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UNDERSTANDING DIGITAL POLITICAL COMMUNITIES: A JUXTAPOLITICAL
APPROACH TO INTIMACY ONLINE

by

BRIAN PEARCE GLUBOK

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE INTERDISPLINARY HUMANITIES GRADUATE
GROUP

IN PARTIAL FUFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF MASTERS OF ARTS IN
INTERDISCPLINARY HUMANITIES

PROFESSOR ROBIN DELUGAN, CHAIR

PROFESSOR SUSAN AMUSSEN

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2020

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University of California, Merced

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ABSTRACT

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Digital publics, while usually understood as allowing each member of the community to communicate with equal voice, are instead best conceptualized as driven by particular dominating users, who I term "intellectuals", borrowing from an understanding of Gramsci. Through an exploration of reactionary and progressive YouTube video producers, Marxist publics, Tumblr and Twitter Feminists, and the Gamergate campaign, I explain how the tactics of counterpublic affect, conflict, and the juxtapolitical are used to allow communities to engage users and grow larger. This growth allows a publics' intellectuals to spread their beliefs throughout digital networks, gaining fame and power through representation of their perspectives.

Chapter 1

       In this thesis, I aim to describe how digital communities operate: what processes they conduct to stay together and how to conceptualize and approach them. After describing my theorizations of digital communities, I provide several examples of digital spaces, describing what they reveal about politics and community online. These spaces are compared to show how shared elements of digital communities allow certain tactics to proliferate. These tactics are the usage of counterpublic affect, conflict, and the juxtapolitical. Counterpublic affect refers to how these spaces define themselves non-normatively, emotionally marking participants in the public as connected. Conflict is meant as the usage of aggressive forms of speech to define the group against other publics. Finally, juxtapolitical is a term I borrow from Lauren Berlant, though slightly modify, to mean how producers in these spaces are able to create intimacy through downplaying difference between themselves and their audience making up their public.

       This thesis is structured into five chapters, with each chapter bound together by community studied and research theme. Chapter 2 covers YouTube political commentary, coupled with the larger response to the Atheist YouTube political community, and further details of what I mean by juxtapolitical. This chapter begins with ContraPoints, a YouTube channel that produces progressive political content and copied many of the techniques that conservative political producers created. ContraPoints is most notable for this thesis, however, for how the response to the channel reveals the importance of being juxtapolitical to create intimacy, and what happens when Natalie Wynn, the creator in charge of ContraPoints, was unable to convince her audience of their lack of difference. After Wynn, I describe Atheist Canadian-Pakistani political activist Eiynah whose relationship to atheist spaces online provides interesting contrast with Wynn.

       Chapter 3 covers Marxist communities, focused on the theme of conflict within a community and how a website's form allows community building. The mailing list Marxmail is analyzed, along with a Marxist magazine archived online. These smaller communities are contrasted with the Marxist publics on Reddit, one of the most popular websites on the internet. Each of these publics provide different ways for their community members to contribute to the public, allowing the public's discourse to continue to be consumed.

       Chapter 4 details feminist communities online, with a focus on humor as way to build intimacy within a community. I use feminist scholar's writings about women's movements online as example of how intimacy is constructed through humor in these spaces. I focus on both Tumblr, a microblogging website, and memes, small easily replicable images designed to be humorously spread throughout the internet.

       Finally, chapter 5 describes Gamergate, and is organized around publics as harassment and the role of organizers in a public. Gamergate, a reactionary movement organized around anti-progressive sentiments in video games and other aspects of nerd culture, provides insight into how the "intellectuals" I describe in this chapter function.

Chapter 5 in addition uses Gamergate as another example of the counterpublic stance in digital spaces.

Chapter 1 describes my theoretical framework for these communities and makes up my central argument- that these communities are best understood through this lens of intimacy and intellectual organizer.

I combine Berlant's conceptions of Intimate Publics (as outlined in *The Female Complaint* (2008)) with Antonio Gramsci's approach to Intellectuals and the "modern Prince" (1971) in an attempt to capture how digital spaces allow individuals to connect and speak to each other, while not forgetting the roles users and audiences play as central figures of these communities. I argue that digital spaces are not "democratic" engines where all voices may be heard and appreciated, but instead are best understood as "republics", where users imbue their political desires and hopes into individuals whose voice carries greater weight.

While "intellectuals" is commonly assumed to mean academics, Gramsci defines and theorizes the term instead as representatives of social groups. These social groups can be understood as Marxist understandings of class, but in this thesis I define social group synonymously with community: as a collection of people bound together through shared characteristics or relationships. Intellectuals spring from these social groups and then change the structures of society to better suit the group they come from. The intellectual must both develop structures, or political theory and aims, to connect them with their group and conduct work to enact their aims. Gramsci develops this theory through a reading of Machiavelli's *The Prince*.

Gramsci understands the social groups intellectuals represent as a "Collective Mass Will", and places great importance on the conclusion of *The Prince*, writing "Machiavelli merges with the people, becomes the people; not, however, some 'generic' people, but the people whom he, Machiavelli, has convinced by the preceding argument" (126). The intellectual does not spring forth out of a social group but must take actions to craft the social group they come from. Gramsci describes those who make up this social group as those "whose consciousness and whose expression he becomes and feels himself to be, with whom he feels identified" (ibid). The prince becomes a lodestar of the political desires of the people even as the prince crafts what those desires are. This sidestep, where the prince represents those who hold political beliefs while also being the one who made those beliefs become held, is explicitly stated by Gramsci: "the entire 'logical' argument now appears as nothing other than auto-reflection on the part of the people—an inner reasoning worked out in the popular consciousness, whose conclusion is a cry of passionate urgency"(127). The prince argues, but only so their argument seems to come from their audience, or to use the term later adopted by this thesis, public.

The modern prince also, as it develops, changes the entire system and structure it exists in (133). All "intellectual and moral relations" are defined by how they connect to the beliefs of the prince. This is not simply arguing that all disagreements with the prince are seen as flawed intellectually or morally, but instead that it is only possible for one's beliefs to be described and understood by those beliefs' relationship to the prince. Others

with political beliefs cannot advocate for their own beliefs and practices, but instead must define themselves by conflicting with the prince. While this description implies the prince is a grand and charismatic individual, Gramsci argues in modern politics the actual prince is a collective system (129): a constellation of social actors advocating their viewpoints. We can understand the basic rules and social ethics of websites and the communities they host as "princes" as well.

Political parties are made up of three elements in a Gramscian perspective: a cohesive element, or the intellectuals[i], who give creative thought to the endeavor, a mass element, with mass as term being used both to categorize the large aggregation baring witness to the intellectuals as well as implying a thoughtless and inert quality (political mass requires intellectuals to become a force and cannot act without this intellect acting on it), and finally a medium to connect the two (152-153).

It is valuable to further examine the troika Gramsci insists on for princes. In the case studies taken up by this thesis, the medium is the internet, but the relationship between mass and intellectuals is more complex than a simplistic reading of Gramsci would allow for. In Gamergate, described in more detail in chapter 5, users organize harassment campaigns by producing videos and leaking information about harassment targets. Those who act on the information, commenting their support and posting harassing comments about targets, are the mass element, but there is also fluidity in this system. A mass element (someone who views a Gamergate video) could share it to their social media, thus becoming a connective medium between the intellectual and still more mass elements. One who is part of the mass element, a passive recipient of Gamergate information, can become part of the cohesive element by becoming more involved, moderating forums, or even just becoming so active in the Gamergate community that they become able to direct how this "social group" develops. Finally, the mass element, after hearing about Gamergate, could go to a different "intellectual", someone who produces content on the internet that organizes groups, and ask them to produce Gamergate content[ii]. The mass element could organize, and create, the cohesive element.

Therefore, I alter Gramsci's theory to better suit the research I do in this thesis. While Gramsci is concerned with the state and how to enact broad reforms throughout all of society, his work still provides a wonderful window into the more granular question of how political groups operate. Collective mass will, the role of participants, and the relationship individuals have to the structure of political organizations are all critical to understanding digital communities. Digital communities are notable for their heavy emphasis on audience, as digital spaces make it easy to have very large audiences that authors speak to. Gramsci's understanding of an intellectual who produces content that mobilizes an audience is an important starting point for approaching political spaces online. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner have provided excellent tools to better conceptualize the relationship between the "mass" and the "intellectuals".

The concept of Publics, more particularly of Counterpublics, is deeply influential to this thesis. Warner (2002) defines publics by their relation to a text, as every text is made for an audience and that audience becomes bound together as a public. The reading of a text creates shared bonds between audience members, as they are bound together as

the "public" the writer speaks to. This is obviously similar to Gramsci's conception of the prince who creates their political mass by speaking to them.

While public is used to describe speaking to "the general public", counterpublics instead describes texts that express their marginalized status and celebrates this (Warner 2002). The text does not address itself to the universal, but instead to particular strangers, socially marking them through their participation; in Warner's words "ordinary people are presumed not to want to be mistaken for the kind of person who would participate in this kind of talk" (120). This amplifies the social bonds between audience members, as now they are implicated by this marking. No longer are they a public that can connect to another text speaking to the public, but instead are "marked" by the text, and the community around it, as unable to be incorporated with normative publics.

This style marks most of what I discuss in these chapters. Counterpublics stylings are widespread and cut across the many different social groups I examine. Acting as a counterpublic builds a community within the group and grows bonds. Alternately, to put this in the rhetoric of social deviance, a counterpublic works to radicalize and draw participants further and further within the counterpublic. The proliferation of this style of speech, from the 18th century she-romps Warner describes in his essay to the memes I describe in this thesis, reflects the strength of adopting this cavalier dismissal of normative taste. The great proliferation of this mode of speaking does spark an important question: what is normative taste if denial of normativity is so common?

I view this dismissal of normative taste as strategy and tactic more than honest appraisal of a community's position vis-à-vis normativity. Thus, counterpublicness should not be appraised through scientific or objective pretensions of a group's relation to normative publics, but instead through questioning if the examined public positions itself as a counterpublic. Further, I do not argue that a counterpublic remains forever and always counter normativity, but instead that it moves fluidly and dynamically, depending on context and speaker, in how it positions itself. Sometimes it even positions itself as counternormative because that is the only way to discuss a topic normatively.

Michel Foucault begins his *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (1978) by disentangling this exact question. He argues that scholars commonly describe the Victorian age as the beginning of repression of sexuality, and that now the author is rectifying that with their approach. In the quote below, Foucault provides an analysis and deconstruction of this rhetorical technique, the attempt to describe one's discourse as a transgression (especially when this "transgression" is one common to many within a community):

> If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom. This explains the solemnity with which one speaks of sex nowadays. When they had to allude to it, the first demographers and psychiatrists of the

nineteenth century thought it advisable to excuser themselves for asking their readers to dwell on matters so trivial and base. But for decades now, we have found it difficult to speak on the subject without striking a different pose: we are conscious of defying established power, our tone of voice shows that we know we are being subversive, and we ardently conjure away the present and appeal to the future, whose day will be hastened by the contribution we believe we are making… Because this repression is affirmed, one can discreetly bring into coexistence concepts which the fear of ridicule or the bitterness of history prevents most of us from putting side by side: revolution or happiness; or revolution and a different body, one that is newer and more beautiful; or indeed, revolution and pleasure (6-7).

These authors adopt the counterpublic tone, "shows that we know we are being subversive", in order to make political moves that would otherwise be seen as ridiculous. Note that Foucault is talking here not of marginalized groups, but instead of an entire normative and recognized genre of writings about sex and sexuality. Counterpublics are performances of anti-normativity, desiring some imagined revolution, but not proof themselves of existing outside of normativity. A counterpublic register cannot be used as barometer of "good" or "public" taste. This "counter" position also allows another advantage to the speaker; it makes them and their audience appear "marked", as Warner argues. This marking creates a form of intimacy between both speaker and audience and between audience members.

Berlant's conception of "intimate publics" provides an analysis of intimacy. She argues "what makes a public sphere intimate is an expectation that the consumers of its particular stuff already share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience… its consumer participants are perceived to be marked by a commonly lived history" (*The Female Complaint* viii 2008). Berlant further pushes the concept by connecting intimacy with the approach to politics adopted by these intimate publics: "where people ought to be legitimated because they have feelings and because there is an intelligence in what they feel that *knows* something about the world that, if it were only listened to, could make things better". (Italics in original, 2)

Berlant develops this concept when discussing women's literature to further an analysis of femininity, but do not mistake this for an implication that this is exclusive to women's political movements. Gamergate, a harassment campaign heavily inundated with masculinity, depends just as heavily upon the intelligence of feelings and on marking its public with a shared historical experience, despite its goal being the denial and removal of femininity from gaming spaces. The desire to excise incongruent people, or their desires, from the intimacy of the public is articulated by Berlant in her concept of juxtapolitical.

Berlant's use of this term is to imply a frayed relationship between intimate publics and the political sphere. Politics requires active antagonism, which threatens consensus and belonging within the public. Politics is a threatening site rather than one

holding possibility: Intimacy is threatened by conflict, so to create a space of belonging one cannot be political (11). These publics still have desires of political nature, so they must be juxtapolitical. Politics are viewed as a site of disappointment and failure, so instead of making overt political moves politics is approached "sideways". Political desires and hopes are held but are described through innuendo and implication instead of explicitly. "Politics" threaten difference when intimate publics desire belonging that come from similarities. Berlant describes women's culture as juxtapolitical because it "like most mass-mediated nondominant communities… thrives in proximity to the political…acting as critical chorus that sees the expression of emotional response and conceptual recalibration as achievement enough" (x). Intimacy is threatened by the inclusion of politics. Intimacy, in my use of it, is to feel already belonging, already a part of a whole. To make arguments that the reader does not feel connected to means intimacy is not possible.

It is necessary to understand the term "politics" differently from Berlant's more obvious meaning, as I am approaching communities, intimate publics, that are explicitly political. Thus, the "politics" that threaten the togetherness of a political intimate public cannot be understood as simply politics, as a community organized around politics is obviously already inundated with politics overtly. I use intimacy to describe the feeling of comfortable belonging, and the political that Berlant defines is the active antagonism within a space that causes that belonging to leave. Therefore, my use of juxtapolitical in this thesis can be understood instead as what I term juxtadifferntial: implying fractures and frays within a social group always to avoid overt dissolvement of a social group.

Berlant defines these publics by a consumption of text. This consumption feeds into a normative belief of its public by aggregating the audiences of the text into a single audience. Even the act of decrying the normativity of a public participates in the promise of belonging; after all to argue the normativity desires of a public excludes others is to implicitly attempt to recalibrate the public to include a larger group in its mass form of intimacy. The archetypical example of this critique is the common analysis that women's spaces become defined by normative desires of white and straight women, leaving out and creating a lack of bonds to normative femininity for women outside of those images. However, critiquing this lack of bonds is to call for and desire a new femininity that does incorporate and allow for women who are neither straight nor white to belong in womanhood. This is a desire to "recalibrate" the mass intimacy, not to decry the intimacy itself, according to Berlant.

Intimate publics provides a deeper approach to the mass element than Gramsci. Public as a concept allows the text to come through the public, instead of conceptualizing it as solely arising from the intellectual element. The intellectual can write a text to be sent to a public, but individuals within this public can belong to and follow different intellectuals. In addition, the mass of the public can reinterpret and write their own texts to be spread among the public- after being made the audience crafted by the text can be adopted by others. Others will be able to access this community and use the public for their own desires as well. Fanfiction, and fan culture, show how this operates. Fan culture are communities built around the production of texts by and for the already existing

community built around a pre-existing text. While the community is brought together by the authors text, the community continues to exist through fan creation of additional texts to be spread and proliferated through the community. Publics have life even after the text that constructed them is finished. Especially when that public relies on being counter-normative and intimate, the affective bonds crafted by the public will not disappear after the creation of the original text. This community follows its own sense of internal normativities that govern their rules- the public is anti-normative but publics, by necessity, create a sense of normativity within themselves. Normativity has two meanings here, both as the unmarked public that is assumed to always belong and as the standard adoption within a social group of styles and traits.

I combine Berlant's notion of intimacy and juxtapolitical with Gramsci's discussion of the Prince representing and creating their own public to frame my thesis. The Prince must not only bring the reader into believing in their argument but continue to present themselves as this speaker of beliefs the reader is already thinking. This presentation is false, of course. But the self-presentation is critical, as in order to create this public the author must be seen as representative through speaking and creating text the audience identifies themselves in.

Gramsci's "Mass Will" comes about from intimacy, and intimacy is buttressed by adopting counter public stances. By defining themselves outside of normativity a counterpublic can be bound together. The political party thus defines itself as not just a social group, but as outside a separate social group, or to put in another way the prince does not just become the people; it is also necessary for the prince to *not* be representative of something else. This does not imply these groupings are stable or in stasis. They are instead constantly in flux, as the intellectuals who craft them can be pushed out, and likewise intellectuals who attempt to step into an intimate public can find themselves accepted by some and rejected by others.

Past researchers have connected these concepts to digital communities in their work. Digital publics as understood in the literature is deeply connected to affect, whether in approaching the spread of news on twitter during political instability in Egypt (Papacharissi & Olivera 2012), a website dedicated to unsolicited pictures of attractive men in London public transit (Evans & Riley 2018), or emotional vulnerability among bodybuilders. (Underwood 2018) While a publics framework encourages examining the community of viewers, research has also focused on the individuals these publics circulate around.

This focus on the individual has been mainly conducted on the "Influencer" image, or the microcelebrity. An influencer is a term that came out of advertising that describes individuals who hold great sway among their social group. Online this usually means Instagram models and twitter comedians. Most of the research on influencers approaches them from an advertising viewpoint, hoping to capitalize on sponsorship opportunities. The objective is to learn who needs to be approached in order to spread a product as far as possible, so this work takes a quantitative approach to find who has the most influence mathematically. Anger & Kittl (2011) and Bokunewicz & Shulman (2017) are both examples of this research. There are some researchers who attempt a

qualitative approach, such as that exhibited by Marvroudis and Milne (2016). This work is difficult to replicate for others, however, as these researchers were influencers themselves before conducting it. In their article, they view this as a necessary pre-requisite before approaching other influencers for interviews.

Microcelebrities are a similar concept to influencers, however they reflect a more insular community. Theresa Senft developed this concept when studying camgirls (women who film themselves live for money online), and though she connects the term to branding and consumption like the influencer, there is also a greater focus on privacy and anonymity (2013). Senft also describes how community and audience, two terms that are typically understood as separate, become intertangled with influencers. This entanglement is examined in Chapter Two of this thesis, in examinations of the Juxtapolitical. There has even been work approaching the current president of the United States, Donald Trump, as belonging to and adopting traits out of these same genealogies. As Pérez-Curiel writes, "Trump's twitter candidacy has been totally eclipsed by his Twitter presidency… he is an influencer who acts above and beyond party politics, applies corporate communication and marketing techniques, and has found in social networks an expeditious format and effective discourse that catches the attention of active communities" (2019: 60).

If the president can be an influencer, then it should hardly be radical to understand Gramsci's prince as an influencer as well, or, to be more precise, the social organism Gramsci describes can be a group of influencers the collective mass will chooses to follow. But this is not a one-way relationship; the public, especially in intimate publics, creates their intellectual just as much as their intellectual creates them.

Lindsay Ellis, a video essayist who uploads her content to YouTube, describes this in a 2018 video titled "YouTube: Manufacturing Authenticity (For Fun and Profit!)". She understands YouTube content production as requiring a continual performance of affective labor. To attract and keep audiences the producer must construct a sense of "realness" the audience can recognize and relate to. This is not just a performance in the sense of Judith Butler, but instead a performance of casualness that is consciously constructed. This construction allows the producer to monetize labor without being seen as greedy or ungrateful. This is rather important: politics and economics are related here in needing to be approached through "juxta" strategies. If the user feels they are economically at odds and being used by the text-producer, they will reject them and not stay a member of the community. The intellectual is not a sculptor working clay to reflect their vision of their public: the clay moves and reacts to them. In some cases, the clay reacts quite harshly when the intellectual is seen as unrepresentative, as chapter 2 describes.

Even when the mass does not respond and engage in conversations within a public, they still effect (and create affect) within the public. As Renee Barnes (2018) describes in her book *Uncovering Online Commenting Culture*, even those who simply read comments without leaving their own comments still develop an affective relationship with both the website and the commenters. The sense of belonging constructed by websites requires an anonymous reader as well, as their non-verbal

viewership allows discussion to take place without becoming chaos. Of course, commenters are critical as well as non-commenters, as she writes comments are not only "self-expression, but also identity construction" (30). Belonging then comes from a development of collective identity within a community.

This group of listeners who choose to not engage further are always present online. The notion that there are always a "public" listening to and paying attention to the commentary, despite their voices not being present, structure how users online engage with each other. If one was desperate to find a "mass" that corresponds with Gramsci's understanding of it, these non-productive viewers would be it. Those who leave comments and create textual works in response to others would be described as fellow intellectuals, in contrast to the non-producing mass. I, however, choose to view this audience as simply fellow members of the public, also creating the bonds of social belonging, despite not taking active roles in the upkeep of the community.

I study these communities with a grounding in anthropological methodologies. Seen in that light, the "field" is quite accessible to my reader, as they could become a member of the public simply by engaging with the same texts I am approaching. While some digital scholars attempt to integrate themselves within the community and conduct interviews, that is not necessary if one approaches these groups as a public organized by consumption. This is not to discount the value and importance of interviews, as they can find out much information my own methodology does not. My methodology, however, is to become a fellow member of the public by consuming content produced by the groups I study. By this I mean to argue that by observing social events, you are a participant within them. The audience is an active and vital part in the creation of the public. Individuals communicating online do so with the assumption they will be read by others not speaking.

Another consideration in this study is the distinction between object of study and peer in study, though this conflict did not originate in digital contexts. My research on Pakistani-Canadian Activist Eiynah in chapter 2 uses her own analysis and understanding as much as my own. The "text" she produces is auto-analyzing. A researcher of this work cannot simply approach the subject and draw out analysis without engaging with the subject's own intellectual analysis, if indeed it was ever possible to study a subject without engaging a subject's perspective on it. The question of how a community polices the intellectual creators of the public is one addressed by Eiynah in her podcast, which itself is a subject that creates a public. It would be easiest to simply write the researcher should trust in what their research participants believe in, as those participants hold greatest expertise. However, as this thesis will detail, some of those expressed beliefs are, if not stated in bad faith, are just simply bad. They should be engaged with but trusting in them uncritically is not a valuable or useful position.

I am myself already a participant-observer in most of these communities before methodological considerations come into play- whether in terms of myself being a fan of these works or by simply engaging with them. Even if I do not believe in Gamergate or act as a member of their public, the proliferation of their beliefs requires an opinion, agree, disagree, or neutrality, if one encounters them. Their beliefs permeate any website

adjacent to gaming, and indeed even touches upon any website related to women on the internet, which is to say all websites on the internet. My own approach to understanding these communities is to become a member of their public, find the websites they frequent, read past literature related to or detailing them, and then attempt to write how and why the site and community functions as it does. Participation with these communities means more than simply visiting them occasionally; it also includes deep archival work to explore the predecessors of these websites. This work is conducted with examinations of different archival tools on the internet, such as the Wayback Machine operated by the Internet Archive. Further, I use comparisons between these communities to draw out what makes them unique or notable.

This is not a radical or deeply controversial methodology- it is in my mind the traditional approach of anthropology and ethnography. Privacy and anonymity are quite important to discuss from an ethical standpoint, as these rights have been critical to the moral conduct of Anthropology and these rights and values have become just as critical in the digital environment. I choose to grant anonymity to any conversations I view as happening between individuals not meant to be read or interpreted by wider audiences. A YouTube video essay describing academic approaches to gender does not need privacy, I could not grant it if I wished to because it would be quite easy to find, and it is rather demeaning to decide a text that calls out to be seen by others should be obfuscated. On the other hand, a comment on that video should not be directly quoted, as that can be obfuscated and further the audience is viewers of said video. This is not a clear distinction and I do not claim to be perfect in my application of it. I do hope this thesis, and the assistance and guidance I have received while conducting it, has not led to any harm to those I research and describe within.

Chapter 2

 This chapter details the way political communities operate on YouTube, where the "texts" publics build themselves around are filmed videos. I will describe two intellectuals who intersect with YouTube, Natalie Wynn who operates a YouTube Channel and Eiynah, who responds to dialogues and discussion that began on YouTube.

 YouTube allows users to upload filmed content to personally managed channels. After being uploaded, other users are able to view and comment on the video, with videos being recommended through YouTube's algorithm, which focuses on videos similar to those the user has viewed before. A YouTube video producer has a "channel" on the website where they upload their content. While sometimes these users are called YouTubers, I lean toward "producer" or "content creator" as a term, as YouTuber implies a level of personal intimacy between producer and audience that is not always present by those who organize communities on the platform. The term can be interpreted as demeaning to those with less personal relationships to the platform, as YouTubers are usually assumed to draw their audience into the intimacies of their lives through constant video uploads.

 As a political platform, YouTube holds many reactionary elements, and much work, conducted by journalist, online activists, and academics, has researched these conservatives creators. Most impressively is Rebecca Lewis' report *Alternative Influence* (2018). She develops the concept of the Alternative Influence Network, or AIN, to describe how conservative YouTube viewers get funneled from normative conservative voices to more and more radical YouTube producers. Some of this process is caused by the before mentioned algorithm, where more mainstream conservatives videos are also viewed by the same public that watches more extreme videos; this leads to YouTube users slowly being led to more extreme videos as they continue watching what is recommend to them through the algorithm.

 However, the producers themselves do take active part in encouraging the creation of this network through collaboration with other conservative YouTube producers. Lewis draws out a web of collaboration, where each producer becomes connected through working together and uploading a video where both are shown. Through this web, collaborative lines are drawn between "classical liberal" producers[iii], advocating for lax economic restrictions and disavowing identity politics, and white nationalist creators who argue for hardline immigration policies, the biological existence of racial hierarchy, and advocation for white identity politics. Prolific producers on YouTube utilize collaboration to create larger publics to appeal to, combining their audiences for potential cross-over appeal. This strategy was organically conceived of, as the platform of YouTube is, mechanically, antagonist toward collaboration between channels, as only one channel can be the "producer" of a video, even if multiple channels are featured in it.

 This marks an important point for this chapter: I am focusing here on the communities on YouTube and how they interact on and with the medium and platform of

YouTube: not studying YouTube itself. It is necessary to understand YouTube only as it relates to limitations and advantages it provides to video producers. Dan Olson, a YouTube creator himself, describes how the relationship between YouTube and content creators is at heart an antagonist one (2017). He analyzes video hosting websites that compete with YouTube to explain how hosting platforms online and the producers who rely on them for an audience relate. These YouTube Alternatives typically try to entice YouTube channels to jump ship through shows of friendship, arguing they are forming a community relationship between platform and producer, allowing these competing websites to be more responsive and representative of the desires of video creators. Olson disagrees with this community framing, placing attention on the economic relationship between producers and hosting sites: producers create the object that hosting websites make money from. This economic relationship means that creators rely on hosting sites to reach their audience and that the hosting site needs creators to bring on audiences. The motivations are allied with very small hosting services, which rely on popular users to bring in users, but once the website becomes large, as YouTube is, the platform's main motivation is not to ensure the happiness of content producers, but instead to work with advertisers and manage the brand of the Platform itself.

Managing YouTube as a brand, instead of having to manage individual content producers, allows communities like the AIN to develop and proliferate throughout YouTube. YouTube itself is not responsible for managing these creators, and YouTube as corporation does not conceive itself as a political forum. However, because of the massive size of YouTube, this network can grow organically despite not being encouraged overtly. This is because, as Lewis argues, these channels do not rely on institutional prestige or gatekeeping from respected members, and in fact relish this lack of gatekeeping and management. These channels utilize "authenticity" and direct accountability to their audience. Though she does not use the term, this is a counterpublic conception of community, where the rejection of mainstream news helps to form the social bonds between user and producer. This rejection of normativity and veneration of the individual producer's "realness"[iv] leads to an easy dovetail with publics built around the political desires of the "intellectual" creating them. The AIN Lewis defines is the "modern prince", using individual producers as cohesive elements, adopting YouTube as medium, and therefore connecting to and creating their collective mass will. The political beliefs pushed for, and the social group this prince creates, is kept rather vague and unclear, on purpose, to adopt a juxtapolitical benefit even in this space that explicitly discusses politics; the only way to have a classical liberal and a white nationalist exist within the same larger public is to create a public that relies on affective connection with individuals then to political ideals. The intimacy created by this counter-public allows difference in political opinions to be papered over in service of continual senses of belonging for audience members.

While discussing this in relation to internet neo-Nazis makes it seem rather dire, this structure is not inherently predatory or dangerous. Tobias Raun's 2016 study of transgender YouTube vloggers shows a counterpublic that provides great benefit for a community commonly ostracized and removed from normative publics. Vlogging is itself an intensely intimate act, being auto biographical in nature and requesting the audience

see in the author's life some relationship to themselves. Raun argues the Transgender video creators use the genres of mirror, diary, and autobiography to connect to a larger transgender community. This community is both other YouTube creators and with the audience, which is assumed to be transgender as well. Belonging is crafted through shared consumption of intimate videos, and through this intimacy these videos presume shared identity with the audience. This community mirrors the same strategies and organizational patterns of other digital social movements, even though it is not mobilized as a political force or by political aims, except so far as one can term acceptance for transgender individuals to be a political goal.

A smaller-scale study conducted on an individual channel by Mattias Ekman (2014) provides a granular level of detail on the specific strategies pursued by political channels. Ekman examines every video uploaded to a Swedish right-wing channel and divides them into different categories. The most important is the humor category, which have the most views and draws in new members to the channel, particularly younger YouTube users. Humor is an especially powerful tool for creating affective bonds between the user and the video producer, as it creates, proves, and facilitates intimacy. Laughter is, after all, the most clear example of intimacy in a public, as it is a shared response that proves one's connection to others through understanding of the joke. This intimacy Ekman views as dangerous, creating a "politics of the will" where users agree with dangerous positions simply because of their bonds to those articulating them. This criticism I feel misses the mark, however, as all arguments rely on affect and intimacy. While it may appear that radical communities are unlike normative political affiliations, joined through connections to affect instead of logical self-interest, those logical self-interests are perfect visions of affect and belonging- what one sees as the interest of the self in an innately social setting must reflect recognizing parts of the self in the political community one exists in.

This is the articulation I aim for with my use of juxtapolitical, or juxtadifferential. The simplest illustration of this format is an example of what happens when it fails. When a political community is torn due to political differences constructed by a rejection of intimacy, it is easy to see how important intimacy is in creating a political community and what intimacy requires.

A year after leaving her doctorate program in philosophy, Natalie Wynn began her YouTube channel[v] in April of 2016 with a video critiquing reactionary elements in the atheist community. This makes up the bulk of her early content: direct response to reactionary videos on YouTube. These videos are in response to the AIN that Lewis describes in her report, hopefully making clear that politics on YouTube at that time was predominantly right-wing creators. Many of these creators would format their videos as responses to video clips of progressive arguments, especially progressive arguments advocating for feminism, queer rights, and racial rights, and undercutting these arguments with jokes and criticism of their own. This made YouTube as a platform quite hostile to progressive community formation, as these response videos would encourage their audience to seek out the videos responded to and post negative comments toward them.

Wynn was one of the earliest on the platform to redirect these strategies and apply them to reactionaries and became quite successful from it.[vi] Her early videos closely follow the model of past political content creators on YouTube, focusing on a target's argument and critiquing it with humor. Wynn had some innovations to this genre; from the beginning she adopted a self-deprecating and ironic tone to insulate herself from reactionary criticism. Further, as she gathered more followers and became more confident in video creation, she started to adopt Socratic approaches in her work.

In January 2017 she released the video "Punching Natsees" about the then-popular topic about the value of violence in Anti-Fascist organizing. This topic was inspired by a viral clip showing Richard Spencer, a member of the Alt-Right in the United States, being punched in the face in the middle of a street interview with a reporter on the day of Donald Trump's inauguration. In this video, Wynn portrays two different perspectives, one an upper class liberal and the other a radical progressive who each grow more incensed toward each other as their discussion continues. This is a common division in progressive discussions, with the image of a liberal being used to describe one who might speak the language of inclusion, but denies addressing system issues, while the radical is framed as a fractious figure who is more dedicated to emotive outbursts than careful considerations.

While Socrates is a clear influence, the dialogue does not end with a final synthesis where one participant accepts the other as correct; instead these dialogues end with two flawed yet engaging positions that reveal the limits of thought and reason. The description to the "Punching Natsees" video says the primary purpose of the debate was to capture the dysfunction of communication among the left instead of Wynn's own beliefs on the value of violence in political discourse. This provides an excellent example of how juxtapolitical tactics are utilized. By having her videos focus on the debate between different beliefs, Wynn's own role as author becomes obfuscated and her public can be formed without needing everyone in the public to totally agree: more positions can be represented in her intellectual position without inspiring conflict. By crafting personas Wynn is able to ensure a much greater deal of intimacy with her audience, making her political goals feel safe and accessible. This is not totally unique to Wynn, many other YouTube creators craft a more distinct "character" when posting online, but Wynn is notable for having these personas debate each other, especially as she does not aim to make these characters strawmen.

While this strategy works well for Wynn, there are still many who dislike and disavow her positions, making clear they do not see themselves represented within her. This schism is crafted chiefly from Wynn's personal positionality as transgender, with other transgender people stating they do not agree with her. The flashpoint for this division came from her 2018 video describing gender, "The Aesthetic". This video begins a new persona for the ContraPoints channel, Wynn dressed as a drag queen. Wynn situates this by saying "Some people say I'm a man dressed as a lady. But I'm actually a lady who used to be a man dressed like a lady". This is constructed to illustrate confusion for the audience, allowing Wynn to situate herself as guiding the viewer through the confusing world of gender. The physical camera shakes as she says this line, to reflect the

audience moving their head in nods of agreement, which then turns into nods of confusion by the end of the sentence. To further punctuate the statement, Wynn interjects "Explain that, Professor Butler!" This reference to Judith Butler is a treat for audience members able to recognize the famous gender scholar who Wynn draws heavily from in this video, and provides additional scaffolding of the confusing mood, with the infamous difficulty in comprehending Butler's work. The video focuses on Wynn's own relationship to gender through two returning transgender female personas, Justine and Tabby.

The video plays on a similar theme to "Punching Natsees", with the Justine character playing the role as normative liberal to Tabby's radical desires. The conflict between the two centers on optics and aesthetics. Justine pushes Tabby to be more "feminine", acting less aggressive, wearing dresses, and exchanging her combat boots for heels. Justine connects this personal decision to the sphere of the political, arguing that "politics is aesthetics" and that being perceived as a woman is the most critical aesthetic for transgender woman if they wish to be taken seriously. Tabby pushes against this arguing there are several different styles of femininity, which Justine counters by saying the most important rules for transgender women are the dominant and normative performativities of womanhood. As the debate between the two continues, it seems as if Justine is in control and "winning" the debate between the two personas.

But the video does not end with Tabby submitting to Justine's arguments. The emotional climax is instead when Tabby rejects Justine totally, arguing that Tabby gathers political power from all the things Justine wants to change about her. Tabby's anti-normativity makes her a "queer icon", while Justine will be forgotten and unnoted. This remark gathers special significance because of its relation to the world outside the video. The previous video featuring both of these characters resulted in multiple fan-created images about their love for Tabby and little acknowledgement of Justine even existing as a separate persona from Wynn herself.

After the publication of this video, there was a lengthy discussion among fans and avowed not-fans about the video. The primary critique against the video is that Justine was framed too positively, with her views being harmful to transgender women and to anyone who does not fit gender normativities. After receiving this pushback, Wynn wrote a series of now deleted tweets clarifying her thoughts, with the final tweet saying "But these are just some feelings I have. I don't have opinions. I made this video to show off that I can walk in heels". This is matched to the video itself, where politics and gender are discussed through the medium of heels and combat boots.

There is no greater illustration of how juxtapolitical strategies work than Wynn arguing a half-minute of her walking down a hallway is the purpose of a twenty-minute video. She disavows the political thought imbued with the video, and instead reframes the whole discussion as affect. Heels and shoes are constructed as a frivolous object, and not a dangerous or fraught desire to describe. This "safe topic" allows intimacy between Wynn and her public. Talking about heels is a personal fun secret to discuss that lets the audience feel connected to the speaker, but clarifying her political point and own desires,

especially clarifications that presume the audience does not already understand her, is a vulnerable position, but not an intimate one.

Intimacy, in my use of it, is to feel already belonging, already a part of a whole. To make arguments that the reader does not already feel connected to means intimacy is not possible. This intimate connection, of course, is non-rational. One can feel an affective sense of belonging to two arguments that are contradictory. An individual can hear an argument, and feel they belong intimately to the speaker, and then hear a dissenter and feel belonging again. This sense of intimacy requires only that the speaker assumes a sense, or makes it possible for the reader to assume the speaker assumes a sense, the reader already agrees and that the reader does not question this. To clarify does away with this shared connection, because it pre-supposes that the audience did not properly understand what the speaker is saying. A difference erupts that makes shared belonging impossible. This is where my amendment to Berlant's juxtapolitical stems from. We should understand the political in the word as unspoken but ever-present differences. To recognize a difference between the writer of a text and the audience, either by the writer *or by the audience not recognizing themselves*, shatters intimacy. I do not mean by this that it is impossible to relate to the other, to be friends with the other, to read the other, or to understand the other. To read someone's writings and find them as different from yourself could provide a powerful affect, and indeed I do not argue that even precludes the ability for the text to form intimacy. But if a text *others* the reader, that readers sense of belonging with the author and readers of the text will be removed.[vii]

In the case of Wynn, this shattering of intimacy led to more instances of her behavior being interpreted in the worst light possible. An entire public was constructed devoted to texts critiquing her. On her channel she conceptualized this in an hour and forty minute video called "Canceling" (2020). Cancel culture, otherwise known as callout culture, is a common phrase in these circles referring to attempts to remove prolific people from positions of power or authority. Wynn defines it as "online shaming, vilifying, and ostracizing of prominent members of a community from other members of that community". Wynn uses the canceling of James Charles, a young gay man who offers makeup tips in the beauty community on YouTube, as an example to describe her taxonomy of tropes in cancel culture. These tropes are the presumption of guilt, abstraction, essentialism, pseudo-moralism/pseudo-intellectualism, and an inability to ever be forgiven. While some of these terms have obvious definitions, abstraction is meant by Wynn to refer to how accusations of wrongdoing, when spread, go from specific and detailed actions to instead generalized accusations. Essentialism refers to the process of criticism transforming from criticism of these actions to instead criticism of the person. Pseudo-moralism/pseudo-intellectualism refers to the conflict between the political desires cancel culture stems from and the named desire of cancel culture: seeing a powerful person covered with a gossamer of moral indignity or intellectual critique.

Wynn then details her own cancellation, which came about from having Buck Angel, a transgender man famous for his work in pornography, collaborate on her video. Angel's views on gender, which were critical of non-binary gender identity, led to Angel being seen critically by transgender publics online. She also discusses "The Aesthetic",

and the negative comments she received after it, as part of the initial cancelling she faced. The two incidents became connected and make it easier for future cancellations of her. After a public was drawn up designed against her, this public can be re-formed quite easily whenever another author wishes to engage against her. The focus on collaboration is also important, as YouTube creators, as previously described concerning Lewis' AIN, exist in a community. Other producers she had collaborated with in the past are asked for their opinion and could become attacked as well if they do not disavow Wynn. To prevent this, Wynn found it necessary to isolate her work and herself from others. This description of isolation, ironically, had previously been described by one of the same content producers whose relationship with Wynn had been attacked.

Lindsay Ellis, in a 2019 convention presentation later published on YouTube, describes how a joking tweet advocating for "white genocide", lead to harassment toward her. White genocide is a far—right conspiracy theory that white hegemony would be overtaken through increased populations of color in white-majority states. Ellis mocked this conspiracy theory through earnest and gleeful appropriation of the term, saying she was happy to see white genocide. This tweet was spread through different communities, creating a public of users incensed by Ellis. This public would then mobilize into action against her, sending her harassing comments and attempting to isolate her from collaborators by using the tweet to mark her socially. These instances reveal how harassment campaigns are effective tools to create a public and lead that public against others online. Aggression in online discussion is a valuable tool, allowing publics to stay together and accomplish goals. Those goals, of course, is to both attack the target of ire and to then have an engaged public that would stay together afterwards for other political aims.

The same Atheist community that Wynn began her YouTube career analyzing has also been discussed by academic scholars, and this analysis focuses on the role of aggression in creating these communities. Stephen Pihlaja, a linguist who focuses on how religion is discussed online, provides a study of aggression in YouTube and how it operates. This focuses on "drama", an emic term used on YouTube "to describe a certain kind of 'antagonistic debate' between two or more users" (2014: 623). Interpersonal relationships became entangled with political disagreements on YouTube, with the audience positioning themselves in relation to channel personalities and the social controversies they become embedded in. The intellectuals lead their publics against each other, for mutually beneficial purposes; the mass can feel connected to the video producer by participating in the conflict through commenting and the intellectuals can garner more attention by having a reason to continually produce content.

In a chapter on conflict in his book, *Religious Talk Online* (2018), Pihlaja argues for the role of economic pressures in the production of controversial and aggressive conflict instead of the more traditional cited factor, anonymity online. Audiences are drawn to drama, and continuing a conflict grants a recurring audience. This is in addition to the obvious remark that conflict in discussion exists both online and offline, especially in religious discussion. Disagreement and debate should not be seen as the ordained trait for online spaces. Conflict is then not just singular acts of aggression, but part of a system

connected to the institutions of both medium and community. Aggressive disagreement situates political discussion and must be understood to approach their operation. The use of disagreement can be seen in Wynn's early videos, but it also can be seen in the tactics and strategies of other content creators.

Eiynah, a pseudonym adopted by a Pakistani-Canadian activist discussing religion, immigration, and gender, relies on this form of aggressive identification to situate herself between ideological groups she does not agree with in order to define her own position and draw the reader to her. She negotiates her desire for secular reforms within southeastern Asia while not wishing to embolden racist discourse and anti-immigration beliefs. The flow between these positions is illustrated through a close reading of some of her past activities online.

In 2014 she published an open letter in *Pakistan Today* addressed to Ben Affleck imploring him to open a conversation about "issues within Islam". This was in response to a conversation between Affleck, Bill Maher, and Sam Harris on the television show *Real Time with Bill* Maher[viii]. Eiynah then published another open letter on her blog in 2016 addressed to Sam Harris, questioning Harris' connection and advocacy for Douglas Murray, who deeply opposed Muslim Immigration. While this second letter adopted a rather positive and apologetic tone toward Harris, in a 2019 podcast episode Eiynah described Harris again, this time in mocking tones and with no attempt at connection with him.

To first set up the context of the original letter, in 2014 on the television show *Real Time with Bill Maher*, Ben Affleck, Sam Harris, and Bill Maher (alongside Michael Steele and Nicholas Kristof), discussed Islam. It is notable here that none of the discussants are Muslims or were ever part of any Islamic tradition. The section begins with Bill Maher arguing that liberal principles might be supported by leftists, but "when you say in the Muslim world, this is what is lacking, then they get upset". Harris agrees, saying that only critiques of Christian theocracy are permissible. At this point, Affleck entered the conversation asking Harris "Are you the person who understands the officially codified doctrine of Islam, you are the interpreter of that?" The discussion continues, with Harris insisting "We have to talk about bad ideas, and Islam is the motherload of bad ideas" and Kristof stepping in to argue that while some Jihadists exist it is important to stand with those advocating liberal ideals within societies instead of condemning the religion.

The conversation ends with Maher arguing that if Filipinos were kidnaping teenagers they should be condemned and Affleck responding we should condemn those committing the kidnapping, not all Filipinos. The emotional tenor of the discussion is rather constant, with Affleck showing disgust and speaking with great passion and the occasional mocking remark, while Maher adopted an incredulous tone and Harris adopting a calm and relaxed state. This emotional landscape colored much of the interpretations of the event, with Harris as rational criticizer against Affleck as offended by the attack on Islam.

Eiynah's response adopts many of the same lines of attack as Maher and Harris against Affleck in her open letter to Affleck, though she filters them through her identity. She writes that "I must say you did me a great disservice that day. Your heart was in the right place, of course… What you really did though, perhaps inadvertently, was silence a conversation that never gets started. Two people attempted to begin a dialogue and you wouldn't even listen." Importantly, her implicit statement here is that Harris and Maher should be having that conversation. Eiynah mentions that "maybe the points Maher and Harris were trying to make are more easily digested when coming from within the community", and further that "if Muslims do not critique their own atrocities, then people on the outside will and their message will not be listened to… It's a vicious cycle, one that can only break if indeed, like Harris said, true reformers are empowered". While this could be construed as a point toward tragic irony, that Harris' critiques because of his subjectivity is ineffective, I view it differently. Even though she argues that it is best for this critique to come from within the community, she still filters this criticism through Harris' voice in this letter. I read this letter then as defining her own position against Affleck and aligned with Harris. She asks her public (both the named Affleck, as this is a letter, and the larger audience of those who read it), to agree with and follow Harris' lead. This public then is defined by opposition to Affleck, but is also defined supportively with Harris, allowing Eiynah to use Harris' public to further supposedly shared political desires.

The next letter (Eiynah 2016), this one addressed to Harris, shows a subtle shift in Eiynah's work. Now, instead of moving against Affleck for silencing conversations, she writes against Harris for his support of Douglas Murray, despite Murray's "awful views on immigration". The letter begins with a small prologue, explaining why it was sent and why it was not published previously. She says she tried to approach Harris directly, but after not receiving any response she decided to release it on her blog. She positions herself as receiving "hate from all sides any way", arguing that while Douglas Murray is loved by many of her audience, her "bar isn't so low that anyone good at critiquing Islam is automatically on my list of favorite people. And yours shouldn't be either."

She still adopts a conciliatory tone to Harris, and this tone is in much greater degree than toward Affleck. Eiynah mentions her past letter to Affleck when writing to Harris, using it as a personal appeal to Harris. She writes she thinks his criticisms of Islam comes from "a compassionate place and from a desire for betterment of the situation for all affected by it". She also argues that while she is a critic of Islam, Islamophobia still exists, and that one can criticize anti-Islam sentiment without becoming an apologist for all Muslim thought. She directly states that "liberal Muslims and ex-Muslims [battle] both Islamists who wish to silence our critique and anti-Muslim bigots who wish to demonize us and our families… it gets harder and harder to walk the tightrope of productive discussion and rational critique".

The remainder of the letter focuses on racist and anti-immigration sentiment in the Atheist community, especially as it relates to Douglas Murray who was brought onto Harris' podcast to discuss migration. Eiynah describes Murray as residing "somewhere on the spectrum of people who otherize and generalize Muslims". As proof she points to

him "saying things like 'why would you allow an increasing number of Muslims into your society'". Eiynah argues that while there are problems with Muslim populations, there needs to be a distinction between liberal Muslims. It is notable that this position still supports Murray and Harris instead of stark opposition; she still believes there is validity to their position: they are taking too hardline a stance. She ends her letter by writing that she still supports Harris, admires him, and that the letter was in full respect. She writes she wouldn't "misrepresent your positions" and that he should know she is "an ally and a fan… who wishes to bridge gaps rather than see them increase".

Three years later, she released a podcast titled "Thoughts on Sam Harris' 'Thoughts on White Supremacy'" (2019) which did not aim to join with Harris, but instead was in direct disagreement against him. The hour-long podcast is a response to Sam Harris' own podcast, called *Making Sense*, and his episode "A Few Thoughts on White Supremacy" (2019). Harris' podcast was packaged with the summary "Sam Harris addresses listener concerns that he uses a 'double standard' to evaluate the relative threats of white supremacy and jihadism". The twenty-minute-long video from Harris discusses white supremacy, especially as it related to the then recent remarks from Trump attacking democratic congresswomen, stating they return to their own country. Harris concludes that despite entertaining and sharing racist ideas, Harris himself does not follow white supremacist ideology, and argues that most white people are not white supremacist, while comparatively more Muslims are Jihadist, and therefore Jihadism, which Harris defines as "murder in defense of the faith", is more prolific than white supremacy, and therefore that is where his double standard comes from.

Eiynah begins her podcast in response to Harris by explaining that she feels writing a response was especially important, as she believed in Harris. Her vocal criticism now is meant to be a restorative measure. She also mentions the salient point that Harris himself has been implicated in bringing his audience directly to white supremacist viewpoints, as part of a larger network connected to the alt-right. This is a rather direct citation of Lewis' "Alternative Influence", where Harris is named and described as one of the video producers who leads their audience to more extreme reactionary producers.

Eiyniah covers the faults in his defense of Trumps comments not being racist (Harris argues Trump's statement, house democratic women of color should return to their home countries, is not racist, as the Irish heard the same. Eiynah's response is a mocking incredulity that Harris is unaware of the well-known history of Irish immigrations relation to whiteness being very fragile until multiple generations) and after this she begins to go into his discussions on his relationship to white supremacy. Eiynah argues Harris has created a strawman of the criticism he receives from anti-racists and discusses how his bias toward the right leads him to find common ground with far-right bigots and not be against white supremacy. While Harris views racism to be totally marginalized in modern U.S. societies, Eiynah brings up several mainstream white nationalists, as well as polls showing support in the U.S. for violence against Muslims, in addition to U.S. Military culture that minimizes Muslim life. Eiynah says that while she agrees there are problems with Islam, and that she has spoken up about these problems,

atheists are now becoming apologists for white supremacy in the west. Eiynah positions herself is an apostate and proud blasphemer and finds Harris' discourse against Muslims disgusting and based in the othering of immigrants. She points to how education of less hardline readings of the Islamic religious texts would lead to less extremists, but Harris views Muslims as universally radical and dangerous.

Especially when Trump is in power alongside white nationalist allies, Eiynah points to how Harris, with his whiteness, is unable to fully comprehend the danger of racism in contemporary society. She says a more objective speaker would point to how their whiteness makes them unable to know how dangerous white supremacy is, which Harris never does. Harris argues only religion is a danger, so until white supremacy becomes a religion itself it can never be equal to jihadism. Eiynah argues that Harris simply moves the goalposts simply to continually argue that racism is not a problem. While Harris brings up how white supremacy can operate as excuse instead of truly held ideological belief, Eiynah says the adoption of white supremacy is still the threat, as agents of white supremacy can convince others to pursue racist goals.

Eiynah uses criticism of first Affleck and then Harris to better define her own position. This strategy works because her conflict allows her own readership to feel moral urgency in her beliefs (as they become endangered by being articulated in the face of opposition) and by defining her beliefs in relation to individuals with much larger audiences (Affleck is a major Hollywood celebrity and Harris is one of the better known Atheist community organizers, so by defining herself in relation to them publics centered around these men can find her own work). While Eiynah positions herself as atheist and an advocate for secularism, she does not try to define her critique of Atheism within Atheist communities. By this I mean that she does not try to break off the larger public of digital atheism away from reactionary racism and into a progressive space, but instead describes the Atheist community from outside of it, attempting to build her own public "from scratch". This is not to say the public Eiynah adopts has never heard of or interacted with Atheist communities before her, but instead to approach the concept that she does not aim to divide the pre-existing Atheist public into reactionary and progressive camps, but instead to define her public as outside of this Atheism entirely. ContraPoints, by contrast, shows how within the larger community of digital leftism differences and divisions between herself and other transgender users leads to divisions. This source of divisions and divides will be further examined in the next chapter, which focuses on Marxist forums online. Aggression and harassment campaigns will be examined in detail in chapter 5, dedicated to Gamergate

Chapter 3

This chapter begins with a discussion of the quite small forum Marxmail. After being described, Marxmail will be contrasted with Marxist communities on Reddit, with the intent of describing how these different websites operate.

In 1994 a group of academics created a small collection of digital mailing lists to discuss social theorists, using resources from the University of Virginia. Eventually a list was made dedicated to the work of Karl Marx, though there was a division within the forum between those interested in exploring cultural concerns of Marxism and economists interested in Marx's approach to value. The story becomes more interesting when the forum began to attract "sympathizers of revolutionary organizations". (Proyect 2004) This led the forum to develop a more explicitly political tone and a major transformation of the mailing list. This transformation and increase resulted in much more vitriolic discussion, and so in 1999 John Proyect, one of the users of the forum, decided it was necessary to moderate posts to the mailing list. The academics who created the larger mailing list this Marxist forum was connected to disagreed with moderation, favoring instead free-speech absolutism, and so the Marx list separated and Marxmail was created. The past archives were moved to the new digital space, and Proyect became the first moderator of the site.

The forum is organized as a mailing list that can be subscribed to through email. Any messages sent to the mailing list would be received by any subscribers, allowing others to respond. These responses are also sent out to other users, allowing others to listen to the conversation. Usually the conversation begins with someone posting an argument that inspires further responses, though sometimes the entire starting post is simply a link to an article the poster wants to discuss. These discussions focus on political concerns as well as theoretical questions of the community's values. For example, there was a minor discussion over the use of "fuck you" on the forum, wondering if the term was too aggressive, reflected a gender bias, or too crass. In response, a few users derived the conversation as ridiculous, which is of course also a position on the values that should be held by Marxmail.

Proyect's histories of the website emphasize aggression and "flame wars". Flame-wars is a term common on the internet describing heavily rancorous conversation between users, especially when the conversation becomes so aggressive that it seems the primary purpose of the discussion is just to provoke emotional responses from one's target. After examining the archives, I am led to wonder if they have been altered to remove these flame wars, or if these "wars" were not as serious or common as implied in those histories. Afterall, moderation of Marxmail stems from the necessity of a response to flame-wars. Most of the history of Marxmail written now, decades after the original founding, reflect the beliefs and desires of the organizers who choose to stay with it throughout the decades. Therefore, believing flame wars were common and required a moderating presence is going to be a common argument among members of Marxmail, as their presence on the website implies consent to be governed by the moderation on the mailing list.

Proyect argues the flame wars centered around discussions of *Sendero Luminoso*, a Marxist insurrectionary group in Peru whose name translates into Shining Path in English and was most powerful in the 1980s and 1990s. Proyect frames this conflict in history as a factional conflict within Marxism, saying "the hard-core Trotskyists and the Maoists began fighting like cats and dogs. The Trotskyists demanded that the Maoists recant for the Moscow Trials, the Popular Front in Spain, and the kulaks, while the Maoists accused the Trotskyists of being CIA agents or worse." Proyect describes himself as above this conflict, arguing it reveals the flaws of both Maoism and Trotskyism and advocating his own version of leftism above this. This version is described on the home page of Marxmail as a "non-sectarian and non-dogmatic approach". It is not of critical importance to understand the specific conflicts between these political beliefs; I am not curious about why the Maoists and the Trotskyists disagree and this thesis is not about that. What is important about this conflict, and why I describe it in this thesis, is to provide an illustrative example of how social conflict operates in digital conflict. While non-sectarian and non-dogmatic seems to imply Proyect and Marxmail are attempting reconciliation with other progressives, creating a community for all, this is too placid an interpretation.

Quoted below, with Italics adopted from the original, is a lengthy discussion Proyect gives describing the discussions of the Shining Path in Marxmail.

> "Eventually, the Shining Path supporters began to fight among themselves over who had the franchise. Adolfo fought with another Peruvian exile named Quispe in a polemic that often focused on who was on Fujimori's payroll. Eventually, this fight spilled over into some serious encounters with the immigration cops as list member Ken Campbell revealed in a Canadian alternative weekly:
>
> *July 4 1996 -- On May 16, I wrote a column about a bizarre, self-described "Maoist magazine" called The New Flag, operating out of New York City -- Queens, to be exact. I treated my "public interview" with one NF editor ("Marcelina" -- a pseudonym) as a joke. This editor had used the "clarity of Maoism" to determine I was a CIA agent. At the time, I just considered the NF as more of the silly people you meet on the net.*
>
> *But it stopped being a joke when, on May 30, Julian Calero, a Peruvian immigrant living and working in Connecticut, was arrested by US feds -- a person the NF had bragged to the net (hence the world) was a member of its "clandestine" Communist organization operating in New England.*
>
> (Campbell disappeared from the original Marxism list shortly after writing this. After rejoining us a few months ago, he had to be removed since it was obvious that he could not abide by the new flame-retardant standards of the list.)" (2004)

The heavily mocking tone should make it obvious there is no attempt at connection with *The New Flag*, though this applies to the New Flag just as much considering Marxmail was viewed as a hotbed of CIA agents. This magazine provides context and contrast of the creation of political communities. Typically, smaller magazines suffer from archives and difficulty in researching them, but despite being

published physically *The New Flag* was archived and preserved digitally through the "People's War in Peru Archive", as *La Nueva Bandera*.

This website is incredibly difficult to access. The "archive" in the title refers to how the website is itself a saved version of a previous digital platform, ostensibly run by Shining Path revolutionaries. The version I can access is connected to a New York progressive website that was also closed sometime in 2014. Luckily, the Internet Archive has screenshots of all the information on the "People's War in Peru Archive", allowing primary documents of how this magazine attempted to build a coalition inside the United States around support for a Peruvian group. Also included in the archives are documents of Shining Path philosophy and brief introductory material to frame the group's actions. Further complicating the archive is that it was mainly produced after the so-called "bend in the road" of their leadership's capture, meaning it is a text written in support of a group after the commonly cited date of the group's destruction. In 1998, the final *La Nueva Bandera* was published, and the initial version of the website was closed

La Nueva Bandera reflects the same writing style and tone as the rest of the content on the "People's War in Peru Archive". They also hold similar views; the biography of Guzmán also stresses that all his comments after his capture cannot be trusted. There is a "Frequently Asked Questions" page which provides basic details on various topics from the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist perspective. The history of Peru, biographies of Marxist intellectuals who have studied Peru, and most interestingly a brief discussion of race and gender in the revolution. The analysis provided in "People's War in Peru Archive" is heavily class-first, arguing that minority ethnic groups and women are all free to join and welcomed in open arms, and that they "voluntarily join the ranks of the revolution, keeping their class interests in mind".

In total this first printing is twelve pages, mostly dedicated to introductory ideas to orient readers into believing *Sendero* was a capable fighting force again. The newsletter expanded heavily after that, though there are only four newsletters on the archives that I can find. The first is not dated, though it appears to be from 1994. There are two later publications in 1997, and the final edition of *La Nueva Bandera* (as far as I can find) is a 1998 "Special Edition". This swan song is the largest of the four, and featured 35 different articles, covering the United States War on Drugs, the role of women in *Sendero*, theoretical considerations of the intellectual in the Maoist revolution, and a celebration of the past decade of Shining Path raids and ambushes. This expansion in scope reflects a changing strategy, trying to use *Sendero* as an organizing principle to critique capitalism in the United States instead of just as outreach attempt to spread information about Peru.

The first *La Nueva Bandera* begins by arguing that *Sendero* has been misrepresented by" pseudo-leftist" academics who have disregarded revolution to instead work to upkeep the status quo. Particular Marxists activists are cited as the cause of this misinformation campaign, with close critique of anti-Sendero articles in a different Marxist paper. The final article is on the leader of the Shining Path, who had been captured by the police and published letters arguing against continually the civil war.

This article argues those letters are fabrications by the Peruvian government as psychological warfare.

It might seem odd at first that this aggressively tiny newspaper would choose to define a counterpublic of not just normative political aims in the United States, but even frames itself as against orthodoxy in American Marxist circles as well. Marxmail does the same, arguing it is, unlike other Marxist spaces, non-dogmatic and encouraging unity. Yet aggression and boundary-making are valuable rhetorical tools in crafting a publics, as previously described in this thesis on both counterpublics and YouTube response videos. While one might be inclined to argue these tools failed, as *La Nueva Bandera* was only able to publish 4 newsletters, it did succeed in terms of speaking to and helping to create a public that still exists today. Going to a much larger Marxist forum will reveal the influence of this public.

Calling itself "the Front Page of the Internet", Reddit receives massive amount of traffic on the internet. Reddit is a central website hub that many different communities branch off from. These different communities are called "subreddits", forums organized around concepts and themes, such as relationship advice or video games. Subreddits are relatively easy to make, allowing very specialized forums to be developed to host communities that are deeply defined. Individuals can become "members" of subreddits, and members will receive messages from a subreddit to the users feed. Each subreddit has its own rules, users, and community culture, despite all of them existing under the larger umbrella of Reddit.

An important difference between Marxmail's mailing listserv and Reddit is how users interact with discussions. On Marxmail, a message is sent to all subscribers, and then those subscribers can read the message and then respond to the message. There are no other interactions allowable. On Reddit, however, each post creates a thread, and under this thread users can comment on the original message. Each of these comments can be replied too, creating several different branching threads off an original post. Further, users can interact with discussions without writing or publishing messages. Each comment, reply, and post can be "voted" on, up or down, by each user. Therefore, the public response to these messages can influence what communication is valued without needing to write their own messages. This works to make it easier for the community to craft its own values and normativity and influences members to write with even greater awareness of the public's reading.

Similar to how Marxmail relies on university server resources to continue upkeep, each subreddit relies on Reddit to continue existing. However, subreddits have an additional advantage besides resource upkeep: a subreddit's brand, through connection to Reddit, will be much larger. As of February 2020, r/Marxism has over 19000 members, while Marxmail in a 2018 history is listed at 1545 subscribers. I choose to examine how these subreddits describe and understand the Shining Path, to draw comparisons with Marxmail and *La Bandera Nueva*. When I last examined these subreddits, last year in April 22, 2019 , the communism subreddit had 90,000 followers, communism101 had 64,200 followers, socialism had 186,000, and even the smallest of the subreddits I look at, DebateCommunism, has an impressive 22,900 followers. These numbers ensure that

there are plenty of threads to examine, which is valuable as none of these forums are particularly about *Sendero*. Because of their size, however, I can get a large sample of discussions about the Shining Path from a variety of perspectives, something missing from smaller forums.

A user on r/communism101, a subreddit dedicated to teaching others about Marxist thought, asked what a Marxist-Leninist, one of the school of thoughts within Marxism, would think about *Sendero Luminoso*. In response, users answered their own persepctives, and some posted links to texts outside of Reddit to describe their positions. Other users who disagree with those articles then posted their own counter-example articles, and others would disagree with all other positions and describe themselves as having a better position.

These threads rely heavily on different sources as a major form of connective tissue. In simillar threads when members are curious how to think about and understand the Shining Path, users will link to articles and documentaries as way of explanation for their own thougts. A Peruvian member posted about violence from the Shining Path, calling it a terrorist organizaiton in a thread where a user wishes to find information dedicated to defending the group, and there are many other threads where users relied on links to create their positions.

These links to other works serve two functions as I see them. First, as a practical concern of answering the question. If someone wants to know why you believe something, it is easy to direct them to someone else who has already justified the beliefs. The second reason for this pointing to other sources is an intrisntic part of the philosphies mobilizing these communities. Reading lists have a long history in Marxist groups, and are even featured as an important heading on the socialism subreddit.

As standard operation, these groups rely on an academic, particularly empircist, understanidng of the social world. This group views itself as built by this perspective, with individuals coming together and building community out of their shared consumption of theory and analysis. The subreddit r/communism has in its rules an illuminating example of this concept in a rule decrying sectarianism:"If criticisms must be made, make them in a principled manner, applying Marxist analysis. The goal of this subreddit is the accretion of theory and knowledge and the promotion of quality discussion and criticism." (Author and Date Unknown) These citations allow the community to view itself as a form of criticism, with "quality discussion and criticism" being the purpose of the public. Therefore, to return to *La Bandera Nueva*, its posts and criticism, despite its own limited interaction with the public, still helped to contribute to a community public. By this I mean, it is not always necessary for an individual text online to be seen by others, but instead simply its exisitence as a text calling out to others in a public is enough. Its influence is felt in how it crafts a historical archive of discussion and discourse, allowing later users to see in the public's past their own positions still exisiting.

These English language forums seem an odd place to discuss Latin American revolutionary groups that have died out decades earlier. The return to *Sendero* is

important because it allows the community to better situate and understand itself. Conversations about *Sendero* in these Marxist communities are less about spreading awareness and support for the Shining Path as it exists today, but instead are opportunities to frame what *Sendero* can teach modern communities about how Marxists should act. Discussing Shining Path in a public forum allows users to help solidify what this community believes, creating normative beliefs and values for the public. The voting mechanism on Reddit facilities interaction between poster and public, allowing the community to increase in size because it opens another layer of interaction with a community.

Users who frame the Shining Path as a moral group in legitimate war and users who view the violence against citizens as abhorrent discuss their positions. Questions of the strategic necessity of violence, and how a Marxist should understand human rights, touch upon Shining Path discourse. Users then return to this group because it allows them to discuss their own beliefs. Members perform this constant return to the common themes of *Sendero Luminoso* within Reddit to allow consensus to be built through the voting system in place.

This chapter has described the role of debate in Marxist groups, as part of a larger point in this thesis about social conflict as an adhesive force in the operation of digital publics. This theme shall be explored further in the next chapter when describing schisms in feminism, but the main focus will be on the role of humor as a binding force within these publics.

Chapter 4

In this chapter I examine feminist communities online through the lenses of humor and divisions. These lenses reflect the most pertinent themes found in the literature by women studies scholars, and these themes allow a greater understanding of how humor and divisions exist elsewhere in political communities online. This chapter explores memes, and how they format and create spaces for feminist organizing through the internet.

As a word, "meme" originated from Richard Dawkins' book, *The Selfish Gene* (1976). Dawkins uses meme as a societal analogue of the biological gene, being replicated by different bodies and spreading throughout a culture. Memes in this understanding are a variety of different social-linguistic forms that are so widely replicated that they exist on their own. For example, the "oriental riff" as a signifier for Asian otherness is a meme within the musical soundscape of the United States. Similarly, the graffiti face coupled with the phrase "Kilroy was here" is also a meme. Meme was adopted to refer to commonly copied and adapted texts, both written and visual, that are spread through digital communities.

In the digital age, memes, stereotypically, began as images of some shared cultural event, usually some media, that have been captioned. These captions could be the true text of the original image or be inserted afterwards. The prototypical example of this meme is a still shot of a movie or television show scene with large bold-face text on both the top and bottom of the image. These are primarily intended to be humorous and rely on both a shared understanding of the original use of the image within the media as well as a knowledge of how the image is understand within the context of the meme once it becomes popular. However, memes can refer to more broad forms of repeated genres used online to mark community presence and craft affective bonds of recognition between those who comprehend the meme.

Humor and the role of affect on YouTube is defended by Gooyong Kim in her 2011 article about Korean women's activism on the platform. She argues these processes are necessary in proper use of YouTube as a platform, and not as warning sign of dangerous political thinking. It, indeed, is a rather common idea throughout the entire internet, as Rentschler and Thrift (2015) discuss in their article about the Binders Full of Women meme. Responses to mainstream media discourses utilize humor through the internet to produce powerful criticism of normative political scripts. Memes are, in this conception, a technique to allow a counter-public to spread beliefs without relying on traditional media gatekeepers.

A particularly useful concept is the "feminist meme event". developed by Samantha Swift and adapted in Clark (2016) to discuss the role of hashtags in activism. Clark uses the term to describe how digital activism responds to mass media, examining #WhyIStayed, a hashtag spread on twitter in response to media discourse after NFL player Ray Rice got engaged to his then-girlfriend after evidence of him committing domestic abuse against her had surfaced. The meme event ended up shifting the media

narrative, leading to more nuanced understandings of domestic abuse among news commenters, according to Clark.

This is a critical thing to note: memes are typically understood as humorous, but they do not have to be. Instead they could be any concept, or genre, that can spread throughout the internet. Memes are spread easily by different members of a public, so publics that adopts the usage of memes allow individuals members to further engage themselves and others with the political desires they hold. Remembering the discussion of voting on Reddit from the previous chapter, it becomes clear this is another way a "mass" can still be engaged with their public and continue production of ideas that resonate with them. A meme can be shared, either in original form or with alterations, and this allows individuals within the mass to show support for a position.

While Clark is positive about the power of feminist memes, Shenila Khoja-Mooliji critiques these meme events in a short 2015 commentary. She argues the hashtag #bringbackourgirls, created in response to the 2014 Boko Haram kidnappings, erased historical specificity and ended up accommodating United States Imperialism. Citing Berlant's concept of Intimate Publics, she argues this intimacy prevents rigorous interrogation and self-reflection in activist spaces. Khoja-Mooliji argues there is a danger associated with memes. She worries that memes, by their function as easily sharable bits of information and discourse, reduce complex topics and allow recruits publics together without dedicated understanding of the subject. This is less a critique of the other authors who support humor than just a logical end-result of their arguments. If the community can bind themselves together based off these arguments through humor, then they can bind themselves to reductive and wrong arguments and ideas.

The intimacy of a counter-public bound together by a wrong belief is still an intimacy. The result is a movement that continues pushing itself forward, despite a lack of innovative or valuable contributions. Indeed, narratives that play into already existing biases of a community are the most likely to be believed, and belief in these narratives leads to them being shared. Still, the power of these meme events is that they allow a large group of people to aggregate together their voice. By combining disparate opinions under a single meme event, the group can effect change. Humor is an especially powerful force in this attempt to bring together groups.

Another meme much remarked upon in the literature is the concept of "ironic misandry", also called "memetic misandry". Ironic misandry is a hyperbolic expression of hate toward men and masculinity. Though the name implies a generic, unmarked "man", many examples of this practice are more specific, such as "white men" or "straight men". Further, this concept is also broad enough to exist outside of feminist spaces and not just referring to men. An ironic hatred of white people, rich people, or even white feminists can commonly be seen. This has been argued to build solidarities, critique culture, and connect a sense of whimsy to political topics (Ringrose & Lawrence 2018). Whimsy and politics obviously imply a connection to the juxtapolitical stance, and though ironic misandry does create and emphasize difference, it also minimizes those differences. Afterall, if someone emphasizes their hatred of men, they imply a shared like and community with non-men. Other scholars have also argued ironic misandry erupts in

response to anti-feminist critiques (Marwick & Caplan 2018). The argument follows that after being characterized as man-hating, and having one's arguments ignored, a feminist adopts the persona of misandry.[ix]

To better explore these concepts, it is valuable to describe the website Tumblr, commonly understood as a central organizing platform for feminists. Tumblr describes itself as a "micro-blogging" website, allowing users to create an anonymous profile, follow the profiles of others, and post entries. Each post can be responded to, "liked", or simply reposted to the user's profile. The website was designed for fandoms, publics organized around shared love for cultural products. Fan-created drawings or stories about characters would be shared throughout the website, allowing easy reposting of content to a user's blog. The website is also well known throughout the internet for its prominent feminist community, usually derogatorily called "Social Justice Warriors", or "SJWs".

An evocative meme showing this phenomenon is the "original vs. un-tumblrized" meme. The original image (accessible at the link in following endnote[x]) portrayed a female video game character that was then contrasted with an image that removed the "Tumblr" aspects of her visual design. These changes include removing hair dye, making her skin paler, changing her eye colors to blue from brown, making her thinner, removing her shirt, and giving her a cross necklace. This image became a meme, repeated and altered, in an ironic and mocking way, with the character portrayed being replaced with famous media characters as well as images of other famous internet memes with and without clothes. This alteration of the original image into meme disputes the original's condemnation of Tumblr as bad and views the original's argument as only a desire for sexually revealing clothes. The original image, however, does not simply construct Tumblr as a place without allowing for sexual suggestiveness[xi] but instead constructs Tumblr design as one that is not rigidly white, Christian, or thin. This image plays off the social understanding of the internet wherein Tumblr is understood as feminist and socially progressive.

Scholars have described Tumblr as a refuge from politically neutered "cool" feminism, allowing Tumblr to provide a sense of solidarity similar to Riot Grrl Zines (Felts 2017), as a conscious-raising platform that utilizes ironic misandry to build community (Connelly 2015), or as an important tool to build community despite lack of intersectional lenses (Ringrose and Lawrence 2018). Researchers have even complicated the notion of Tumblr as a feminist site by studying Anti-Feminist communities on Tumblr (Collins 2015). The existence of feminism and social justice on Tumblr is well-documented, but this community does not exist outside of the fan-focused side of Tumblr. They are deeply inter-connected, with users coming to Tumblr both for social justice content and fan content (Hillman, Proycyk, & Neustaedter 2014).

A publics-based approach to politics understands these communities as fan-relationships. Individual are drawn to political ideologies and become fans of them. They can produce texts and activist projects that draw upon inspiration from this fan-relationship. Further, these political beliefs that the public is bound together around become larger than just the political beliefs themselves. While they provide connective tissues to bring the mass into a community, what keeps the group together is affective

bonds to other members. Further, the splintering of a community continues to envelop these groups. While past research has focused on Tumblr feminism as a unified group, oriented against anti-feminism, that is not wholly accurate. Instead feminism on Tumblr is constantly struggling with itself in terms of which community within the larger concept of feminism a user claims recognition of.

Queer theorist Andrea Long Chu makes this connection more explicitly in a 2018 essay on the history of feminism. She focuses on feminism's relationship to transgender women, focusing on pre-digital contexts. However, when she moves to the modern-day conflict over transgender identities and feminisms, she goes to the realm of the digital:

> "the true battles rage on Tumblr, in the form of comments, memes, and doxing[xii]; it is possible, for instance, to find Tumblrs entirely devoted to cataloging *other* Tumblr users who are known "gender critical feminists," as they like to refer to themselves. But this conflict has as much to do with the ins and outs of social media—especially Tumblr, Twitter, and Reddit—as it does with any great ideological conflict. When a subculture espouses extremist politics, especially online, it is tempting but often incorrect to take those politics for that subculture's beating heart. It's worth considering whether TERFs,[xiii] like certain strains of the alt-right, might be defined less by their political ideology (however noxious) and more by a complex, frankly fascinating relationship to trolling, on which it will be for future anthropologists, having solved the problem of digital ethnography, to elaborate."

I labor under no pretensions of having solved the problem of digital ethnography, or to even have delved into the problem here, but Chu's message should be listened to. She puts in simple language how conflict is the "beating heart" of these counterpublics. Trolling, a form of aggressive communicative practices designed to cause moral and intellectual discordancy in the target, is an aggressive term, and also implies a degree of dishonesty. This implication, a troll usually lies when they attempt to get a rise out of their target and adopts beliefs they do not hold, is not necessary to understand conflict within and between political groups. The common struggle within Feminism over the role of minority groups is commonly decried, and trolling is not the accurate term to describe this practice. Instead, it is my belief that it would be best to understand this relationship as instead one of community, with performances designed to gather a public around the performer.

Susan Loza (2014) approaches twitter, among other digital spaces, as locus of interventions for woman of color to counter feminism that centers on whiteness. Hashtag feminism, which Loza situates as feminism coming from Women of Color, especially African American women, is contrasted with Digital feminism, which Loza argues is primary white women. This division in feminism did not begin with the adoption of digital technologies, but Loza argues feminist of color can now have their voices heard on the internet. Fredrika Thelandersson (2014) takes a different approach to this question, critiquing claims of toxicity in feminist discussion on twitter as a return to "the tired old stereotype of 'catfighting'". She argues the proper application of intersectionality will end this debate and allow feminism to continue marching forward.

However, the problem of division within feminism cannot be solved so easily. To say the community will be bound together as long as it adopts certain guiding principles is to attempt to fashion a public together through those guiding principles. This argument ignores the question of why all digital feminist spaces are not already bound together by intersectionality. To analyze difference in a community, the pre-existence of difference needs to be understood first. It is not a question of lack of information, but instead pre-existing histories of conflicts. If there is toxicity in feminism, it is not to be solved by simply asking everyone adopt the same beliefs, because the division is over what beliefs should be adopted.

Further, conflict does not destroy publics, but instead strengthens them. Having aggression, and factions against each other, allows a constant cycle of text production that allows intellectuals to further connect with their publics. A conflict indeed cannot be said to be settled or finished; so long as the conflict is remembered, the social nature of the conflict places those in the conflicted public to place themselves in relation to those positions. An issue can become more or less pronounced, viewed as "dangerous" and causing division or seen as safe and not critical. But when an issue is raised, all those in the public of the raised question must position themselves with relation to question.

While these issues can be political statements (should pornography be supported or opposed by feminists?), they can also be centered on individuals (should Natalie Wynn be supported or opposed?[xiv]). When an individual becomes the locus of a public's debate, this can lead to especially hostile occasions. Amanda Elliot (2018) argues that women represent an issue on the internet, as women and femininity are constructed as in conflict with public. She reads Gamergate and its campaign against Zoe Quinn as a masculine intimate public attacking femininity due to a desire to keep separate spheres of gender: masculinity in public and femininity in private. Gamergate is so illustrative an example that it makes up the final chapter of this thesis, as capstone to the themes and concepts described so far.

Chapter 5

Gamergate refers to a lengthy period of digital harassment beginning in the mid-2010s focused on the video game industry. This was a reactionary movement against social justice, arguing that social activists were colluding with journalists (and even more conspiratorially the government and academia) to change the culture of video game players. The central tactic of Gamergate was wide-spread dissemination of comments and creation of content designed to overwhelm and socially isolate individuals. This technique both allowed Gamergate to mobilize itself into appearing to be a large and powerful public and this creation of content allowed Gamergate to recruit others into believing their perspective on their targets.

To properly address Gamergate, it is necessary to place into context what gaming cultures were like at the time. One of the most prominent of these, and one of the main websites that hosted and encouraged the development of Gamergate, was 4chan. Created in 2003 in response to moderation and rules on an anime subforum on the website Something Awful, 4chan is an anonymous forum that advertised itself on the lack of moderation or rules. The website is divided into separate "boards" organized around specific topics. Posts made to the website are automatically deleted after a short time, giving 4chan an ephemeral quality. This transient nature has not prevented 4chan from being massively influential in the larger internet community: many memes were invented on 4chan before being then exported throughout the rest of the internet.

Anonymity is a major source of interest for scholars studying 4chan, with examinations of how communities can police and moderate themselves to create internal logics despite the lack of official rules or stable identities among the users (Trammell 2014), how clear identities are not necessary for a website's community to produce prolific content (Bernstein et al. 2011), and how anonymity is 4chans primary political stance (Knuttila 2011). This anonymity is closely related to the website's political stance, at least according to these articles. They all argue the website itself lacks politics, or only follows a politics of anonymity.

Vyshali Manivannan (2014) pushes a deeper understanding of the site's internal logics and beliefs as it relates to anonymity. She argues misogynist language on the website reflects a growing anxiety among 4chan users around inability to continue being anonymous. Toxic and insulting rhetoric is spread among anyone who drops anonymity in an attempt to police their behavior into following 4chan's cultural norms. The politics of 4chan is fluid, but more institutional perspectives argue the only political motive 4chan should follow is the policing of the website itself, with little attempt to move beyond the web-forum. That has not stopped 4chan from hosting "raids" on other websites, organized public actions designed to create chaos, but these raids are usually focused on communities related to gaming, instead of any target. However, Manivannan describes a case that breaks the logic of 4chan's norms, when 4chan users attacked a tween girl for posting publicly on the internet. This girl was not posting on 4chan, but some 4chan users saw her as representative of the same practices that would be attacked on 4chan, leading to harassment towards her. These attacks on outsiders formed one of the conflicts of the website, as some 4chan users think these forms of attacks should only be kept on

the website itself, and not be aimed against non-4chan targets. The founder of 4chan, when asked to create a board solely dedicated to these attacks, described this as "the cancer ruining /b" (/b is one of the forums on 4chan), to great applause (Higgin 2013). Still, despite the efforts to keep 4chan as a closed network, the bigotry employed ironically to reflect being a community member aware of social rules eventually became instead an earnest belief in bigotry. Afterall, the wide-spread presence of these attacks, even if they are viewed as a "cancer", implies some amount of genuine belief in these causes. It is in this social arena that Gamergate was able to be created, which is usually stated to have begun with the planned attacks against video game developer Zoe Quinn.

In 2014, an approximately 10,000-word document was uploaded to the internet by Eron Gjoni, an ex-boyfriend of Zoe Quinn. The lengthy post details his relationship with Quinn, including screen-captures of messages the two sent to each other. Gjoni originally posted this to gaming forums, but after it was deleted from those websites, he created a new website through WordPress to host the document. The most inciting details were of Quinn's infidelities, especially with a writer on a gaming website. This connection led to the development of a truly massive campaign arguing that Quinn had used their sexuality to garner positive reviews for her video games (despite no review existing from any of the men they are alleged to have slept with). This campaign morphed into a larger movement against "corruption in gaming", alongside the common slogan that Gamergate was not about Quinn, but instead about "ethics in video game journalism". This slogan was almost immediately mocked because the organizing principles of the community was against Quinn for their infidelity, becoming a meme shared alongside obviously evil characters from different media.

Quinn's 2017 book, *Crash Override*, focuses on Gamergate as a harassment campaign, describing their hacks of Quinn's online accounts, the abuse sent to them through social media and their phone, and how the abuse spread from Quinn to anyone Quinn associated with, and then further to anyone those people associated with. Natalie Wynn's description of canceling, as covered in chapter 2 of this thesis, shows remarkable similarities to the Gamergate campaign in the spread of accusations and tactics of isolation. The tools and processes developed by the internet are used generally. Unlike Wynn, Quinn faced significantly more dire and widespread attacks, however. Death threats were commonly sent to them, as well as sexually degrading images of Quinn with ejaculate on it. These techniques, as Quinn themselves states, were not first directed against them.

While Quinn acted as flashpoint and caused further progression and development, the tactics of digital hate was already directed toward others, particularly women of color online. These already existing reactionary publics that politically harassed marginalized groups saw in Quinn a propagandic tool to widen their public by connecting anti-progressive communities with gamer communities. Quinn's harassment is then a tool to another end. Quinn refers to YouTube "Inquisitors" in their book: people who used Gamergate to build their own public and community. Citing their words directly is valuable, as they are describing the same sort of "intellectuals" this entire thesis argues exists:

These pundits are community leaders of a sort- they validate feelings and provide guidance. Internet Inquisitors position themselves as authority figures and truth tellers; they confirm the mob's hated, paranoia, and insecurities and direct toward the nearest combustible witch on their radar. They serve as morale boosters, assuring the mob that they are correct, that their path is righteous, and that it's the world that's wrong (Or in this case, the person they're offering up as a sacrifice). Without leadership, a ragtag group of people who make being an asshole their hobby will usually fall apart from infighting or get bored in a short period. It's hard for an anonymous mob to coordinate itself- someone has to do a bit of cat herding…

Why are they so devoted? Some of them toil in obscurity because they're true believers in their pet cause. Their self-righteousness shines through the sweat they work up hollering about internet people. For others, it's a power trip- they thrive on making hate-filled videos that rise high in the attention economy, making their numbers go up: likes, comments, subscribers. But there's another motivation that's not readily apparent to anyone who doesn't know how broken this system truly is.

Money…all that traffic can be turned into revenue. You can make a career from online abuse… in the case of Gamergate, the mob's hero worship of the most popular Internet Inquisitors was as intense as their hatred. While photos of my [Quinn's] breasts covered in slurs and conspiratorial talking points circulated, they were joined by Photoshops of The Ex [Gjoni] as the pope. Classical paintings of war heroes were redrawn to include the faces or avatars of the Internet Inquisitors. When one of them was banned from Twitter for repeatedly revealing where a target lived, the horde adopted his old avatar in a massive show of support (61-63)

Quinn's theorization of Gamergate's formation is strikingly similar to the theorization I gave for online publics in chapter 1: intellectuals are necessary to organize the mass, with these figures being imbued with the political desires and hopes of the public they construct for themselves. Quinn has existed on digital spaces, and consider these spaces deeply important, so their description reflect this expertise. This connection also requires a particularly delicate approach when describing digital communities, as they do not attempt to denigrate the internet itself but instead provides an innovate approach that describes what makes digital spaces valuable instead of only as dangerous spaces in need of intervention.

Digital communities are valuable to those within them. They provide emotional support to members, alongside information and senses of belonging. This affect of belonging is what gives emotional weight to harassment campaigns on the internet: the attacks aim to push the target away from the internet and isolate them from their own belonging. The impetus for these attacks is similarly from the importance of digital spaces, as information spread along these networks is viewed as trustworthy and

valuable, just as information delivered in physical communities is. Communities online then provide important affect and support, even as they are also mobilized to cause harm.

This relationship is best explored with a comparison of Quinn's *Crash Override* with a similar book written from the "perspective of someone within Gamergate", James Desborough's *Inside Gamergate: A Social History of the Gamer Revolt* (2017). Desborough, a game designer, used Gamergate as an opportunity to widen his own appeal, and create an audience for his own work by situating himself against the game industry. The introduction to the text demands a close reading, as it reveals how Gamergate understands itself. The text describes, in detail, a suicide attempt, using this example of extreme emotion as evidence of Gamergate's moral righteousness.

It's the night of the sixteenth of October 2014, and I am sitting in a bathtub with a razor blade—retrieved from a carefully smashed 'safety razor'. I'm cutting into my arm over and over, trying to build the courage up for those two, vertical death slices to my wrists.

Why am I doing this? Why is blood running down my arm from cuts to my shoulder, bicep and forearm? Why am I in such a state of despair?

Because of Gamergate.

No, I'm not a woman in tech, 'cruelly bullied' and 'marginalized' because of my ovaries.

I'm not a brave 'white night' standing up for some cyberpunkish damsel in distress.

I'm not an 'entirely innocent' games' journalist under assault from legions of paranoid anonymous, online trolls.

No, I'm not a victim of Gamergate- which is already being painted as an online misogynist hate mob.

I'm part of Gamergate.

I want to kill myself mostly because I suffer from severe clinical depression and bouts of suicidal ideation, but this particular incident has been triggered- not by Gamergate- but by its opposition.
It has been set off by the crushing weight of disappointment that comes from a whole community of creative people letting me down; personally and professionally.

I want to kill myself because hobbies I consider myself a maker and fan of- games, fiction, comics, geek media in general- have betrayed their audience and their right to creative freedom.

I want to kill myself because people I once respected and trusted are uncritically buying into bullshit and letting corruption and censorship slide. They're ending friendships and blacklisting writers, artists and developers because they tacitly support censorship, corruption and debunked sob stories. Meanwhile I stand for free expression, ethical media and skepticism.

I want to die because this community, one I saw come together in the 80s and 90s to fight The Satanic Panic and Jack Thompson's crusade,

is now the one prosecuting a new moral panic. They're calling everything and everyone sexist, racist, misogynistic, bigoted and a host of other damaging buzzwords. They're trying to censor the very creativity that they once defended. The self-same creativity that I depend on to make a living, that they depend on to make a living. It's a masochistic act of self-destruction, and they're threating to take a lot of other people down with them. (1-3)

Desborough utilizes an easy rhetoric device here, using his suicide attempt as evidence of trauma and abuse he faced, with emotional pain operating as proof of moral righteousness. Criticism of Gamergate becomes framed as abusive, "damaging buzzwords", and also acts of censorship that aim to destroy the gaming community, much like the named "Satanic Panic" of the 1980s. The antagonists Gamergate fights against, 'women in tech', 'white knights', and 'games journalist', who are usually portrayed as victims, are here portrayed as aggressors, with Gamergate supporters as the true victims. Yet, despite taking an opposite stance to Quinn's book, both use casual language and personal testimony to describe Gamergate and their position within it. Further, both attempt to describe 'internet culture' for an audience assumed to be rather ignorant of the specifics. Finally, both describe the internet as a site of potential, granting social connections to those who feel out of place within their physical communities.

These connections should not be too shocking, Quinn themselves identities as once being a "Teenaged Shitlord" (175) when arguing that, in an alternative universe, they could see themselves becoming a member of Gamergate, as in the past they would join into these harassment campaigns. This harassment campaign, which was attempting to uphold an imagined sense of purity around nerd communities, was aimed at someone who had all the necessary bona fides to count as a member. Quinn's targeting came about because of the "zoe post", but it continued because those who organized the harassment campaign were able to continue producing content to be consumed off of Quinn's life. The mass organized around Gamergate might have joined that public because of ire toward Quinn, but the public called to Gamergate was more mobilized by desires for a stable and powerful 'Gamer' identity. By calling this identity into threat, individuals could harass Quinn to produce ties within and solidify a "gamer" public.

Adrienne Shaw, feminist video game scholar, discussed the gamer identity in a 2013 article. She defines the gamer identity "in relation to dominant discourses about who plays games, the deployment of subcultural capital, the context in which players find themselves, and who are the subjects of game texts". To be a gamer then, is to be known as someone who plays games, to be able to gather cultural cachet in gaming communities, to be around people who game, and to be represented within video games. After delivering this definition, she argues that the common progressive approach to gaming, increasing representation of marginalized groups to make these publics more accommodating, is a failure of gaming studies.

Representation should exist "outside the market logic of the term itself"; instead of attempting to have marginalized groups buy their way into normativity, there should be a radical shift of understanding what gaming is. Instead, gaming should be understood as a normal process, and disassociated with the gamer identity. Much in how movies can

be understood and read without needing to create a special identity of "moviers", gaming likewise can be approached without needing to reify a special identity with exclusive enjoyment of the medium. Her interviews of players of video games shows that "gamer" is associated with consumption and masculinity, not simply being an audience member of video games.

This article was part of a larger conversation about the "death of gamer identity", arguing that video games were becoming a normative public and were no longer counterpublic signifiers of anti-normativity. This argument became indexed with Gamergate targets, with the Gamergate public believing in a conspiracy to destroy the gaming community. Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw (2015) describe the harassment they faced from Gamergate after a "fishbowl" conversation among academics online arguing for intersectional approaches in video game studies. The scholars' government funding led to an even greater implication and far reaching theory of corruption between journalism, academia, and the state to destroy gaming. These theories, Chess and Shaw argue, is a form of counterknowledge, even if it doesn't totally fit the common model of counter-normativity:

> On one hand, the process of disarticulating and rearticulating historical moments and current events nicely sums up how the conspiracy theory is built and spread. On the other hand, it is difficult to understand those involved in the Gamergate movement as 'persecuted'—the movement is inhabited by people who, by and large, are representations of the power structures that have been built into gaming culture for decades

This perceived sense of persecution is what leads to conspiracy thinking, they argue. I would add this sense of persecution is what grants Gamergate a sense of community- if "gaming" was not threatened, being a gamer would not become endowed with political weight.

Paolo Ruffino (2018) focuses on the relation between the academy and Gamergate, conducting a close reading of the argument that scholars are "parasites to gaming". Gamergate argues that academics do not produce anything for gamers, but instead only take information and context which is sold to others. The "truth" of gaming remains invisible (or, as I would put it, the affective bonds between gamers through shared consumption of gaming is not focused on, with scholars instead looking at harassment. This lack creates a sense of persecution for self-described gamers). Ruffino argues academics should be parasites, examining and critiquing gaming to push the community toward social justice. This vision of the relationship between academic critique and change, though slotting in nicely to Gamergate nightmares, obfuscates the difficulty in these connections becoming fact. Academics are at risk of worsening situations for marginalized groups than aiding them, as Quinn describes in a chapter dedicated to the ethics of Academia approaching gaming culture. They write that

> someone speaking about their experiences publicly, whether it's through social media, blog posts, or interviews, should not be treated as if they are automatically consenting to anything an academic might want to do with

their words. The nature of online abuse centers on violating the target's boundaries and ability to control their digital life; without centering the consent of the people whom researchers study, research itself can be another violation. (165)

When academic texts spread through the internet, the text is as likely to provide additional context to urge on harassment than slow it. Assistance from institutions such as higher education and the government provide greater evidence of a wide conflict between groups, which allows Gamergate to treat its target as powerful figures being brought down. As these publics are counter-normativity, evidence of institutional support for antagonists can help Gamergate more than the intended recipient of support. This relates to a central theme I argue for- online political communities define themselves relationally by what they are not. When this is added to a counterpublic stance, support from others for an opponent operates as counterpublic bona fides.

The "internet inquisitors" that Quinn describes can use support for Quinn as fodder for additional texts, allowing them to continue production of Gamergate publics. These audiences are the same that Wynn defined her YouTube Channel, ContraPoints, against when she first began it. Early on her career, she would craft "shrines" to Gamergate targets, pretending to worship them in "satanic" rituals drawing on the same witch rhetoric Quinn uses in *Crash Override*. The reactionary viewpoints espoused by Gamergate is tied to the same Atheist creators that Eiynah defined herself against.

These disparate communities I describe in this thesis are not as disparate as they appear: they are connected. The cultural tools and genres developed on the internet are shared amongst the many communities present there. Even 4chan, dominated as it is by United States politics and users, was heavily inspired and influenced by Japanese websites and cultural forms. The internet, and digital communities, are not more "democratic" forms or technologies, and they should not be understood in that way. particular voices and users dominate discussion and the form discourse takes. In addition, to think of digital communication as a democracy, where all voices can speak, is to ignore the most critical difference digital spaces have to physical ones: anonymous viewers are totally unknown. Digital communities operate as republics, with avatars of viewpoints being watched. The conflict between these representatives is what forms political dialogue, and it is from these representatives that digital communities form. These personalities and users, not the anonymous mass, provide the binding force in a digital public. It is the "inquisitor" that drives forward digital campaigns, not the "mob" they inspire.

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[i] Intellectual is not used here to imply great intellect or formalized rhetoric to those it is applied to. An intellectual in this thesis is only meant to mean those who organize together social groups and help to plan what this social group is to do.

[ii] This exact process was described on page 62 of Zoe Quinn's book *Crash Override*.

[iii] This "Classical Liberal" construction is typically used to portray the producer as centrist and non-radical, with positions drawn oppositional to the left and right wing of politics. Typically, this construction is critiqued for its relation to right-wing ideologues who choose to obfuscate their true aims by claiming centrist desires.

[iv] A concept to be remembered through Ellis' video on YouTube described in Chapter 1

[v] To be totally accurate, this was a return to an already existing YouTube channel she had stopped producing videos for. As she removed all of her previous videos before beginning again, and there is very little overlap between her audience then and her current one, it is best to imagine the current channel as totally separate from the original.

[vi] She has over 750000 subscribers to her personal channel and multiple journalistic profiles of her work.

[vii] Every authoritative statement requires a small amount of clarification, as does this one. The use of irony or camp provides an obvious example of a text that others the reader while still providing a sense of belonging and intimacy by those who read the text otherwise, understanding the joke or adopting pleasure from the text ironically. In the case of digital communities, this is not in fact a rare occurrence, and is related to trolling.

[viii] The times I give for this discussion comes from the link given below, of the official YouTube channel for *Real Time*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vln9D81eO60

[ix] It would be rather irresponsible to not mention here that similar arguments apply to ironic forms of bigotry applied toward minority communities online. The archetypical example of this is someone saying homophobic or racist slurs, arguing this is a joke, and after being critiqued embracing more racist and homophobic views. These represent similar enough strategies, in so far as the distinction between ironic support of a position and earnest support is quite difficult to investigate in digital spaces.

[x] https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1336757-original-vs-un-tumblrized

[xi] A somewhat Ironic sentiment, as Tumblr is famous for its early hosting of pornographic and sexually explicit images. This has only recently changed, with Tumblr's owners deciding to limit nudity for ease of advertisers.

[xii] Doxing refers to a form of organized harassment where personal and private details of a digital user's life is posted publicly online by someone else, typically to shame or threaten them

[xiii] TERFs is an acronym meaning Trans-exclusionary Radical Feminist. While it is typically used by outsiders (these individuals prefer the term gender-critical), the acronym accurately describes their position- that feminism can not and should not respect transgender individuals, and feminist beliefs should disregard them and instead focus on birth sex.

[xiv] Wynn, and this concept, is discussed in further detail in Chapter 1