grandmother, who generally speaks in Spanish (with subtitles for Anglophone viewers); Xiomara, Jane's mother, who is pursuing her lifelong dream of being a singer; and Jane, the eponymous heroine. Its omniscient wisecracking narrator, who speaks in a stereotypical "Latin lover" voice, comments on the proceedings of the show not only directly in voiceover but also by "typing" commentary on-screen as the episode unfolds. The typed comments and hashtags pertaining to the show are integrated into the diegesis of each episode and are therefore not vulnerable to being stripped in its afterlife on streaming sites.[7]

Most hashtags in a given *JtV* episode comment on a specific plot point and commonly use puns and other textual jokes. In a season 2 episode, for example, a hashtag appears on-screen as one character, Petra, is being immobilized and replaced by her twin: #Petrafied. Other hashtags on *JtV* reference hashtags used or mentioned by the characters in the show. The *JtV* character most invested in social media is Jane's father, Rogelio De La Vega, a telenovela star with a very active Twitter profile (the char-

acter is also active on a real-world Twitter account that is apparently operated by one of the show's producers[8]), and many hashtags that *JtV* puts on-screen whenever Rogelio appears either reflect on Rogelio's behavior or simply spell out the hashtags he mentions (thus neatly avoiding the spelling confusion that can occur with spoken word hashtags, such as those that proliferate on *RPDR*, as discussed above). For instance, when Rogelio is nominated for an award, and announces that he plans to live-tweet the awards show with the hashtags #GoRo, #RogelioMyBrogelio, and #VivadelaVega, all of these hashtags appear across the bottom of the screen as he speaks them.

A more sparingly used but more thought-provoking form of hashtag that appears on *JtV* connects the narrative world within the show to larger issues facing families in the United States. Episode 9 of season 1 ended with Alba, Jane's grandmother, being pushed down the stairs after seeing proof of criminal activities; episode 10 picks up with Alba in a coma in the hospital. While the Villanuevas are happy to hear that Alba should make a recovery, the doctor informs them, "Your mother is in this country illegally. She has no insurance, and the hospital cannot afford to absorb the cost of her care. . . . We will have to notify ICE and they will deport her to Venezuela, where she can continue to receive care if she needs." Xiomara exclaims, "What? That can't be legal!" and our faithful narrator types for viewers, "YES, THIS REALLY HAPPENS / LOOK IT UP / #IMMIGRATIONREFORM," with a sound effect ("thunk") punctuating the end of each line of text. As the doctor gives the official name of the act of deportation to which Alba is about to be subjected ("medical repatriation"), a mournful theme begins to play. *JtV*'s creator, Jennie Snyder Urman, said in an interview following the airing of this episode, "We know how important [this issue] is to the community we are representing. The hope is by personalizing this issue and playing it out through beloved characters, we can make the political, personal . . . and hopefully raise consciousness, and compassion" (Orley 2015). In this way, *JtV*'s creator has "focused on love as its immigration platform" (Carlin 2015), using the show to humanize and make immigration reform emotionally resonant and pressing for an audience beyond that which has had firsthand experiences of its necessity. And second-screen viewing, which the on-screen use of hashtags promotes, is uniquely suited to facilitating viewers' immediate and visceral reactions to story lines, such as Alba's threatened removal from the United States.

JtV initiates this plot that deals with immigration midway through its first season. For the remainder of the season and into the next, the story

arc about Alba's need to be naturalized as a US citizen—and the show's focus on the need for immigration reform—continues. In season 2, episode 5, which aired one year before the 2016 US presidential election, Xiomara and Jane meet with an immigration lawyer and ask whether Xiomara's record as Alba's sponsor would damage Alba's chances of getting a green card. The lawyer responds, "It's hard to say for sure. Immigration laws are constantly changing." Then the frame freezes, and "#VOTE #VOTE #VOTE" appears across the bottom of the screen in red, white, and blue. With this hashtag, *JtV*'s writers and producers make clear that they hope viewers will empathize with Alba's predicament and that this empathy will lead them to vote for candidates committed to reforming US immigration laws and policies. In other words, the show's inclusion of "#VOTE #VOTE #VOTE" as a visual marker in scenes about Alba's immigration drama makes explicit the show's intention to be more than pure escapism for its audience and to alert the viewer to real-world issues—even to politicize viewers—through viewers' emotional engagement with the plight of its characters.

During and after the airing of the episodes concerning Alba's possible deportation, hundreds of tweets using #ImmigrationReform appeared on Twitter. Some users shared articles about medical repatriation and said that the show had inspired them to research the topic (Baldwin 2015); others expressed excitement that the show got the hashtag and issue trending (Alexa 2015); others shared joy at the happy resolution to the grandmother's immigration journey, employing the hashtag #WhenTVTeachesEmpathy (Kumar 2016). Hashtags such as #VOTE #VOTE #VOTE and #ImmigrationReform are not wholly specific to *JtV*, but they will remain visual elements of *JtV* episodes as markers and metacommentary for future audiences, who may seek context for understanding why those hashtags were incorporated into episodes that aired at specific times. On the one hand, the looming 2016 election added mounting pressure to the *JtV* narrative, as the candidates for president held widely different positions on immigration laws and the show clearly wanted to inform viewers about those differences[9]; on the other hand, #VOTE remains a hashtag that is timeless and important in its lack of specificity. Alba's story highlights the significance of having a voice in politics, and the show urges viewers to vote, in whatever year they are watching, even if they discover the show many years later on a streaming platform or in broadcast syndication. The show's ability to connect its fictional world with real-world politics provides an example of how television programs and networks can encourage second-screen viewers to advance issues of

social justice and policy change. It is uncertain whether or how future audiences will understand the hashtags embedded within the narrative of *JtV*, but even if second-screen viewing becomes passé in the future, the hashtags will likely serve as traces for future viewers to reconstruct the historical context of the show's production and initial airing.

Conclusion

Media theorist Henry Jenkins noted over a decade ago, "There is a new kind of cultural power emerging as fans bond together within larger knowledge communities, pool their information, shape each other's opinions, and develop a greater self-consciousness about their shared agendas and common interests. We might think of these new knowledge communities as collective bargaining units for consumers" (2007, 362–63). Second-screen viewers may be fans who actively contribute to social media discussions of television, or they may be "lurkers" who read far more than they post. Even second-screen lurkers are interpellated into the communities defined by official and fan-launched hashtags, and these tags advance second-screen viewers' "greater self-consciousness about their shared agendas and common interests." Although scholars have commonly viewed hashtags on television as new avenues for fan interaction and network marketing, I argue that hashtags have sociopolitical potential—to encourage self-expression by marginalized people, to help minority communities coalesce and find new members, to raise awareness about social problems, to spur activism, and to seed interest in legislation reform and voting—even through seemingly passive interactions such as second-screen lurking. The longevity and effectiveness of any politicization that takes place due to second-screen viewing is unpredictable. Despite the ways viewers may feel involved, as Donatella Selva points out, "Broadcasting logic is still dominant in the use of social television" (2016, 169). This is to say, notwithstanding the ways networks and show creators are beginning to incorporate viewers' possible social media use into their programs, television remains largely unidirectional, broadcast to viewers. Nevertheless, the paratexts created and elaborated by second-screen viewers who like to tweet to their favorite shows create the possibility of a broader spectrum of influence beyond the show itself. In addition, if series that appeal to underrepresented communities or are willing to promote a political stance create buzz on social media, a burgeoning number of shows might find their communities online potentially building network support of those fledgling shows.

Hashtags may be a way to target minority viewers, help those viewers to find one another, and thus prompt higher ratings and longer life spans for these shows. As show creators and networks navigate the divided markets of niche narrowcasting and stretch the ways they try to help shape discussions through the hashtags they promote, there is hope that audiences will respond with greater interest and passion, linking how they view to how they spread information and promote their own interests and ideals. Although there has been great ambivalence in the popular press about the passivity of "hashtag activism,"[10] *RuPaul's Drag Race* and *Jane the Virgin* serve as examples of the political benefit of expanding political consciousness through hashtag-organized communities online. Individual viewers can find like-minded viewers through hashtags but also engage in a performance of community that expands visibility and awareness.[11] By fostering emotional ties to contestants (on *RPDR*) and characters (on *JtV*), hashtags can create shared languages for discussing the politics of underrepresented communities. The aspiration is that official hashtags, when folded into genuinely entertaining television, might prove to be an effective means for media makers to move viewers toward a higher degree of politicization and social consciousness.

Notes

1. See also "Nielsen Launches 'Nielsen Twitter TV Ratings,'" 2013. The press release notes, "Initial analysis of Nielsen Twitter TV Ratings reveals that the Twitter TV audience for an episode is, on average, 50 times larger than the authors who are generating Tweets" and that Twitter conversation about television is a growing trend.

2. See, for example, the Twitter accounts for ABC's *Scandal*, a show with broad appeal on Twitter. There is the official show account, @ScandalABC; the writer's room, @ScandalWriters; and the lead actor accounts, all of whom are extremely active (@kerrywashington, @tonygoldwyn, @bellamyyoung, etc.). Parallel accounts exist for many shows.

3. Second-screen viewing is the act of utilizing two screens while watching a program, one for viewing an episode of television and one for interacting with other viewers of that episode on one or more social media platforms. See, for example, Wilson 2016, Portes 1998, Nagy and Midha 2014, Oh et al. 2015, and Lin and Peña 2011.

4. While hashtags are used across several social media platforms, including Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and Tumblr, the hashtag as an organizing principle is strongly associated with Twitter and initially "caught on" through the Twitter platform. As such, throughout this chapter, I discuss hashtags in terms of Twitter, though I recognize that those hashtags may cross platforms. See Gannes 2010, regarding the invention of hashtags.

5. See Jones 2013 and *Vanity Fair* 2016.

6. In season 7, episode 5, the mini-challenge was based on the paper and tape recreations of Instagram fan "paperdragrace."

7. Until recently, sites such as Hulu and Netflix were notorious for removing all traces of network branding, possibly to allow or even encourage users to mistake programs for Hulu or Netflix original series. This has begun to change slightly insofar as Netflix now permits network logos to precede or conclude shows.

8. See Schwindt 2015.

9. See, for example, Whiting and Alonso 2012. They conclude that hashtags can function as "a topical annotation from the crowd" (1).

10. See, for example, "2014: The Year of Outrage" 2014, Carr 2012, and Berlatsky 2015.

11. See Gerbaudo 2012 for a good discussion of how social media can choreograph activist movements, and kw 2017 for clarification on the important distinction between activism and raising awareness, which is more applicable here.

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PART III

Disavowals

ELEVEN | Hashtag Rhetoric

#AllLivesMatter and the Production of Post-Racial Affect

KYLE BOOTEN

Using a hashtag is now, like protesting or marching, a form of political activism. Therefore, hashtags themselves are not merely the tools of online politics but are also themselves objects of political discussion or protest in their own right. If hashtag activism is a form of political labor, part of this labor is using new media to draw attention to inequality and injustice, and another part is a kind of *meta*politics in which online activists, both central and peripheral to movements, try to negotiate—and at times police—which hashtags are to be used, who is to use them, and to what ends they can be used.

The recent history of #BlackLivesMatter, the hashtag, as it relates to Black Lives Matter, the movement, suggests some of the difficulties of carrying out activist politics on social media. The tag #BlackLivesMatter was created by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the killer of Black teenager Trayvon Martin (Garza 2014). Black Lives Matter is now a widespread (and indeed international) movement that reacts against (especially state-sponsored) violence against Black people while also drawing attention to broader issues of structural racism (Rickford 2015). In the context of this movement, the #BlackLivesMatter tag has continued to serve as a rallying cry in the wake of the deaths of Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, and Sandra Bland, among many others. Still, no account of this tag's trajectory can be given without reference to the myriad tags it has inspired. Some of these, such as #BrownLivesMatter and #MuslimLivesMatter, extend

the antiracist message of #BlackLivesMatter. When #MuslimLivesMatter emerged in response to the racially motivated killing of three Muslim students in North Carolina in February 2015, activists debated whether this tag was an act of solidarity and coalition building with Black Lives Matter, or if it was a co-opting that unfairly equates the histories of racialized violence against Black Americans and Muslims regardless of race (Walker 2015; Arias 2015). Alicia Garza herself suggests that variations on #BlackLivesMatter fail to acknowledge the ways that other nonwhite groups benefit from antiblackness (Garza 2014).

And then there is #AllLivesMatter. While the origins of this tag (and its non-hashtag variant, "All lives matter") are murky compared to those of #BlackLivesMatter, by 2014 it had emerged as a discursive lightning rod, with activists and bloggers decrying it as a subversion of the antiracist agenda of the Black Lives Matter movement (see Newton 2014). Critics have observed that the use of this tag, with its rhetorical move toward "humanity" as a category that transcends race, transparently manifests a color-blind or perhaps post-racial politics that insidiously denies or silences the grievances of the Black Lives Matter movement (Langford and Speight 2015; Orbe 2015; Rickford 2015). In fact, the rise of #AllLivesMatter is grimly ironic in light of the fact that Black Lives Matter itself emerged as a response to the ascendance of post-racial politics during the Obama era (Taylor 2016). Still, though #AllLivesMatter's color-blind racism may be obvious, it is important to understand how this discourse functions and reproduces itself on contemporary social networks.

Recent work on hashtag activism has demonstrated how activist movements can become "hijacked" (Hadgu, Garimella, and Weber 2013) and, in the case of #BlackLivesMatter in particular, has pointed to key differences between this tag and #AllLivesMatter. My analysis here stems from conversation with two recent works in particular. Pairing qualitative discourse with analytic techniques to analyze a small sample of #BlackLivesMatter tweets, Carney (2016) identified the ways that social media users deployed as well as contested the contradictory discourses represented by #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter. She argues that the #AllLivesMatter tag was mostly used by young white women on Twitter in order to enact a color-blind (but inherently white-supremacist) negation of #BlackLivesMatter. Analyzing a larger sample of #BlackLivesMatter tweets using computational techniques, Ryan J. Gallagher and his colleagues (2017) unearthed some key differences between #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter. While the former tag was

more often used to discuss the death of Black victims of violence, the latter tag was more often used to voice support for the police. However, these researchers also found that #BlackLivesMatter advocates themselves "hijacked" the #AllLivesMatter tag in order to "directly interrogate the stance . . . and the worldview implied by that phrase" (11).

In this chapter I contribute to this emerging conversation on #BlackLivesMatter versus #AllLivesMatter in several ways. While Carney is persuasive in her analysis of the ways that social media activist spaces can function as a Habermasian public sphere, I take a position inspired by the theorizing of Zizi Papacharissi (2014, 125), who has convincingly argued that online political activism often gives rise to "affective publics," meaning "networked public formations that are mobilized and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment." If the production of affect is an immediate effect of hashtag activism, language on social media must be understood not just as argument but also as *rhetoric*—language designed to provoke the affective responses of an audience. As a historical category, rhetoric sits at the boundary between politics, affect, and the artful structuring of language. Here I am thinking of Aristotle's (begrudging) elaboration of the ways that rhetorical styles arouse specific emotions, and of later theoreticians' sometimes quite specific typologies of rhetorical figures designed to evoke particular affective reactions (see Quintilian 2011; Peacham 1954). Blending large-scale and small-scale linguistic analysis of #BlackLivesMatter tweets, I isolate some of the latent patterns that structure the discourses surrounding this tag, patterns that evoke and evolve certain rhetorical figures in ways that make clearer these discourses' latent ideologies as well as the affective states they evince and seek to reproduce.

While I do see the opposition between #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter as one between "protest" and "counter-protest" (Gallagher et al. 2017), I note that these terms assume a relationship between two forces that are, though defined in terms of each other, legible as distinct entities. Perhaps these terms refer most naturally to other, nondigital forms of activist performance (e.g., physically co-present protesters marching in unison while counterprotesters gather nearby, perhaps behind a row of steel barricades; the two groups have their own chants and their own signs). As this chapter argues, such clear divisions become increasingly precarious in the context of hashtag activism. It is a central condition of this form of political labor that the boundaries between protest and counterprotest, earnest participant and "troll," sometimes disintegrate. In fact, it may be the case that the dissolution of such

boundaries is one of the most effective tactics of those who would seek to enervate significant activist movements such as Black Lives Matter that derive energy and participation from social networks.

The Corpus

In order to gather a corpus of unique tweets, retweets were expunged from the data set via a variety of preprocessing steps. The final data set, consisting of approximately 150,000 unique tweets, is one small temporal slice of the vast history of #BlackLivesMatter on Twitter. These tweets come from the months following November 24, 2015, when a grand jury declined to indict Darren Wilson, the police officer who shot and killed unarmed Black teenager Michael Brown. By this time, mainstream news outlets had begun to cover the rise of the #AllLivesMatter tag. (See, for instance, the dialogue between George Yancy and Judith Butler printed in the *New York Times* [2015].)

Micro-Rhetoric: Affect, Attunement, and Chains of Equivalence

In her analysis of the uses of the #ows tag on Twitter during the height of the Occupy Wall Street movement, Papacharissi (2014, 93) suggests:

> Twitter plays a part similar to the role music used to play for movements—by enabling affective attunement with the movement itself. . . . Affective attunement permits people to feel and thus locate their own place in politics.

She observes that #ows attracted not just those who agreed with the anticapitalist message of Occupy Wall Street but also conservative Twitter users who used the tag only to advocate against it, often derisively. While she admits that hashtags are inherently polysemous and that there is thus no single "right" meaning the tag carries, Papacharissi does draw a distinction between those participants who deployed the tag in good faith and those who took it up only as what we might call "trolls." In the case of #ows, "Antagonistic content injections interrupted the affective harmony . . . creating an effect similar to that of noise interrupting song" (93). Her use of the word "antagonistic" alludes to the definition of this term as provided by Chantal Mouffe (2000; 2013), who has distinguished between *agonism*, in which groups argue for cultural as well as political influence (i.e., hegemony) in an atmosphere of contentious respect for

other groups, and *antagonism*, in which the rights of opposed groups to even exist or speak are denied.

In the corpus under analysis here, it was not difficult to find tweets that evince a sort of "affective attunement" to the antiracist message of Black Lives Matter. Such tweets may register a range of affective positions, from disgust and despair to hope and love:[1]

```
The police don't deserve lip service and should get
no sympathy. NYC and Ferguson were disgusting abuses.
#blacklivesmatter

Reimagine while we resist. Lay the foundation
for the world we hope to see. #BlackLivesMatter
#NewYearsRevolution

I love being black and I love black people. No more
self hatred. No more white bullshit. #BlackLivesMatter
#BlackPower
```

Still, #BlackLivesMatter does not always mean *Black lives matter* and in fact can mean the opposite. A hashtag like #BlackLivesMatter is easily hijacked as Twitter users use the tag to condemn the movement itself. The tag accompanies posts that variously characterize Black people in America not as the target but the perpetrators of violence against other groups (e.g., police, whites) or against themselves:

```
About 6,000 Blacks were killed by blacks in 2012.
200 Blacks were killed by police. #BlackLivesMatter
#SoStopKillingEachother
```

Other tweets change the topic:

```
Campaigning for late term abortion? You sicken me
#tolerance #blacklivesmatter #disabledlivesmatter
#unbornlivesmatter
```

Tweets that use the #BlackLivesMatter tag but obviously attempt to undermine it are far from infrequent. In the first and second tweets, the tag #BlackLivesMatter is used, but its message is not: in no way do these tweets allege that Black lives matter. The tag is used ironically while si-

multaneously drawing attention to the tweet (making it visible to anyone who searches for #BlackLivesMatter). The third tweet, however, takes this message and reinterprets it: Black (unborn) lives matter. Such tweets are evidence of that "polysemous" characteristic of hashtags; users can deploy the tag in ways that are outright antagonistic—or, in the case of the antiabortion use of the tag, ways that are well beyond the tag's original discursive boundaries. These examples draw attention to two different ways of hijacking the tag: directly countering the tag's message or expanding its reach to include causes that are very different from those it was designed to promote. In them it is possible to see the dichotomy between those uses of the tag that are harmonious and dissonant, those engaged in the work of building an agonistic movement, and those engaged in antagonistic discursive sabotage.

Yet the boundary between these two poles is not always so clear. In the tweets that make up my corpus, it is relatively rare for a tweet to contain only one hashtag. Users tend to string them together in *hashtag sequences*, series of immediately adjacent hashtags. Sometimes these lists come at the end of a tweet:

> "Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that."—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. #MLK #MLKDay #MLKDay2015 #BlackLivesMatter

In other times, the tweet simply contains an image or a link accompanied by a hashtag sequence:

> #HandsUpDontShoot #AntonioMartin #mikebrown #Ferguson #ArrestDarrenWilson #ICantBreathe #BlackLivesMatter

In one sense, this common way of using hashtags is purely functional, since the more hashtags in a tweet, the more likely that other users searching for this tag will find the tweet. At the same time, these hashtag sequences must also be understood rhetorically, since tags in these agglomerative bundles are positioned as equivalent or at least harmoniously related. It is argument by association. Eric Garner's last words ("I can't breathe"), though uttered in Staten Island, resonate in the context of Ferguson. And the deaths of Antonio Martin, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown must be understood not as isolated "incidents" but as symptoms of an enduring and consistent system of racialized violence. In fact, some tag sequences consist only of names:

```
#MikeBrown #EricGarner #JohnCrawford #AkaiGurley
#TamirRice #DontreHamilton #JordanBaker #EzellFord
#McKenzieCochran . . . #BlackLivesMatter
```

In this funereal litany, those invoked as victims are equated but not dissolved into a category. They are indexed, remembered in their specificity, though the list trails off into an ellipsis: no such list, especially one enclosed within a tweet, could contain *all* of the names.

In other moments, hashtag sequences seem to build bridges between Black Lives Matter, narrowly construed, and related antiracist agendas, such as drawing attention to a lack of diversity in Hollywood:

```
Dear Hollywood, #BlackLivesMatter #BlackFilmsMatter
#OscarsSoWhite Yeah.
```

Sometimes these sequences entangle #BlackLivesMatter with other important and widely used political hashtags:

```
Don't get angry, get active. #BlackLivesMatter #Change
#JesuisCharlie #BeTheChange
```

In this case, the writer implicitly equates or connects Black Lives Matter with a tag in protest against terrorist violence in Paris (and in support of the French publication *Charlie Hebdo*, which had itself been accused of racism). If semantic yoking through hashtag sequences is the defining rhetorical move that Twitter users perform with hashtags, it is an interesting if perhaps unresolvable challenge to mark clear boundaries defining exactly how #BlackLivesMatter may be used without doing violence to its message, without hijacking it, twisting it, or watering it down. However, taking these as uses of the tag that are in "good faith" (i.e., they are not attempting to sabotage #BlackLivesMatter), the sequencing of hashtags enacts what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001) call "chains of equivalence," the discursive positioning of political struggles as related without forcing them under the umbrella of a metacategory. The reader is not proffered an explanation of why, exactly, Black Lives Matter has anything to do with terroristic violence against a European publication. The assertion is not argued for but rather enacted, so these sequences are arguments that disguise their own argumentativeness.

What, then, of the tag #AllLivesMatter?

One of the primary rhetorical functions of both it and

#BlackLivesMatter tweets is metadiscursive, the production of both negative and positive definitions of how it and other tags should be used. Some tweets militate against #AllLivesMatter:

> #AllLivesMatter isn't a legitimate sentiment. It's just a bullshit response to #BlackLivesMatter

> The name of the protest is #BlackLivesMatter and nothing else. If you're down with #AllLivesMatter you need to stay in your homes.

Others do the opposite:

> To a racist only #BlackLivesMatter to a lover of all #AllLivesMatter. Learn that you are the racist.

Such tags try to draw stark distinctions between #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter. Yet, if users such as these engage in the metadiscursive labor of regulating these tags and positioning them as opposites, users are not always so clear in their affiliation with one perspective and their antagonistic perspective toward the other. I have suggested that hashtag sequences are a primary rhetorical form through which Twitter users attempt to place concepts, events, and people into a state of equivalence. While disruptive and antagonistic uses of this technique are possible, it lends itself most naturally to an affirmative politics. This is even the case when #AllLivesMatter is used with #BlackLivesMatter:

> "We will never have a perfect world, but it's not naive to work toward a better one" #alllivesmatter #blacklivesmatter #endracism #coexist

> A lot of parents are teaching hate—don't be one of them. -Nelson Mandela #AllLivesMatter #BlackLivesMatter

Can we disregard the above tweets as mere "dissonance," noise that ruptures the "harmony" of the #BlackLivesMatter tag as it operates on Twitter? Such tweets trouble Papacharissi's distinction between antagonistic and non-antagonistic uses of the tag. The goals and stakes of online activism would likely be clearer if this activity could be neatly divided up into harmony and dissonance, agonistic coalitions and antagonistic

trolls—yet the two examples above work so that it cannot be. In the first, an unattributed quote invokes a generalized "we," and it imagines a world in which this "we" can "#endracism" and "#coexist." Indeed, on a linguistic level, this tweet allows #AllLivesMatter and #BlackLivesMatter to coexist, in a way, by simply juxtaposing them. The second tweet, this one containing a quotation attributed to Nelson Mandela, attempts a similar diffusion of the tensions between #AllLivesMatter and #BlackLivesMatter. Mandela can signify a post-racial politics based on reconciliation by way of forgiveness (see Roy 2014), though here the quotation points more toward a perspective in which racism is a personal problem, one attributable to bad parenting rather than racialized structures of power and violence. In this way, this tweet does not just manifest a color-blind racism that seeks to silence discussion of race (and thus leave those racialized structures intact and beyond the reach of critique); it also manifests what Keith P. Feldman has called the "privatization of race," a logic that "lodges the question of racial animus within personal expressions of preference and choice, while hiving it off from structural and historical analysis, as well as state intervention" (2016, 294). Crucially, however, these tweets do not actually argue against the claims of Black Lives Matter. Their assault on this movement is implicit, a fact that once again points to the important role of affect in social media politics. These tweets do not really even argue for why saying #AllLivesMatter and #BlackLivesMatter in the same breath (the same tweet) is not in fact incoherent. No explanation is needed; these tweets merely bask in the hope that we will learn to "#coexist."

As foci of web-based affective politics, hashtags may indeed be tools through which individuals may "be counted" as part of a cause "without having to enter into complex negotiations of ideological affiliation" (Papacharissi 2014); people with somewhat different understandings of why and how "Black lives matter" may nonetheless perform with each other a flexible, polysemous solidarity. The hashtag itself, as a linguistic artifact, lends itself to a particular form of political expression that generates "chains of equivalences" between movements, ideas, and causes. Doing so is as easy, in a sense, as juxtaposing two tags: "#BlackLivesMatter" and "#OscarsSoWhite," "#BlackLivesMatter" and "#icantbreathe." Yet, according to Laclau and Mouffe (2001), the goal of politics is to produce through discourse a new kind of hegemony based on the (provisional, contingent) coalition of various interests against some other interests that are themselves seeking hegemony. In their formulation, this aspect of politics is not secondary but foundational,

since positive self-definition is achieved only through the negative discursive act of constructing an opposed "Other" (just as the meaning of any sign is produced only in its opposition to other signs). And so when "#BlackLivesMatter" is juxtaposed with "#AllLivesMatter," this "chain of equivalence" may be more detrimental than the overtly antagonistic uses of the #BlackLivesMatter tag, since it rhetorically destabilizes the boundary between protest and counter-protest. To the critic, a tweet that says that both #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter while offering an inspirational quote seems grotesquely (and perhaps even disingenuously) naïve. Yet what if the very vacuousness of such statements gives them power as tools for mobilizing an "affective public" that is not sympathetic to the demands of Black Lives Matter?

Statistical Rhetoric

Having closely examined some of the stakes of the different discursive positions carved out by #AllLivesMatter, I now step back to think about how this discourse's ideologies and effects can be further uncovered through statistical means. While any large enough group of texts can be examined using computational, quantitative techniques, social media data invites this kind of analysis because the vastness of social networks such as Twitter is an unavoidable fact for those who use them. In terms of politics, although Twitter users do engage in bursts of one-to-one threaded conversation, the sheer scale of discourse around a particular hashtag can also give users the sense of being an individual voicing a single utterance amid an overwhelming din:

> To all the ppl who keep say #AllLivesMatter. #BlackLivesMatter #MikeBrown #TamirRice #AntonioMartin #SoMuchMore

> #BlackLivesMatter & #BlueLivesMatter are trending. May I remind you all #AllLivesMatter An eye for an eye makes whole world blind . . .

In each of these tweets, the object is not any particular users but some unspecified number of users ("all the ppl" and the "you all" that makes certain tags trend), visible as an aggregate unit—in other words, a statistical phenomenon. Twitter's interfaces and underlying algorithms, as well as those of third-party sites and software, make it easy to see trending

hashtags, and users may also get a less quantitative sense of trends simply by sampling their own feeds or by searching for tweets labeled with a particular tag. To use a hashtag is a twofold act; while the utterance carries its unique meanings, it may also in some small way cause a tag to trend—a collaborative rhetorical action whose most immediate function is merely to establish that the tag is important. Hashtags produce not intimate debates but swarms of discourse.

So far I have examined individual tweets as examples of hashtag activism. What follows is an attempt to glimpse some of the statistical properties of #BlackLivesMatter activism as a discursive system and to locate the role of #AllLivesMatter within this system.

Networking Hashtags

Out of the tweet corpus, around 30 percent end with a hashtag sequence, a series of at least two hashtags. Assuming that hashtag sequences imply some kind of semantic proximity between tags, which tags are most frequently related to each other?

I call a *sequence association pair* any pair of hashtags that occur together in a tag sequence coming at the end of a tweet. The sequence association pairs extracted from the tweet "#protest today in nyc! #blacklivesmatter #trayvonmartin #mikebrown" would be ("#blacklivesmatter, #trayvonmartin), (#blacklivesmatter, #mikebrown), and (#trayvonmartin, #mikebrown). For each user in the corpus, I gathered a unique set of sequence association pairs; I then combined all such lists into a list of sequence association pairs in which each user contributed no more than one instance of each. I visualized these associations in the following way: first, taking a random tag sequence from each user in the corpus (n = 10,399), I identified the pairs of co-occurring tags in which each tag occurred at least fifty times in this random sample; these constituted the possible edges in the graph. The homophily between any two tags was calculated as their pointwise mutual information, a commonly used statistic for measuring the association between terms in a corpus (see Manning and Schütze 1999). Edges were drawn between tags if this sequence association pair's mutual information score was in the top decile of all such scores, with the thickness of each edge visually corresponding to the strength of the statistical relationship between two tags. This method for producing a network visualization of co-occurring tags is similar to the one used by Gallagher and his colleagues (2016) to examine the differences between #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter. My inten-

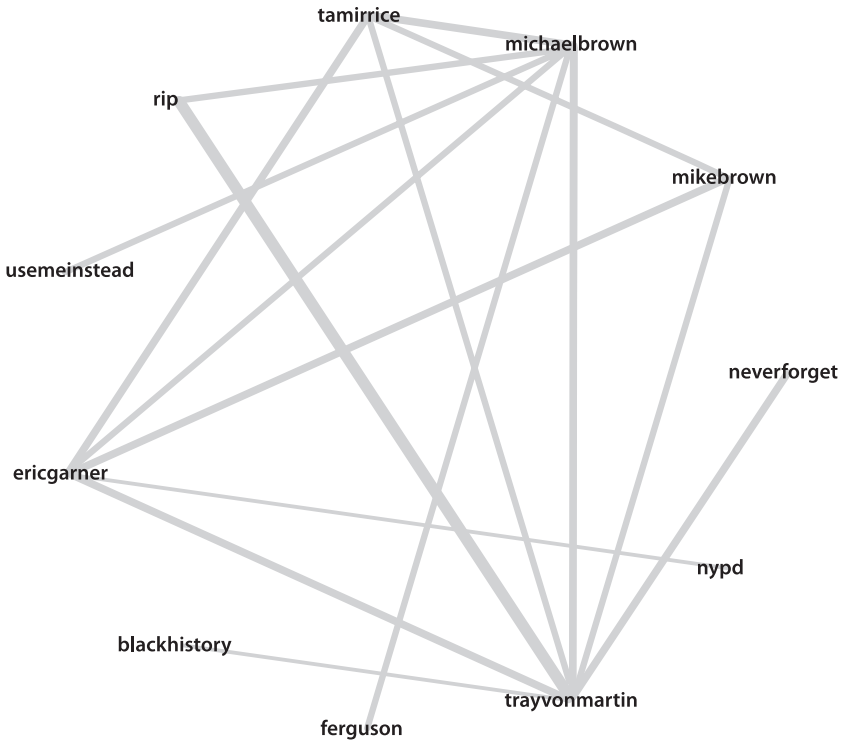

Figure 11.1. The connectedness of names.

tion here was to represent the strongest associations between the most common tags.

Visualizing these relationships sheds light on some of the major structures of discourse surrounding #BlackLivesMatter. Figure 11.1 represents a subsection of this graph consisting of those components connected to the most frequently occurring names in the corpus: #mikebrown, #tamirrice, #trayvonmartin, and #ericgarner. Figure 11.2 shows this subgraph in the context of the larger network. Among the strongest relationships between tags in the corpus are those between these names, statistical evidence of the importance of the rhetorical strategy of listing names in a litany in order to remember them. The name of #trayvonmartin is connected also to #rip and #neverforget; many of these tweets remembered him on his birthday, the fifth of February.

Figure 11.3 represents the subgraph of common tags frequently used in tag sequences with #AllLivesMatter, and figure 11.4 depicts this sub-

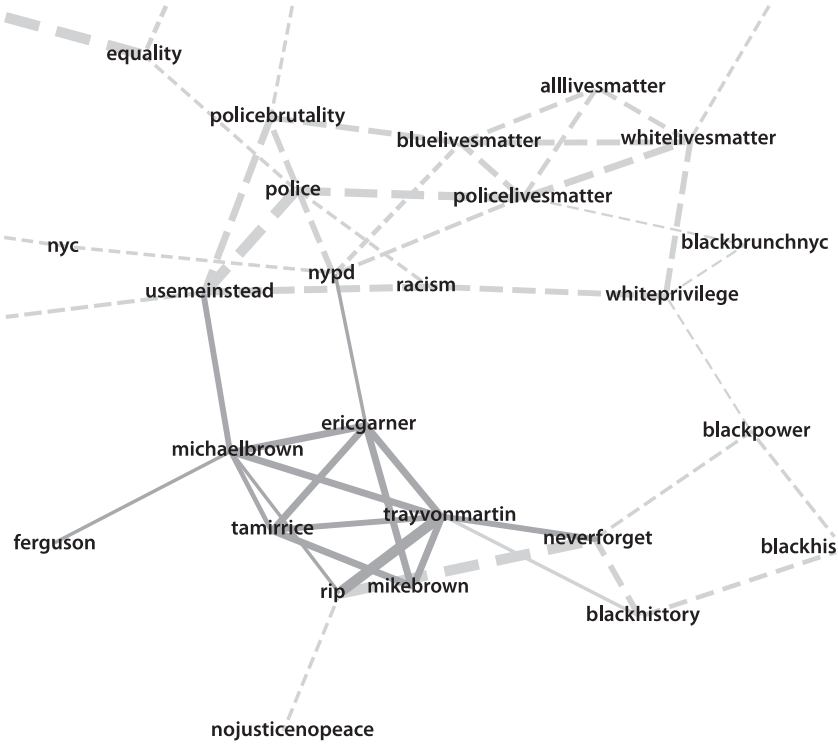

Figure 11.2. The position of names within the discourse network. The darker solid edges are connected to a key name.

graph within the larger network. This tag was most strongly connected to #bluelivesmatter, #policelivesmatter, and #whitelivesmatter; this corroborates the finding of Gallagher and his coauthors (2016) that use of the #AllLivesMatter tag indicates a more positive sentiment toward the police compared to use of #BlackLivesMatter. Part of the rhetorical project of #AllLivesMatter is not just a direct negation of #BlackLivesMatter (i.e., #whitelivesmatter) but also the symbolic imagining of the police force itself a population under attack; tweets that make this rhetorical move often refer to the killing of New York Police Department (NYPD) officers Wenjian Liu and Rafael Ramos by Ismaaiyl Brinsley on December 20, 2014.

Looking beyond the connection between #AllLivesMatter and a pro-police sentiment, it is noteworthy that the hashtags with which this tag is most strongly associated also take the form of **-livesmatter*. In fact, 24 per-

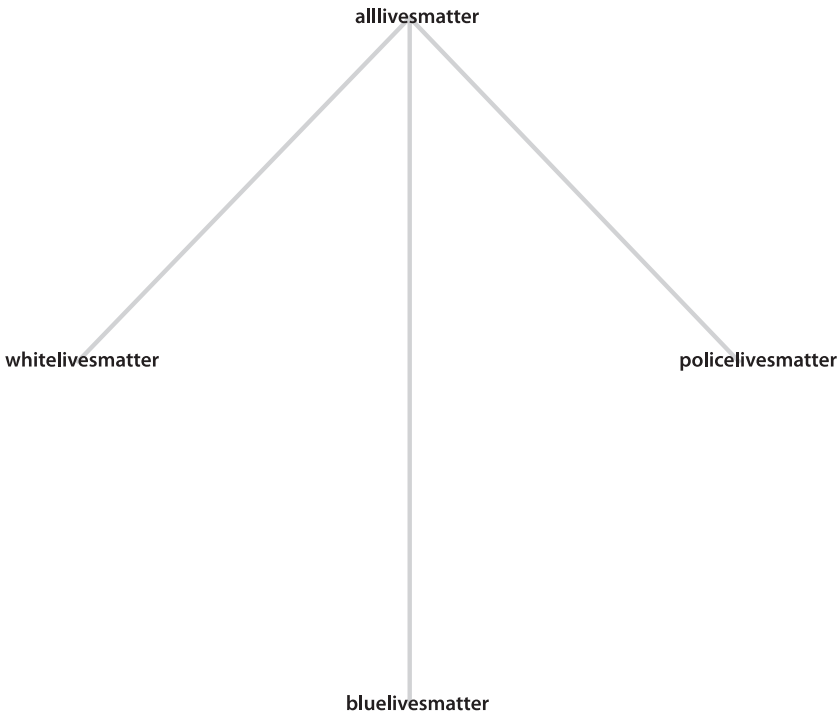

Figure 11.3. #AllLivesMatter's strongest connections.

cent of tag sequences of three containing #AllLivesMatter ($n = 289$) also contained *only* tags of the **-livesmatter* form (usually #BlackLivesMatter and one other):

```
#alllivesmatter #blacklivesmatter #nypdlivesmatter

#palestinianlivesmatter #blacklivesmatter
#alllivesmatter
```

Such sequences bear a certain resemblance to classical rhetorical figures. With their omission of coordinating conjunctions (#BlackLivesMatter *and* #BrownLivesMatter), they could be considered examples of *asyndeton*, a technique "often resulting in a hurried rhythm or vehement effect" (Burton n.d.). Most notable, however, is the repetition that comes at the end of hashtags, themselves clauses (all *lives matter*, Black *lives matter*, nypd *lives matter*); *epistrophe*, a figure in which successive clauses end

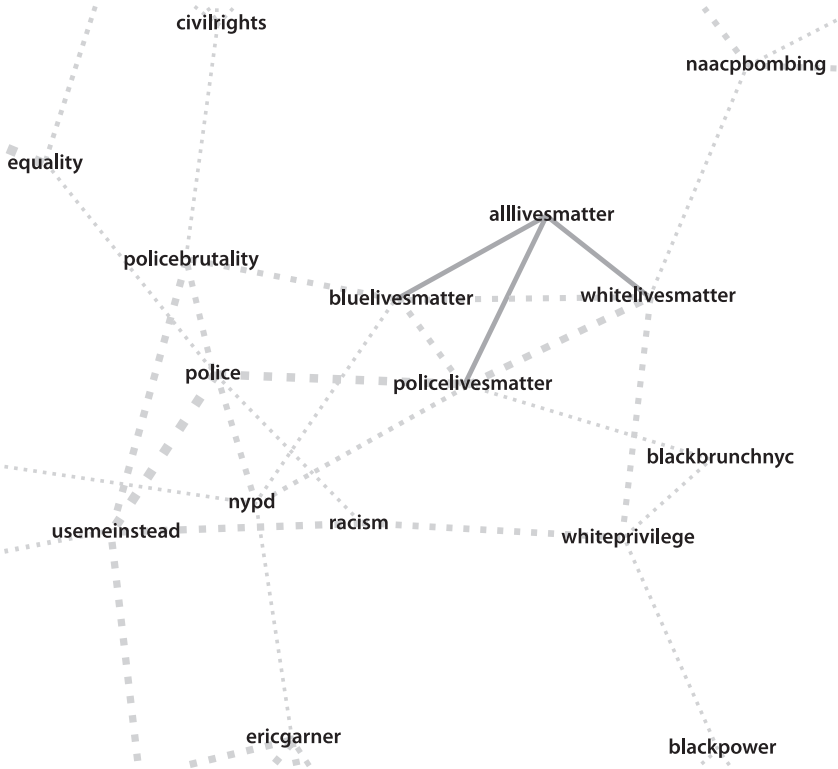

Figure 11.4. #AllLivesMatter's position within the discourse network. The darker solid edges are connected to #AllLivesMatter.

with the same word or words (Burton n.d.), is alive and well on Twitter. Such combinations of tags are self-consciously repetitious, ornate. In a general sense, the fact that hashtag activism has taken up these figures suggests the degree to which contemporary social media may privilege forms of persuasion that use language to provoke the affective responses of a swarm of listeners. Yet rhetorical figures beget effects that are often quite specific. As Quintilian explains, asyndeton is used not just to "express anything with vehemence" but to "render" certain individual things "as it were, more numerous" (2011, 490–91). In the case of these **-livesmatter* sequences, one effect of asyndeton could be to "render numerous" the types of lives that matter in addition to black lives. And according to Henry Peacham, an early modern theorist of rhetoric, epistrophe (or, as he called it, *epiphora*) "serveth to leave a word of importance in the end of a sentence, that it may the longer hold the sound in the

mind of the hearer" (1954, 42). If he is right, then **-livesmatter* sequences attempt to "hold longer" in the reader's mind the belief that "lives (in general) matter" after the particularities ("Black," "all," "NYPD," "Palestinian" . . .) have faded from memory. If the rhetorical force of naming victims derives its power from its specificity, these **-livesmatter* sequences operate primarily according to a logic of generality. As David Theo Goldberg argues, "antiracist commitment requires remembering and recalling"; the opposing force of "antiracialism" demands "forgetting, moving on, wiping away the terms of reference" (2009, 21). On a statistical level, #AllLivesMatter functions not solely by denouncing the claims and concerns of #BlackLivesMatter; though it can do so, this discourse can also embrace #BlackLivesMatter as a key term while hovering safely above the specific events, people, and arguments to which others draw attention with this tag. It enacts and invites forgetting.

One goal of #AllLivesMatter as a discourse is to deny that what its critics (from prominent activists to nearly anonymous Twitter users) hold to be obvious: that the discourse of the #AllLivesMatter tag is incompatible with #BlackLivesMatter. In fact, those who use the #AllLivesMatter tag with the #BlackLivesMatter tag often do so in ways that explicitly or implicitly argue for the complementarity of these ostensibly oppositional discourses. Take, for instance, the following use of the two tags:

```
We can't allow this anymore!! #BLACKLivesMatter
##BROWNLivesMatter #AllLivesMatter
```

Notice that in each of these cases the #AllLivesMatter tag comes at the end of the sequence. These are indicative of a larger trend in how tweets attempt to reconcile the discourses of #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter. In tag sequences comprised of only the tags #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter, the tags were approximately four times as likely to appear in that order (#BlackLivesMatter, #AllLivesMatter) than in the opposite order (#AllLivesMatter, #BlackLivesMatter), a statistically significant difference ($n = 268$, $\chi^2 = 97.8$, $p < .001$). A further exploration examined only those tag sequences in which every tag is of the form **-livesmatter*. In such sequences that also contained #BlackLivesMatter, this tag was the final tag in 28 percent of them. Looking at **-livesmatter* sequences containing #AllLivesMatter, however, this tag was the final tag in 78 percent of them, another statistically significant difference ($n = 610$, $\chi^2 = 185.0$, $p < .001$). #AllLivesMatter tends to come at the end of a tweet;

the logic of such tweets is not that of pure equivalence (#BlackLivesMatter *equals* #bluelivesmatter *equals* #AllLivesMatter). Rather, it suggests a logic that other tweets occasionally make explicit:

```
I'm in solidarity with both #BlackLivesMatter and
#PoliceLivesMatter because #AllLivesMatter. Will you
join me?
```

The tendency of #AllLivesMatter to occur at the end of tag sequences enacts another rhetorical figure, climax, in which words appear in order "of increasing importance" (Burton n.d.). More specifically, the final "#AllLivesMatter" is positioned as a superordinate category that logically subsumes both #BlackLivesMatter and #policelivesmatter. The use of this figure implies that the abolition of difference of any kind is a political destiny and a logical inevitability. Black Lives Matter, in this formulation, is merely a stepping-stone on the way to a post-racial state of affairs in which, finally, All Lives Matter.

Post-racial politics operate by taking a certain view of history in which "society has transcended the racial movement, or civil rights era" (Cho 2009). On the level of statistical rhetoric, #AllLivesMatter enacts this "transcendence" again and again, proleptically figuring itself as the end of politics. As Feldman (2015) has argued, digital media may be an especially effective tool for the post-racial "dematerialization" of racial discourses by inviting forms of participation that are highly individualized but symbolically "universal." Indeed, certain #AllLivesMatter tweets suggest that taking recourse to an explicitly racialized subjectivity (rather than a "human" one) and even articulating grievances that stem from systemic injustices that are themselves racialized are not wrong so much as belated, tactics from an earlier step in a dialogic contention between protest and counterprotest that leads to a utopian moment, a time beyond race and also politics. This rhetorical pattern, the performance of post-racial transcendence, invites participants to imagine or feel themselves not so much *against* #BlackLivesMatter as *after* it.

#AllLivesMatter as White Noise

More than descriptive tags and more than mere slogans, hashtags are the semiotic units of a new form of rhetoric. Through protest and counterprotest, users are figuring out new ways of making meaning in the

constrained space of the tweet. Hashtags are like music, allowing for affective attunement (Papacharissi 2014). Yet where does music end and discord begin?

While #AllLivesMatter can be used in ways that are obviously antagonistic to the goals of Black Lives Matter, it can also be used in ways that are—if just as antagonistic—not obviously so. The reality is that on Twitter, the hashtags #AllLivesMatter and #BlackLivesMatter are sometimes used together in ways that do not admit their incongruity. #AllLivesMatter is best understood not as dissonance (recognizable as an off-key note, a scratch of the needle on the record) but rather "noise"—fuzz and chatter that makes it hard to hear the melody in the first place. In the context of #BlackLivesMatter, #AllLivesMatter could be figured as a sort of anti-Black "*white* noise" meant to interrupt the antiracist message of Black Lives Matter. Politics is played out on the level of how people use hashtags: #AllLivesMatter sometimes refuses to be positioned in a purely agonistic relationship to #BlackLivesMatter. It declines to fully symbolize a "them" against which the coalitions otherwise attuned to #BlackLivesMatter might organize themselves—the crucial step in a battle for hegemony (Laclau and Mouffe 2001). Insofar as social networks are spaces for the mass cultivation of affect, we must not ignore the ways that "counterprotests" like #AllLivesMatter produce not just the feeling of opposition but also the feeling (no less genuine for being dubious) that opposition is optional. And so perhaps the rise of #AllLivesMatter should be understood as a symptom of what Robin DiAngelo (2011) has called "white fragility," the inability of white people to cognitively or emotionally cope with the slightest degree of "racial stress." Like the "Muzak" played in elevators and airports, designed only to soothe the listener into a state of quietude, #AllLivesMatter provides an emotional escape from the "stressful" demands of Black Lives Matter. Through the very specific rhetorical techniques that #AllLivesMatter deploys, ignorance becomes weaponized.

This chapter has used a combination of close and distant discourse analysis in order to sketch out some of the main features of #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter as complexly interrelated discourse systems. Yet this approach is, at last count, a static one. While providing typologies of rhetorical moves, it does not offer a sense of the ways that contemporary rhetoric actually works upon its audiences as it proliferates across Twitter and other networks. If one goal of #AllLivesMatter is to create networks of those who are opposed to Black Lives Matter but do not have to actively feel their own opposition, the question emerges:

how can antiracist activists on social media not just form their own "affective publics" but also disrupt the perversely bland aesthetics of post-racial quietude?

Note

I have refrained from identifying the authors of individual tweets. This is first and foremost because my goal is to critique discourses, not individual Twitter users whose contributions to the network may instantiate these discourses. Also, since Tweets and accounts can be deleted, specifying that a particular Twitter user posted a particular tweet would interfere with users' "right to be forgotten."

1. This case study takes as its corpus a collection of tweets, gathered using Twitter's Search API daily between December 30, 2014 and February 6, 2015. The Twitter API allows for the collection of tweets containing a specific hashtag—in this case, #BlackLivesMatter. When using the Twitter Search API to gather tweets containing a popular tag, Twitter only provides access to a sample of the recent data, so my data set is not guaranteed to be a "complete" archive.

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TWELVE | #CancelColbert

Popular Outrage, Divo Citizenship, and Digital Political Performativity

ABIGAIL DE KOSNIK

The Social Drama of #CancelColbert

On March 27, 2014, the official Twitter account of *The Colbert Report*, comedian Stephen Colbert's political satire show on the cable network Comedy Central, tweeted, "I am willing to show #Asian community I care by introducing The Ching-Chong Ding-Dong Foundation for Sensitivity to Orientals or Whatever." This was the punch line of a long joke told by Colbert on the episode of his program that had aired the previous night. On that episode, Colbert announced that Dan Snyder, owner of the Washington Redskins football team, chose to respond to the long-running criticism of the team's continued use of a racial epithet as its name by launching an organization called "The Washington Redskins Original Americans Foundation," whose mission is "to provide resources that offer genuine opportunities for Tribal communities" (Washington Redskins Original Americans Foundation 2017). Colbert mocked the organization's odd combination of a presumably pro–Native American mission with racist language by proclaiming that he would be supporting "the #Asian community," with a (fictional) foundation whose name was replete with anti-Asian discourse: "ching-chong ding-dong" is derived from nineteenth-century English speakers' derogatory imitations of the Chinese language (Chow 2014); "Orientals" is a designation for Asians that most Asians consider to be, at best, outdated, and at worst, racist

(Tsuchiyama 2016; Oh 2010); and "or whatever" indicates utter indifference regarding what Asians prefer to be called.

However, Colbert's tactic of deriding Snyder's racist discourse met with resistance from Asian American online activist Suey Park (@suey_park).[1] Shortly after the @ColbertReport tweet appeared, Park tweeted, "The Ching-Chong Ding-Dong Foundation for Sensitivity to Orientals has decided to call for #CancelColbert. Trend it." Soon thereafter, she followed up with "#CancelColbert because white liberals are just as complicit in making Asian Americans into punchlines and we aren't amused."

Later that night and the next day, Park continued to tweet in #CancelColbert. Her tweets included "#CancelColbert because racist humor comes from racism" and "Still trending and waiting @StephenAtHome and @ColbertReport. Want to know how many hours #NotYourAsianSidekick trended? #CancelColbert."

In this last tweet, Park indicates that one day after beginning her hashtag #CancelColbert, she has not yet received a response (she is "still waiting" for a reaction) from either Stephen Colbert, via his official personal Twitter account @StephenAtHome, or his television program *The Colbert Report*, about the #CancelColbert campaign. She notes that the #CancelColbert tag remains active and refers to the fact that one of her earlier hashtag campaigns, #NotYourAsianSidekick (which encouraged Asian American feminists to share their experiences of intersectionality and to articulate their distinctness from white feminism) from December 2013, persisted for months on Twitter and attracted national attention (Chen and Jha 2013).

As per Park's call to action, #CancelColbert did trend: for ten days after Park initiated the hashtag, thousands of tweets (more than forty-seven thousand, according to our data scrape, described in more detail below) used it. Many #CancelColbert tweets reinforced Park's critique of the *Colbert Report* joke. For example, @eiridescent tweeted, "I can get behind this. 'Ironic' oppressive 'jokes' aren't funny and still oppress. #CancelColbert," and @cheuya tweeted, "Using satire that 'ironically' ridicules Asians = not productive for indigenous nor any marginalized group. White humor blows #CancelColbert." However, other tweets accused Park of failing to comprehend Colbert's joke. For instance, @BurningTheAlter tweeted, "Anyone who actually wants Colbert cancelled is a fucking idiot who has absolutely no understanding of satire. #CancelColbert." A tweet from @WorldofIsaac read, "If you want a good laugh, read the #CancelColbert hashtag. It's faux outrage at its finest."

The volume of activity in the hashtag, Park's profile as a digital activ-

ist, and the sharp lines drawn between supporters and critics of Park's call for protest, led to coverage of #CancelColbert by prominent news organizations, including *Variety* (Stedman 2014), *CNN.com* (Respers France 2014), *Salon* (Cooper 2014), and *Slate* (Weigel 2014), and *Time* published a piece by Park and Eunsong Kim explaining the #CancelColbert campaign (Park and Kim 2014). Taking note of the interest generated by #CancelColbert, *HuffPost Live*, the video-streaming network of the *Huffington Post*, invited Park for an interview with host Josh Zepps on March 28, 2014, the day after Park originated the hashtag. Park and Zepps, who is a white male, openly clashed throughout the interview, which led to intensified press coverage of #CancelColbert and also increasingly hostile tweets directed at Park, such as "'white men don't have the right to an opinion' lol wow @Suey_Park give me a break"; "'As a white man, you're not allowed to have any beliefs.' Sheesh"; "Annoying race-baiting liberals. @Suey_Park"; "Someone needs to chop Suey"; and most disturbingly, "Go get raped, c**; you f*****ing deserve it" and "You are a dirty f*****ing n****; you should probably just kill yourself" (*Internet Ruined My Life* 2016).

Four days after #CancelColbert began, on the next episode of *The Colbert Report* that aired on March 31, 2014, Colbert directly addressed the controversy. He did not apologize for @ColbertReport's "Ching-Chong Ding-Dong Foundation" tweet, but he criticized Comedy Central for posting from an account with his show's name on it that Colbert did not control, asked Twitter cofounder Biz Stone to help him delete the @ColbertReport account, and told his followers to stop harassing Park. "That ends the controversy," Colbert said (Blake 2014).

The "controversy," in the form of widespread media coverage of #CancelColbert, did die down after Colbert declared an "end" to it on March 31, but according to Park, it did not completely halt. Park says that a group of trolls doxxed her, publishing her phone number, email address, home address, and other personal information on the internet so that others could vilify and threaten her, and that after receiving a barrage of frightening phone calls and confronting a man who was stalking her, she largely withdrew from Twitter (Bruenig 2015; *Internet Ruined My Life* 2016). Not all critics of #CancelColbert expressed anti-liberal viewpoints, but strong threads of racism and sexism ran through the most vehement threats and harassment posted in the hashtag and directed at Park. In this chapter, I characterize #CancelColbert as a "leftist" action in the sense that it was antiracist, and I frame the extreme end of the spectrum of backlash against #CancelColbert as "rightist" in the sense

that people at this extreme defended racist speech (and, in doing so, propagated highly misogynistic speech and actions).

Popular Outrage

Liberals' use of the internet to collectively criticize expressions that they interpret as racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist, xenophobic, or otherwise prejudiced, has been criticized as "call-out culture," "dogpiling," and "piling on" (Friedersdorf 2017). Some argue that when individuals cause offense, it is mostly done unintentionally or in minor ways and does not warrant their being subjected to barrages of rebukes; this line of thinking holds that call-out culture is "toxic" because it inhibits expression rather than inspiring productive dialogue among different groups of people (Friedersdorf 2017, Ahmad 2015). Others argue that for too long, public speech (which includes online posts) that is racist, sexist, or offensive in other ways has been allowed to proliferate without comment, as dominant social norms often presume such speech to be innocent or harmless, often excusing it as "just a joke" (Nguyen 2016) or "not that big of a deal" (Riley H. 2017). Some advocate for "calling in," or having a private conversation with someone who has caused offense in order to offer them information and guidance, as an alternative to "calling out," or criticizing someone for offensive speech in a public setting (Ferguson 2015). However, software engineer and blogger Riley H. (2017) argues that calling in is not sufficient to stop harmful behavior: "It takes 50 call-ins before someone is tired enough of being harassed to make the call-out." Pro–social justice internet users thus regard collective and public articulation of outrage as a valuable tactic for making visible, and interrupting, public expressions of bias and prejudice that would otherwise be ignored, widely accepted as normal, or rapidly covered over and dismissed.

Outrage was the primary effect of the #CancelColbert campaign. Park's initial #CancelColbert post publicized her own outrage at the @ColbertReport "joke" and called on other Twitter users to respond and announce their outrage using the hashtag. The common use of the #CancelColbert tag across the responding tweets served to aggregate and amplify the outrage. #CancelColbert was therefore exemplary of what we might call *social justice digital performativity*—that is, the repertoire of call-out culture, the order of actions commonly taken by leftists when they perceive that offensive speech needs to be collectively highlighted and disputed in the public sphere of the Internet.

While outrage at casual racism has fueled online call-outs like #CancelColbert, far more intense and widespread forms of outrage—outrage felt deeply by masses of people for a long duration—has driven large-scale political resistance and revolution. Manuel Castells's book *Networks of Outrage and Hope* (2015) characterizes the Arab Spring revolts of 2010–2012, the Occupy movement in the United States that began in 2011, and the hashtags through which participants in those movements organized and communicated, such as #ArabSpring and #OccupyWallStreet (or #Occupy/#OWS), as manifestations of society-wide outrage. Castells writes, "It was not just poverty, or the economic crisis, or the lack of democracy that caused the multifaceted rebellion. . . . It was primarily the humiliation provoked by the cynicism and arrogance of those in power, be it financial, political or cultural, that brought together those who turned fear into outrage, and outrage into hope for a better humanity" (2–3). However, in Castells's analysis of the political movements of the 2000s, feelings of outrage are not exclusive to left-wing activists. Castells also describes right-wing movements driven by outrage, as when he states that in response to the election of President Barack Obama in 2008 and the subsequent obstructionism exhibited by the Republican Congress, "The first expression of popular outrage was the rise of the Tea Party, a mixture of populism and libertarianism that offered a channel of mobilization to a variety of indignant opposition to government in general and to Obama in particular" (157).

I cite Castells's arguments about #ArabSpring and #Occupy not to claim that #CancelColbert approached the intensity or reach of these sweeping political movements, but in order to underscore his claim that both left-wing and right-wing groups can operate from the shared affect that Castells calls "popular outrage." Leftist (antiracist) outrage motivated the launch of the #CancelColbert campaign, but racist and sexist outrage motivated many criticisms of Park, as well as the acts of trolling, doxxing, and stalking perpetrated against her. As Castells's examples and #CancelColbert make clear, online outrage is not exclusive to any particular party, group, or philosophy; rather, outrage is a component of the repertoires of both alt-right digital performativity and social justice digital performativity. In other words, *digital political performativity*, of which online outrage is a defining aspect, can be enacted by either those working to dismantle historical structural inequities or those working to reinforce them.

The Alt-Right's Affect of Underrepresentation

Noting how commonly right-wing Twitter users express outrage at left-wing hashtag campaigns leads to a reconsideration of Zizi Papacharissi's work on "affective publics." Papacharissi argues that "the narrative structures of Twitter lend form to affective modalities of storytelling" (2015, 12), and that affective publics differ from earlier models of public spheres in that they do not purport to employ "rationally based deliberative protocols" but are "textually rendered into being through emotive expressions that spread virally through networked crowds" (14). Papacharissi writes, "Affective publics typically produce disruptions/interruptions of dominant political narratives by presencing underrepresented viewpoints" (12). However, she notes that affective publics can, in turn, be disrupted; she quotes one anti-Occupy tweet that used the #OWS hashtag: "I'm sick of the perpetually out-raged & offended . . . I'm offended they can afford to take a day off work to WHINE! #OWS #99%" (13). #OWS sought to interrupt the dominant social, economic, and political narrative of neoliberal capitalism, but anti-#OWS posters sought to disrupt #OWS, perhaps regarding it as a dominant political narrative in that it was heavily and frequently reported on (not in the mainstream press but on social media platforms).

In the case of #CancelColbert, I postulate that posters who took issue with Park's criticism of Colbert's joke saw liberal outrage as a "dominant political narrative" that manifested in the protest against Colbert's joke but also in many previous hashtag campaigns that drew attention to pervasive everyday racism, such as #NotMyName, #ClassicallyBeautiful, and Park's #NotYourAsianSidekick.[2] Right-leaning users formed an affective public that sought to disrupt, and interrupt, the liberal outrage that may have seemed to dominate Twitter in the first half of the 2010s.

I propose that #CancelColbert allows us to perceive right-wingers' outrage at the "out-raged," and their being offended by the "offended," as an affective stream of outrage in its own right—that is, as rightist outrage writ large. In other words, alt-righters in the years leading up to the 2016 election did not only manifest backlash against liberal outrage; rather, they were themselves constitutive of an affective public motivated by outrage.

Topic Modeling of #CancelColbert

At my request, one of my PhD students in computer science, Andrew Godbehere, mined all of the tweets that appeared in #CancelColbert

on Twitter in the eleven days following Park's debut of the hashtag (between March 26 and April 5, 2014), finding 47,434 total tweets. Godbehere then applied to the data set a topic-modeling program, which resulted in eight topics. Machine learning engineer Bugra Akyildiz (2015) defines topic models as "probabilistic generative models which uncover hidden thematic structures in large collections of documents." One of the topics that emerged from Godbehere's analysis, Topic 7, was thematically structured around outrage. Here are select tweets from Topic 7:

Topic 7

outrage faux fake: [outrage, faux, fake, matters, real, time, feel, listen]
—-
OhHiNickBlake at 1396028124—OUTRAGE OUTRAGE OUTRAGE OUTRAGE OUTRAGE
OUTRAGE OUTRAGE OUTRAGE #CancelColbert OUTRAGE OUTRAGE OUTRAGE OUTRAGE O
UTRAGE OUTRAGE OUTRAGE OUTRA

travarp at 1396013863—So #CancelColbert has gone from outrage to faux outrage, to faux outrage over faux outrage #america

FelixMcCormick at 1396045800—#CancelColbert FAUX OUTRAGE, FAUX OUTRAGE, FAUX OUTRAGE!

brooklynmike21 at 1396026308—I'm outrage by your outrage! Somebody please listen and feel sorry for me!!! #CancelColbert

Alf954 at 1396025257—I searched #CancelColbert and all I see is fauxoutrage over faux outrage. Except for @EdgeofSports, but hes ALWAYS offended.

jtLOL at 1396020802—Yes, only YOUR outrage is real. RT @Toure Don't #CancelColbert. Because context matters more than fake outrage.

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DouglasRowan at 1396018674—What did people do with
their faux outrage before social media? Who is
going to out-outrage the other outraged community?
#CancelColbert

itsjustjoshy at 1396100919—@StephenAtHome what did you
do? Omg! Just read about it. Outrage!! Generic outrage!
I don't even know who you are anymore. #CancelColbert
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Topic 7 shows many tweets mocking Park's and her followers' liberal outrage at Colbert's joke. For example, OhHiNickBlake's tweet consists of the word "OUTRAGE" typed in all caps over and over, implying that #CancelColbert liberals are simply shouting their feelings of outrage at the rest of Twitter, hoping someone will listen. There are mentions of "faux outrage," "fake outrage," and "generic outrage," which intimate that the #CancelColbert tweeters' outrage is unfounded and unjustified. brooklynmike21 tweets, "I'm outrage[d] by your outrage! Somebody please listen and feel sorry for me!!! #CancelColbert," and DouglasRowan tweets, "What did people do with their faux outrage before social media? Who is going to out-outrage the other outraged community?," which hints that #CancelColbert supporters are not truly outraged but perform outrage only to seek attention.

When conservatives condemn liberals for their overt displays of outrage, they are themselves showing righteous anger, taking offense, and making known their feelings; those who express outrage at liberal outrage may think their position is the more rational one, but their expressions are full of affect, emotion, and sentiment. Anti–#CancelColbert tweeters accuse pro–#CancelColbert tweeters of being overly performative, but the "antis" are no less performative than the "pros." The anti–#CancelColbert users condemn the pro–#CancelColbert camp for enacting "fake" and "faux" outrage, but as Victor Turner would argue, performance is not "faking," but a form of "making" (1982, 93). In #CancelColbert, both pros and antis performed outrage and thus *made* something; Papacharissi would say that what both camps made over the course of the hashtag campaign were affective publics.

I argue that the current wave of US conservative and alt-right outrage is based in *strong feelings of subordination*: feelings of being underrepresented and marginalized, not feelings of being dominant, even though the majority of conservatives and alt-righters are white Americans and thus belong to the demographic with the most political, social, cultural,

and economic power in the country. I claim that, more often than not, the affective public constituted by outraged rightists see themselves as followers rather than leaders, underlings rather than managers. I base this claim on the prominence and significance of individual spokespeople, such as Donald Trump and Milo Yiannopoulos, in the alt-right.

Divo Citizenship

Manuel Castells calls the Arab Spring, Occupy, and other social movements facilitated by social media "leaderless movements" (2015, 131), but #CancelColbert was not leaderless. I read Park's instigation of #CancelColbert, #NotYourAsianSidekick, and other social justice–oriented campaigns as acts of what Lauren Berlant (1997) calls "Diva Citizenship." Berlant locates Diva Citizenship in moments when individual members of subordinated groups, bear witness to their experiences of subordination, in the hope that by making public their personal histories and feelings, they will aid in "the transformation of U.S. political and social culture" (222). She writes:

> Diva Citizenship occurs when a person stages a dramatic coup in a public sphere in which she does not have privilege. Flashing up and startling the public, she puts the dominant story into suspended animation; . . . she renarrates the dominant history as one that the abjected people have once lived sotto voce, but no more; and she challenges her audience to identify with the enormity of the suffering she has narrated and the courage she has had to produce, calling on people to change the social and institutional practices of citizenship to which they currently consent. (223)

Park and other women activists—such as April Reign, who launched #OscarsSoWhite, and Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, founders of #BlackLivesMatter—have operated as diva citizens in social media platforms, news media, and real-world spaces. Through hashtags that these women launched and propelled into mainstream visibility, they have "flash[ed] up and startl[ed] the public" and have articulated emotions and ideas that seem new to people outside of their ethnic groups (but are familiar to people inside those groups). They have called upon Americans and overseas followers to identify with their pain and with the pain that millions of people of color in the United States have experienced, in different sectors of American life, in the hopes of driving

collective change in racist American systems. Berlant lauds diva citizens for their "optimism" and "courage" (222–23) in choosing to become public figures when, more often than not, dominant American culture dismisses and derides them. Park's attempt to draw attention to Colbert's joke as an example of seemingly innocuous, satirical, everyday racism fits Berlant's definition of Diva Citizenship in every respect, including the fact that #CancelColbert attracted far more censure than support.

However, in the years following #CancelColbert, the daring and bravery of diva citizens, their willingness to say what usually goes unsaid, and their proclaiming—and inciting others to amplify—certain thoughts and affects that are usually kept hidden from the majority of the American public have been reproduced by men on the far right of the political spectrum. As women like Park, Garza, and Reign asserted themselves as outspoken critics of how social and cultural structures continue to fail women and minorities, so did men like Donald Trump and Milo Yiannopoulos establish themselves as individuals willing to speak out against the failings of the supposedly dominant and entrenched liberal political system. Trump and Yiannopoulos rose to popularity with the alt-right in 2015 and 2016 by "staging . . . dramatic coup[s]," "flashing up and startling the public," "put[ting] the dominant story"—of liberal inclusivity and equity—"into suspended animation," giving voice to the stories and feelings of the "abjected people" who have "lived sotto voce, but no more," "challeng[ing] [their] audience to identify with . . . the courage [they have] had to produce," and "calling on people to change the social and institutional practices of citizenship." An op-ed in the *Washington Times* in December 2015 stated that Trump "says what nearly everybody thinks but is too fearful or polite to say." Buffalo Bills coach Rex Ryan said, introducing Trump at a rally in April 2016, "One thing I really admire about [Trump] is . . . he'll say what's on his mind. . . . [A] lot of people want to say the same thing. . . . They all think it, but they don't have the courage to say it" (Rodak 2016). Jesse Singal (2017) wrote in *New York Magazine* in February 2017 that Yiannopoulos "has attracted an audience of resentful young people frustrated with 'political correctness,' many of whom believe they aren't 'allowed' to say various offensive things."

Trump, Yiannopoulos, and other "heroes" of the alt-right thus act as *divo citizens*, my term for the right-wing male public figure who mirrors Berlant's social justice–oriented diva citizen. The divo citizen seems to speak up when no one else will, about experiences and affects that are widely felt but little expressed. In their willingness to speak out, and in

their voluble criticisms of a slew of liberal customs and laws that seem (to their followers) oppressive and wrong, they embody rightist outrage both offline and online. However, diva citizens and divo citizens do not have an equal claim to outrage: women of color have been historically silenced in the United States in a myriad of ways, white men like Trump and Yiannopoulos have not. As Singal (2017) says, "It is plainly false that reactionary speech is severely restricted in the U.S. . . . This is a common conservative falsehood, that . . . people are getting fired or blacklisted left and right simply for 'tellin' it like it is.'" I am not arguing that the causes of diva citizens and divo citizens are morally equivalent but that divo citizens *act like* diva citizens—that these white men inhabit the positionality of oppressed women of color and perform the repertoire (*speaking out, defiantly telling the truth, daring to say what others will not, calling for widespread reform*) of women of color who have dared to become public spokeswomen and advocates for themselves and their communities.

The performances of divo citizens are not the same as those of diva citizens, since any claims to being oppressed made by wealthy white male media celebrities would be spurious, but the performances of divo citizens and diva citizens feel the same to their respective followers. That is, the divo citizen's and the diva citizen's performances stem from, and foster, the same affect—the affect of outrage—and thus similar affective publics form around both types of performers, though the diva's public leans left and the divo's public leans right. While popular outrage has long been a tool of the US conservatives (the "culture wars" of the 1980s and '90s largely consisted of conservatives' advocating for censorship of art and media that they found offensive and outrage-worthy), the 2010s have seen the rise of a new dimension to the outraged conservative: the posture of being persecuted rather than occupying the position of persecutor, of being the underdog rather than the one holding power, of being the one censored (by political correctness, which supposedly tells rightists they "'aren't allowed' to say various offensive things" [Singal 2017]) rather than being the one calling for censorship.

By performing being disempowered and silenced and needing to fight back against structural oppressive forces, and by constantly expressing outrage at the ways that they and their communities are made to suffer, spokespeople of the alt-right such as Trump and Yiannopoulos emulate leftist hashtag activists such as Park, Garza, and Reign. I speculate that liberal diva citizens may have provided the model for social media success for conservatives and alt-rightists in the 2010s, because their performance style—the proclamation of grievances, the call to amplify

or "trend" that proclamation, and the rallying of community around an affect of outrage that for too long was mostly individually felt and rarely collectively expressed—is now the dominant style of not only the alt-right's most prominent representatives but also the swarms of users whose negative responses to campaigns such as #CancelColbert range from critical posts, to threatening posts, to doxxing, to harassing the diva citizens who launch the campaigns. The leftist tactic of using social media to mobilize outrage against systemic injustice and inequities appears to have been mirrored by the right and then turned against its originators. From 2014 to the present, rightists' outrage has mobilized popular support for the expansion of unjust policies and laws and the intensification of inequitable treatment of women, immigrants, and racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities.

The rise of alt-right digital performativity may have, in a sense, defeated Park, who has not led any social justice hashtag campaigns on Twitter following #CancelColbert. But since the election of Trump to the presidency in 2016, which many regard as a "victory" of the alt-right (Posner 2016), other leftist diva citizens have "flash[ed] up and startl[ed]" the public, including former acting attorney general Sally Yates,[3] Representative Maxine Waters,[4] and freelance journalist Lauren Duca.[5] The cries of outrage made by the followers of divo citizens have not entirely overwhelmed the calls for inclusivity and universal recognition of human rights issued by their outraged opponents.

Notes

1. "Suey" is not Park's real first name. Elizabeth Bruenig writes that the fictional name "Suey" "is a sardonic play on 'chop suey' and Asian American stereotypes" (Bruenig 2015).

2. In the #NotMyName campaign, people with markedly ethnic names shared stories of the numerous times they have heard their names mispronounced or have been called incorrect names. In the #ClassicallyBeautiful campaign, people took issue with white *New York Times* television critic Alessandra Stanley's (2014) characterization of African American actress Viola Davis as "less classically beautiful" than another lighter-skinned African American actress, Kerry Washington, and praised the diverse beauty of black women.

3. On January 30, 2017, Yates, acting US attorney general, refused to defend President Trump's executive order banning travelers from seven Muslim-majority states, "saying that she was not convinced that it was lawful," and was fired for her resistance (Lizza 2017).

4. Representative Maxine Waters of California, seventy-eight years old and the longest-serving Black woman in the US House of Representatives, has been

called "the Hero of the Anti-Trump Internet" (Sands 2017) for frequently and consistently speaking out against President Trump and his administration on the House floor, in interviews, and on Twitter (see Wire 2017).

5. *Teen Vogue* published an op-ed by Duca titled "Donald Trump Is Gaslighting America" in December 2016 that earned Duca national attention. That month, right-wing political commentator Tucker Carlson invited Duca to appear on his Fox News show and advised that Duca should "stick to [writing about] thigh-high boots" (Wemple 2016). Duca retorted, "A woman can love . . . thigh-high boots and still discuss politics," and titled her recurring column on *Teen Vogue* "Thigh-High Politics." *The Guardian* has called Duca "an unlikely hero of the movement against Donald Trump" (Helmore 2017). Since the publication of her "Gaslighting" piece and the Carlson interview, Duca has received numerous rape threats, doxxing threats, and death threats (Duca 2017).

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THIRTEEN | #nohomo

Homophobic Twitter Hashtags, Straight Masculinity, and Networks of Queer Disavowal

BONNIE RUBERG

#nohomo on Twitter

The phrase "no homo" and its corresponding hashtag "#nohomo" appear approximately five thousand times a day on Twitter.[1] Most often placed at the end of tweets, #nohomo is ostensibly used to signify that the content preceding it should not be interpreted as homoerotic or "gay." However, in this essay I argue that the actual meanings of #nohomo, while indeed homophobic, are more nuanced and telling than they may at first appear. In fact, #nohomo functions as a tool for performing and self-policing straight masculinity. In a social media environment, the hashtag mediates utterances that are implicitly associated with "homoness." These utterances fall into three main categories: (1) expressions of male-male intimacy, (2) the declaration of feelings, and (3) an interest in self-presentation and the body. In this way, #nohomo represents an attempt to distance the user from associations with both queerness and femininity. At the same time, it stands as evidence of the anxieties of cisgender male heterosexuality as it is performed in social media spaces and links #nohomo tweeters through a network of queer disavowal.

While many other hashtags on social media platforms trend and then fade away, entering popular use for a brief period during a particular cultural or political moment, #nohomo has appeared with notable consistency throughout Twitter's history. In this sense, the phrase

is an endemic fixture of the site's discursive landscape. This is also true of a number of other homophobic terms and phrases used on Twitter (e.g., "so gay"), as well as racist, sexist, transphobic, and ableist expressions of hate speech. However, #nohomo stands out among these terms precisely because it is, first and foremost, a hashtag: a unique unit of communication that emerged from within the Twitter-sphere. As such, it functions socially and semantically in ways that distinguish it from homophobic speech uttered offline and in other digital environments. Even when #nohomo appears on Twitter in non-hashtag form—as "no homo" or "nohomo"—the phrase remains fundamentally linked to the networked nature of meaning-making that the hashtag represents. #nohomo embodies the place where cultural anxieties about difference meet computer-mediated communication. At a moment when the linguistic unit of the hashtag is moving from Twitter into mainstream discourse, and when online harassment campaigns against marginalized subjects have reached new peaks of vitriol, the boundaries between oppressive language online and offline are blurring.[2] Deconstructing the social and rhetorical functions of #nohomo offers a valuable opportunity to better understand the complex relationship between language and identity as it both manifests in and emerges from digital spaces.

The Uses of #nohomo

#nohomo, and its spoken incarnation, "no homo," may initially seem dismissible as mere flip (albeit offensive) turns of phrase. To the contrary, my research has shown that the hashtag and its iterations serve as shorthand for a surprisingly intricate, largely unspoken, and widely held set of heteronormative beliefs about what it means to express oneself—and, indeed, to enact oneself—as a gendered and sexual subject on the internet. In particular, I contend that #nohomo most commonly performs a self-policing of cisgender, male heterosexuality. More explicitly than other forms of homophobic speech, #nohomo functions less as a direct expression of discrimination and more as a tool for making oneself an acceptable subject within a system of straight masculinity. In fact, rather than overt homoeroticism, the central concerns of #nohomo tweets are intimacy, affect, and the bodies of seemingly cisgender male users. Often the hashtag is deployed to mediate affectionate communication between such users as well as to render "safe" expressions of male-male fandom. Another trend that I have identified is the link between #nohomo tweets and male users' expressions of emotions, both positive and negative.

Tweets from male users about body care and clothing are also prominent fixtures within the landscape of #nohomo usage; in these cases, the hashtag appears to reflect an attempt on the part of speakers to distance themselves from associations with femininity.

Together, these patterns suggest a larger picture around #nohomo usage. By insisting on what is not "homo," #nohomo signposts an otherwise implicit network of what is imagined as "homo," giving definition to queerness as seen through the anxieties of straight masculinity. By their nature, hashtags create networks. Rather than establishing a network of shared interests, political goals, or community (e.g., #BlackLivesMatter, #ItGetsBetter), however, #nohomo creates a *network of disavowal*. A network of disavowal is one in which subjects are, ironically, connected through their attempts to distance themselves from connection. By using the hashtag to reject association with "homo-ness," #nohomo users in fact build a web of links that associates them with others who have also deployed #nohomo. Through this network, which speaks to a set of anxieties about the precariousness of heteronormativity in online spaces, the prevalence of #nohomo brings a queer valence to Twitter and digital modes of communication more broadly. In addition to its ties to historically feminine-coded genres of writing, such as the diary, platforms like Twitter, designed to facilitate interpersonal connection, seem to raise concerns about whether the structures of social media may themselves be "homo." The widespread use of #nohomo stands as evidence that homophobic discourse thrives in digital spaces, yet it also suggests that the structures of computer-mediated expression might themselves be implicitly understood by some users as queer.

Methodologies

This project stands at the intersection of big data, cultural analysis, and close reading. It emerges from a collaboration between humanists like myself, social scientists, and data engineers. Starting in 2012, UC Berkeley's Color of New Media collective began work on a software tool that scrapes and parses content from Twitter associated with specific phrases. For the present study, we pulled tweets containing "#nohomo," "nohomo" or "no homo." These tweets were collected over designated periods in 2013, 2014, and 2015. The resulting data set was processed through the tool's topic modeling algorithm, which generated "constellations," or common clusters in usage patterns, across the data set. Importantly, this algorithmic output was not the conclusion of my re-

search but the starting point. By identifying patterns in the archive, which consisted of tens of thousands of tweets, the tool pointed me to toward key areas of interest and allowed me to perform a critique of a body of text that would otherwise be too vast for the "naked eye."[3] Conceptually, this work draws from notions of language, culture, power, and identity formation articulated by Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, as well as "speech act" theory, while adapting and expanding these notions for the digital context.[4] There are also limitations to these methodologies. Because Twitter does not collect information regarding users' racial and ethnic identities, it is difficult to comment on the role that race plays in #nohomo usage without making problematic assumptions. Language, nationality, and geography also present challenges. Even users' gender and sexual identity, central concerns in the discussion below, are not tracked by Twitter. This means that, by necessity, my points regarding correlations between gender, sexuality, and #nohomo usage are less concerned with "realness"—that is, definitively categorizing who #nohomo users "really" are—and more concerned with the equally important issue of performances of identity, such as the performance of straight, cisgender masculinity. In place of offering definitive answers, this work uses the #nohomo hashtag as a window onto the anxieties and beliefs that drive discrimination against LGBTQ subjects and shape normative notions of sexual and gender identity, both online and off.

"No Homo" and #nohomo: A History

Though the phrase "no homo" has become most prominent in its widespread use on social media platforms, particularly Twitter, it originates offline in African American vernacular culture. "No homo" was originally coined in East Harlem in the 1990s, but it entered more mainstream circulation through hip-hop music, where it was introduced by rapper Cam'ron in the early 2000's and popularized by Lil Wayne—as in the 2009 single "Run This Town," where Wayne raps, "It's crazy how you go from being Joe Blow, to everybody on your dick, no homo" (Weiner 2009). Here, in these early examples of the phrase's appearance in popular culture, the link between homoeroticism ("everybody on your dick") and the supposedly clarifying function of "no homo" (translated roughly to "but I don't mean that in a gay way") is clear. In response to claims that hip-hop culture has traditionally discriminated against LGBTQ people, evidenced by homophobic remarks like "no homo" through which rap artists have distanced themselves from the figure of the "down low

brother," some commentators have argued that "no homo" has actually allowed hip-hop to become a "gayer place." "No homo," so this thinking goes, creates the opportunity for straight male rappers to test the boundaries of heteronormativity by offering them the opportunity to speak and subsequently negate the "gayness" of their lyrics (Catucci 2009). This seeming contradiction, within which "no homo" might simultaneously encapsulate a system of cultural homophobia and make space for the expression of queerness, stands as a backdrop to the social functions of "no homo."

The popularization of "no homo" in hip-hop, and subsequently mainstream, parlance coincided with the marked rise in Twitter usage recorded between 2007 and 2008. The translation of the phrase from primarily a spoken utterance to a social media fixture took place at a crucial moment in the popularization of the social media platform, when the average number of tweets per day skyrocketed 6,000 percent (Beaumont 2010). Hashtags are emergent units of communication: users invented and implemented them, and then Twitter integrated them into the site's official system. In this moment of coevolution, "no homo" was already uniquely suited to the hashtag format. Similarly, to the way that a hashtag is placed at the end of a tweet, the verbal phrase "no homo" follows a speaker's statement, clarifying and coloring its content and linking it within a network of references. Already functioning in spoken language as a kind of proto-hashtag, "no homo" transitioned and translated easily into #nohomo. When it did, the phrase moved beyond African American vernacular speech and was adopted by Twitter's broader and predominantly white user base.[5] In this sense, "no homo" reflects the well-documented phenomenon by which rhetorical innovations from Black culture are co-opted and decontextualized. #nohomo in particular demonstrates the role that digital media can play in the appropriation of Black culture (Clifton 2015). In this case, Twitter functioned as the primary locus and an amplifier of this cooptation.

Both "no homo," as a phrase used in conversation, and #nohomo, its digital incarnation, claim to disavow the homoerotic implications of the utterance that immediately precedes it. They represent an attempt to nullify the queerness of statements that are seen as having homoerotic connotations or overtones. However, on Twitter, #nohomo is employed in this way surprisingly rarely; tweets with overtly homoerotic content number among the least common in identifiable genres of #nohomo tweets. In fact, the hashtag #nohomo has taken on much more nuanced social and rhetorical functions than the phrase "no homo." Because the

hashtag is often appended to tweets that do not contain explicitly homoerotic content, #nohomo itself often "queers" tweets at the same time that it purports to negate queerness. This is because, by nature, the presence of #nohomo suggests that a tweet's content might be interpreted as "homo." In presenting my research on #nohomo, I have often encountered audiences' expectation that the hashtag is used ironically or humorously. This may be true for the spoken "no homo," but the Twitter data set suggests that, though #nohomo often appears in tweets with a jocular tone, it is almost always used in earnest. Much as Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kate M. Miltner have argued about hashtags in their work on #MasculinitySoFragile, #nohomo speaks in real and meaningful ways to the functions through which identity is constructed and deconstructed on Twitter (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016). In what follows, I have grouped the usage patterns of #nohomo into three primary categories: male-male intimacy, body care, and affect. Together they demonstrate how straight masculinity defines itself through queer disavowal and how the "homo" is imagined as a danger that lurks within the very systems of social media.

Male-Male Intimacy, Communication, and Fandom

Among the most frequent uses of #nohomo is the mediation of intimacy and affection between two or more male Twitter users—as well as between an individual male user and another man, such as a movie star or sports figure, for whom the user is expressing admiration. It is common to see #nohomo appear in tweets that proclaim sentiments of straight male friendship, or what might be termed "bro-ship." Sometimes these tweets directly state warm feelings; at other times they simply imply caring and connection by enacting friendliness. Here are two examples of this genre of #nohomo tweets[6]:

```
@twitterfriend1 I love you, bro #nohomo

Hey dude, happy birthday @twitterfriend2 #nohomo
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In the first tweet, the speaker is using #nohomo to assure the friend whom he is addressing that his "love" is safe and normatively acceptable—in other words, heterosexual. In the second tweet, the affection between the users is implied, yet the speaker still includes the #nohomo hashtag. The utterance "happy birthday" presumably express-

es caring and therefore is also associated with an intimacy that could be perceived as "homo." Such instances, in which #nohomo is deployed to disavow even the most basic sentiments of male-male friendship, suggest that friendliness between heterosexual men is imagined by some users to represent a potential site of queer slippage. While constructs of bro-ship allow for expressions of male-male closeness (e.g., "I love you bro"), they also produce anxiety between users who must always also be working to uphold heterosexual masculinity. Bro-ship is therefore formulated as straight yet queer-adjacent, and it must be carefully monitored and mediated in order to ward off the threat of queerness.

Importantly, in the social media context, #nohomo's function as a safeguard against queerness in male-male friendships is fundamentally linked to the communicative structures of Twitter. Taken as a total data set, #nohomo tweets on average contain a higher number of @-mentions and @-replies than random samplings of tweets. Roughly speaking, #nohomo tweets are approximately one and a half times more likely to contain @-mentions and @-replies than tweets that do not contain #nohomo. @-mentions and @-replies are the tools through which users directly link their tweets to other users. Within the formal structures of Twitter, @-mentions and @-replies both enact and embody connections between individuals. If we understand intimacy as characterized in part through interpersonal closeness and attachment, @-mentions and @-replies are the formal units of intimacy on Twitter. The fact that #nohomo tweets contain, on average, a higher percentage of these units suggests that structured connections through @-mentions and @-replies have themselves become associated, whether directly or indirectly, with the anxieties of heterosexual male sociability. These mentions and replies literalize the type of intimacy that #nohomo polices. Through the structure of links, they create ties between users' Twitter accounts that may themselves implicitly be associated with homo-ness.

Related to #nohomo's function in mediating male-male friendships is the use of the hashtag in tweets in which male users express their appreciation for male celebrities, such as movie stars, musicians, and, above all, athletes. These tweets usually perform fandom either through specific references to a celebrity's accomplishments or through a general proclamation of positive sentiment. Tweets of this sort often look like this:

```
LeBron James is a basketball god. #nohomo
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Ok, I'm actually really liking this Justin Bieber
album. #nohomo

Michael Phelps dominated today. That dude has muscles
like WHAT. #nohomo
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The use of #nohomo in tweets such as these suggests that male-male fandom, in the eyes of heterosexual masculinity, stands in complicated relation to "homo-ness." As the first tweet demonstrates, the prevalence of #nohomo in these utterances implies a concern that men's admiration of other men will be presumed queer, even when these tweets contain no explicitly homoerotic content. It seems that the mere expression of positive feeling suggests a queer intimacy that must be neutralized. The second tweet represents another prominent and related genre of tweet. Here, the celebrity or material for which the straight male user is expressing appreciation is imagined to be associated with queerness (i.e., liking Justin Bieber is "homo"). In the third tweet, the user expresses admiration for the body of a male celebrity. Whereas the first tweet reflects the rigidity of heterosexual masculinity, which renders unacceptable appreciation for other men, the second and third tweets do suggest, as discussed above, that #nohomo allows users to push the boundaries of their straight male identities. By amending their statements with #nohomo, they are able to admit to liking "queer" music and to appreciate male bodies while returning to their positions as normative heterosexual subjects. In such moments, #nohomo makes queer-coded expression possible while working to uphold a hegemonic system.

Among the perceived traits of queerness that #nohomo suggests is the belief that same-sex friendship, intimacy, fandom, and even basic appreciation can constitute "homo-ness." Notably, as the prevalence of @-mentions and @-replies in this data set indicates, this intimacy also extends to the structures of interpersonal communication in digital spaces; these structures themselves create connections that are too close for straight male comfort. The hashtag #nohomo makes these beliefs and biases visible by literalizing them into standardized rhetorical units. This first genre of #nohomo tweet underscores how same-sex sociability functions as a site of anxiety for the performance for straight masculinity.

Body Care, Personal Appearance, and Femininity as Queer

The second major trend in the usage of #nohomo is the frequency with which the hashtag appears in conjunction with tweets about body care

and personal appearance. As is the case in tweets regarding male-male intimacy, these tweets seem to come primarily from straight male users. Within the subjects of body care and personal appearance, physical fitness and clothing are both common themes. Here are three examples of this type of tweet:

```
I just finished my workout and my abs look sick.
#nohomo

I got my eyebrows done today. #nohomo

Can I wear a scarf with a button-down shirt or is that
weird? #nohomo
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Each of these three utterances represents a different aspect of this trend. The implications of the first tweet seem, at first glance, the most straightforward. Like the tweet above in which a user expresses admiration for Michael Phelps's muscles, the statement that the user's "abs look sick" ("sick" used in complimentary sense) is imagined to run the risk of seeming homoerotic; a male user appreciating a male body, even his own, triggers anxieties about sounding "homo." However, it is meaningful that the contents of this tweet also mark it as heteronormatively masculine. In boasting about the intensity of his workout and the resulting strength of his body, this user is simultaneously performing a version of straight male butchness as well as undermining that same identity performance by straying dangerously close to the queer. To say "no homo" after admiring his own body implies that this user thinks he looks so good that he might be attracted to himself. This is an example of a tweet in which #nohomo infuses utterances with queer implications even as it purports to disavow them.

By contrast, the second and third tweets in this list are less concerned with homoeroticism and more with normative gender expectations. In the tweet about having his eyebrows "done," the user employs #nohomo in order to preempt the response that it would be socially unacceptable for a straight man to take part in this kind of personal grooming, which is traditionally associated with women's body care practices. In this case, the "homo" in #nohomo seems synonymous with "effeminate," implying that disavowing queerness also means disavowing femininity. In the third tweet, the user asks whether he can wear a scarf with a button-down shirt. Though the question seems simple, the inclusion of #nohomo signals

that the users believes even this level of interest in clothing and personal appearance may be deemed unacceptable for a straight male subject. Here, #nohomo takes on a self-policing role; the user calls out and rejects the imagined queerness of his question, performing the task of cultural regulation on himself. Whereas the first genre of #nohomo tweets mediated intimacies between men, many tweets in this second grouping mediate the speaker's intimate relationship with his own body.

Strikingly, this genre of tweets, especially those that address body care and personal appearance, suggest that many of the conditions of "homo-ness" relate much more closely to gender than to sexuality or erotic desire. For a straight male subject, association with female-coded interests is seen as queer. Heterosexual masculinity, in such moments, defines itself in opposition to femininity. This is one of the key findings that this research reveals: that queerness, as constructed through a hegemonic system of beliefs, is imagined as fundamentally linked to the destabilization of normative gender roles. In this way among others, the imagined characteristics of queerness that #nohomo tweets suggest differ substantially from how LGBTQ subjects and queer theory have traditionally articulated their own identities. They also differ from the common definition of homosexuality (i.e., an orientation toward sex or romance with a person of the same sex), suggesting that #nohomo speaks to a more complex network of beliefs and concerns that operate beneath the surface in mainstream perceptions of LGBTQ people. It is also important that the site of gender anxiety for straight masculinity, as suggested by #nohomo usage, is the heterosexual male body. #nohomo is much less frequently used for female-coded activities (e.g., crafting, shopping) and much more frequently for a set of female-coded interactions with the embodied self. Far from representing a material stronghold of heteronormativity, the straight male body becomes a place of weakness. It is when discussing his body that the speaker must be most watchful and most self-correcting, lest discourse stray toward queer.

(Queer) Affect and Twitter as Women's Writing

The third main trend in #nohomo usage is the appearance of the hashtag in association with tweets from ostensibly straight male users in which they directly express emotion. Some of these tweets make reference to positive emotions, others to negative emotions; some reflect emotional responses to important life events, others speak to everyday experiences. Here are some examples of this genre of tweet:

```
I'm just feeling really sad today. #nohomo

Being a dad is the best, you guys. This little kid
makes me so happy. #nohomo

I love you all! #nohomo
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In the first tweet, the user describes feeling upset or depressed, whereas the speakers in the second two tweets are expressing feelings of affection and love. What these tweets share is that they reflect the belief that the admission of emotion is itself "homo," regardless of the specificities of the sentiment expressed or the object of that sentiment. This genre of #nohomo tweet suggests that feeling itself is imagined as nonmasculine and therefore non-straight. Sadness and love alike fall outside the boundaries of acceptable male, heterosexual subjecthood; affect becomes queer. Straight masculinity on Twitter is therefore not only constructed through what a user may do but also explicitly through what (and whether) a user may feel. #nohomo here functions to mark affect as queer while simultaneously allowing users to return to heterosexual normativity after having expressed emotion.

Admittedly, this genre of tweets appears with considerably less frequency than those that relate to male-male intimacy or the male body. However, I include it here because these tweets highlight a commonality that exists across almost all types of #nohomo tweets: an imagined interrelation between feeling and queerness. In tweets about friendship and fandom, #nohomo mediates sentiments of warmth and love. Similarly, in tweets about body care and appearance, the function of #nohomo is to de-queer the act of *caring*. The user who worries that asking about his clothing choices will seem "homo" is less concerned with his clothing itself and more concerned that caring too much about clothing will mark him as queer; the user who reports having his eyebrows done employs #nohomo to ward off the implication that he cares more about his appearance than a straight man should. Being "homo," in such instances, is not about doing or looking unacceptable but about feeling unacceptable. #nohomo itself is a unit of communication powered by the feeling of anxiety. It serves an affective function (rendering feeling un-queer) and reflects an affective state (fearing associations with queerness). Like straight male users' own bodies, the user's state as a feeling subject emerges as a site of slippage between heteronormativity and an imagined queerness.

This connection between queerness, affect, and identity reintroduces the importance of the Twitter platform itself into an analysis of #nohomo. "Homo-ness," as a critique of the trends in #nohomo tweets has revealed, is closely linked to femininity and the expression of emotion. Twitter, too, is culturally associated with this same nexus of gender and emotion. Commonly described as a micro-blogging platform, Twitter emerges from a history of online, text-based self-expression platforms (e.g., LiveJournal) with its roots in predigital forms such as the written diary. Like public, short-form diary entries, tweets are commonly used to document or reflect on a user's daily life. Genre historians have argued compellingly for the gendered history of the diary, long seen as women's writing.[7] In this way, Twitter and social media posting more generally can be understood in association with cultural constructs of femininity; simply using Twitter puts the straight male user in the realm of the feminine—which, by the logics of #nohomo, is queer. In this way, Twitter itself, as a platform, produces anxieties about queerness for heterosexual masculinity.

The prevalence of #nohomo on Twitter, then, can be explained by more than its easy translation to hashtag form. Social media sites of this sort promote self-reflection, emoting, and interpersonal connection. The "homo" is associated with intimacy and attention to the self, both of which Twitter fosters in its structures and its cultures. Understood in this way, it could be said that all tweets contain something of the queer that #nohomo seeks to disavow. For this reason, the widespread use of #nohomo on Twitter reflects not only a larger-scale social issue with homophobia and discrimination in digital spaces but also an unspoken belief that social media may itself be too feminine, too intimate, and too queer for straight male users who are attempting to successfully perform heteronormative masculinity. #nohomo mediates and self-polices identity in a way that is specific to the digital environment precisely because that environment raises a wealth of anxieties and concerns around gender, sexuality, and maintaining the normative self.

Networks of Disavowal and Not-Queer Twitter

What, ultimately, are the primary social and rhetorical functions of #nohomo? What is the discursive and cultural work being done by the hashtag? Some of its functions, notably those that seem intentional on the part of users, are in line with the oppressive and hegemonic values of homophobia. #nohomo works to uphold dominant notions of straight

masculinity. It mediates intimacy between men and renders acceptable an interest in the male body; it also allows for the expression of emotion, otherwise associated with queerness. At the same time, #nohomo demonstrates a number of functions that blur the line between homophobia and queer expression. It allows for straight male users to incorporate elements of perceived "homo-ness" into their otherwise normative self-presentations. Often it colors utterances that might otherwise appear to have no queer valence with homoerotic implications. The hashtag signals and simultaneously counterbalances the culturally coded queerness of the Twitter platform itself. Across these many functions, #nohomo reflects a set of heteronormative anxieties and beliefs about what constitutes straightness, in which straight masculinity is defined as the opposite of the "homo." To be "homo" is not the same as to be gay in the way that gayness might be articulated by an LGBTQ subject. Rather, "homo-ness" is as much a matter of gender as of sexuality or desire. Being "homo" means falling outside accepted cultural norms for male heterosexuality and, in particular, in the ways that one expresses oneself in digital spaces. More than a tool for enacting discursive violence against LGBTQ subjects, #nohomo is a tool for the self-policing of straight masculinity. This vision of what is "homo" does not imagine queerness as a set of desires that the subject has but rather as something that might happen to the subject—something they might accidentally slip into.

In this way #nohomo does the work of establishing identity through disavowal; the straight is the not queer. The straight self is a self of disavowal. Because the nature of the hashtag is to create connections, #nohomo in fact establishes a network of this disavowal between tweets and users. This final function, the creation of a network of disavowal, is crucial for understanding the broader social implications of #nohomo on Twitter and beyond. #nohomo is fundamentally contradictory; it queers even as it negates the queer. The prevalence of #nohomo creates a "not queer" Twitter, a shadow network of things that are alike in refusing to be likened. In this way, in seeking to reject queerness, #nohomo makes visible a vast network of all of the things that cultural anxiety dictates may seem queer. It affiliates all those users who deploy #nohomo in order to reject affiliation with sexual and gender identities that fall outside the dictates of heteronormativity. Therefore, the network of disavowal functions on both a personal and a social level. On the level of the individual, it creates ties between #nohomo users, who form a kind of "uncommunity," a disparate network of those who all wish to be unaffiliated with the same thing. On the cultural level, #nohomo reveals a network

of anxieties and beliefs that seek to disavow the thing that nonetheless shapes and binds them: queerness.

Hashtags and homophobia on social media represent a rich area of further research. Research of this sort is important in this moment when harassment campaigns and threats are making clear that there is no easy distinction between what happens in online spaces and what is "real." As a long-standing fixture of Twitter's discursive landscape, #nohomo reflects the discrimination and hate speech present on the platform, even as the site exists as a powerful tool for the fight against oppression—and, more specifically, even as this fight takes the form of other hashtags, like #BlackLivesMatter. Yet #nohomo does more than this; it also demonstrates how what people say and how they say it in online spaces is key to the construction and upholding of gender and sexual identity. At the same time, it demonstrates how nuanced, difficult, and at times contradictory the performances of these identities are—how much work is required in order to make oneself acceptable as a heteronormative subject within digital spaces that are coded or perceived as gendered or queer. Whether #nohomo enacts homophobia or allows for the expression of queerness (while upholding a normative system) is not ultimately the question; it does both. What becomes clear is that it is the hashtag, this unique linguistic unit, that is able to do the complexity of this work, revealing a vision of straight masculinity threatened by digital communication that requires digital tools to uphold it.

Notes

1. This number represents an average of the total "no homo" phrases tallied at NoHomophobes.com, a website that counts daily instances of homophobic speech on Twitter, as noted from late 2014 to early 2016.

2. One such online harassment campaign that illustrates the real-life stakes of both web-based violence and the networks formed by Twitter hashtagging is #GamerGate. Formed in 2014, a group of reactionary video gamers organizing under this hashtag has launched ongoing attacks against women, queer people, and people of color who push for diversity in games. These attacks received national attention through coverage in publications like the *New York Times*.

3. This distinction between algorithm and analysis matters because, as feminist scholars of the digital humanities like Jacque Wernimont (2016) and Roopika Risam (2015) have noted, data-driven initiatives often risk reinforcing hegemonic power structures by overlooking the politics of their "objective" methodologies.

4. See especially Butler's *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997),

the discussion of power in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1995), and J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (1962).

5. According to the Pew Research Centers studies of social media user demographics, African American and Hispanic adults have consistently been somewhat more likely to use Twitter than white adults (28% of Black adults reported using Twitter in 2014, as compared to 20% of white adults, for example). However, white users are still in the majority on the site. Once again using 2014 as an example, the Pew Research Center reported that in that year approximately 85 percent of white adults used the internet, compared to 81 percent of Black adults and 83% of Hispanic adults. The United States Census Bureau estimates that in 2015, 77 percent of Americans were white. Together these numbers indicate that white users on Twitter outnumber Twitter users of color.

6. With the exception of tweets posted through private accounts, all of the user-generated content on Twitter is publicly available without password-protected access and is therefore considered acceptable for use in research without permission from users. However, in order to best illustrate the #nohomo usage patterns, all of the example tweets included here are reconstructed amalgams rather than verbatim quotes.

7. An example of scholarship that outlines the predigital link between gender, genre, and the diary is the introduction to Suzanne L. Bunkers and Cynthia Anne Huff's *Inscribing the Daily: Critical Essays on Women's Diaries* (1996).

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PART IV

Twitter International

FOURTEEN | "Is Twitter for Celebrities Only?"

A Qualitative Study of Twitter Use in India

NEHA KUMAR

As mobile connectivity becomes increasingly prevalent across India and other countries in the Global South (World Development Report 2016), the use of social networking sites (SNSs) has also grown rapidly (Kemp 2017). Mobile technologies are significantly more affordable than desktop or laptop computers and are far more appropriate for the Indian context, particularly in resource-constrained regions where telephone landlines have yet to make an appearance. Further, as mobile devices become more advanced, they are gradually becoming the primary communication and computing medium for a significant fraction of the populations in so-called developing countries. In India, in particular, mobile penetration has grown to include more than a billion subscriptions as of March 2016 (TRAI 2016).

A growing mobile-equipped population in the Global South, and certainly India, is online more frequently than it has ever been. Increasing affordability of mobile data has also encouraged a greater volume of online engagement. In recent years, research has shown how this population spends a large chunk of its time on Facebook, Twitter, and various other SNSs, largely for communication purposes but also for various other ends (Rangaswamy and Cutrell 2012; Mudliar and Rangaswamy 2015). In addition to these studies of SNS adoption and use, Daniel Miller's *Tales of Facebook* (2011) offers an ethnographic account of Facebook practices in Trinidad. S. P. Wyche (2013), Anicia Peters (2012), and their respective coauthors have expanded this body of work by studying Facebook

use in Kenya and Namibia. My own (Kumar 2014) account of Facebook use as a means of self-empowerment for urban Indian youth discusses the adoption of the SNS as the youth fulfill their aspirations toward an improved standard of living. This narrative of SNSs being used in the interest of freedom, democracy, and empowerment across the world continues, widely holding the optimistic view of social media as engines for driving much-needed social and political change in various parts of the world (Lotan et al. 2011; Harlow and Johnson 2011), though this view has also been criticized (Wojcieszak and Smith 2014; Comunello and Anzera 2012). The discourse of participation on SNSs has grown and deepened considerably—certainly in the United States but also in the Middle East and various African and Asian countries, including India. Such discussion comes along with a certain utopian notion that Twitter, along with other SNSs, enables a process of democratization of new media that was previously not possible.

In this chapter, instead of focusing on participation on Twitter through the use of a particular hashtag, I draw on offline empirical findings from an urban, lower- and middle-class setting in India to show that this utopian view of Twitter as a site of democratization does not quite hold there. Using my qualitative inquiry of Twitter use in these settings, I demonstrate that the perceptions of Twitter that have evolved over time in India are different from how the SNS is perceived in other, Western settings. These lead to limited use or *non-use* of the SNS and therefore limited participation in the hashtag culture that has rapidly become pervasive in the West. Here, I relate my findings to the growing literature on concerns of non-use of technology (Baumer et al. 2015). Eric P.S. Baumer and his colleagues discuss several factors that contribute toward non-use, including power differentials, differences in levels of social and economic development, among others. I also engage with K. Toyama's (2011) *amplification theory* to highlight that although the Twitter non-users I study might experience a greater awareness of their social status (or lack thereof) when they engage with the technology, we might also make an effort to better understand the choices that they make and motivations they are driven by. I suggest that perhaps there is, in fact, power in their act of choosing non-use and rejecting Twitter as a platform of expression.

Method

This chapter draws on data that was collected in the midst of an eighteen-month ethnographic engagement with youth from lower middle-income

backgrounds in the National Capital Region (NCR) in and around New Delhi. The ethnography was aimed at understanding how young adults from diverse demographic backgrounds adopted and engaged with mobile technologies and used them to consume various mobile media in addition to getting online. The portion of this study that I draw on in this chapter relied on a combination of qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews and media analysis of print and television news. The latter was motivated by the interview participants, who made several references to news media in print and on television. These participants included twenty-one individuals—male and female—who were from low- and middle-income backgrounds and lived or worked in the Delhi NCR area at the time of their interviews. All participants were in the twenty-one-to-thirty-five-year-old age range; this is the age group that is most active in accessing the internet. Those who are older might also be familiar with the internet, in many cases, but being online is often not a part of their daily workflow, nor are they as digitally savvy or literate. The participants in my study, on the contrary, actively used smartphones but also knew how to use computers and were comfortably aware of different SNSs and related mobile services, such as WhatsApp, Hike, and Telegram, in addition to those that are more widely recognized, such as Facebook and Twitter.[1] All interviews took place in a mix of English and Hindi, both languages in which I am fluent. Though Hindi was the native language of all participants, there appeared to be an inclination to converse in English when possible, perhaps owing to their perception of my identity as a US-based researcher, regardless of my fluency in Hindi. This is a trend I have observed in earlier research as well. Perhaps in perceiving me as an outsider, participants made an overt effort of presenting themselves to me as technologically competent, highlighting how many different mobile devices and internet platforms they were familiar with. Though participants were perhaps unduly enthusiastic in their responses and eager to elaborate on them, it is unlikely that they misrepresented their views or misreported their use of Twitter. Participants were selected using a process of snowball sampling, with a particular effort to ensure that there were a few women in the sample, since my earlier work (Kumar 2014) had highlighted how much easier it is to identify male technology users not only among low-income or rural groups but also among middle-income groups in urban India. Social and cultural norms in India are still much more accepting of men and boys using technology than women and girls, but this is slowly changing, especially in urban areas. Finally, although several of the participants came from

what might be considered middle-income households, their ability to afford smartphones and 24/7 internet access is still limited. It is worth noting that though these participants are able to afford relatively expensive smartphones and internet plans, they still ration and deliberate over their internet use.

I analyzed the collected data using an inductive process of analysis by coding the interview transcripts and iteratively distilling emergent themes, focusing on discussions around use/non-use of Twitter—on its own and in comparison with other SNSs. Earlier ethnographic findings had demonstrated limited use of SNSs other than Facebook, and this meant that my study (Kumar 2014) was deliberately driven toward understanding what made Facebook more attractive than Twitter, Hike, or Telegram. In this chapter I focus on the findings that pertained to Twitter in particular, as laid out below, but also those that compared Twitter to the use or non-use of other SNSs.

Findings

Participants were uniformly unenthusiastic about using Twitter, though they were all quite familiar with Facebook and somewhat regular users of other services such as Hike, Viber, WhatsApp, and Telegram.[2] Below I present the findings from my interviews to unearth popular perceptions of Twitter that led to its limited use or non-use by the participants in my study. I discuss the role that print and television news media have played in generating an image of Twitter as being for "high-class" people, how participants from low- and middle-income groups subscribe to this image as well, and how other potential and competing uses of my participants' online time have further challenged Twitter's popularity.

The first response I heard to Twitter was from Vijay, a young male participant, who said, "Twitter is for high-profile people. . . . If you're a big politician or if you're a Bollywood star, then Twitter is for you." Vijay further shared that he did not see any reason for him to use Twitter, because, he asked, "who has so much time?" It turned out that Vijay did have time for other SNSs, such as Facebook and WhatsApp, but he saw those services as allowing him to connect to his circle of friends. Twitter, according to him, was not a place for connecting to friends; it represented a sea of users, most of whom were unlikely to be interested in hearing what he had to say. Those on Twitter were either politicians or film celebrities or their fans; the latter would use the service "only to check

what their favorite politicians or celebrities had said twenty minutes ago, like what they had for breakfast, or who they were meeting for dinner."

Vijay was not the only one who viewed Twitter as a service that was not intended for him. However, through successive conversations, I learned that the news media played a large role in perpetuating this perception of Twitter as being for "high-class" individuals. Jeevan, who was another young male interview participant, told me that if you looked at the newspaper on a given day, there would be tweets published about how Priyanka Chopra (a popular Hindi film actress and star of the US television series *Quantico* [ABC 2015–present]) had traveled to a new, foreign country or a poem that Amitabh Bachchan (another popular Hindi film actor) had shared. I also observed that on television news programs, scrolling text on the bottom of the television screen would indicate what popular film stars or politicians were saying on Twitter, connecting their tweets to goings-on in their worlds. Spats between politicians on Twitter, regarding minor and major public issues, frequently made their way to sections of print media. Leaders of state departments and all well-known film stars were known (by participants) to have Twitter accounts that they use to communicate with a large fan base.

This phenomenon has also been described by Joyojeet Pal (2015), who studied the extensive use of Twitter by Indian prime minister Narendra Modi to craft (or recraft) his public image after he was elected into office. PM Modi has over 16 million followers on Twitter, making him the second most-followed political leader in the world, after US president Barack Obama (Indian Express 2015). One of my participants saw Modi's heavy tweeting, however, as a sign that the PM and other politicians had "a lot of spare time." For him and several other participants, subscribing to Twitter was for those who—like PM Modi—had very large fan followings, or those who were fans themselves, but not for those who wished to be heard. Deepika, a twenty-one-year-old college student, was of the opinion that on Twitter people could "connect with their fan club" and prove to the world "that they are there and everyone should listen to them." She added, "I am not a diehard fan of any celebrity, so I don't see why I should be there." Jay, a twenty-four-year-old, also mentioned in this vein, "I have limited time. With Twitter, there is no end. How much do I follow?" Indeed, when I discussed Twitter use, participants—by default—viewed themselves as potential listeners rather than contributors. Sudha, a thirty-year-old schoolteacher, also responded by saying, "There are so many important people on Twitter. Who will listen to my voice? People

have so much other work to get done." Deven, who is thirty-two and works at a small business, added that Twitter was meant for one-way communication only—that was the image of the social media platform that the news media had created over time. According to him, all one could do on Twitter was understand "whether Amitabh Bachchan has more followers or Shahrukh Khan [another popular Bollywood actor]."

When I asked Sudha to compare this scenario with that of Facebook's, where people also might have a lot of work to get done, she said that on Facebook she knew that her friends would be listening and responding with their thoughts on her comments. That Twitter was a public medium did not concern her from a privacy standpoint. It did make her feel, however, that when "everyone" was listening, "no one" was listening. And, of course, she did not have a fan following that would be interested in what she had to say. This view was echoed by almost all participants, who were either unenthused by the idea of actively contributing on Twitter or actively voiced a lack of desire to use it. In comparing their use of Twitter to other SNSs, there were clear affordances that participants derived from services such as Facebook (as Sudha mentioned), Telegram, or Hike. For example, Mohan (a twenty-three-year-old male participant who worked at a small business) shared that Telegram had become quite popular after the prime minister had announced that any data that was on Telegram stayed within India and did not get "sent overseas." Mohan also shared that over time he had discovered that this was not the case and that Telegram was actually a Chinese app. He went on to explain that this had disappointed him and that he thought Hike was a better option than Telegram or Facebook because it was made by a team that was based in Gurgaon, India. I asked how he knew this was the case, and he showed me Hike's website, pointing out their office location, which was indeed listed as Gurgaon. This is something he and his friends had made an effort to look into. Mohan also felt that, as a result of its origins, Hike was much more in tune with its users. This is why it distributed vouchers for local businesses (such as the local Domino's Pizza), which he regularly made use of. This connection with the SNS owing to its connection with his local surroundings was what attracted Mohan to Hike. It makes sense then, perhaps, that Twitter, with its lack of localized appeal, was less than attractive to Mohan and his friends.

Sudha and Mohan were from relatively well-to-do, middle-income backgrounds. Among lower-income earners, such as migrant workers I interviewed, there was less of a critical differentiation among the variety of SNSs that were available for their use. Facebook was commonly used,

though users talked about having transitioned to WhatsApp in recent years. Once again, the dominant reason that was mentioned was that it was clear who was reading their messages and who did not have access to these messages: "on WhatsApp we know who is listening to us." One twenty-six-year-old female participant also mentioned that although WhatsApp was popular, because it allowed for conversations that were more private, it appeared to be a double-edged sword, because "once you are on a WhatsApp group with someone, you end up getting their phone number too." Thus, one still needed to be careful about whom one was communicating with through WhatsApp. However, there was general agreement that it was straightforward and easy to use—"with WhatsApp there is no tension." Shailesh, a twenty-three-year-old male participant, felt that Facebook had been replaced by WhatsApp among most of his friends and family, since Facebook was much slower and WhatsApp allowed "separate conversations." WhatsApp was also seen as having a smoother, quicker workflow, while "Facebook involves too many steps."

This quickness and ease of use for WhatsApp is relevant because, for almost all participants, but especially those from lower-income groups, internet access is neither free nor ubiquitous. Participants used their mobile devices to go online—"we can only use the internet when we are on our mobiles" (Diwakar, male, twenty-one)—and were limited to using mobile data plans. This limited access also led them to acquire a thorough understanding of which data plans were available to them. They also kept themselves updated about plans offered by competing providers, and there was little resistance to switching providers in favor of better data plans. This sensitivity to cost also meant that they had to divide internet time wisely across the different SNSs. In prioritizing which service had more to offer them, Twitter fell to the bottom of the preference list.

Discussion

In their discussion on research regarding use and non-use, Baumer and his colleagues (2015) mention that there are many ways of conceptualizing use and non-use, also adding that there are shades in between—as also discussed by Amanda Lenhart and John B. Horrigan (2003)—that we might sometimes miss. Baumer and his colleagues (2015) further discuss the "digital divide" (Keniston 2003) as a factor that induces non-use of technologies—that is, when an individual might wish to use

a technology but cannot, because those technologies may not be accessible, affordable, or available. In the data on Twitter use—or non-use—presented above, the users are not excluded from use by individuals, communities, or systems, nor are costs preventing their use of Twitter, as in the case of work done by Susan P. Wyche and her coauthors' work on Facebook use in rural Kenya (2013). There are no caste or class hierarchies that are driving out users, per se, as discussed by Rabin Patra and his colleagues (2007) who studied computer sharing in Indian schools and observed that girls or children from lower castes were left out of the fray. However, there is a conflation of some of these factors when seen through the lens of my participants, for whom Twitter is a sea of seemingly important voices, of which (they feel) they are not a part. These are low-income and even middle-income users of the internet who found that, when compared to communities on Facebook, WhatsApp, Hike, and Telegram, there was no benefit to be gained from their being on Twitter. Jenna Burrell's work (2012) echoes this sentiment of exclusion with its study of young men who frequented internet cafés in Ghana hoping to meet and communicate with foreigners online; though these men were "connected," they were subject to an online culture that followed Euro-American norms as well as low quality and expensive access to connectivity. In this study we see that the norms were created within India, for and by Indians. No one was actively excluded from participating; however, users had evolved into an understanding of the roles they could play. To be a contributor, one needed to have a fan base and a hefty social status. To be a listener, one needed to have a great deal of spare time and had to be a dedicated fan of one or more contributors. Twitter was seen as being composed of these "elite" and "non-elite" users, and none of my participants—from low- and middle-income backgrounds in the technology-rich regions of India's capital city—associated themselves with either of the two groups.

Kentaro Toyama's amplification theory (2011) discusses the effect that introduction of a new technology might have on a population that is ridden with acute socioeconomic inequalities. According to Toyama, technology amplifies the differences between people. He argues that while technology can be used "to augment, improve, or streamline existing development capacity, it cannot make up for the lack of human intent and capability, whether it is the ability to implement an effective national vaccination program, the capacity to provide quality agricultural extension, or the intent to govern a country without corruption" (2). In the case of

my study above, it would seem that Twitter is this technology that cannot make up for the lack of human intent or capability. Indeed, my findings indicate that in the case of Twitter, it is the people with power, the so-called elite of the country, who remain "in power" over this particular form of media, public and universal though it might be, while those who are the "non-elite" remain sans power. However, I argue for broadening Toyama's perspective here. Introducing a technology like Twitter to users may or may not be fruitful—that is, it may or may not be adopted. However, in that Twitter is accessible and that people in India, be they ordinary or "elite" citizens, have the freedom and agency to exercise their choice to use or not use the platform, non-users might feel quite differently about the technology than if this choice were to be taken away from them. In my study (Kumar 2014), by examining use of SNSs other than Twitter, I was able to discern that my participants also had other services to turn to. There was little or no remorse that Twitter as a platform was not intended for their use, because they had plenty of other options available to them. What they chose to spend their limited (and potentially expensive) online time on was a choice that they made, and they felt that it was quite natural for Twitter to fall to the bottom of their list of preferences. The nature of communication that these competing SNSs offered was far preferred, and in some cases, as we saw, there was even disdain for the petty concerns that actors and politicians brought up in their tweets that were subsequently glorified and discussed, ad infinitum, by print and television news media. Intent to use, then, must also be given its place of importance in this theory of amplification so that we might also reflect on what drives the forces that shape the adoption and use of a technology.

Conclusion

In my study of Twitter adoption and use, in addition to the parallel use of other SNSs, by a young, urban Indian population, I discovered that although these participants had easy access to mobile internet, Twitter was not a popular medium for them to use. In a country that ranks sixth in its number of Twitter users (Nisha 2015), I investigated the reasons underlying lack of widespread Twitter use ("Twitter accounts for only 17% of Indian social network users" [PTI 2015]). I found that while Twitter had acquired an image as a service that was exclusively for politicians and film celebrities or their fan followings, services such as WhatsApp and

Hike were able to connect with the users' desires to have connections that were "on the ground" and with people in locations that they were most familiar with, as well as in well-defined "separate conversations."

I used my findings to connect with and begin to challenge the claims of amplification theory (Toyama 2011). An incomplete perspective focused on Twitter use alone might attest to Toyama's point that technology, when introduced, amplifies only socioeconomic differences. By also analyzing adoption and uses of competing technologies, we might offer ourselves an enriched perspective that highlights how intent and freedom of choice also make a difference. Infrastructural constraints such as limited or expensive connectivity to the internet have their own role to play in shaping this choice and resultant use. Thus, we see that while hashtag analyses provide a deeper understanding of varied social phenomena at play, probing the nonengagement in hashtag culture—and Twitter in general—can likewise lead us to novel insights regarding online participation trends.

Notes

1. Released in December 2012, Hike is India's first social media company, https://get.hike.in; Telegram, released in August 2013, is a cloud-based social media/messenger service, https://telegram.org.

2. Viber, which requires a telephone number, was released in 2010 and is used for instant messaging and media exchange.

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FIFTEEN | Reterritorializing Twitter

African Moments, 2010–2015

REGINOLD A. ROYSTON AND KRYSTAL STRONG

An Introduction to the African Social Mediascape

Africa is the fastest-growing market for mobile devices in the world today (ITU 2015; GSMA 2014). Since 2001, cell phone use on the continent has grown exponentially, giving Africans unprecedented access to digital communications, particularly voice telephony, but also internet-connected devices. This often-cited development has led many to label Africa's emerging infrastructure as symptomatic of "leapfrog" innovation, in which a fledging society skips over legacy, statist-driven industrial technologies, such as those around telecommunications that still dominate the West (Davison et al. 2000). However, while physical infrastructure transformation in Africa has not progressed as rapidly as the telecommunications sector, practices of "lead users" (von Hippel 2005) do exist on the continent, particularly when it comes to mobile phone cultures. This chapter examines the use of Twitter in the last five years in Africa to mark unique ways that Africa's Twitter-sphere has deployed the technology in innovative forms of discourse, particularly around identity and political organizing.

In this chapter we attempt to illustrate how the process of deterritorialization that media theorists Néstor García Canclini (1995), John Tomlinson (1999), Pierre Lévy (2001) and Gil-Manuel Hernàndez i Martí (2006) have described as symptomatic of globalization, also works in reverse. Anthropologists Jonathan Xavier Inda and Renato Rosaldo have

stated that the colonial spread of media conglomerates from the West to the rest is "only half of the story of globalization. . . . Cultural flows do not just float ethereally across the globe but are always re-inscribed in specific cultural environments" (2002, 11). In this way, Twitter practices on the African continent and diaspora have made distinct reterritorialized geographies of media practices that can be dubbed African Twitter. But even within this African social mediascape, Twitter is one of a growing number of tools enabling an innovative mobile media ecology.

The African mobile device market has an impressive array of local practices, regional apps, and niches for tech developers. When Facebook purchased WhatsApp in 2014, the voice and messaging service (part curated community, part p2p (peer-to-peer) texting service) had already become the most widely used app in Africa and the Middle East, next to Facebook itself—while the service still struggled for visibility in the United States (Activate Analysis 2016). Other apps such as the Skype clone Viber and South Africa's 2go also have penetration in the millions of users on the continent. But short message service (SMS) communication—that is, text messaging—remains the key form of digital connection on the continent. The majority of mobile devices on the continent are twelve-key "feature phones"—semi-smart devices made by companies like Samsung, Nokia, or Korean or Chinese firms, with little or no way to download apps or customize programming without aggressive hardware hacks (Poushter and Oates 2015; Ekine 2010).[1] Twitter is part of an African social mediascape that includes practices such as texting, intentionally missed calls ("pinging"/"beeping"/"flashing") (Donner 2007), web-based instant messengers like Viber and WeChat, factory-embedded Facebook apps, and the micro-banking tool M-PESA, among others. That Africa is at the heart of an emerging mobile internet provides a strident foil to the lingering perception across media and tech development discourse that the continent remains the antithesis of modernity (Mbembe 2001).

In this volume and elsewhere, much has been written about the transformative impact of Twitter in other Africa-based social upheavals, including those in Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria, often termed the "Arab Spring." During our separate and ongoing research projects (Strong 2015; Royston 2014), we met almost no one using Twitter as an SMS-based application, though this was the origin of the platform when it became a media phenomenon at the SXSW Interactive Festival in Austin in 2007. The commercial researcher Portland Communications

identified more than 11.5 million geotagged tweets from Africa over a three-month period in 2011. That number has undoubtedly grown with African Twitter megatrends such as #Kony2012, #BringBackOurGirls, and #FeesMustFall, indicating that, despite its use among Africa's digital elites, Twitter is an undeniable discursive and technological force in Africa's social mediascape. The concept of a *social mediascape* draws from Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at Large* (1996), in which the anthropologist described late-capitalist, transnational culture as being produced by "global flows" where a "complex and interconnected repertoire" of varied media channels help to construct the narratives of people's lives in linked, uneven, and disjunctive ways (35). Among these socially and materially implicated spheres of public discourse and exchange, the mediascape remains essential to the shaping of contemporary life, especially identity practices in the age of networks.

Perhaps what is most surprising about Twitter and social media use in general on the continent is not that Africans are adept in spreading their life experiences using the instruments of modernity but rather that these practices prevail amid a media ecology of what Brian Larkin (2008) describes as one configured by "breakdowns." The mobile web may witness Africans socializing, engaging in commerce, accessing the internet, and connecting internationally via voice and data, in ways that surpasses the ability of Western information technology users, many of whom are typically confined to "walled gardens,"[2] subscription lock-ins, and lack of access to international cellular networks. However, failing infrastructures continue to mark the African sociotechnical system, particularly when it comes to water, sanitation, roads, and electricity. This ecology of breakdowns also figures prominently in discourse on Twitter.

In the sections below we briefly describe several key moments of hypervisibility for Africans on Twitter, through the coproduction of trending topics and use of hashtags during media events, online sociality, and political discourse. Using these megatrends as backdrops to a broader discussion on the production of self and subjecthood through media use, we consider two cases that are essential to our ethnographic engagements. First, we examine how in Ghana's Twitter space, the local hashtag #dumsor resonates through differential global networks signifying a discourse of cynicism amid the talk of a "Rising Africa."[3] Conversely, the global circulation of the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag in Nigeria and beyond illustrates how strategic reappropriation of the foreign gaze has been able to mitigate translocal catastrophe toward progressive, if un-

resolved, ends. These key moments demonstrate how the audience and scale of Twitter have worked toward both the detriment and benefit of media events local to the continent.

Key Moments in African Twitter, 2010–2015

In our fieldwork, in interviews, and in critical analysis of other research, it is clear that Twitter has been utilized in several veins in the African context: (1) as a key form of connection to Africa's digital diasporas; (2) as an information source for news and entertainment producers and consumers; (3) as a media tool for elite and professional tech users; (4) as a source of transnational discourse via hashtags and trending metrics; (5) as a facilitator of political visibility and movement building; and (6) as a platform for group sociality, particularly intracontinental discourse, humor, and other forms of contemporary cultural phenomena. The time frame is important for several reasons. Although Twitter has been available as service since 2006 (with 1 million users being first recorded in the United States in 2008) (Toole, Cha, and Gonzáles 2012; Arrington 2008), the adoption of Twitter among African users was also significant during a key moment of global Twitter visibility, vis-à-vis the Arab Spring, and the 2010 FIFA World Cup. We believe that presenting both the generalizable trends during this significant period of African (and global) uptake of Twitter serves as a multidisciplinary perspective in documenting the platform's life on the continent and perhaps the Global South. We wanted to also contextualize Twitter use, which is important but cannot be decentered from other local social media practices. Providing the broader scope of Twitter in Africa's social mediascape speaks to Twitter's context among other tools, which have been just important (Mxit, WhatsApp, radio) if not more. Later in this chapter, however, we highlight the local stories and deployments of Twitter, and the impacts that have been produced via their particular context, in order to speak to the different and particular effects of the platform, especially among Africa's diverse transnational media publics.[4] The inspiration for many of the political upheavals discussed below was the result of events in Tunisia, Egypt, and Algeria between 2011 and 2012. The description of these events as "Arab" belies Black life in North Africa, reinforcing a colonial fragmentation of this part of the world. The Occupy movement, amplified through Twitter (including #OccupyNigeria, #OccupySenegal, and #OccupySouthAfrica), was as much an African phenomenon as it was a Middle Eastern media moment. In this chapter we focus on key events in the sub-Saharan region reflecting

our ethnographic engagements and because popular notions of technoscience and material history continue to ignore contributions of this part of the world to "modern" technology.[5]

African Twitter attempts to overcome the asymmetry of global information networks, and media generally, which are dominated by apparatuses such as BBC, CNN, Viacom, and others. Against these clustering nodes in the global mediascape, hashtag activism has been a particularly potent weapon in the struggle for representation. The platform has proved central to mitigating what Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) has described as the "danger of a single story" and, specifically, prescriptive narratives of "catastrophe" that ensnare the very idea of Africa. The key moments below help define "African Twitter" as a coherent geography of users, discourses, tools, infrastructures, and practices. Though Twitter's branded "moments" are anchored to the life span of specific trending topics, in our usage here we use moments interchangeably with the notion of media events. As such, these key events are chronological, contemporaneous, and aggregative discourses, contributing to a range of interventions that crosscut local, national, regional, and global interests. From the description of practices above, in the following section we group African Twitter's most influential hashtags into five thematic clusters: (1) global media events, (2) culture and everyday life, (3) crisis intervention, (4) governance, and (5) protest movements.

As in other Twitter publics, global media events that figured prominently in the international press were experienced synchronically among Twitter users in Africa and beyond. The 2010 World Cup in South Africa (#WorldCup; #WC2010) was the first case of a global Twitter experience geographically centered in Africa.[6] This was itself a stark reversal of the colonial relations embedded in global football and its mediated consumption, which more often sees African footballers playing for European clubs and African football enthusiasts supporting European leagues (Darby 2002). Other memorable events include President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama's visits in 2013 (#POTUS/FLOTUSinAfrica), the death of Nelson Mandela (#Mandela, #Madiba), and the 2015 historic visit of Pope Francis to Kenya, Uganda, and Central African Republic (#PopeinAfrica, #PopeBars).

Central to African Twitter's contrarian discourse is the attempt to disrupt sensationalist narratives that have long defined the continent. For instance, #someonetellCNN circulated counterdiscourses about culture and everyday life in Africa after CNN reported that President Obama was visiting the "terror hotbed" of Kenya ahead of his 2015 official visit.

Other hashtags have offered less oppositional takes on the diversity and complexity of African (national) cultures. Both #IfAfricaWasABar and #GrowingUpAfrican trended globally in 2015 as Africans around the world satirically tackled shared experiences of childhood and cultural traditions, as well as the region's geopolitical diversity, which was rehashed months later as a facetious "Twitter war" between two of Africa's largest technocultural enclaves, #NigeriavsKenya. Crises such as natural disasters and violent attacks are among the quickest to trend on Twitter. However, in the African context, moments of crisis intervention gain inconsistent traction. Media analysts (Zuckerman 2015; Tufecki 2014) and Twitter users have noted how mainstream media and social media algorithms collude to ignore terrorist attacks when the victims are not Americans or Europeans, such as in the murder of 147 Kenyan students by al-Shabaab terrorists in April 2015 (#147notjustanumber), as compared with the global exposure of the attack on the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in January earlier that year (#jesuischarlie).

Without question, the most impactful arena of African Twitter's influence is in the realm of politics. Over the past twenty years, democracy in Africa has been plagued by conflict, corruption, tenure elongation, and political systems that are unresponsive to the citizenry. Twitter has played an important role in enhancing the participation of citizens in governance. Many African politicians have active Twitter accounts and engage with constituents on the platform. During elections, members of the electorate informally monitor polls and electoral irregularities under hashtags that typically follow the form of #[CountryName]Decides (e.g., #GhanaDecides, #NigeriaDecides, #KenyaDecides). Alongside these reformist approaches to political change, Twitter has aided in the organization of mass protest movements and, occasionally, revolution. Tunisia's and Egypt's popular uprisings that resulted in regime change in 2011 were the first to be labeled "Twitter Revolutions." #OccupyNigeria in 2012 similarly used Twitter to facilitate sustained national protests against the removal of fuel subsidies by the government. At the time of this writing, the movement among South African students since 2015 to decolonize the university and nation by removing physical structures of colonialism on campuses (#RhodesMustFall) and against proposed fee hikes that would decrease access to education in the country (#FeesMustFall) continues to grow and signal the continued promise of Twitter's role in Africa's social transformation.

These key moments illustrate how through the hashtag mechanism Africa produces a distinct discursive space[7] around notions of interest

and relevance to the continent and its diasporas. This is a corner of the African social mediascape that activates personal identity practices (via "profile pages" and user handles), a social interactional space via the use of hashtags, participation via media events, and a material reality in the form of political and social movements, especially with regard to management of the physical resources of the political economy.

#Dumsor: Ghanaian Twitter and the Ecology of Breakdown

In contrast to #OccupyNigeria, #OccupySenegal, and #OccupySouthAfrica as fomented on Twitter, Ghana's young political activists took to a reformist agenda, utilizing a number of hashtags, including #GhanaDecides in preparation for the 2012 national elections. Ghana has enjoyed relatively smooth transitions of electoral power since 1992 and is described by the US State Department and others as a "stable" and "peaceful" democracy (US State Department 2015). These factors have contributed to a discourse of what one might describe as "African" exceptionalism for the West African country that it has enjoyed since becoming the first colonized nation on the continent to achieve its independence, in 1957. But while Ghanaian Twitter's discourse initially advanced an optimistic narrative of "openness, honesty, and accountability" (NGO Star-Ghana 2015), the continuing failures of the Ghanaian government to address failing public infrastructures have given way to a discourse of despondence using the hashtag #dumsor, a shaming discourse that challenges the nation's identity as a leader in Africa. In this section we analyze how the efforts of local advocates on- and offline intervened in a nation-centric discourse relying on Twitter's global scale and accessibility. This transnational visibility, however, did little to ameliorate local conditions. The experience reflects the limited penetration of Twitter among Ghana's overall mobile phone user base, and perhaps the failures of hashtag activism in general, to transform conditions on the ground when not tied to media events such as elections.

Ghana's visibility on Twitter was heightened during the 2010 World Cup, when the "Black Stars" became the first African team to reach the tournament's semifinal rounds, as users hashtagged #GHA for Ghana, #BlackStars, and #Vim, a colloquial expression of "energy!"

By the 2012 national elections in Ghana, Twitter began to be utilized as a chief means of political organizing and online rhetoric.[8] At local tech meetings dubbed "BarCamps," civic advocacy groups began to promote Twitter as a chief way of interacting, especially for individuals who

could not be physically present at conferences and networking sessions. Organizers at these events projected the tweets of student participants on large screens behind presenters. A civic advocacy group also formed in 2012 called GhanaDecides and began to promote election participation through "TalkParties" on Twitter. Other tech-focused civil organizations began to use the tool, as well as did celebrities and traditional radio and TV broadcasters.

Dumsor, pronounced /doomn suh/ is an Akan word that means "off, on" and describes the phenomena of "lights off," or electricity failures, largely due to scheduled and unscheduled blackouts by the publicly administered utility, the Electric Company of Ghana (ECG). Ongoing failures of the national electric grid had been brewing since the early 2000s due to the dwindling capacity of the country's chief power source, the Akosombo Hydroelectric Dam. Equipment was deteriorating, service lines were unreliable, and increasing demand was growing due to population growth in the capital Accra (Miescher 2012; Eshun and Amoako-Tuffour 2016; "VRA to Shut Down" 2015). The dam was an achievement of Kwame Nkrumah's First Republic government but, in the new millennium, also a sign of its weakening infrastructure. The term "dumsor" began to be used sparsely in the country's south according to participants interviewed, when power outages spiked in 2008 due to years of drought. Water eventually returned, but blackouts became more regular again when a pipeline in the Gulf of Guinea supplying fuel to Ghanaian auxiliary generators was ruptured in the summer of 2012. In our research, "dumsor" appears on Twitter as a keyword or hashtag only intermittently until 2013. Prior to this, Twitter bloggers such as Efia Nkroman, a programmer and active volunteer in her mid-twenties using the handle @LightOffGhana1, initially attempted to provide a public service by compiling crowdsourced outages and putting online the officially scheduled periods for "lights off" by ECG. But before she ceased to tweet in 2014, her tweets had grown more frustrated and less neutral. Parody accounts, both profane and politically strident, such as @Online_ECG and @_E_C_G, meanwhile, had taken her place in commenting about both the municipality and the worsening dumsor crisis. These fake ECG accounts often satirically castigated tweeters for their expectations of service reliability. In response to students complaining about not being able to stay up late to study or iron shirts for classes the next day, parody tweeter @ECG_ghana replied "u no get steam iron?" A more poignant post on March 10, 2015, showed a picture of doctors and nurses in a blacked-out hospital room with the text "Blame JDM for this, not us," referencing Ghana's sitting president, John Dramani Mahama.[9]

Figure 15.1. A fake Twitter account purporting to be from the municipal firm Electricity Company of Ghana blames then President John Dramani Mahama for frequent, disabling power outages in 2015. The photo allegedly shows hospital workers using light from mobile phones to do their work. March 10, 2015, https://twitter.com/_E_C_G_.

In 2015 dumsor reached crisis levels when the electricity grid's load-shedding schedule, often more of a loose impression of the rolling blackouts, started to announce that power would be shut off for twenty-four-hour periods throughout the country, instead of the typical twelve-hour blackouts. On the ground, the scheduled outages could last for days at a time, especially for areas only tenuously connected to the grid. That year, #dumsor peaked on the internet, with a Wikipedia page started in February, several Facebook groups sprouting up to discuss the issue, and thousands of serious, sarcastic, irate, and politically strident comments about dumsor on Twitter. In early May, international Ghanaian pop star Sarkodie released a song about dumsor, which became the anthem for a new "Dumsor Must Stop" campaign, initially promoted on social media by celebrities like film star @yvonnenelsongh. While the nonpartisan hashtag #GhanaDecides served as an ambivalent form of political critique aimed at reforming the state, by the close of the troubled 2012 contest, the hashtag was being deployed by the established political parties and election bureaucracy to promote mainstream politics. But in contrast, #dumsor did not appear in any of President Mahama's tweets until his failed reelection campaign in 2016.

Nevertheless, the term "dumsor" has become a potent form of social critique, circulated by Twitter users in the homeland and diaspora. Its signification goes beyond electricity concerns to address perceived fail-

ures to make good on the promises of neoliberal deregulation in the 2000s, the discovery of oil reserves in 2008, and Ghana's designation as one of Africa's only "middle income" economies by the World Bank in 2011: #DumsorMustStop is a potent alternative tag, but most tweets tackling the failures of the government use the simple construct #dumsor as a static pessimistic descriptor. Tweets that utilize it are often despondent, literally reflecting powerlessness. A tweet directed at then president Mahama from a user in the Ashanti region of central Ghana criticized him for the growing economic instability caused by dumsor:

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#Dumsor intensified
#Transport fares up
#Fuel prices up
#Unemployment rising
#National debt rising
#Businesses are collapsing

@JDMahama (@Aye_Asem_OOO, April 10, 2016)
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Mahama suffered defeat in the 2017 national election in part due to growing dissatisfaction with the economic downturn caused by an ongoing energy crisis and inflation.

Sarkodie's song and a May 15, 2015 Dumsor Must Stop march drew critical attention and ultimately produced a national media event to highlight jobs and business revenue being lost, deadly accidents, and the growing hesitancy of foreign investors, including diaspora returnees. But the vehemence of the movement was parried in part by a human disaster in June 2015 when an explosion at a local gas station killed over one hundred people. Many attributed the incident to the failures of the government, even dumsor itself, as generators were in use in the area where "lights off" had occurred. The spark of the explosion was believed to have been started by leaking gas, either from the fuel station or from backup generators nearby, which was accelerated by seasonal floodwater escaping through Accra's failing sewer systems and roads. Reserve power generators were brought in to relieve the crisis later in late 2015, but by the time of this writing, rolling blackouts had returned to the major cities Accra and Kumasi, prompting a spate of "dumsor has returned" tweets on Twitter, among online activists as well as headlines in mainstream media. The despondence that #dumsor signals has been potent in forcing the political establishment to address a crisis that betrays Ghana's

narrative of African singularity with regard to peace, development, and democratic social order. But its continued use, like the phenomenon itself, signals an enduring technoculture of breakdown, entrenched in developing economies, even as lead use on mobile technology such as Twitter provides a narrative of advancement.

#BringBackOurGirls: Reappropriating the Gaze of Interventionism

Nigeria shares with its regional neighbor the frustration of social and political breakdown, which similarly animates its national social mediascape with everyday critiques of the state and rampant infrastructural failure. Unlike Ghana, however, discourses of crisis rather than stability more often characterize Nigeria, Africa's most populous country and largest economy, after the turn to democracy in 1999. Violent conflict surrounding oil extraction in the Niger Delta region and the more recent ongoing menace of Islamic extremist group Boko Haram in the northern region have claimed thousands of lives and internally displaced over 2 million civilians since 2010 (Amnesty International 2016). The government's inability to protect its citizens has only compounded existing cynicism toward a political system that is popularly regarded as corrupt and ineffective.

Despite a general lack of faith in formal political channels, Nigeria's Twitter scene has become increasingly central to public life as both a venue for national discourse and a means for activists, celebrities, civil society groups, and everyday citizens to galvanize support for electoral participation, protest, and demands for government intervention. The 2011 "Enough is Enough Nigeria" (#EiENigeria) multiplatform social media campaign to organize young voters during national elections was an early harbinger of Twitter's potentiality in Nigeria, particularly among users who are young, educated, and urban. #OccupyNigeria was the first hashtag to trend internationally in January 2012, when Nigerians launched demonstrations and a national labor strike in response to the government's removal of the fuel subsidy, which is one of the few benefits citizens derive from the oil-producing nation. Both media events helped produce the social media infrastructure that facilitated the ascendance of what is, to date, Nigeria's most visible Twitter mobilization and the focus of this section, #BringBackOurGirls.

On April 14, 2014, heavily armed members of Boko Haram stormed a girls boarding school in the northern Nigerian village of Chibok, kidnapping over three hundred secondary students between the ages fifteen and

eighteen and burning the school to the ground. Though Boko Haram has garnered international press for dozens of deadly attacks in recent years, none of these tragedies attracted the media attention or affective response of the efforts to rescue the Chibok schoolgirls. The circulation of the hashtag and rallying cry #BringBackOurGirls in many ways defies the critiques of "clicktivism" that are dismissively levied against online, increasingly Twitter-driven forms of activism—namely, that online forms of activism have a "limited shelf life" and thus are unlikely to catalyze enduring social transformation (Drumbl 2012). Our discussion here emphasizes that the Bring Back Our Girls media campaign amplified grassroots organizing rather than substituting for it; it also reappropriated the gaze of interventionism, which typically inflects Twitter activism toward Africa, in favor of locally defined political interests.

Nine days after the kidnappings, the first tweet was sent with the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls. Much attention has been drawn to the "global phenomenon" of the hashtag: a month after its first use, BBC Trending (2014) reported that it had indexed 3.3 million global tweets. The most highly circulated of these accompanies an image of US first lady Michelle Obama in the White House with a handwritten sign inscribed with the hashtag (see fig. 15.2). Creating international awareness to pressure the Nigerian government to intervene was an express purpose of the Twitter campaign. In the immediate days after the abduction, parents and community members unsuccessfully pursued the militants on foot. However, after news spread about the attack through national media, the government released a false report that the girls had been rescued. In the capital, Abuja, hundreds of women organized demonstrations to force the government to take deliberate steps to rescue the girls, under the leadership of several women politicians and activists, including former minister of education, Obiageli Ezekwesili. With intense international scrutiny and offers of assistance from the United States, United Kingdom, France, and China, the Nigerian government publicly vowed to secure the girls' release. However, many of the girls are still missing, even despite reports that the United Kingdom and United States discovered the location of a large group of the Chibok girls through surveillance in the weeks after the kidnapping.[10]

Though the #BringBackOurGirls Twitter campaign failed in its stated objective, this moment remains an instructive case study of the ways Twitter can productively amplify activist work in Africa and other parts of the Global South even while the medium itself threatens to efface these forms of grassroots labor. Online activism has been scrutinized for

Figure 15.2. Perhaps the most widely recognized tweet of the #BringBackOurGirls campaign. US First Lady Michelle Obama poses with a sign in the White House in support of the nearly 300 girls kidnapped by Boko Haram militants in Northern Nigeria. May 7, 2014, archived at https://twitter.com/FLOTUS44.

its reliance on technocratic metrics (clicks, tweets, subscriptions) and anonymous social relations that require "low-stakes" sacrifices rather than a commitment to the more taxing, prolonged work of building social movements (e.g., Gladwell 2010; White 2010). However, in the global/digital peripheries where access to smartphones and mobile internet access remains uneven, mobilizing what Malcolm Gladwell (2010) disregards as the "weak ties" of social media to increase the visibility of specific issues stands to strengthen and safeguard on-the-ground movements rather than replace them. That the Nigerian government committed at all to a rescue effort after erroneously claiming the girls had been returned is a direct result of the international shame the Twitter campaign produced. For local activists who reported facing intimidation from state agents to suspend their demonstrations, their increased visibility on social media provided an indirect form of protection, since targeting protesters with violence would only compound the government's public relations problem.

Still, despite such benefits of aligning Twitter and grassroots activism for local activists, the hashtag archive of #BringBackOurGirls obscures their continued work. A Google Images search of "Bring Back Our Girls" returns an overwhelming majority of images of Western celebrities holding up a handwritten sign with the hashtag. That this has become the archived story of the movement speaks to the effects of what

Jean Baudrillard in 1981 famously described as the "simulacra," in which images, optics, and simulations (in this case, of direct political action) supersede the original object. In this context, this means that despondent images of Westerners effectively erase the activism of the Nigerian women whose unsung heroism is actually driving the production of these images. Women activists continue to lead mobilizations for the rescue of the Chibok girls, over three years after the hashtag has stopped trending, and they continue to keep women's issues a part of Twitter discourse, as in the case of 2015's trending #BeingFemaleInNigeria, which featured everyday experiences of sexism in Nigeria. These gendered forms of erasure are important to bear in mind, particularly as social media publics are idealized as more gender-inclusive than conventional African public spheres.

At its core #BringBackOurGirls is a campaign predicated on intervention, which is an especially complicated terrain of practice in the African context. The normative belief that the continent is ripe to be "saved" by Westerners was established through the logics of colonial empire. Such legacies continue with contemporary technocratic forms of "development," in which technology plays a central part. #BringBackOurGirls offers a contrastive approach to #KONY2012, which is African Twitter's most controversial "crisis" to date. KONY 2012 was a Twitter campaign and cause célèbre anchored to a two-minute short film of the same title that was produced by the nonprofit organization Invisible Children. Filmed a decade earlier by trio of twenty-something American film school graduates who traveled to Uganda to "find a subject to make a film about," the film constructs a victim narrative surrounding child soldiers in northern Uganda with the express purpose of mobilizing enough social media support in the West to pressure military intervention to capture Joseph Kony, rebel leader of the Lord's Resistance Army. KONY 2012 was underwritten by what Nigerian writer Teju Cole (2016) describes as the "white savior industrial complex," in its rabid construction of Africa as a perpetual "zone of intervention," which worked to fuel the appeal of the viral campaign.[11] #BringBackOurGirls, conversely, is rooted in preexisting local efforts to compel government action. Though there were eventually some calls for Western military intervention after President Goodluck Jonathan failed to act militarily, Bring Back Our Girls is ultimately a refusal of the logics of "white savior" interventionism that are typically at work in responses to crises in the region. To the extent that Bring Back Our Girls proponents mobilized international power brokers, including

the extensive African diaspora(s) in Western countries, they did so strategically in order to shame local and national actors into action on behalf of citizens. Rather than mobilize discourses of victimhood, which help create the conditions of possibility for (further) foreign intervention, Nigerian activists emphasized the personhood of the girls and their aspirations, which guided them to pursue education under such unfavorable conditions. The sustained advocacy to date on behalf of the Chibok girls and others subsequently trafficked by Boko Haram also indicates that activists understand Twitter to be a space that offers the possibility of local and global convergence. However, the maelstrom of criticism now associated with KONY 2012 and the contrasting approach of Bring Back Our Girls both suggest that African Twitter will trend toward discourses and mobilizations that are locally rooted and center the particular interests of African people.

Discussion: Africa's Reterritorialization of Twitter

A hashtag is what Henry Jenkins would describe as a *transmedia* text, capable of spreading across digital platforms and through discursive styles while retaining its role as a meaningful signifier (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013). Hashtag movements in Africa have had meaningful impact with regard to both the discursive online space but also the material lifeworlds of politics and the politics of media technology in particular. As illustrated before, Africa's Twitter users and movements have not been simply obsessed with politics or the politics of representation. Yet the question of identity and technology remains at the core of Africa's Twitter practices. By "identity" we signal not simply the static or cultural notions related to tradition and shared meaning among Twitter users living on the continent. Instead, we deploy a notion of identity as a set of discursive practices, where media is implicated. The culture of iPhones, MySpaces, and YouTubes simultaneously enforces the notion that the individual is the chief articulator of their identity claims in the digital age. But there is always a "struggle for representation" at the core of this co-construct of the self.

Stuart Hall described a similar struggle for representations of authentic identity as crucial to the artistic work of young Afro-Caribbean and Black filmmakers and musicians in late twentieth-century England: "We have been trying to theorise identity as constituted, not outside but within representation; and hence of cinema, not as a second-order mirror

held up to reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects, and thereby enable us to discover places from which to speak" (1990, 102).

Social media is a new form of representation, not just with respect to profile pictures and avatars, but in the construction of identity, the production and relations that construct identity. Twitter use in Africa is one form of this practice of identity (that of the "prosumer") (Toeffler 1981), and this mediation of the self is useful in thinking about the production of the self in virtual spaces that are translocal if not global. The African social mediascape, particularly Twitter, has been a space for the simultaneous deterritorialization of African political action, where transnational tools and models of activism and self-representation have provided a moment of rearticulation for social movements at the grassroots levels. The Western gaze still overdetermines the capacities in Africa, even as the users of the platform are increasingly global, but in these key moments cited above, Twitter has been made African, reterritorializing the process of innovation. Twitter, WhatsApp, and Facebook may have been designed in elite software houses in California, but the local adoption and innovation of users, often conceived as being outside the core demographic, continues to provide innovative practices and tacit understanding of how technologies produce connections and subjecthood. #BringBackOurGirls and #dumsor highlight differing valences of these practices, where global visibility met differing outcomes of real politics on the ground.

Notes

1. It should be noted that Facebook, Viber, WhatsApp, and Twitter often come factory-embedded in the software systems of these phones, though that is not always the case.

2. "A 'walled garden' is a telecom industry term for restricted resources kept within a firm's proprietary networks or operating systems, such as Comcast's Xfinity content, most AOL services, or Apple's iOS software."

3. The trope of "Africa Rising" is a disputed political-economic development that began again in the new millennium (Gilley 2010; Wadongo 2014; "Africa Rising" 2011).

4. The authors would also like to acknowledge that at the time of writing, few, if any, scholarly pieces addressed the emergence of an African Twitter. This early publishing record now includes Bruce Mutsvairo, ed., *Digital Activism in the Social Media Era* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Bitange Ndemo and Tim Weiss, eds., *Digital Kenya: An Entrepreneurial Revolution in the Making* (Springer, 2016);

Seyram Avle, "Radio locked on@ Citi973,' in *Everyday Media Culture in Africa Audiences and Users*. Vol. 18, 161–79, Wendy Willems and Winston Mano, eds., (Taylor and Francis, 2016).

5. For examples of the Eurocentric, tech determinist view on Africa, see Terry Reynolds and Stephen H. Cutcliffe, "Technology and the West: A Historical Anthology," in *Technology and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). For a critique of this view, see Rosalind Williams, "Afterword: An Historian's View on the Network Society," edited by Manuel Castells, *The Network Society: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2004).

6. Barack Obama's first visit as president to Africa, in 2009, produced a torrent of Twitter activity, but in our ethnographic encounters, the platform was not yet ascendant on the continent.

7. André Brock (2012) considers a similar experience of "Black Twitter" in the American context. This idea of discursive space builds upon the idea of "social space" developed by Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja.

8. The 2014 Portland Communications report shows Accra, Ghana's capital, as one of the leading urban locales for Twitter use on the continent, though Ghana's ranking on Twitter use remains low compared to use in South Africa, Kenya, Algeria, and Egypt.

9. @ECG_ghana Oct. 17, 2012, 4:34 am @twitz_ov_mascot [Twitter]; @_E_C_G March 10, 2015 "NB: Blame JDM for this not us."

10. As of 2018, 82 of the original kidnapped women and girls have been released. Bukola Adebayo. 2018. "Missing Chibok girls not coming back, Boko Haram commander tells police." CNN, July 18. Accessed September 14, 2018. https://www.cnn.com/2018/07/18/africa/chibok-kidnapping-suspects-arrested/index.html.

11. Original tweets found on https://twitter.com/tejucole.

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SIXTEEN | #IfAfricaWasABar

Participation on Twitter across African Borders

NAVEENA KARUSALA, TREVOR PERRIER, AND NEHA KUMAR

In February 2016, Siyanda Mohutsiwa (2016), a writer, speaker, and self-declared Pan-Africanist, delivered a TED Talk about the promise of Twitter as a site for fostering social Pan-Africanism: the idea that people of each African country can relate to, share, and collaborate with one another despite cultural and geographic differences. She recounted how in the summer of 2015 she was inspired by the question of what each country would be doing or drinking if Africa were a bar and tweeted, "#IfAfricaWasABar South Africa would be drinking all kinds of alcohol and begging them to get along in its stomach," referencing the attempt to rebuild South Africa after apartheid. By the end of the week, the hashtag had amassed more than sixty thousand tweets.

We qualitatively examine this hashtag from the perspective of outsiders—to the network of Twitter data as well as to the culture. This perspective allows us to expose the challenges in navigating being "outside" when attempting to analyze the realities of social movements through Twitter data. Our research contributes to studies that examine the limits of what we can infer about experienced realities from Twitter data and analysis. Some examples include studies that look at prior social movements such as the Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, and the *Charlie Hebdo* protests (Khonsari et al. 2010; Segerberg and Bennett 2011; Bruns et al. 2013; Recuero et al. 2015; Freelon et al. 2016). For instance, Kaveh Ketabchi Khonsari and her coauthors analyzed tweets

related to Iran's Green movement to understand the "anthropological and sociological characteristics" of modern social movements, assigning users roles such as "listeners," "brokers," and "gatekeepers" (2010). Also, Jennifer Larson and her colleagues (2016), through an analysis of tweets on the *Charlie Hebdo* protests, theorized that one's decision to protest is based on the views of one's immediate social network. This type of understanding of participants' perceptions and motivations is particularly important in #IfAfricaWasABar because of how it intentionally elicits judgments about nations and identities connected to Africa. As a result, we reflect on how being an outsider to the movement and relevant data might simultaneously render inferences about the movement problematic.

The idea that Twitter data is not perfectly representative of the physical world is not new. Certainly there are individuals who choose not to use or cannot access Twitter. Of those who do, there are "elite users" who garner a disproportionate amount of attention (Wu 2011). Geographically, Kalev Leetaru and his coauthors' (2013) global study of geotagged tweets showed that English tweets in Africa clustered around South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana, while South Africa and Nigeria had the most influential users. At the same time, affordances of social media platforms can also skew or limit representation of the user (Marwick 2005; boyd and Crawford 2011; Marwick 2014; Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Rost et al. 2015; Kow et al. 2016ABC). Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa's (2015) analysis of #Ferguson pointed out the gaps in knowledge when qualitatively analyzing tweets, such as the author's intended meaning and targeted audience, related but non-hashtagged tweets, and reason for participation. Our study seeks to understand how such issues of representation related to the use and affordances of Twitter play out specifically in a transnational conversation and how they are compounded when we are outsiders to the social movement.

To understand and work beyond the problematic aspects of an outsider's perspective, we turn to two critiques of data analysis. In Alex S. Taylor's (2011) work titled "Out There," he argues that researchers characterize "new" contexts as a complex and vastly different network, resulting in a problematic view of researchers as objective observers of the network and subjects as something to map out. Meanwhile, Gillian Rose (1997) cautions researchers to not fall into the opposite trap. She argues that researchers cannot assume they fully understand their subjectivity, emphasizing the importance of recognizing multiple knowledges and absent knowledges in the research process. We examine the insights pro-

vided by these critiques on how to complicate inferences about social movements made through Twitter data.

In the sections that follow, we describe our methods for collecting and analyzing the tweets containing "#IfAfricaWasABar." We then describe our findings in terms of what we learned about African countries' cultures and geopolitics, positioning ourselves as (US-based) outsiders looking in and learning through these tweets. Finally, we discuss our findings in light of Taylor's and Rose's critiques to help us rethink current methods used to analyze online social movements, particularly in the context of the Global South.

Method

We collected our dataset of 2,326 original tweets and their associated retweets by querying Twitter's public Search API for tweets containing "#IfAfricaWasABar" and "#IfAfricaWereABar" multiple times a day on July 29, July 30, July 31, and August 4 of 2015. The latter two searches were limited to tweets with a newer ID than the maximum tweet ID in the former two searches. Twitter's Search API "searches against a sampling of recent Tweets published in the past 7 days" to return tweets containing the search query with any combination of capitalized and lowercase letters ("Search API"). However, it does not return exhaustive results; according to documentation, "Some Tweets and users may be missing from search results" ("Search API"). We ordered the tweets and associated metadata in various ways. First we analyzed the original tweets by creating a random sample of approximately 5 percent (170) of original tweets and coding for the aspect of the country commented on by the user (e.g., leadership, conflict, stereotypes). We categorized these codes into high-level codes of cultural traditions and attitudes, economic ties and criticisms, and political events and relationships. Next we created frequency lists and calculated percentages of user-submitted locations (based on one- and two-word phrases), the number of times a country was mentioned in the set of tweets and retweets, and other metadata, such as users' interface language preferences, users' number of tweets in the data set, and place information attached to a tweet. We also created ordered lists of the 100 most retweeted tweets (and the user who created them) and the 100 most-followed users (and the 512 tweets that they created). We coded these tweets based on the aspect of the country being commented on and the user's description. We also created a list of tweets categorized by the country the tweet mentioned. This list was joined with

a list of users and their submitted locations parsed into a three-letter country code using pattern matching; we then used this combined list to determine how many users' submitted locations matched the country mentioned in their tweet or retweet. Prior work has indicated that while the location field on social media is not guaranteed to match the user's true location, location should be operationalized within the research context and determined accordingly (Johnson 2016).

We detail the authors' backgrounds, because this analysis, including our understanding and coding of tweets, is colored by our experiences. The first and third authors are both cis females of Indian origin. The second author is a white American cis male. We collectively have eighteen years of experience doing research in the United States, India, Kenya, and South Africa. To frame our analysis, we position ourselves as researchers who are "outside," learning about African countries and the relationships among them through these tweets. In the process of coding, we occasionally needed to research general knowledge about a country or look up unfamiliar phrases, references, and people to understand the tweet's commentary. According to critiques of reflexivity, acknowledging this process is important, because our interpretation of each tweet is partial and only one of many that could be produced by diverse knowledges (Rose 1997).

Who Is Tweeting?

To start with, we wanted to know who contributed to this hashtag. Approximately 76 percent of users in this data set had a user-submitted location description. According to a one- and two-word frequency list of user-submitted locations, the most frequently mentioned countries and cities were Kenya (Nairobi), Nigeria (Lagos), South Africa (Cape Town, Johannesburg), Ghana (Accra), and Uganda (Kampala). Other than these five countries, locations also frequently referred to Africa as a whole, New York, England or the United Kingdom, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and Zambia. This reflects place data as well, which indicated that tweets were most often associated with Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria, Uganda, the United States, and Ghana. Most users had a single tweet in the data set, counting both tweets and retweets. The number of tweets posted in a user's account lifetime averaged to 20,623 but had a median of 5,672, indicating a smaller number of users that heavily use Twitter or have been members for a relatively long time. The average number of followers that users had was 2,076, but the median was 399, once again

indicating a smaller number of users with a large number of followers. In fact, approximately 10 percent of users had more than 2,000 followers. Users also overwhelmingly used English as their interface language (94%), while the next most popular language was French, used by just 2 percent of users.

Among these users, we wanted to know who was having a significant impact on the hashtag in terms of content creation, retweets, and number of followers. The most retweeted original tweet, having 50 percent more retweets than the next most retweeted tweet, was "#IfAfricaWasaBar The bartender would apologize about the loud Nigerian table but explain that they're the ones keeping the place in business." It may not be surprising that this was a popular tweet, considering it was about Nigeria, where many users of the hashtag were from. However, the user, a reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, had two other tweets in the set of one hundred most retweeted tweets and more than double the average number of followers. These characteristics generalized to other users in the list. Many top retweeted users described themselves as reporters, analysts, journalists, writers, or radio or TV personalities—all occupations that arguably rely on creativity and a large social network. In fact, Mohutsiwa herself had contributed two of the most retweeted tweets, and Anele Mdoda, a popular South African radio DJ, was the most-followed user on the list. The number of followers and high number of retweets each user had reflects the power of these users' social networks—compared to the overall data set, most retweeted users had a much higher average of 22,437 followers and a median of 3,568 followers. Additionally, nineteen users contributed a disproportionate fifty-one of the one hundred most retweeted tweets. Overall, this data mirrors previous findings showing that elite users, such as bloggers, celebrities, or media representatives, attract the most attention on Twitter (Wu 2011). However, it would help us better understand how Twitter's strata of influence affected this social movement if we could know who these users imagined they were reaching or influencing with this hashtag, compared to how users interacted with the tweet online. Comparisons could also be made between the imagined audience of, say, the *Wall Street Journal* reporter and that of natives of African countries, like Anele Mdoda or Siyanda Mohutsiwa, to understand the role of identity in influence.

Switching gears, we also examined the characteristics of users with the highest number of followers. The top five most-followed users did not have the most retweeted tweets (which can indicate less influence on Twitter [Cha et al. 2010]) but were news organizations such as

@mashable (Mashable Inc.), @BBCAfrica (BBC news in Africa), and @cnni (CNN International). They posted "meta"-tweets seeking to spread information about the hashtag. The following are a few examples:

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#IfAfricaWasABar hashtag pokes fun at Africa's ever-
complicated geopolitics http://t.co/cPMRlI6P0S

#IfAfricaWasABar: Twitter erupts in pan-continental
satire fest http://t.co/PZxBV5SSWS http://t.co/
MePvB5Hyek

RT @CNNAfrica: #IfAfricaWasABar creator @SiyandaWrites:
'Africans on social media are dying for opportunities
to talk about Africa' http:// . . .
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Local news and radio stations, such as Radio702 in South Africa and Naij in Nigeria, posted meta-tweets as well. Other most-followed users were individuals with occupations such as social media personalities, radio personalities, entrepreneurs, rappers, and bloggers in Africa that elicited a large following. Most of these users posted retweets, with a minority of users posting more or exclusively original content. Notably, most-followed users with the highest number of retweets of original tweets were a journalist, a media site that critiques Western media content about Africa called "Africa is a Country," and a user in Nairobi with a computer science–related occupation (indicated by the hashtags #socialprogrammer and #computerscience). Their high number of retweets combined with a relatively high number of followers indicates their influence relative to other most-followed users (Cha et al. 2010). Because "most-followed" accounts had the ability to reach a wide audience, looking at the motivations of their discourse around the hashtag ("ever-complicated," "satire fest") combined with the scope of their audience might lead to a more nuanced understanding of how users from different parts of the world learned about and perceived the hashtag.

What's Happening in the Bar?

We also delved into the diverse commentary users provided via the tweets. In the set of tweets and retweets, the most frequently mentioned countries were Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa by far, followed by Uganda, Zimbabwe, Ghana, and Ethiopia. The most frequently mentioned non-

African countries were the United States and China. Many countries were mentioned fewer than ten times, often located in continents other than Africa. In our analysis, we sorted the tweets into what stood out to us as high-level yet multifaceted categories: cultural traditions and attitudes, economic ties and criticisms, and political events and relationships.

Tweets regarding culture in our sample commented on both specific aspects of culture, such as traditions, as well as more general attitudes regarding a country's culture and how it relates to Africa as a whole. Some tweets commented on the unique traditions of a country that might come out in a bar setting, such as language, dance styles, or food preferences. For example, a user commented on Angola's hypothetical language skills: "#IfAfricaWasABar Angola will be tht chick tht agrees to everything said in english coz she doesn't understand wht is said." After we learned that Angola's official language is Portuguese and that its primary languages exclude English, this tweet seemed to be pointing out Angola's distinctiveness among half of all the countries in Africa that have English as an official or de facto official language (though this does not mean English is a primary language in these countries) (CIA 2016). Similarly, other unique cultural practices came up, too, such as Ivory Coast's traditional dance: "#IfAfricaWasABar Ivory Coast will be dancing mapouka throughout the night." We learned that *mapouka* is a traditional dance from southeast Ivory Coast that has received media attention for purportedly inspiring the twerking dance style and eliciting a government ban on being performed in public spaces. It seemed that from the user's point of view, the nation was characterized by this dance and its associated events.

Tweets also pointed out other cultural phenomena that were not codified into traditions but were instead embedded into the attitudes of a country's residents: "#ifAfricawasabar Swaziland'd be drinking traditional beer while secretly wishing it cld hv some of this 'lager' folks are always talking abt." Written by Mohutsiwa herself, we interpreted this tweet as a comment on the perhaps repressed but extant desire of Swaziland's people to better meld the traditional and the modern, having learned that Swaziland is the only absolute monarchy in Africa and retains much of traditional Swazi culture. In this case, the hashtag serves to point out the rapid "modernization" of Africa and the perceived byproducts of not keeping up. Meanwhile, the way many users tweeted about South Africa was another example of a cultural attitude, this time more critical: "#IfAfricaWasABar you know South Africans would be there every day while pretending to themselves they're not part of it."

Here, the tweet describes the user's notions of South Africa's prevalent attitudes toward other African countries, implying a sense of superiority or refusal to identify with Pan-African culture. This particular tweet was authored by @Africasacountry, a media site originally founded by Sean Jacobs, a native of South Africa, to critique American or Western media content about Africa. However, Jacobs himself may not be the author of the tweet, as the site has multiple contributing authors or, potentially, a social media manager. Looking at replies to this tweet, most users indicated agreement with the sentiment while a few were more reluctant to agree, replying "Really?" or "Ouch." As outsiders, it is difficult to assess, past these replies, the complexity of the sentiment in question, considering that nuanced agreement or disagreement with the tweet can be expressed only in replies. Commentary on countries' status within Africa was not limited to South Africa, however. Countries with different ethnic makeups, such as Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt, were also considered to be "loners" at the bar or mingling only among themselves.

Another category of tweets commented on the economic choices and trends often brought about by a country's leadership. These tweets related to how a country spends money or creates economic ties with other countries. Some tweets could often be critical of spending, indicating a concern for the direction of the economy and leadership. One user tweeted: "#IfAfricaWasABar Nigeria would be the potbellied Oga buying drinks (on a credit card) for everyone. . . ." This tweet criticizes government spending without means, which we inferred based on the use of *Oga*, the Yoruba word for "chief," often used to describe government positions and made popular by its use by a public official in a controversial interview. Users also commented on economic relationships between countries and were particularly critical of dealings with the United States and China: "#IfAfricaWasABar people would be slow dancing with the West but snogging China in the toilets http://t.co/ZleDeTnjnK." Not only were African countries' characters in the bar, but so were other countries by virtue of the opportunistic economic relationships forged with them. Other tweets were even more critical of countries' economic ties, especially when they involved forces dominated by the West: "#IfAfricaWasABar Tanzania would be that guy with alot of money (resourses) [*sic*] and still depends on his white friends for drinks. (IMF & WB)." This tweet appears to indicate judgment of countries that rely on aid or perhaps purposefully keep up relationships with organizations often criticized for supporting neo-imperialism. In fact, one user pointed out the irony of maintaining such relationships: "#IfAfricaWasABar

Europeans would spike all the drinks then sell antidotes to everyone at a later date." This tweet, while generating agreement among many users, elicited opposing viewpoints claiming that it is stereotyping Europe. Though we can see greater complexity through replies, there is little sense of what these multiple perspectives on issues such as many African countries' colonial past mean for social Pan-Africanism in terms of actual cooperation and relatability among Africans.

Finally, users also commented on politics, ranging from historical conflicts or political trends to current events. This made #IfAfricaWasaBar not only a method of commentary but also a record of certain political events that were relevant at the time the hashtag was trending. As a result of this embeddedness in experience and history, these tweets seemed to require a deeper understanding of the history of African countries than we as US-based researchers possessed in order to understand users' intentions and deeper meanings. From our perspective, in some tweets the tone could be satirical, wishing to point out ongoing political turmoil. One user commented on Zimbabwe's political leadership: "#IfAfricaWasABar Mugabe is the guy who still doesn't leave even when the barman puts up all the stools and switches off all the lights." We learned that this tweet satirizes the fact that Robert Mugabe has been president of Zimbabwe since 1987, comparing him to an overly persistent customer at the bar.

More current events were also the center of attention in countries like Burundi, where Pierre Nkurunziza had won a third term in a controversial election at the time #IfAfricaWasaBar was trending: "#IfAfricaWasABar #Burundi will be that guy on the phone promising his wife he'll just be staying for two drinks whilst ordering a third." The metaphor expanded outside the bar as well, even talking about longstanding conflicts between countries under the guise of trouble getting into the bar: "#IfAfricaWasABar South Sudan would need a fake ID and hope Sudan is not the bouncer that night." Here, the tweet refers to South Sudan's relatively recent independence from Sudan after a civil war and instability since then. Users also commented on more underlying conflicts between countries, such as the soured relationship between Nigeria and Ghana: "#IfAfricaWasABar Nigeria and Ghana would be the two guys who came together then end up beefing." We interpreted this tweet as a reference to Nigeria's and Ghana's stances on immigration coming in from the other country, pointing to a historical conflict that comes out in the disorderly atmosphere of a bar.

Examining characteristics of users and tweets helped us gain a bet-

ter understanding of the way the hashtag was being used and by whom. However, it is also valuable to understand the questions regarding representation that the hashtag brings up. One issue of representation was the dominance of the English language. The overwhelming majority of users wrote their tweets in English, and the hashtag itself is an English phrase. Indeed, in an analysis of five thousand hashtags in Africa, more than three-quarters of tweets were written in English (Portland Africa 2017), and it has been argued that the many different languages spoken in African countries makes English a lingua franca that unites people across language barriers (Portland Africa 2017). However, prior work shows that English geotagged tweets are concentrated in South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, and Ghana (Leetaru 2013). This may explain the high participation we see in this hashtag from those countries, but it also begs the question of which countries English is uniting on Twitter.

Additionally, understanding who is able to represent whom is important in examining a hashtag like #IfAfricaWasaBar. Therefore, we examined the number of tweets and retweets that matched the user-submitted location with the country mentioned in the tweet. Approximately 41 percent of tweets had users with locations that contained the name of a country that could be parsed into a standard three-letter abbreviation. Matching the user-submitted location with the country mentioned in the tweet showed that only 16 percent of parsable tweets had matching locations. The countries that consistently had a slightly higher percentage of matching locations than percentage of country mentions were countries with high hashtag participation overall, such as Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, and Zambia. Additionally, because we only parsed country names, this does not account for user-submitted locations consisting solely of the frequently mentioned major cities in these countries, such as Nairobi, Kenya, or Accra, Ghana. While not every user-submitted location mirrors a user's true location or national identity, this data may indicate that participation on Twitter shapes how much self-representation a country has within the hashtag. Indeed, entire countries were considered irrelevant at the "bar." Looking at our random sample and the set of tweets that mention small countries like Seychelles or Mauritius, users often tweeted about the smaller or less well-known countries in similar ways. From one user from Botswana and located in Canada: "#IfAfricaWasABar Dudes like Seychelles, Madagascar, Cape Verde and Mauritius wouldn't even get in because nobody really knows about them."

Other users recognized the effects of uneven representation of coun-

tries in the way a Western media organization like CNN might misperceive or oversimplify the hashtag: "@CNN be looking at this #IfAfricaWasABar trend like, So you mean all this [*sic*] countries are in Nigeria." Other users tweeted about participation in the hashtag itself from non-African users, pointing to the importance of identity and representation in a conversation like #IfAfricaWasaBar:

> When I see white non African people tweeting the #IfAfricaWasABar hashtag http://t.co/uIitZdNNXB

> My face when a non-African tweets using #IfAfricawasaBar [crying/laughing emoji] srsly tread lightly. . . . http://t.co/YDORrb6lKS

These tweets show that questions of representation are important to a social movement like #IfAfricaWasaBar. However, looking at the data set from a bird's-eye view might point out these issues, but it does not delve further into the motivations behind these notions of participation or the complexities of why certain countries are underrepresented or represented in particular ways.

Discussion

Our findings aimed to highlight what we could learn about notions of social Pan-Africanism as viewed and engaged by the tweets we collected from the hashtag #IfAfricaWasaBar. We also noted the motivations and intentions that were more difficult to understand as outsiders to the movement and to the online network itself. In order to learn from this perspective to make Twitter analysis of social movements more fruitful, we find a middle ground between Taylor's (2011) critique of othering and Rose's (1997) argument for the need to recognize multiple knowledges and the absence of knowledges. In the rest of this discussion, we look at Twitter research in terms of Taylor's critique, exploring current proposed methods of bridging "in here" to "out there" in Twitter analyses. We then argue for methods that go one step further to focus on multiple knowledges and the absence of knowledges.

In looking at our study through the lens of Taylor's critique, it is easy to believe that it does not apply, since Twitter (like other social media) really is a network. Users are the nodes, and communication creates edges

among various users, which leads to Twitter analysis methods that make inferences about communities' real-life behavior based on the communication that is evident within the network. However, these methods of analysis create a bird's-eye view of Twitter interactions, and prior work shows that in addition to not understanding users' own perspectives on the social media activities being analyzed (Marwick 2014; Bonilla and Rosa 2015), researchers are limited to the type of data and representation of identity that the social media platform allows users to provide (Marwick 2005). Specific to hashtags, any meta-remarks on the use of one, such as counter-hashtags like #AllLivesMatter to #BlackLivesMatter or meta-tweets that comment on the hashtag, need to manifest in the form of a hashtag, tweet, retweet, or reply in order to be taken into account. Furthermore, it is difficult to assess based on public discourse (Kow et al. 2016) on Twitter if participation in the hashtag (or lack thereof) has affected the user offline. As a result, prior work has described the benefits of qualitative interviews and ethnography in understanding user perspectives and technology use (boyd and Crawford 2011; Marwick 2014).

However, we wish to specify how qualitative methods in Twitter analyses of social movements, particularly in a cross-cultural context, might be used to avoid simply erasing the inside/outside dichotomy and instead complicate the researcher's interpretation of a social movement on Twitter. Recognizing Rose's notion of multiple knowledges and the absence of knowledges requires considering how "networks cut everywhere else, besides, 'back here'" (Taylor 2011). From this perspective, it becomes important to better engage with where the network of a hashtag "cuts" or stops (Taylor 2011). This stopping point could be quite literal in contexts with lack of internet access or language barriers in an English-dominated conversation. It could also be due to disagreement with the hashtag itself, lack of awareness or understanding of the hashtag, or simply being part of the periphery of the movement, as seen with the smaller or culturally distinct countries in this study. There could also be stopping points from a user's point of view—opinions on who should or should not be participating in the hashtag can also determine where the network can be considered cut, as in the case of users who felt non-Africans should not be participating in the hashtag.

Therefore, intending to complicate researchers' understanding of the social movement, qualitative interviews of non-users of the hashtag, in addition to users, may be beneficial. Eric Baumer and his colleagues

have explored non-use of technology, showing that understanding non-use can provide an idea of the larger trends that result in non-use amid widespread usage (Baumer et al. 2015). Similarly, understanding non-use of a hashtag and the Twitter platform can provide insights on why issues of representation might be arising and the multiple knowledges at play in defining a social movement.

Admittedly, determining who non-users are begins with learning who users are as well as who is being underrepresented in the hashtag and on the social media platform. Non-users might be those who do not use the platform itself but might be likely to if they were on the platform (which in turn relies on access to that demographic as well as an understanding of a likely user and the intention of the hashtag). Non-users of the hashtag could also be found by examining users' ties on the platform for friends who did not participate in the hashtag despite the users' participation. Examining replies to meta-tweets may also be useful in finding users who did not necessarily use the hashtag but had a perspective on the meta-tweet. Finally, as in the case of #BlackLivesMatter, users who utilize variations of the hashtag without using the original might be considered non-users who are indirectly interacting with the hashtag. In these ways, Twitter research might be able to balance a view from "inside" the data with the recognition that there are always multiple and sometimes missing perspectives that the researcher must always worry about when characterizing a social movement from the outside.

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SEVENTEEN | Beyond Hashtags

Black Twitter and Building Solidarity across Borders

KIMBERLY MCNAIR

It was the year of the Occupy Wall Street Movement, Arab Spring, and the Egyptian Revolution. I began following the 2011 London uprising like most "xennial" Black Americans—via social media (Merriam-Webster 2018). Traditional media outlets had moderate coverage, but I found it easier to follow the protests in real time on Twitter. As I settled into my third year of graduate school at UC Berkeley that fall, the Occupy Oakland encampment at Frank H. Ogawa Plaza—newly renamed by protesters and occupiers as Oscar Grant Plaza—was only five blocks away from my apartment in downtown Oakland, California. Oscar Grant III was a twenty-two-year-old Black man killed by a Bay Area Transit police officer in the early morning of New Year's Day 2009. Amid the tear gas fumes and sounds of helicopters above, I understood the unrest in London that had started two months earlier as existing within a global context of Black death in police custody. The London uprising was sparked by outrage over the death of Mark Duggan, a twenty-nine-year-old Black man killed by police in Tottenham, North London, England, in August of that year. The protests and confrontations with police spread across London and other cities in England, and the hashtags #MarkDuggan, #LondonRiots, and #UKRiots went viral days after Duggan's death.

This chapter explores how Black political expression has evolved in the social media age. It grew out of a curiosity about how Twitter as a platform offers a way to connect with similarly marginalized communities in the African diaspora and evolved into an examination of how social

media and smartphone technology are used in international movement building. To this extent, the "Black" in Black Twitter extends past the online neighborhoods that are interconnected by signifying cultural knowledge and practices and addresses the offline reality of blackness born out of continued subjugation (McNair 2015; Brock 2012; Florini 2013; Clark 2014). This chapter positions one case study within the historical, cultural, and political context of the United Kingdom.

As a way to communicate and build movements, social media and Twitter in particular facilitated an inter-diasporic dissemination of information. Through the use of hashtags, Black Twitter (an online community described at times as a racial, social, or political formation) circulates cultural forms that travel between the United States and throughout the diaspora (McNair 2015; Brock 2012; Florini 2013; Clark 2014). The visibility of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the United States is a key example of how US-born social movements have helped enliven simultaneous movements and decades-long struggles (Brown 2005). Deaths in police custody and community surveillance are the threads that connect the US Movement for Black Lives to established activist organizations and networks created around the globe. The constellation of hashtags as visual material, the adoption of "Black Lives Matter" as a political frame, and resistance to violent policing as a legitimate response contributed to the solidarity among Blacks in the United States and the United Kingdom.

This chapter explores the condition of Black Britons as victims of police brutality and their use of discursive activism online and off. Through interviews with community activists and family members of those killed by police, I focus on the following themes: (1) how movement participants use social media as a political tool, (2) what social media can tell us about diasporic communication regarding global struggles, and (3) how social media has changed Black political participation. I also explore how youth of color in London use smartphone applications specifically designed to monitor and record police-citizen encounters to collect visual evidence of systemic racism.

Scholars Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow White have described the internet as a space where "race itself has become a digital medium, a distinctive set of informatic codes, networked mediated narratives, maps, images, visualizations that index identity." Through this lens, I think of Black Twitter as a Black online community, connected through a shared understanding of political and historical meanings, formed within the same history of racialization (and racial understanding) that exists in the

physical world (McNair 2015). These "online neighborhoods," Meredith Clark writes, "mirror the variety in the Black lived experience."[1] With this framing, we can imagine these neighborhoods as London, Birmingham, and Brixton, or Baltimore, Los Angeles, and Oakland, and the border crossing that has also become characteristic of Black Twitter. Blackness (and, by extension, the lived experiences of Black people) has no need for boundary maintenance (Brubaker 2005). The "Black" includes not only the diaspora but the history of criminalization and surveillance as well. The different neighborhoods that form Black Twitter use tweets to challenge the images that the press has used to represent Black people (and the criminalization of young Black men in particular). As scholar S. Craig Watkins explains, "Hashtags put news media organizations on notice that they were being watched, scrutinized, and held accountable for the narratives that they constructed." Therefore, social media has helped redirect the arc of the story, framing the conversation about race and inequality in the US happening in (offline) traditional broadcast news outlets acting as gatekeepers. Black Twitter as participatory media has enabled diasporic Blacks to co-create the news and influence the way stories of Black people killed by the police have been reported (Graeff et al. 2014).

I propose that the emergence of Twitter as a political tool is a response to a discursive crisis. This crisis is the skewed depiction of Black victims of police murder and the community uprisings that often occur in white mainstream media. These tweets represent a point of contention between traditional news outlets (and their function as a space that reproduces racist ideology) and counter-hegemonic discourses. We also see a progression within social (media) constructed communities like Black Twitter from discursive identity (as a performance of cultural understanding) to "discursive activism" (transforming frequency of use into a currency of use) (Watkins 2014). Hashtags are a discursive intervention made in response to this crisis. This "#" language emanating from social media—such as #BlackLivesMatterUK—decenters traditional kinds of social action, such as established political organizations and parties, and privileges a group-centered style of participation (McNair 2017). I argue that Black Twitter should be understood as a counter-hegemonic project and media intervention after decades of increased policing of Black and other ethnic minorities in the United Kingdom.

The Black Lives Matter movement, which originated in the United States, expanded into the United Kingdom through protests coordinated by activists such as Natalie Jeffers, cofounder of Black Lives Matter

UK (BLMUK), as publicity surrounding cases of death in police custody in the United States increased and international public outrage escalated. As an online community with shared political interests, cultural references, and practices rooted in the Black experience, Black Twitter facilitated the communication and coalition building necessary between diasporic locations (Florini 2013; Watkins 2014).

Family members of victims of police violence delivered a letter to 10 Downing Street, the British prime minister's residence, on the day of the seventeenth annual march against deaths in custody during the Black Lives Matter UK/US Solidarity Tour in 2015. The solidarity tour was an act of reciprocity, organized mostly through communication via social media. The United Families and Friends Campaign (UFFC), together with other grassroots organizations, invited Patrisse Cullors, one of the cofounders of Black Lives Matter (United States), in February 2015 to tour across the United Kingdom. Others involved included Adeyemi (Ade) Johnson, brother-in-law of Sheku Bayoh; Stephanie Lightfoot-Bennett, the twin sister of Leon Patterson; Jo Orchard, the sister of Thomas Orchard; Ajibola Lewis, the mother of Olaseni (Seni) Lewis; and Cephus (Uncle Bobby) Johnson, the uncle of Oscar Grant, along with his wife, Beatrice X Johnson, both from Oakland, California. Later that year, the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) brought a number of family members from the United Kingdom to Southern California to share their family members' stories, including Shaun Hall, the brother of Mark Duggan; Kadisha Burrell-Brown, sister of Kingsley Burrell; and Marcia Rigg, the sister of Sean Rigg, who traveled to the United States from the United Kingdom to start a global conversation about deaths in police custody and state violence (Rigg 2015).

For seventeen years now, the families and supporters meet annually for the UFFC remembrance procession at Trafalgar Square in London and then march to Downing Street to the prime minister's residence to hand in a letter of demands (Rigg 2015). The UFFC T-shirt worn by Stephanie Lightfoot-Bennett includes the statistic and statement: "1518 Deaths in Police Custody Since 1990 in London and Wales. 0 Convictions." At the time of the 2015 march, of the 1,518 deaths in police custody since 1990, 152 of these victims were Black. Despite there being ten unlawful killing verdicts, there has not been a single conviction (INQUEST Charitable Trust 2017).

In late 2016 I conducted interviews with Marcia Rigg and Stephanie Lightfoot-Bennett, the cochairs of the United Family and Friends

Campaign, and Shareefa Panchbhaya from StopWatch UK, who all participate in the Black Lives Matter movement in the United Kingdom. I asked them questions about their experiences incorporating social media into their activism. The United Family and Friends Campaign was created in 1997 by media activist Ken Fero and was a coalition of Black families (at that time) who raised the issues of Black families and Black deaths in police custody in the United Kingdom. The organization has since become a multiracial organization for all those affected by deaths of loved ones in police custody. Marcia Rigg is the cochair and cofounder of UFFC along with Stephanie Lightfoot-Bennett. Marcia's brother Sean Rigg, who suffered from mental health issues for a period of twenty years, died in 2008 in police custody. The hashtag created for Marcia's brother, #SeanRigg, has been in circulation since as early as July 2010 among the many campaigns and organizations created to resist deaths in police custody (i.e., Police State UK, UK Black Defenders, and INQUEST). And because of the tireless work that Marcia has done over the years, this hashtag has been shared as recently as December 2017. Stephanie Lightfoot-Bennett, another longtime organizer with UFFC, is the twin sister of Leon Patterson, a man who was murdered by the police in 1992. The hashtag created for Lightfoot-Bennett's brother, #LeonPatterson, began in June 2015 included on a list of other known victims (e.g., #SeanRigg and #MarkDuggan) of death in police custody. And by August 2016 it had drawn many comparisons to the Freddie Gray case in Baltimore, Maryland.

Though African American popular culture dominates international media, this exposure to Black Atlantic life and culture does not go both ways. Many people in the United States are unaware of the systemic issues faced by Black Britons; participants believe that the solidarity tour has helped change that (Rigg 2016). When reflecting on her trip to the United States, Marcia Rigg stated:

> From the beginning, the most surprising aspect of our trip was the lack of awareness amongst communities and activists in the US in relation to the UK context. . . . Black lives on both sides of the Atlantic appear to mean nothing and there is a remarkable disproportionality of deaths.

Over her many years working with UFFC, there hasn't been enough media attention, and any media attention garnered from the T-shirts, demonstrations, and social media presence would help bring their cause to

the top of the political agenda. "That's where change will only happen," she insists. Rigg suggests that "the difference in this day and age is social media." She further explains:

> One of the issues we have here as they have in the States is media attention. We don't get proper media platform attention. In those days in the 1990s there was no social media. There were no mobile phones and such. It was all made by word of mouth. . . . Social media is a platform for protest and campaigning, and the news can spread fast worldwide. . . . It's modern-day protesting, Twitter, Instagram. . . . When young people in Britain found out about what's happening here and we started to tell them about our history . . . suddenly everyone is awake. The future generation have woken up, and they are much more political than past generations. It's phenomenal.

Lightfoot-Bennett also spoke about the uses of social media:

> For getting to know what's going on, like with Mzee Mohammed [an eighteen-year-old Black male who in 2016 died after being detained by police at a shopping center in Liverpool following reports he had a knife] . . . It brings people out in solidarity for the family . . . because they had to raise some money to send Mzee back to Jamaica. And once social media had heard about the story, heard about what happened, people were now willing to help donate to get him back home.[2]

The hashtag #FergusonSolidarityTour started on January 20, 2015, and was used to promote the first leg of the Ferguson US to UK Solidarity Tour until March 11, 2015. The hashtag was included in tweets originating from individuals and organizations in the United States and the United Kingdom who either participated in the solidarity tour or were affiliated with Black Lives Matter (i.e., Ella Baker Center (Oakland, California), the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California, Defend the Right to Protest (DTRTP, in the UK), and notable members of BLM Oakland and BLM Los Angeles). The highest rate of tweets and retweets occurred during visits to college campuses like Kings College University (fig. 17.1), University College London, Edinburgh University; cities like Leeds and Sussex; and the protest at the G4's corporate headquarters in London. The hashtag #CaravanForJustice began on October 3, 2015, and kicked off the second leg of the Ferguson US to UK Solidarity Tour.

Figure 17.1. Ferguson Solidarity Tour at Kings College University (UK). In the largest image, Marica Rigg is second from left and Patrisse Cullors is fourth from left. Source: Maroon News (@MaroonNewsmag) Twitter account.

This hashtag has been tweeted and retweeted hundreds of times by as many individuals and organizations over the past two and a half years and is still in circulation as of June 2017.

There have been multiple "caravans for justice," and the slogan has been repurposed for everything from resisting New York's stop-and-frisk policy, to protesting President Donald Trump, to defending the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy and undocumented immigrants. The hashtag predecessors #LondonToFerguson and #LondonToNYC had emerged a year earlier in 2014 in the wake of the deaths of Mike Brown and Eric Garner. By November 2015 calls began for all of those involved with #LondonToFerguson to connect with the United Families and Friends Campaign (fig. 17.2). During the January 2015 solidarity tour, UFFC and BLM were mentioned together in the same tweet for the first time; and August 2016 was the first time BLM UK and UFFC were mentioned in the same tweet. However, tweets and retweets are not the best indicators, as much of the organizing and alliance building between organizations like UFFC and BLM still happens through traditional movement practices, offline. In a way, Twitter Analytics cannot tell the full story.

These organizations' engagement with social media represent a

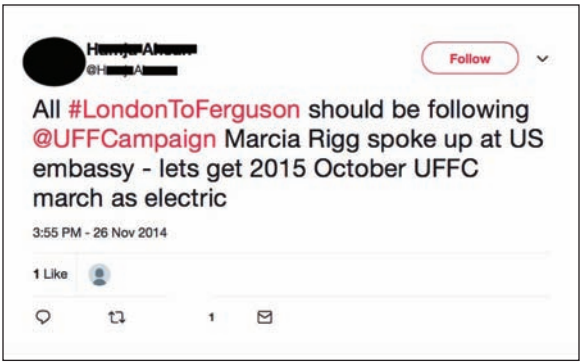

Figure 17.2. @UFFCampaign Twitter follower.

Figure 17.3. Defend the Right to Protest (@righttoprotest) Twitter account.

change in discursive activism in Black political movements over time. A change of medium—that is, moving from the television news broadcasts of court cases and protests to "live streaming" and video capabilities via smartphone technology—allows for a change in message, frame, and point of view. The United Families and Friends Campaign has traditionally utilized their website (uffcampaign.org) and their Facebook page more often than their Twitter account (@UFFCampaign). However, as the social (media) movement that became the global Movement for

Figure 17.4. Defend the Right to Protest (@righttoprotest) Twitter account. Vigil held in Riverside, California, during the Ferguson Solidarity Tour. Pictured: Marcia Rigg (prominent, right) and Stephanie Lightfoot-Bennett (second from left, wearing UFFC T-shirt).

Black Lives grew, the organization incorporated social media into their repertoire. According to Foller.me analytics for Twitter, the organization joined Twitter in 2011—one month after the London uprising. They describe themselves as "a coalition of those affected by deaths in police, prison, immigration and psychiatric custody."[3] With 918 tweets and 1,479 followers (a ratio of 2.07 followers per following) the organization shows a moderate usage of the platform as compared to other UK-based organizations. Defend the Right to Protest (@righttoprotest, figs. 17.3 and 17.4), which cosponsored the solidarity tour, joined Twitter in 2011 and has 5,588 tweets and 9,551 followers (3.35 followers per following) to date. Black Lives Matter UK (@ukblm, fig. 17.5), which joined Twitter in 2016, only has 1,501 tweets but over 22.9K followers (67.50 followers per following). However, this may be a result of general curiosity or goodwill and not necessarily participation offline.

Here again, the numbers presented do not tell the full story. Using the Foller.me Twitter Analytics tool to look deeper, I found that breaking these statistics down per one hundred tweets illustrated diffusion of information and UFFC's proud network and activist community. For every one hundred tweets, UFFC had three replies, included seventy-five @mentions or #hashtags, and 100 percent of their tweets included

Figure 17.5. Black Lives Matter UK (@ukblm) Twitter account. Announcement about the annual @UFFCampaign march. Image taken from US to UK Justice Tour in 2015. Pictured, from right to left: Cephus "Uncle Bobby" Johnson, Beatrice X Johnson, Stephanie Lightfoot-Bennett, and Marcia Rigg.

media or web links. On average, fifty-four of one hundred tweets were retweets from allied organization like 4wardeveruk.org and justiceforkingsley.wordpress.com. What is most interesting is that UFFC spent as much time publicizing other organizations and related campaigns as their own events. Their connections to other organizations doing similar work as part and independent of the Black Lives Matter movement in the UK illustrates the longevity and impact of the group. The tweet frequency of BLMUK is similar to UFFC, with three replies, eighty-two @mentions and #hashtags, forty retweets, and fifty media embeds and links for every one hundred tweets. However, again, this organization has joined only since the summer of 2016, a year and a half as compared to both DTRTP and UFFC, which joined in 2010 and 2011 respectively. This means that BLMUK has had a larger social media impact than UFFC to date, largely influenced by the Black Lives Matter name and the movement in the United States and other global locations. Their most liked domains include news outlets like *The Guardian*, the *Evening Standard*, and *The Independent* and the BBC. This illustrates a difference in media strategy as far as visibility, whereas BLMUK has focused on large demonstrations and direct-action protests that gain news media

coverage. This is different from UFFC, which has largely focused on garnering support for families, criminal trials, police inquisitions, and their annual procession.

UFFC's collaborator, DTRTP, was formed by millennials in the aftermath of the student protests of November and December 2010 and is closely affiliated with the National Union of Students (NUS). The organization, which, according to their Twitter bio, campaigns against "police brutality, kettling and the use of violence against protesters," is indicative of a generational shift in movement building and different communication strategies. For every ninety-seven tweets, DTRTP replied thirteen times, included eighty-eight @mentions and fifty-nine #hashtags, retweeted fifty-six times, and provided forty-five links to organizations such as NUS and the Cole Family Truth Campaign. Though they have an average of ten more replies than UFFC, DTRTP engaged with—really talked to—more people online than UFFC. This indicates a frequency of use and familiarity with Twitter as a discursive and visibility strategy familiar to this new generation of activists. Youth who are frequent users of social media then tap that frequency to build momentum for various campaigns and actions (Fromm 2016).

Rigg spoke more about the need to make UFFC international, because people in the United States were not aware of what's been happening in the United Kingdom. And from her observation, young Black Britons were not aware that the same thing happening in the United States had happened in the United Kingdom. Rigg recalled, "Because the younger generation were coming out on the streets for BLMUK but the younger generation in this country and a lot of people in this country were not aware of deaths in custody in this country either. Because the media doesn't give it the platform that it deserves." This is why they invited Patrisse Cullors (cofounder of Black Lives Matter and from the Ella Baker Center in Oakland, California) to the United Kingdom in January 2015 for an eight-day tour across the United Kingdom. Rigg recalled, "She reciprocated some of the UFFC to come to the United States and so we did . . . [The Caravan for Justice] went to Oakland, Salinas, Riverside, LA. . . . We went to eight different counties in California, and we met all the families to tell our stories, and they couldn't believe [what was happening in the UK]" (figs. 17.3 and 17.4).

For Rigg, the major struggle in the fight against police custody deals with the lack of convictions (zero to date, regardless of the victim's race) after more than fifty years of recorded inquiries into police misconduct. Rigg explains:

> What's happened is that police officers did not have body-worn cameras. There's no CCTV police vehicles in this country. We have CCTV everywhere, on the streets, on buses, in taxis, everywhere. . . . The UK is a "big brother state" except in police vehicles, where the deaths happen and the brutalities happen behind closed doors but the only witnesses are police officers.

Rigg campaigned to require cameras in police vehicles, which was initiated in 2016. During the Caravan for Justice tour in the United States, Rigg was interested in one particular tool—a mobile phone app. The ACLU of California, in partnership with the Ella Baker Center, developed the Mobile Justice CA app. The app would allow people to record and report (via automatic upload) their interactions with law enforcement to the ACLU for review. After the Caravan for Justice tour in the United States, Patrisse Cullors initiated the creation of the YStop app for UFFC along with the aid of the Ella Baker Center, UCLA, and the ACLU. Rigg emphasized the significance of the app:

> Black people have said for decades that police officers lie, they brutalize us. But there was never any proof. But now there is proof, we are recording it ourselves, and putting it on social media. . . . That's made the massive awareness in police brutality and deaths in custody. Because everybody can see, now. . . . Even though people are recording, there are not many convictions. [But now] the world can see we are not lying. That's the difference in social media, people getting the cell phones out and recording it.

The idea of social media influencing the creation of smartphone apps is a breakthrough in police-citizen interaction. However, I needed a way to gauge the success of such tools. I spoke with Shareefa Panchbhaya, who has worked with StopWatch, a UK organization dedicated to research and activism that challenges policies around stop-and-search. She's a supporter of UFFC and promoted YStop in communities, organizations, events, and universities during stop-and-search workshops. For Panchbhaya, it's a youth empowerment project. Panchbhaya explained, "YStop came from StopWatch and RELEASE (the national center of expertise on drugs and drugs law). It was demanded and created by young people, brought forward and demanded by young people so young people could know their rights."

YStop lets people put their locations directly in the app. This way, if

the police try to grab the phone, the phone shakes and the video gets uploaded immediately to YStop. The complaint goes immediately to YStop and to the police. It doesn't save on the phone; it saves online. Improvements are needed, and, unfortunately, the way the UK justice system handles judicial proceedings means that video footage is not always counted as permissible evidence. Panchbhaya admits that YStop was not an immediate success. "It had about 8,000 downloads, 1,400 videos, 100 reports," she explained. Panchbhaya was hopeful about how social media may encourage people to download and use the app.

StopWatch UK's @YStopUK Twitter account has 884 followers and has composed over 3,000 tweets with 513 likes. The app is described as a "stop and search project for young people by young people" and has posted images and information on how to download the app as recently as October 2017. StopWatch UK joined Twitter in April 2011, four months before Mark Duggan's murder, and initiated their YStop UK account in June of 2014. Compared to the organization's Twitter account, @StopWatchUK, which has roughly 2,300 followers (1.38 followers per following) with 1,259 more tweets with 284 likes, the reach and popularity of the YStop app is still undetermined. According to Foller.me analytics for Twitter, @YStopUK replied to tweets three out of one hundred times (the same as UFFC and BLMUK). However, their average retweets (33/100) and inclusion of links (70/100) is more indicative of the function of not only the YStop Twitter page but also the YStop app itself. On both Twitter accounts the StopWatch campaign shares video tutorials and short documentaries on the YStop app and how to use it. They also offer alerts regarding police sweeps and patrolling of specific communities as well as articles related to the growing resistance to police violence in the United Kingdom. Young people also tweet their stories, and other community members tweet about recent cases of police brutality. These stories are then retweeted by StopWatch UK and YStop UK and illustrate the emotional and mental toll stop-and-search policies have had on young Black Britons.

For Panchbhaya, the app would encourage people who don't usually get involved to report and make complaints. Though StopWatch and YStop use standard Facebook and Twitter to communicate with YStop users and community members, she feels they need to revise their social media strategy. She admits that they don't have the best numbers when it comes to Twitter (both YStop and StopWatch don't have thousands of followers). "It's not always the best tool," she insists. "It keeps things current, but as far as engagement it's more important for people to text or

call someone." From Panchbhaya's comments, it would seem that they had only begun to think about collecting data on usage and efficiency. This also illustrates the challenges in transitioning smartphone users from those who engage with social media about issues of police surveillance into those who use smartphones as tools of surveillance against the police. What is promising is that as the international Movement for Black Lives matures, so will the strategies used within the movement. Social media and smartphone apps are two strategies among many that can harness the energy of the masses to disrupt global systems of oppression.

The imbalance in the ways Black victims are depicted in the media has been met by innovation in visual strategies (e.g., the Solidarity Tour, marches, and T-shirts, to name a few) as well as communication strategies (e.g., social media) on both sides of the Atlantic. The tweets included in this chapter illustrate how a social media presence can function as a means for political intervention in the public sphere. Harnessing the frequency and currency of social media usage has also popularized new smartphone technology to expose violent police citizen encounters in their communities. These interventions have not only challenged the framing of Black victims in broadcast news but have also exposed the inequalities in legal policies that disproportionately affect Black people whenever they come in contact with the police or other agents of the state.

Through their mutual concern around deaths in police custody without legal redress, the United Family and Friends Campaign and the international coalition of Black Lives Matter activists used discursive activism in the form of the solidarity tour, social media platforms, and smartphone applications to help bring the movement to the international stage (Rutherford 2016; INQUEST 2017). The United Family and Friends Campaign represents one example of the multitude of organizations that have played roles in bringing the deaths of Black Britons to the forefront. Furthermore, their activism helped initiate the creation of new activist tools in the form of smartphone applications. Although these initiatives are still works in progress, they show advancement in the ways activists are using new technology to help in the fight against policing as a global system of racism. The major takeaway from this project is that beyond the hashtags, we see a network of African-descended peoples who are venturing into the formation of a diasporic black political identity, wherein social media serves as a cyber communication center that helps coordinate tangible political practices offline.

Notes

1. Clark: "I define Black Twitter as a temporally linked group of connectors that share culture, language and interest in specific issues and talking about specific topics with a black frame of reference. And when I say 'black,' that isn't just limited to US blacks, but blacks throughout the diaspora, and I think a lot of what we see reflects on blacks just in the US, but I do want to make that distinction clear, that it is not just of a matter of what we talk about here in the United States" (quoted in Ramsey 2014).
2. See Perraudin 2016.
3. @UFFCampaign Twitter Account.

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PART V

Notes from the Color of New Media

EIGHTEEN | The Color of New Media Enters Trumplandia

TRANSCRIBED BY NICOLAS CHANG

EDITED BY ABIGAIL DE KOSNIK

The following is an edited transcript of a meeting of the Color of New Media that took place on February 1, 2017. All eight of the members who attended that day were women; six were women of color.

We include this transcript as a historical record of individual and collective reactions of our working group to the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency, and the earliest acts of his administration, captured a week and a half after Trump's inauguration.

This meeting took place amid an array of notable events:

- Twelve days before this Color of New Media meeting, on January 20, 2017, the inauguration of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth president of the United States of America occurred.
- Eleven days before the meeting, the Women's March took place in cities all across the United States and around the world and became what was probably the largest single-day protest in US history (Broomfield 2017).
- Five days before the meeting, on January 27, 2017, Trump signed his first executive order denying entry into the United States by citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries, which quickly became known as the "Trump Travel Ban" or "Muslim Ban."
- Two days before the meeting, on January 30, 2017, acting attorney

general Sally Yates ordered the Department of Justice (DOJ) not to defend Trump's executive order and was dismissed that day by the Trump administration.

- On the morning of February 1, 2017, just a few hours before this Color of New Media meeting, the Senate Judiciary Committee approved the nomination of Republican senator Jeff Sessions as attorney general. Also, Trump made remarks at the start of Black History Month that implied that he thought that nineteenth-century abolitionist Frederick Douglass was still living (*WhiteHouse.gov* 2017; Wootson 2017).
- A public lecture by alt-right agitator Milo Yiannopoulos on the UC Berkeley campus was scheduled for the evening of February 1, 2017, and protests had been organized by Berkeley students, and by the antifascist, or antifa, organization called the Black Bloc, which would all unfold about seven hours after the Color of New Media meeting concluded.

De Kosnik began the meeting by asking members to share one or two persistent thoughts or reactions they'd been having since Trump's inauguration.

Reactions of Women of Color to the Election and the Women's March

YAIRA. I am a student of Latin American literature, and this whole political climate that we're in dialogues with how Latin American dictatorships were micro-experiments, the US's neoliberal experiments. I think the current political climate sort of takes me there [to US-imposed Latin American dictatorships] in relation to authoritative and retrograde discourse in the service of corporate interests.

As a woman of color, [I've also been thinking about] the Women's March, and something that caught my attention from that event was how out of place I felt, even though part of its platform was inclusivity. It didn't necessarily feel that way. There was something about it that didn't resonate with certain realities of minority groups.

ABIGAIL DE KOSNIK. And other women of color have told me that too. "Was that a white woman's march?" was one of the questions around those events—as amazing, as stupendous as they were.

PAIGE JOHNSON. Thinking about the events that are happening today [Yiannopoulos's scheduled talk on the Berkeley campus and the planned protests against it] has really made me think about the early scholarship on what it means to be a nonwhite person on the internet, [where] there were two streams of thought: either the internet is the great equalizer [where] you can be whoever you want to be, or you don't get to erase race or gender in that space. I think we're having that conversation a lot more—some have been having that conversation a lot more with the Black Lives Matter movement. I think the ways in which violence carries over into the digital realm is something that we are going to have to start to grapple with [more] in different ways.

The Confirmation of Jeff Sessions as Attorney General

JOHNSON. I'm just so mad about [Jeff] Sessions [being appointed attorney general of the United States]. I mean, there's so much to be mad about, but for me, that really hits home, as someone from Alabama, having to deal with his bullshit for fifty years in the Senate—and now, to see him validated on a public stage in this way! Of course he's been in the Senate majority for forever. Just to see him reach this level . . . ! The fact that he's being validated and put in a position of power that he had not before, in a way he failed to gain before. Like, [before the Trump administration, Sessions was told,] "You are blatantly racist, and you make racist policies, so we cannot elect you to this type of sort of national leadership position." The fact that he won today just . . . [The Senate Judiciary Committee approved Sessions's appointment to attorney general on the morning of February 1, 2017, minutes before the beginning of the Color of New Media meeting.]

DE KOSNIK. If I'm recalling right, you're alluding to the Senate hearings to make Sessions a federal judge that happened years ago, and I think Strom Thurmond was on that committee. [Strom Thurmond, the longest-serving senator in American history, was a prominent opponent of racial integration throughout his political career.] And when Strom Thurmond tells you you're too racist to be a judge, I feel like you're too racist to be a judge. [*laughter*]

[While Thurmond chaired the 1986 Senate Judiciary Committee that voted down Sessions's nomination, Thurmond did not personally vote against Sessions. However, two Republican senators on that committee, Arlen Specter and Charles Mathias Jr., did vote against Sessions.]

The Struggle Did Not Begin Now

RA. One of the things that I've been dealing with is that it feels like a secondhand exhaustion, where I know that I haven't necessarily been in all the places and on all the streets [protesting], but I just feel so exhausted. I feel like turning inward and feel like avoiding. I think that part of it comes from just trying to make sense of this new white liberal frenzy that's all about being on the streets and all about waking up and being disappointed with America for the first time. And I guess for me it's that there has been so much cause and so many things to protest, at least from my positionality [as an African American woman]. Specifically on the eve of the Women's March, I remember being on Instagram and seeing [that] someone I went to high school with posted a picture of their glittery uterus sign and wrote a caption about how they recognized this is the first time they felt this enraged to march. And I remember feeling like, "Really? Now? 2017, this moment?" A lot of what's happening doesn't feel surprising. What else is America gonna do after its first Black president? This kind of energetic excitement around racism is, in my mind, what I expected to come after what some would perceive as a false victory—or this incomplete victory—in the end of racism [that was thought to be achieved by Obama's presidency]. Of course post-racial America would lead itself into this trap.

"We're in This Moment of Acceleration": The Citizenry Is Not Complacent

RA. I've been thinking a lot about protest, thinking a lot about what it means to have all of these representational exercises that show that we're fed up and that we're not gonna take it, but then what does it mean if those don't actually hold any weight or hold much weight? If the cabinet keeps getting confirmed, if the policies keep getting advanced, then the courts

can say that this ban is unlawful, and Trump can say, "I'm gonna do it anyway, and I'm gonna fire the attorney general [Sally Yates]."

DE KOSNIK. Or individual airports can just choose to defy the [executive] order also. [On January 29, 2017, the San Francisco International Airport released an official statement announcing that the airport opposed Trump's Muslim ban executive order and supported the people who had come to the airport in droves to protest the ban (Saleem 2017)].

RA. Right, right. It's interesting to watch all of this play out in real time. And I've been seeing a lot of thought on Twitter too. Online [people are saying], "Obama was lying when he said presidents can't do what they wanted." Or maybe he didn't want to break the law, which is what Trump is doing. Or maybe he was more bound to the Constitution than our current administration is. It's interesting for me to just watch people try to make sense of Trump and then map Trump's trajectory onto Obama and what a lot of people perceive as his [Obama's] lack of ambition or this radical, on the other end of the spectrum, agenda. And we are seeing the Constitution being violated and ignored. And how we shouldn't normalize that or accept that's the way our government is supposed to run.

JOHNSON. We're in this moment of acceleration. That's a part of what prompts people to get out [protesting] again. I think that if this happened slowly over four years, people would have been resigned to it. Like, "Ugh, of course." To see this kind of counterpoint [happening now] is causing people who initially supported what was happening to take a step back—people who were moderate. Of course, there's people like the [Steve] Bannons. But I think we started to see it immediately after the election, that people were like, "Oh, health care. Now I kind of regret my vote." I think *that* part, *that* demographic is going to start to get more liberal.

DE KOSNIK. I would love that. I admit that I'm a little dubious about that. There is a Tumblr that's called "Trumpgrets,"[1] but you know, I wish that were more of that conversation today, or tomorrow.

JOHNSON. There were a couple things around the time the executive order for the [Muslim] ban came out. There were people who were like, "I voted for Trump but now my husband, who

works for the military, is stuck." I think that as it starts to actually affect that demographic more, we'll see.

DE KOSNIK. I love that prediction.

The Optics of the Resistance and of the Trump Administration

KAILY HEITZ. I think there's definitely something about optics, about the visuality of protesters, but also this weird hyperpublic persona that Trump has while also being very secretive. Like, he's all over Twitter, but you can see how surveillance is happening and from a very tight group of powerful people. They see what's happening, and they see that there's an immediate pushback to their actions. So it's like we can see how the optics are working on social media, at least at the governmental power level. There's a sort of panopticon that's happening.

DE KOSNIK. Was I correct in seeing [then White House press secretary] Sean Spicer hold up printouts of tweets that Trump had issues with? I mean, is that what the press secretary's role is today? Is it printing out Twitter? I think there are some optics that if this becomes normalized we should remember when these things started to happen. And remember how inappropriate and childish a lot of the behavior seems to be without a regard for appearing more presidential or seeming more mature or above it. There's this kind of willingness to engage at this very middle school playground level with almost anybody. I'm thinking about the "context collapse" on Twitter that Alice Marwick and danah boyd [2011] talk about, where you can just tweet at a celebrity and they retweet you, or they tweet back at you. And you shouldn't share that same social space with a person of that status, but suddenly you do. It's like, "Oh, now the president can retweet or fight with almost anyone in the country—anyone in the world—whose tweet he picks up on and has some issue with." So there's something about the paradox of the optics where, on the one hand, it's being very public and really wanting to be out there and way too much, too. Like, not just in a way that's overly accessible and welcoming but overly engaged and overly immersed. There's something strange about Trump's Twitter behavior, that's more—to reinforce Yaira's point about other kinds of dictatorship—more like a dictator would be, or how a king would behave. I think

about regimes like the ancien régime in France or something. Trump's Twitter behavior seems more like that kind of imperial power, which can be really capricious. A king can be capricious, but a president is not supposed to have those same triggers.

How Can White Women Be Allies?

JULIANA FRIEND. Something that myself and many others are thinking about is how, as a white woman, I can best be an ally at face-to-face protests given two things. One, that you don't want to dominate the space visually or physically. Two, that in particular events with particular aims, the presence of white people might matter a lot to the optics and impact of an event, by making it impossible for those in power to claim that opposition is only coming from those with marked subject positions. So perhaps the decision of how to participate is particular to the context. And then there is the question of history. I think the Anti-Milo Toolkit addressed this really well.[2] The toolkit teaches that there is a risk of reinforcing flippant, unqualified praise for free speech. Like, when Milo calls himself a free speech fundamentalist, he obscures the history through which free speech has been made accessible for some people and not others. So how does someone from a less marked subject position play a positive role in protests in the moment, in the now, in a way that draws attention to that history rather than further effacing it?

DE KOSNIK. Yeah, and of course you're talking about today on this campus, as Yiannopoulos is speaking tonight, and we know that the protest is scheduled at 6:15 PM today, so when you say "free speech in the now," you mean a few hours from now.

"Can He Do That?": The Balance of Power under Question

MIYOKO CONLEY. I'm going back to the idea of the acceleration that is happening. I just keep thinking about how I feel the acceleration, and the moves that the Trump administration is pulling with its backlash against protesters, shows how much of our governmental system is reliant on decorum. And a sense of people following rules that are not actually laws. And then the

fact that Trump and his team are not following those rules feels like mass confusion. I also feel within myself and other people a lack of education in asking, "Can he do that?" I start thinking to myself, "Can he do that? Is this unlawful? Do we have any kind of safeguarding to prevent someone in the White House from doing this, or were we just relying on him not doing it, because that would be the sensible thing to do and the nonracist, not hateful thing to do?" But when someone kind of comes up with hateful actions and just starts pumping them out, really, really quickly, we start to think, "Well, what type of lawful recourse do we have?"

DE KOSNIK. The social drama that just played out with Yates and Trump does seem to be about balance of power and rule of law and the fact that there are parts of the federal government that are partitioned off from the presidency on purpose. The A.G. [attorney general] is supposed to interpret the law and the president is not supposed to influence the A.G.'s interpretation of the law. So I think to Paige's point about the acceleration, one thing that the protests seemed to effectuate was Sally Yates's desire to perform, because she understood that there was a kind of a vote that happened with the airport protests. And so people were wondering, Who is going to represent that voice of the people, that will of the people? And the A.G. decided that she should be it. She decided she should be the actor on the national stage that expresses the will of the people in a dramatic way as that dramatis personae, and she expressed it. And then, as you were saying, Paige, it did not take but a few hours for the executive branch to respond with a big fat "No." Yates is standing up for the rule of law, for the balance of power, and the executive says, "No, that's not going to happen. I don't respect that." Then, after that, you *knew* this administration was not going to respect the balance of power. And I think that's pretty dramatic, as far as Victor Turner's [1980] four-stage process of social drama goes, where first is breach and then crisis.

This is a major crisis, because, to Miyoko's point, it does throw the whole underpinning of checks and balances into question, as far as people even within the Republican establishment taking sides. I do think that the message is very clear to them. And the message was that, "If you take sides, that will

be noted." There won't be this safe zone of, "Oh, I'm going to respectfully disagree and I'm going to maintain my power base." What it looks like the message was today [with the firing of acting A.G. Yates]—we can't tell exactly how this is going to play out even three hours from now—but today, it looks like the message was "If you disagree with this administration, you will not hold on to your power base. Your power will diminish in some way, large or small."

LYNDSEY OGLE. What's so crazy, too, is that when that happened, when they started circulating some of the footage from Yates's Senate confirmation hearing, and then it's Sessions that's asking her, "If you get an unconstitutional mandate from the president, are you prepared to be in opposition?" And that's [her exchange with Sessions, in which Yates stated that she would oppose an unconstitutional mandate from the president] part of what got her confirmed. [Sessions was approved to replace Yates as attorney general on the morning of this meeting.] It's just the . . .

DE KOSNIK. The irony, the dramatic irony of it all . . .

OGLE. Shonda couldn't write this. [*laughter*]

DE KOSNIK. Shonda Rhimes? Yeah.

OGLE. I'm also thinking about [journalist] Sarah Kendzior. She's been, since the election started, clocking the ways that fascist undertones were there, since the beginning, in the rhetoric that was around Trump's campaign. And one of the things that she tweeted out really early, and repeated a couple of times, is the importance of noting, at the beginning of a fascistic regime, all the small things that seem really small, but all are out of the norm—to note them, to keep a record of them. That sort of recordkeeping is going to be more and more important as we move forward.

The Muslim Ban and Black Muslims

RA. I've been thinking about the conversations around the Muslim ban and rumors that are circulating, and I've been asking Black Muslim folks that I'm in community with, and a lot of them were like, "They're [the government] not concerned with us." They're not going to go to the Philly mosque and protest or "register" all of them. [There was speculation in early 2017 that

a mandatory Muslim registry might be created in the United States.] That's not a concern for them, thinking about Black immigrants in this current discourse around immigration. But still, I've heard conversations that are grateful that Black immigrants [seem] to have a little longer to figure out their shit because they're not the ones being targeted right now, in this moment. It's coming, but they have a moment. I guess I'm trying to reckon with utilizing erasure as a tactic. That's a lot to work through. But working to utilize the blind spots in this administration, or maybe creating some, to recognize that there are some things that this administration doesn't care about the same way. I think that there are ways that some folks, some "issues" are considered below white people's attention, and how might we make that blind spot politically advantageous.

DE KOSNIK. Yeah. Communities that are not so visible or "common," as Fred Moten says [in the book that Moten coauthored with Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (2013)]. There's a collective called the Raqs Media Collective [2010] that has written about "seepage." There's a critical legal studies scholar called Lawrence Liang [2005] who thinks of seepage as something that happens when the moment and the situation is opportune. Seepage takes advantage of the infrastructure not right up front on the face of the building. It's something that happens in the cracks of the building, and it can alter the composition of the material so that enough seepage can bring that building down. So I've been thinking about that opportunism and that kind of fast but small action. What can escape, and what can remain hidden in plain sight? What are those tactics right now?

The Resistance Needs to Be Anticapitalist

OGLE. I think that in collaboration with that we've got to talk about capitalism. Part of me feels like until we have a full-scale internal strike, we're just nothing. You know, because that's what they care about. If you cut their money off at the knees, that's really the only type of opposition that has been tried in the small scale in the United States, North America, and was quickly crushed time and time again. But for me that felt like the only type of opposition that there's no playbook for how power

can co-opt that yet. I think that we're talking about protest as a strategy, but that gets re-enfolded back into power. I think about who's now being inducted into the Hall of Fame, and who's getting MacArthur grants, and there are ways in which I think we all know that that has also been fully co-opted by capitalism and power. So for me it feels like the last thing left, and also the thing that's the most possible here . . .

DE KOSNIK. Is a labor movement.

OGLE. Is a labor movement.

DE KOSNIK. Yeah, is a general strike. I mean, in a way, neoliberal capital already did the work of collapsing the labor movement in this country over decades. But I have heard the term "general strike" being thrown around recently. For the first time in my lifetime, I'm hearing calls for that in the United States.

And I'm also seeing some analysis of this moment as a corporate takeover. The extraction industries and the deregulated financial industries that depend on their continual exploitation of the American populace, at this point, those parts of society are done working through middlemen. They're done trying to get the "right people" elected, and they've basically effectuated a takeover of power directly and explicitly, because they don't want to deal with the political system anymore. They would rather just reconfigure the political system to be what they need it to be.

One of the parts of hopefulness is some of those people making that argument are basically saying that corporate America is running scared. We are near the end of the extraction of fossil fuels. I mean, we're not at the total end of that, but as fossil fuel becomes more scarce as a resource, the financial industry is starting to get some blowback from that rampant extraction of value.

The Need for a New Kind of Undergraduate Education

DE KOSNIK. I think there's a broader need for education—of course I think this, because I'm an educator—but to Ra's point . . . people don't understand that these things are all implicated in each other. How a Black rights movement is a Muslim rights movement not just because there are Black Muslims but because it's a human rights movement. And that

a white women's march is a movement for all women's rights. There's always been an understanding in this country of the relatedness of these movements in this country, and some of that is about needing intersectional discourse and not having a common vocabulary. But a lot of it—how these movements have been thought of as separate—is how capitalism has operated, keeping neighborhoods separate, keeping kids segregated in schools and housing, and people literally remaining ignorant of each other's struggles. And I feel like we are really paying the price for a whole century of different groups striving for equality in this country but not really learning the major lesson of the need for unity of the struggle, and how they have been divided from each other, mostly by racist capitalism.

I think there's so much more critique to do, more education to do, and yet we don't have time to put together, to reconfigure undergraduate education so it really teaches people, at eighteen, the lessons they need to be prepared to fight this. We don't have time to get people ready. There's ways we need to act right now and tonight and tomorrow.

"How Many Years Have [Racists] Felt Oppressed?"

RA. I'm curious as to all these young folks and people [we] go to school with, because they invited this man [Milo Yiannopoulos] here, if they have had all this racism bubbling under the surface of their lives. How many years have they felt oppressed by their inability to say it [racist speech]? Or if something about this moment empowers them to claim this racism, or this conservatism, in a public way. Because it is troubling for me to accept that these leaders of the Berkeley Republicans—and I've had run-ins with people from *Breitbart* too—and their cries for free speech are supported by institutions, because they [have] more fiscal and social privilege than the people that they're endangering. And I'm really interested to know, had they always known that they wanted to say these things out loud and couldn't? Or is the affirmation from whatever little frustrations they might be having as white individuals? This growing multicultural world has given them a new textbook for ways for dealing with their frustration, to yell and attack rather than sitting in it and processing in a more healthy way.

HEITZ. Yeah, and I think how much of that is space for a movement for propaganda. Like, before the Japanese internment [during World War II, more than 110,000 Japanese Americans were interned in camps throughout the United States], we had a wave of anti-Japanese sentiment. People posting these flyers saying, "Japs go home." And we have the same sort of thing, but it's not flyers. It's happening online.

OGLE. I will say, having seen the entire election cycle in Missouri, that there's a lot of rhetoric about the reason why Trump won. What the left is missing. What's coming from the right, right now, is, "Your protests are ridiculous, you're missing the point. You have ignored [the] middle." I've been really trying to understand, I've been trying to identify the rationale for agreement, for not only electing Trump, but also these policies he's making. Because in my own mind, and when I have conversations with various liberals, there's a fine community in the Midwest, but . . . they cannot dissociate those ideas from racism.

It's a huge portion of the population, so your option is to let a huge portion of the population that has this racist undercurrent just never able to voice [that racism] or whatever, or something else is going on. Unfortunately, I have not identified this something else that's going on, but that's part of my dissertation work.

The Usefulness of the Middle American Trump Voter

OGLE. But I will say to these stories about ignoring Middle America, about the rest of America ignoring their needs, or the needs of the lower-middle class: that if you read these articles, they're not being written by those constituents. They're being written by the wealthy or the upper- or upper-middle-class conservatives.

DE KOSNIK. So that group as a construct is convenient . . .

OGLE. I feel like it's a trope. And it's not that it's *not* true. Obviously, there is a lot of shrinking resources and people that feel alienated and feel like they have not been—they're the "deplorables" they have not been recognized. But it's interesting that *that* is the group that this community of wealthy or upper-middle-class conservatives keeps going back to. But they [more economically privileged conservatives] are not particularly interested in doing the work to help solve [the problems facing

the lower-middle or lower class], as much as saying, "You liberals are not looking at this community."

DE KOSNIK. When you put it that way, it makes sense. Because if we think about this as the ascendency of corporatism to the White House, then corporatism can definitely not own its own interests in terms of interests that it's representing and defending. They can't say, "We're here to defend the corporations and the exploitation and the system that we have going on." It has to, instead, say to some reasonable sector of exploited people, whose labor is being extracted, it has to say, "We're here to defend you," to those people. It can't own itself.

OGLE. Then, it just becomes, "I'm sorry." It just becomes a cycle. The reaction, the discourse, that comes from the left is, the left says, "Yeah, you're saying this, but you're not interested in doing anything," and the right's saying, "No, you're not paying attention, you're just . . ." And it's this loop where no one's actually really addressing the needs of these communities.

DE KOSNIK. Right. The community just gets ignored either way.

OGLE. It's interesting even the way that radio in the Midwest—that was rough for me, just listening to the way that people were discussing things leading up to the election. They knew that Trump was going to win, they knew for certain that Trump was going to win. So the shock that a lot of us felt . . .

DE KOSNIK. They didn't feel.

OGLE. They didn't feel.

The Myth of "Vast Swaths of Untrodden Whiteness"

JOHNSON. My family [of African Americans in Alabama] never bought it [that Trump's victory was all about Midwestern economics] for a second, because the jig goes sky-high when you consider that there are Black people in the Midwest. What is this idea that there are vast swaths of untrodden whiteness in the middle of the US that are completely devoid of people of color? If you look at, demographically and economically, who is continually at the bottom rungs in the US? [The majority of nonwhite people in the United States at every class and education level voted for Clinton.] That's why I can never get behind this idea that "it's not about race, it's about economics." Because that is alternative facts. [*laughter*] Because all you have to do is look at this country . . .

DE KOSNIK. All the Black and brown people didn't just move to the edges of the map of the United States.

JOHNSON. Or you just sort of think of this transcript of Trump's speech at the Black History Month breakfast [this morning]. And he's still using this discourse of Blacks in the inner cities. Ben Carson [an African American] being head of HUD [the Department of Housing and Urban Development] is going to fix the inner cities. [Trump said, "We're going to work very hard on the inner city. Ben is going to be doing that big league."] And that's what makes this so infuriating, to see this idea [that Black people only live in urban areas] being taken up by the press over and over again, this type of justification, because it just completely erases the actual on-the-ground reality.

DE KOSNIK. Well, thank you, everybody, so much for participating today. I thought this was really amazing and productive, and I just thank everybody.

On the evening of this Color of New Media meeting, the scheduled lecture by Milo Yiannopoulos on the Berkeley campus was canceled after Black Bloc activists threw Molotov cocktails at, and smashed windows of, campus buildings (Kutner 2017). On February 2, 2017, one day after our meeting and the Yiannopoulos protests and cancellation, President Trump threatened to withdraw federal funding from UC Berkeley in a tweet:

> If U.C. Berkeley does not allow free speech and practices violence on innocent people with a different point of view—NO FEDERAL FUNDS? (@realDonaldTrump, February 2, 2017)

Notes

Participating members of the Color of New Media: Abigail De Kosnik, Paige Johnson, Yaira, Miyoko Conley, Juliana Friend, Ra, Kaily Heitz, Lyndsey Ogle (some names are abbreviations or pseudonyms).

1. Trumpgrets is a website that posts news articles about, and social media posts by, people who voted for Trump and regret their vote: https://trumpgrets.tumblr.com.

2. The Official Anti-Milo (Digital) Toolkit (which can be accessed in its entirety at http://bit.ly/2ha3EpG), was created by a group of UC Berkeley students and alumni just prior to the planned lecture by alt-right spokesperson Milo

Yiannopoulos. Some authors of the toolkit were members of the Color of New Media.

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NINETEEN | The Color of New Media Responds to UC Berkeley's "Free Speech Week"

TRANSCRIBED BY LIDA ZEITLIN WU

EDITED BY ABIGAIL DE KOSNIK AND KEITH P. FELDMAN

The following is an edited transcript of a meeting of the Color of New Media that took place on September 1, 2017. Of the fourteen people who attended that day, eleven are women (six women of color) and three are men (one man of color); several identify as LGBTQ.

In the immediate aftermath of the events of February 1, 2017 (see "The Color of New Media Enters Trumplandia" in this volume), right-wing provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos promised to return to UC Berkeley and stage what he termed "Free Speech Week" at various venues around the campus. Throughout the spring semester, an increasing number of faculty clashed with university administrators over the content of their participation on social media while online harassment of faculty and students of color grew. In April high-profile conservative culture warriors Ann Coulter and David Horowitz were to be featured on campus, though in both instances plans fell through. At the same time, the Berkeley College Republicans (BCR) and the Young America's Foundation (YAF) filed a lawsuit alleging that the university restricted "conservative speech" on the campus, thereby violating the organizations' constitutional rights to free speech, due process, and equal protection. Meanwhile, just before the beginning of classes at the University of Virginia, a "Unite the Right" rally descended on Charlottesville, featuring virulent white nationalist and neo-Nazi rhetoric, allegedly to protest the possible removal

of a statue of the Confederate general Robert E. Lee. They were greeted by an organized counterprotest that included the presence of a growing antifascist movement. Clashes resulted in one of the "Unite the Right" participants driving his car into a crowd of people, killing a counterprotester named Heather Heyer. A documentary video reporting on the events by *Vice News* soon went viral while President Trump persistently drew moral equivalences between those protesting to keep the statue and those resisting their white supremacist views.

Then UC Berkeley's new chancellor, Carol Christ, dubbed 2017–2018 "Free Speech Year." The first major event was a BCR/YAF–sponsored speech by conservative pundit Ben Shapiro, on September 14, which made headlines for prompting the university to spend an estimated $600 thousand to cover the cost of an expanded police presence while greatly restricting access to campus facilities. The Yiannopoulos event, originally scheduled for September 24–27, was advertised as bringing together luminaries in the alt-right and "alt-lite" universe with Coulter, Horowitz, and Pamela Geller, and was to be headlined by former Trump counselor and *Breitbart* executive Steve Bannon. Thirty-six hours before it was to begin, Free Speech Week ended up being canceled by Yiannopoulos's student group sponsors, the *Berkeley Patriot*, even as the administration promised to spend more than $1 million to provide security for the speakers.

Critiques of Chancellor Christ's Statement on "Free Speech"

ABIGAIL DE KOSNIK. Thanks, everybody, for coming. I'm just going to read pieces of [Chancellor Carol Christ's email regarding "free speech" on the UC Berkeley campus] to kick us off. So this came out on Wednesday, August 23, from our chancellor. [*These are only excerpts from the chancellor's letter.*]:

> "Dear Students, Faculty and Staff: This fall, the issue of free speech will once more engage our community in powerful and complex ways. Events in Charlottesville, with their racism, bigotry, violence and mayhem, make the issue of free speech even more tense. The law is very clear; public institutions like UC Berkeley must permit speakers invited in accordance with campus policies to speak, without discrimination in regard to point of view. The United States has the strongest free speech protections of any liberal democracy; the First Amendment protects even speech that most of us would find hateful, abhorrent and odious, and the courts have

consistently upheld these protections. But the most powerful argument for free speech is not one of legal constraint—that we're required to allow it—but of value. The public expression of many sharply divergent points of view is fundamental both to our democracy and to our mission as a university. . . . Once you embark on the path to censorship, you make your own speech vulnerable to it. . . . Some constitutionally protected speech attacks the very identity of particular groups of individuals in ways that are deeply hurtful. However, the right response is not the heckler's veto, or what some call platform denial. Call toxic speech out for what it is, don't shout it down, for in shouting it down, you collude in the narrative that universities are not open to all speech. Respond to hate speech with more speech."

So that's a message from our chancellor. As you know, we have a number of alt-right speakers coming to campus in the near future, including Milo Yiannopoulos, and I also just wanted to say, just to give this context, that Penn State University and four other colleges have now refused to allow the white nationalist Richard Spencer to speak on their campuses. Here are the five universities that have refused to let Spencer speak on their campuses: Penn State University, the University of Florida, Michigan State, and Louisiana State, and Texas A&M canceled an event that was already scheduled for September 11. Those are public universities. So let's hear some thoughts about our chancellor's position, about what's going to happen on this campus this year, and if people want to also reflect on what happened last year with Milo's planned visit and Ann Coulter's visit, that would also be welcome.

SHERRY. The line that really stands out to me is "Call toxic speech out for what it is, don't shout it down, for in shouting it down, you collude in the narrative that universities are not open to all speech." I am troubled by a directive coming from the chancellor, an official, [about] how folks are to respond in a space. It's one thing to offer the space—that's already a conversation. But then to also give a directive in how to respond. . . . And in the next line, it says "respond to hate speech with more speech." So shouting is not speech? Then the voices of those shouting, or the voices of those who would use loud noise, are being rendered as ineffective, invisible, not speech.

RA. As someone who has studied higher education and the changing demographics of this campus, I personally find it really concerning as to what it means to protect those who are intending to use their voices as an act of violence against others and who those others are. As individuals who have been systematically erased from our campus community, I think we're essentially doubling down on the elitism of the UC and, specifically, of where our country's tides are coming in.

DE KOSNIK. Could you say a little more about that—what we're doubling down on and how the tide is turning?

RA. Yeah, absolutely. So the idea of simultaneously erasing communities of color from our campuses, while also protecting others who are attempting to, through their speech, dehumanize those exact communities.

DE KOSNIK. And you're referring to campus policies about admissions that have involved over time in such a way? [In the mid-1990s, after California banned affirmative action in college admissions, enrollments of Black and Latino students immediately dropped by about half, to 4 percent and 9 percent of the entering class, respectively. While there has been an increase in Latino enrollments over the past twenty years (to 15 percent in 2015), enrollment of African American students has continued to drop (to 2 percent in 2015).]

RA. This context is necessary for our conversation, because it's kind of difficult to call out toxic speech if you're not even on campus. If your community is not on campus, or if you were already engaging in practices of survival to maintain your position on campus, plus the realities of stereotype threat . . . I think all these things come into the conversation that hinders communities from "standing up" for ourselves in the face of hate speech. And as for the changing tide in the country, I'm referring to Forty-Five's [President Trump is the forty-fifth president of the United States] potential desire get rid of DACA. [President Barack Obama signed an executive action in 2012, called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, which allowed people who had entered the United States as children without documentation prior to 2007 to obtain work permits that were renewable every two years. About 800 thousand people have received work permits through DACA. At the beginning of September 2017, the Trump administration announced the

repeal of the program. As of August 2018, the status and future of DACA remained unclear.] We're literally putting college students at risk of their bodies being criminalized while also simultaneously attempting to get an education. So I think there are a lot of things happening in the context of our country that really add to my disheartened feelings about Christ's message, which is again, in my opinion, a doubling down on protecting those who actually need to be called out.

MARCELO GARZO MONTALVO. Can I also say that [Christ's message] really embodies the neoliberal university in particular? It embodies the limits of neoliberal politics, when neoliberalism tries to erase power dynamics that are historically embedded, and operates in this "moral high ground" that is very condescending in terms of how it resonates with certain students—specifically, students of color and activist students who are directly resisting forces that are seeking to enact violence. It resonates more with Trump's "there's two sides of the situation," you know? Which is how she's framing it. This is what neoliberalism actually does: it proposes this alternative to conservatism and ends up being kind of the mirror image of it, or two sides of the same coin. And of course it just relies on so much privilege, and the erasure or normalizing of that privilege, and is very much [from] that "chancellor position" of speaking down to these masses and trying to pacify them.

JOY. If I could build on that, that was one thing that struck me from the email: a kind of false equivalence, this idea that it's two extremes and we ought to allow both of them to engage in discourse, that there's a fundamental value in allowing two different equivalent sides. But you can't really say there's an equivalence between white supremacist rhetoric that logically ends in genocide and people who are trying to fight back against that. There's no equivalence to be made.

RA. [Christ's] message also seems willfully naïve about the way these acts of "free speech" literally create unsafe and violent situations for students who have to make life out of these campuses. Or just folks who can't just come for the weekend without being counterprotested. There's a way in which every speaker, every event, every rally, makes this less of a suitable learning environment for folks whom this white supremacist rhetoric is actually and abhorrently against. And I don't un-

derstand how the fact that "free speech," even if it's just words, leads to and attracts violence in a way that has really material outcomes, is lost on our environment.

DE KOSNIK. I'll just represent quickly Christ's thinking as it's been translated to me by the chair of my department. Some of the thinking that Christ has shared with the chairs is: "We'll put a lot of money towards security. We'll have these people come and lock it down in their space where they speak, and nobody gets hurt, and then we can't say that we refused them. Then they have to be quiet after that, because"—and maybe I'm adding in some of my own reading here too—"you let them have their space once, and you lock it down with tons and tons of campus security, more than we had last year, and then they can't ever say again that they didn't have that space for that time." So that's one way to look at the chancellor's approach.

And I also just wanted to say that every single one of the campuses that has refused [Richard] Spencer has done so on the grounds of [the threat of] violence. So I do want to bring violence into the conversation.

A Militarized Police Force on the UC Berkeley Campus

JOY. Just to respond, let's also name what violence is, in that we're not actually talking about security. We're talking about a militarized police force that is occupying our campus. That *is* an act of violence to many bodies, myself included. So the idea that Christ is using a militarized police force to benefit us just does not hold up with my experience or the experiences of the students I've come in contact with.

DE KOSNIK. Yeah. That kind of violence that you just named is more what Ra was talking about, too, which is that it's about our students' spaces being disrupted. It's about our students' lives and the lives of the people who dwell here, who study here, who are using this space in ways that they feel are the most constructive for them at this time in their lives. That a space like that should be disrupted by the routine appearance and reappearance of a militarized police force is a kind of violence that is guaranteed to happen.

SPARKLE. I'm thinking about the type of campus climate that is being created. It doesn't just create an unsafe environment for

students, but also for workers, which is one of the reasons why we used the tactic of filing grievances last year [when Milo Yiannopoulos was scheduled to come to campus (see "The Color of New Media Enters Trumplandia" in this volume)], to say that it was a violation of our contract to have—

DE KOSNIK. Of your union contract. [Academic Student Employees belong to the UAW Student-Workers Union Local 2865.]

SPARKLE. Yeah, of our student workers' contract—the health and safety article. [We argued that it was a violation of our contract] to have people who are creating an unsafe and violent environment on campus and to have a militarized police presence on campus, which actively resulted in violence. People who were walking across campus were criminalized. I think that unpacking the type of violence that Christ is referencing in her email might be important, because we're using different definitions of violence. The violence that she's saying is intolerable in her email is destruction of property. So that's really dehumanizing, to hold up that as the pinnacle of what kind of violence is unacceptable, when Milo [Yiannopoulos] is doxxing undocumented students and trans students actively and inciting people to do these people harm. [In the lead-up to Free Speech Week, Yiannopoulos publicly posted photos and identifying information of two student senators, including one transgender woman and one Muslim woman, who reported receiving widespread slurs, vulgarities, and death threats. Yiannopoulos encouraged similar forms of harassment during events he held at the University of Wisconsin and the University of Washington.]

"Freedom" as Protection of Property

KAILY HEITZ. I was just thinking about the ways that the word "freedom" has been recognized, and this constant callback to constitutional rights—that this country is built on the semblance of liberty and freedom, but those have always been used against Black people and always to protect whiteness and property, as you were saying. That also makes me think of all the other related incidents that we've been talking about: police violence against Black communities, Black Lives Matter, and the continuation of taking away some of those rights that we're

struggling for. Really realizing that sense of complete freedom for everyone through the ratification of some things like permitted action—the continuous call to [reinforce that] "We have the freedom to do XYZ," but not recognizing how that actually takes freedom away from the majority of people.

PAIGE JOHNSON. I was reading [Christ's] letter again, and I was really taken aback by one phrase, which was "If you choose to protest, do so peacefully. That is your right, and we will defend it with vigor." So this idea that the only response to this kind of presence on campus is a peaceful protest, this idea that free speech is consequence-free speech.

Again, if we go back to this rhetoric of freedom and protest as an essential part of the founding principles of this country, as our constitutional rights to free speech, well, those constitutional rights were founded in violence. That speech wasn't peaceful speech, and those protests weren't peaceful protests. So this idea that, as Sparkle noted and what I immediately picked up on, it's about protecting the property of the university. It's about the fact that windows were smashed last [academic] year [at the February 1 protests against Yiannopoulos's scheduled lecture]—those were the things that were subsequently brought up in the [administration's] letters to the campus community after last year's events, that are being brought up again, and heralded again, as a thing that *cannot* happen. It's a thing that spread in the news, right? This "violence" of the UC Berkeley students and paid protesters and antifa that show up [was the story of the February 1 protests as reported by many news outlets]. So, again, you see the ways in which the actual safety of our student community is nowhere within this document.

Whether we're using various definitions of violence or bodily harm or safety, in light of the fact that we actively had students and faculty doxxed last year [for authoring the Official Anti-Milo (Digital) Toolkit, which can be accessed in its entirety at http://bit.ly/2ha3EpG] who are still dealing with those repercussions, the concern that underlies this statement [to] "the community" is the protection of the university's property. I just feel like that if that [the safety of property] is heralded above the safety and concerns of the students, then, I mean, with all due respect, fuck it [*laughter*]. That should not be the

concern of a public university that in many ways, as we've already noted, does not reflect "the public" of this area or state. You can go back to the diversity reports that were put out in 2013, the subsequent reports from 2015—you can see who is at risk, who is the minority on this campus, whether ideologically or physically, and it's not the windows. It's not the new Amazon student center. [The newly remodeled MLK Student Union includes Amazon@ASUC Student Union, a hub for receiving and returning packages, situated at the primary entrance to the campus. During the February 1 protests, several of its windows incurred damaged.]

JOY. I think that's absolutely right, and I see it as not only about protecting property but about protecting the very apolitical idea of diversity and multiculturalism that completely takes out of account the structural things that an actual view towards abolishing white supremacy, or social justice, or however you want to think about it, would require us to address. When Christ talks about us going down a path of censorship, it implies that we're already in an ideal liberal society instead of the actual society we really live in.

The Free Speech Movement Being Invoked to Protect Racist Hate Speech

ANONYMOUS 2. A couple thoughts that I'm having: one, the way that free speech gets invoked, and specifically the Free Speech Movement. [The Free Speech movement was led by students in the early 1960s at UC Berkeley. It culminated in December 1964 with a series of large-scale actions in Sproul Plaza, that resulted in Berkeley's Academic Senate agreeing to expand the contours of permissible political discourse for members of the Berkeley community. Its legacy is routinely hailed on the campus, including by the chancellor in her letter, even as the substance of that legacy is continually debated.] To me it's really interesting and kind of goes to the call for peaceful protest [mentioned earlier]. With the Free Speech Movement, part of what was at stake was accessing public space in order to advocate for civil disobedience, to contest racist discriminatory policies in the Bay Area. So students were accessing the platform of the campus in order to advocate for civil disobedience, to

contest white supremacy. And that was peaceful protest, and that had enormous impact. So I think that what's lost today is our own history of what was at stake in the Free Speech Movement, as well as the fact that the connections between here [this time] and the Free Speech Movement gets invoked to protect the right of hate speech. I think that history is really, really important: what was at stake there [for the Free Speech Movement] in accessing the platform of Sproul Plaza in order to contest and take action and organize acts of civil disobedience against white supremacy?

How Administration and Police Use New Media Platforms

ANONYMOUS 2: And then the platform question is also very interesting to me because—and maybe it kind of goes to the new media [focus of the Color of New Media] as well—we get these emails from the administration. What about the platform of the emails themselves? How many people heard about "No Marxism" or whatever they called themselves? We heard about [it] precisely because the chancellor sent out an email explaining that this thing called "No Marxism" was going on. [A "No to Marxism" rally was slated to take place in downtown Berkeley on August 27, 2017, although the city denied the organizers permits and the event never took place.] What kind of process went into the construction of that email, which gives us a narrative about what's happening on this campus? Who has access to that? Who can send an email to the entire campus and use that platform to frame these things? To me that's also an issue.

I don't know if everybody's on this Nixle thing or whatever it's called. [Nixle is a messaging service used by the UC Berkeley Police Department [UCPD, the campus police] to send alerts to the campus community about matters of public safety.] So UCPD says, "Don't go to a protest," and a couple of days later, the chancellor sends out another message saying, "I want to applaud everybody" [for a peaceful protest]. . . . There are these mixed messages.

What are the counter-platforms? How do we create another stage or platform? Because clearly that's a pretty big platform, to be able to send an email out like that [to the entire campus community].

Intersections of Physical Space and Digital Space at and through UC Berkeley

DE KOSNIK. Thank you so much for getting to the intersection of the stage of Sproul Plaza and the platform of email and the digital, because we do have to talk about that. That is one of our working group's core questions, always, and I just want to go through some of the ways that physical space and digital space have intersected over the past year—have intersected *at* Berkeley and *through* Berkeley.

First of all, I would like to propose that this rising movement of white nationalism has been largely formulated online. The trolls began trolling online first, and something like Charlottesville is something that results from a lot of digitally networked activity and communication between those people. So now *we* are—Berkeley is—being trolled. The trolling takes place in the physical space as well as online, and those cannot be completely disconnected. It's not like [we can dismiss online hate speech as] "Oh, that's just trolling." We can't talk about it with this dismissive lens anymore, because now we see how trolling can happen in so many spaces, virtual and actual.

The other thing I wanted to bring up is the order of events: An online provocateur, Milo Yiannopoulos, who doxxes trans people and who trolled [people of color online]—he called Leslie Jones, an African American actress, out for days, to the point that Twitter banned him [in July 2016], and Twitter hardly bans anybody. That person [Yiannopoulos] became a prospective physical guest speaker on this campus, which then caused a lot of other digital things to happen and caused physical things to happen, and [these events] incited a tweet from our president threatening to take away the federal funding of this campus. So there's this way in which the feedback between the digital space and the physical space has been going on for a while now on this campus, where an online provocateur rallies a group of online trolls to swarm people of color and trans people online. And he gets to be a highly paid speaker for that, and that results in physical demonstrations and manifestations that lead to some property being broken and people being arrested, and that leads to our president threatening us online.

And then there's more organization [in response to the president] in online space.

I also want to recognize that some members here put together the Anti-Milo Digital Toolkit, which was an online resource that helped many people on this campus and other campuses mobilize against alt-right speakers coming to lecture at their campuses. Some of those authors, including our students and former students, were named on *Breitbart*, a prominent online periodical that is for the alt-right audience, and as a result of that, we at this university had to take those students' information off of *our* web pages, because we didn't want them to be even more vulnerable to online predation. So those are just a few ways in which all of these different ways of networking, mobilizing, and activating large groups have intersected just at Berkeley. And I think the Free Speech Movement is the reason that Berkeley has been a site of so much activity and trolling. It makes us a target, and we become *Reddit* [*laughter*]: that space where people come to troll and hate and perform that identity out in the public. Sproul Plaza becomes that [type of] website, you know?

I want to hear if people have more to say about that intersection between virtual and actual spaces that has been happening for the last year now, in a way that I haven't seen recognized in the chancellor's email, for instance. I think that people who don't talk about that intersection of the internet as a space of politicization and physical spaces of politicization—I think people who miss that are not really seeing what's happening right now.

JOY. So this hasn't necessarily been publicized on campus, but for the last several years, our residence halls have been targeted by hackers into our [networked] printer systems, printing racist and hateful and violent flyers across our campus. This is something that has happened across college campuses in the last several years. It's something that's primarily been held within higher ed conversations of how we deal with it. But, yeah, our students have been targeted repeatedly.

DE KOSNIK. Thank you for bringing up that example. I didn't know about that.

The Narrative of Violence at Berkeley

SHERRY. When you talk about public space and the platform for performance being Sproul Plaza . . . Well, there's this thing where you say, "At Berkeley . . . ," and I just wanted to broaden that to think about the city of Berkeley too. As someone who is part of community organizations here in the city, the other site for performance this past weekend was Civic Center Plaza and MLK [Martin Luther King Jr.] Park, ironically, with all the alt-right folks blocking there. [These were the events of August 27, 2017, in which several thousand participants in the Bay Area Rally Against Hate converged in downtown Berkeley, along with several dozen right-wing protesters.] What are we talking about when we think about the virtual, or what becomes public on a broader scale?

Because there is this attention around the world: if you look up the hashtag #Berkeley or #BerkeleyProtest or #NoHateInTheBay, everyone's looking at that to see what's gonna happen this weekend before they go to San Francisco. There are several narratives happening at the same time, right? There's what you've seen on CNN and Fox News, which are looking for the narrative of violence that's happening. I know firsthand, because several of us were involved this past Sunday with our signs, "No Hate in the Bay," and our kids and families were out there, and there were folks singing and chanting peacefully. And that would not make the national news. That [story] would not be picked up by any mainstream networks.

There is this interesting split between the real and the virtual, where that [the virtual] does become what we see made mainstream. I know that was probably the same thing that was happening in the sixties with the Free Speech Movement, but to be living it out and feeling this sense of, "Hey! Why is that becoming the story, when there are a whole bunch of other stories that are happening?" I think that's where those of us at Berkeley, in Berkeley, and around Berkeley have a duty to tell our stories of what the counternarratives are against this dominant narrative, which is very much aligned with Forty-Five's way of looking at "many sides." No! There were folks of color aligned with white folks and queer folks [at the Berkeley

Civic Center Plaza and MLK Park protests]. . . . Everybody was coming together and singing and letting folks know that this [neo-Nazis and white supremacists marching] was not going to fly in Berkeley.

STEFFEN MOESTRUP. I just want to pick up on [this topic of] news coverage [of recent protests in the city of Berkeley] and also to what extent it spreads to elsewhere on our planet. Being an outsider and also coming from another place [Denmark], I've been tracking the coverage of UC Berkeley a bit. And it's about the expectation of violence to happen or conflict to happen. And then the reaction when the rallies were rather peaceful was more like relief that it did *not* happen. So that doesn't really counter the fact that it [news coverage of Berkeley] always revolves around this tension and relief and distances it [a Berkeley event] from what it's about. And it becomes more about the form and output of the event, or this relief after the event, and not really the substance of the event. Those are the reactions I see when I look at my own country's coverage of this place.

Possibilities for Counternarratives and New Performances

HEITZ. Yeah, [there are questions about] what is real and what is the narrative we're trying to keep? Because it seems like even though Berkeley is an institution that's physical, tangible, real, it's still very much an institution that is being created. And so if we're in the process of imagining something new, which I feel we all are by just being together at this moment, there's something powerful about media, and the ability to create one narrative, and [our ability to] imagine something that's alternate to the dominant narrative. I wonder about the effectiveness of that, like how much those hashtags get out in the world and how many people actually see them? But [those hashtags offer] an opportunity for people to either confront what's happening and say, "This is the story that I want to tell about it," or create something else.

There's something about visibility at Berkeley, too, that I want to bring attention to, that this is a campus where this stuff has physically happened, and what would it mean if we actually *did* say no to these folks and *didn't* allow for this type of visual

representation of Berkeley? [But] the fact that we're allowing them to come in is vital for types of narratives that have the potential to be really transformative.

TONIKA. I find what you're saying very exciting. I mean, that's part of the reason that I think this space is so important. The analysis and understanding of where the pressure points are, and where the contradictions that create this problem are, are important, but to also be looking at that for strategies for imagining something else that could be done through new media or the intersection between new media and—what did we say, real world performance?

DE KOSNIK. Physical space [performance]?

TONIKA. Physical space performance. As we know not to expect from this state a certain level of protection, we know not to expect from entities that are dependent on this state for their sense of self [such as universities] a certain level of protection. That's clear. But if we depend on something else—like you're saying, there's an invitation to ask, "What *is* it that we actually depend on?" I think we're dealing with a scenario in which . . . You can't look for Mother, you know? You can't. It's hard, and it's painful to be like, "It's your [the university's] place to care for us, but you don't know how to do it for *us*. And how would you? Because there's no history, as [Anonymous 2] was saying, of you knowing how to do that."

What I struggle with as a person from outside, and what I get excited about as a person from outside, is that it's confusing to know what the history of free speech is and to come here and be like, "Yeah! Berkeley!" And then being like, "What?" You know, trying to unpack that [the Free Speech Movement] means [understanding what they did]: "Oh, so they occupied this thing [UC Berkeley]! They occupied it virtually, and in space, and they're continuing to occupy it [because their movement continues to be invoked in the present day]. Explain the strategy for that occupation!" Which leaves us with the opportunity to sort of use . . . I don't want to say "master's tools." [Queer Caribbean American feminist Audre Lorde famously argued that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."] But we can ask, "What does the current moment open up for us if the challenge really is in the imagination?" And I get really excited about a space like this, because

this is my performance studies training asking, "Where can we play?" And I don't mean to use play in a way that reduces the importance or the potential of what happens, but also like [*clapping*], "Where can we move? Where can we dodge and swing and swoop and hide?" You know? So that's what I get excited about, and I think new media creates new ways to move, to respond in these slick kinds of [ways], "Oh, you want nonviolence? Okay."

Whose University Is It?

DE KOSNIK. I think it's clear to us who live here and work here that we're being interpellated into a national social drama that the people in this room did not call forward. So we're being cast as the resistance in a conflict that is expected to turn violent. That's our role in this, except we didn't enter the ring. We didn't say, "Great! It's on! Let's fight!" It's interesting how much I've been thinking about the words "homeland security" or "homeland defense," and thinking about Berkeley as a homeland that we now have to defend because it's being invaded by certain things: by certain people, ideas. It feels in a way like we're being called to arms without having deliberately or explicitly asked to engage in combat. So combat is sort of forced upon us in some way, and even when it doesn't happen, and even when, as Sherry was saying, the whole recent protest that happened just last weekend, was peaceful, it doesn't fit the whole narrative of the social drama. It doesn't even register. It doesn't even become a factor in the overarching narrative, whatever that is, and whoever is authoring that.

JOHNSON. I've been thinking a lot about this question of the virtual and the actual, of Berkeley as a real place but also an imagined place, and then the university's attempt to position itself as the bastion of the public when it suits the university's needs, which has brought me back to the Occupy movements and the protests that were happening back in 2011 and 2012. Now we're in the space of Berkeley, a public university, and as a result of it being a public university, it is beholden to certain standards of public decency and public allowance, right? So we have to allow certain kinds of speech to happen on campus because we are public, but I feel like Berkeley very much thought of itself

as *not* public when it came down to the Occupy protests that were happening on Berkeley's campus. That was my first experience with the militarized police force on this campus, and [their] coming in and very explicitly trying to determine who should be here and who shouldn't be here: Who is a student? And who is an Other?

So at that point, Berkeley stopped belonging to the city of Berkeley, to the Bay Area: Berkeley belonged to the institution of Berkeley. And I think that tension often gets lost. I've been tracking and reading a lot of the [white] supremacist hashtags that pop up around events like this [the upcoming talks by alt-right spokespeople], and how certain images and narratives are spread through those, especially with the recent pivots to digital that all these news outlets are making. So no one's writing substantially about anything anymore; it's all video clips now and how those videos get weaponized and used.

To step outside of it, it's been interesting to see how Berkeley becomes public when it suits the safety concerns of Berkeley, not necessarily the concerns of its student population, its teaching population, its worker population—none of its community that it's beholden to in certain ways. But then also to see how that gets played out in the digital as well, where that nuance and that tension is totally lost. [Online discussion of events at Berkeley is] very much a narrative of "liberal Berkeley and the violence that it manifests against the right," and so on and so forth.

I think, so often, the imagined Berkeley and the narratives that come with that, whether it be the ghosts of the Free Speech Movement, or how it thinks about itself as a leading public institution within this country or within the world, how oftentimes the desires of the actual Berkeley and the desires of the right very much are in alignment, and that gets erased in the digital a lot of the time. It's still very much dependent upon this narrative or idea that Berkeley is the counter—that we are the space of resistance, and I think that presence is here, but, institutionally and officially, that oppositionality doesn't exist. In fact, institutionally and officially, the desires of the university are very much in alignment with those [alt-righters] who are being invited to speak on this campus.

The Threat of Revolution

DE KOSNIK. I do want to say that listening to you made me realize that Berkeley *is* a threat. Not the institution of the University of California at Berkeley, but the people that the institution gathers together on this campus. I mean groups like this room—they *are* a threat. We *are* a threat, and you can see that threat in the amount of repression [*laughter*], in the sheer volume of our voices being shouted down, or our wishes being ignored, or—my favorite—one of our former chancellors telling students to "be civil." [In the midst of Black Lives Matter protests taking place nationally and locally, and in the immediate aftermath of American Indian Studies professor Steven Salaita being notoriously "unhired" from his tenured position at the University of Illinois allegedly over the content of his tweets during the Israeli siege on Gaza, UC Berkeley's then chancellor, Nicholas Dirks, marked the beginning of the fiftieth anniversary of the Free Speech Movement with a campus-wide message arguing that free speech and civility were "two sides of a single coin."] I like how free speech was not the question when our students were protesting against tuition hikes, and rather "civility" became the word of the day.

The sheer volume of enmity directed at exactly the people Berkeley was designed to attract and host—even if Berkeley no longer fulfills that promise or potential in large part—the fact that a group still exists in some space for some period of time all together is a potential problem for a lot of people. There is always the question, "What if that group did get together? What if they did decide to make changes? What if they decided to demand some real alterations in the systems of power?" And I actually think part of the violence narrative is that everybody sort of knows that revolution can be violent. And so when people start to repeat the violence expectation and the violence narrative coming out of Berkeley, it's a repressed suspicion in them that actually there could be a class revolution. There could be a race revolution, a gender revolution. Those things could happen from a place like Berkeley. Because where else would it come from? It would have to come from a place where a lot of people who, in "normal" or "mainstream" society, live

on the edges. Here at the University of California at Berkeley, they live in the middle: we are the university. And so I do think there is a way that the institution aligns with the right, and that number of forces gathered against us tells me something about our power.

SHERRY. Why you gotta give us hope, Gail? [*laughter*]

ANONYMOUS 2. I'm thinking about our campus ecology, and how our campus ecology is the physical manifestation of our history of resistance. I mean, the structure of California Hall has been augmented in order to shut down protest and occupations. The five-hundred-thousand-dollar fence outside of our chancellor's mansion was installed as a result of the Students of Color Conference, the largest student-run conference in the state, which was a system-wide push to showcase how Dirks was a racist. That fence lives on our campus as a physical manifestation: they know the revolution is coming, and they see our bodies as dangerous.

RA. So what do we do? I'm trying to understand—we obviously have all this power, and there's obviously a threat just in the mere existence of folks whose existence and ways of thinking are inconvenient to the powers that be. But then we have this fray of, whatever you want to call them, who seem to have the university by the proverbial balls. And I just feel so thoroughly assaulted by this small group of people. It feels like they have the ability to change the entire energy of the campus, with some very concerted acts that are backed by power and money and infrastructure that I don't have access to, and I don't know people who have access to them. So I'm wondering, whether it's through media intersections or new coalition strategies, how can we give body and shape to this threat? But I don't want to say that, because I don't want to be at war against this thing that, in my eyes, wouldn't be a threat if it wasn't so thoroughly backed by a really specific type of oppressive infrastructure. Whatever the group is called, that are doing all the things—they would be easier to shout down if they weren't backed by lawyers and money, and all this stuff that makes them . . . not indefensible . . .

DE KOSNIK. Unassailable.

RA. Unassailable, there you go! They have a big fence in front of

them too. So what are ways to go about this coalition work, or this revolution work, that can actually unsettle this fence that surrounds these people?

Identifying Multiple Publics and Communities Involved

SHERRY. I just wonder . . . earlier someone mentioned the "public." I wonder what role identifying the multiple publics that are present here has in all of this. When you're talking about one group, I feel that that email, or the ways that the system is operating, doesn't fly, doesn't work unless there's an audience that it's catering to. Yes, people send their kids here from a whole lot of places and it works for them, and that messaging and everything that's going out is for somebody, and it's being received, and it's like, "Yes, I need to know that my kids are going to be safe. I need to know that I didn't make the wrong choice." So we need to identify those multiple publics that are present and what's working there. I think the work that we're doing here is very important in calling out how the micro-workings of these structures and what we're just taking for granted as the "safety narrative."

HEITZ. On that note, who is the public that's really paying attention to this particular group right now? I wonder if what makes this particular group so dangerous right now and so violent is white fragility and the fact that so many people are paying attention to it, because [they think], "I can't handle this type of racism! I can be perfectly fine with racism that exists already, structurally, but now I have something to prove, that I'm a 'good' type of white person!" So along with this whole idea of "What do we do?," I can't help but keep coming back to Black Lives Matter, too, because it really started as an alternative way of addressing violence—structural violence, not just police violence—and bringing together communities like Ferguson and Oakland and creating all these chapters in a really constructive and not-violent way. But it didn't get a whole lot of attention until it became something that the media could grab onto.

The Internet as a Space of Connectivity for White Supremacists

GARZO MONTALVO. Some of this might be a little awkward with the timing and the flow of the conversation, but I'm sitting here listening, especially about the original question regarding the digital and the physical, and there are a couple things that are coming up for me. The main thing I'm trying to translate is, just thinking about the internet and the digital historically, as a cultural thing or moment, where we're still really trying to figure out what its effects really are. I'm just sitting here and thinking that one of the things we have to grapple with is how the digital is producing a particular kind of space. And on one hand I firmly believe in its possibilities. In Gail's class [De Kosnik taught a digital humanities seminar called "Making Sense of Cultural Data" in Fall 2016] I worked on, specifically as a Native Studies scholar, how indigenous communities worldwide are taking up new media and using it to connect and learn in ways that work for us and end up helping fulfill our ancestors' prophecies.

The digital can be powerful in this way, and it can be connectivity, but what I'm sitting here reflecting on is the underside of all that. That's how I'm thinking historically about the alt-right as an internet-age thing, in the sense that it's not new in terms of white supremacy, but it is new in the ways that it's articulating itself. In particular, it provides a space of connectivity among very isolated white people, especially white men, who feel disenfranchised and victimized [according to] this weird narrative that I'm hearing. It's kind of interesting for me to think about it in that way, as someone who's outside of that experience: How do you formulate that there's a white genocide happening?

And that narrative really gains more traction in an internet situation, where there are these very isolated spaces that can have so-called echo-chamber-y dynamics, where the digital does provide a space for people to just get into these stories that are really delusional or just very insular. It's a very cowardly kind of energy. I remember when YouTube first came out, and before I learned to not read the comments, it was just hateful. I find it a very cowardly way to express your opinion in this anonymous way and just put out this really vile stuff. I'm just

thinking that, historically, that's connected, like, "Oh, you're a really vile and hateful person too. Let's hang out online, and we can organize." [*laughter*] You know what I'm saying? It created that space to really ferment, in that sense.

And the other thing I'm thinking about in that context is that a lot of these homies are sitting and playing a lot of videogames that are war games. A lot of them are consuming violence of all types in a very normalized way—it normalizes and glorifies a lot of war and particular types of violence. You see it in the way that they come out in, basically, cosplay—they come up in these white supremacist superhero things. I'm just thinking about it culturally. There are a lot of things in there, and I'm also thinking about this question: what do we do?

"We Continue to Struggle from a Place of Love"

GARZO MONTALVO. For me, the one thing we do is we continue to struggle, and we continue to struggle from a place of love, because in seeing all that, what's producing all of it is profound fear and misunderstanding, and that creates a lot of that violence in the material. I'm talking at the individual level of these white supremacists and what may be appealing to them, but of course there is also the structural violence that we've been struggling against. But the way in which it's manifesting now is a very particular and emotional experience of fear and isolation and alienation from who you are. You don't know who you are or where you come from, and everything that you think is true in terms of the supremacy of Western civilization is in crisis and crumbling, and this is a response to that. I want to think that my best self can show up for that, and be like, "Yes! Western civilization and whiteness is imploding, is being dismantled, is going away, but that doesn't need to be a source of fear for you. That's what we need for this planet to exist. We need for that to happen, and you can be a part of that." I think that's what motivates a lot of the alt-right: they want to feel like they're a part of something, and it ends up being this really violent kind of space.

Use Every Tool We Have

JOHNSON. I've also been thinking a lot about strategies, and I've said in [Color of New Media meetings] before that I feel that in the most abstract, ideological sense, until we strike at the heart of capitalism and just burn this university down, there's nothing that can be done. But I'm on the market this year, so I can't officially say that. [*laughter*] But I think that in terms of things that have helped me, particularly last year and in my earlier years here, stuff like the Anti-Milo Toolkit was super useful, particularly with my students, because I realize that for many of them, there was a really fundamental lack of understanding about what the rhetoric was. For them, [the controversy around Yiannopoulos's visit to campus] was kind of about someone who's conservative and who wants less taxes. So for them to go through [the toolkit] and thoroughly know what this person is advocating for and have it [the information about what Yiannopoulos has said and what he stands for] gathered in one place was extremely useful.

I mostly teach freshman and sophomores, and mostly freshman, so that [semester of Yiannopoulos's scheduled lecture, Spring 2017] was their first semester at the university, so for them it was a rhetoric of "But we all deserve free speech, right?" That's what they had been told up until that point, so for them to be able to make these connections about what this speech is advocating for was really eye-opening for them. So I think there's stuff we can do in our classrooms, of course.

I've also been thinking about the recent slate of protests in South Korea, particularly the sort of ghost protests that were happening. So what does it mean to invoke the digital when to be in the physical is particularly precarious for certain bodies? And what was used a lot then were actually mass projections and images, and, as we know, that eventually led to the ousting of the South Korean president [Park Geun-hye in March 2017]. It eventually led to an opening up of space for mass physical protests, which then led to a political outcome that was desired, but the reason I've been thinking about that is about that power of imagery.

I've been thinking a lot about Charlottesville and why that particular moment seemed to resonate more than every other

moment of these protests over the last couple of years, and I think it really has to do with this image of a group of mostly white men with torches within this particular space of the South. As someone from the South, that is an image that is present in really particular ways within our public institutions. I think there was something about that connection, like when they're using this language and saying these things, "This is what they actually mean!" People now get the Klan connection to the alt-right. So I think it's really important and really powerful to not erase these visual references—to see when that speech is used what it's actually advocating for. Particularly in the space of California, where it's not just about anti-Blackness, but also about the mass violence against indigenous populations, against Latinx populations, against Chinese populations—to connect with what that white supremacist violence actually looked like and meant in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and still looks like and means. It might not be at the same scale—we might not be dealing with the treasure trove of indigenous peoples' bones that this university is sitting on anymore. . . . [at the time of this meeting, UC Berkeley's Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology held the remains of approximately ten thousand Native Americans, one of the largest collections in the world.]

DE KOSNIK. We're still dealing with it.

JOHNSON. Yeah, I know, the university is dealing with it. But I guess I mean that that type of mass violence gets hidden away within California's prison systems. It's not on the street, except when it comes to our homeless populations in Northern California. I would love to ask someone who is more technologically savvy than me: Is there a way to bring this imagery and history and real-time make it happen during these moments of speech? Isn't that nonviolent counterprotest? We're not smashing the windows, but we can project on the windows. We have these huge archives at the university, and we can get the digital [technology]. We have these images, so what would it mean to not let the face or public image of this rhetoric be equated with the *New York Times* article about how dapper Richard Spencer is? What if it shows these white people picnicking at lynchings? It's the bodies of starving Chinese men, the bodies of the indigenous communities within this area—it's *this*. It's not just about

free speech—it's about what the consequences of that speech are, and we've seen the consequences of that speech. So I think that would be really cool.

DE KOSNIK. I do think there's something about Charlottesville that was about [those events taking place] at the foot of Thomas Jefferson's home, having the master's house sit on top of that university, having a statue to slavery be in the center of that campus. And, by the way, the White House was also a place where Thomas Jefferson lived, and I think the conflation of that White House with the master's house is really important right now. That's the history that we are reckoning with, that's the trajectory of the United States of America that we're in right now. It's not just Monticello; it's the White House that we're facing. So that's the house we have to dismantle with whatever tools we can.

Thank you, everybody! This was so productive and generative and really great, and I do find hope in this group. So thank you for being here today, and let's just close it with some love! [*applause*]

Participating members of the Color of New Media: Abigail De Kosnik, Paige Johnson, Sparkle, Kaily Heitz, Joy, Rachel, Anonymous 1, Sherry, Steffen Moestrup, Keith Feldman, Marcelo Garzo Montalvo, Ra, Anonymous 2, and Tonika (some names are abbreviations or pseudonyms).

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