UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Niggas on the Internet:

Scenes of a Black Social Life

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

Requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Film and Television

by

Ariel Stevenson

2022

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Niggas on the Internet:

Scenes of a Black Social Life

by

Ariel Stevenson

Doctor of Philosophy in Film and Television

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Shelleen Greene, Chair

This dissertation, "Niggas on the Internet: Scenes of a Black Social Life," considers cases across TikTok, Instagram, and the now-defunct Vine to investigate how Black women and girls have contributed to the broader culture, syntax and visual language of the Internet from 2013 to the present. In this project, I look at memes, videos, and caption posts to investigate how people, Black or not, "pass" through a deep knowledge and masterful utilization of Black cultural logics. I interpret specifically racialized signs in audiovisual media online, to analyze racial performance and the (im)possibility of Black self-determination toward an ethic of fabulation and redress for Black digital creation. While guided and inspired by contemporary theories in Black (feminist) studies, this dissertation analyzes the cultural production of Black women and girls online by merging Black (feminist) studies with media studies, Internet studies, and production studies. I

do this in order to further my argument that Black women and girls have become a crucial pathway in navigating the Internet —a, or even *the*, way to get into the Internet.

The dissertation of Ariel Stevenson is approved.

Steven Franklin Anderson

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2022

DEDICATION

This goes out to all my niggas in the whole wide world.

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Introduction: Because the Internet…

The video, or rather the Vine, starts with a sort of tinkling sound of a beat, something like the sound that my Aunt Sandra's 1990-something Honda Civic made when you left a door open with the key in the ignition.[1] A young Black boy is seen from a lower angle as the camera tilts and rotates around a 90-degree angle to an upright position. The boy, self-identified as Semi, remains in the foreground as a clear blue sky, suburban cul-de-sac, and unknown friend are revealed through the movements of Semi's camera, a crescent pan that moves vertically. As he moves the phone he drops a simple yet amazing rap: "I'm Semi/ I stay automatic/ (M)oney, (a)dd, (TH)en (M)ultiply/ I call that MATHM-mathematics." The layered approach to this rap, in creating an acronym but also comparing ones' self to a semi-automatic rifle seems almost too good to be true in such a short sequence of only six seconds. The reference to guns in a suburban setting would not seem to match except for the fact that this is America and the sight of a semi-automatic gun is as American as theft. But what stands out to me about this Vine is the presentation of that mix (suburbs, Black youth, playing in the street, rapping) as an everyday confection. Because it is. Aside from the mastery of language this is a regular facet of a Black social life. The contrast of the dainty beat against gun references and the suburban backdrop makes this Vine a quintessential classic. The rap itself is so good that it made some of 2013's best rap lists and best music video lists.[2]

Vine died on October 27, 2016. That is, Vine, a short-form video hosting service known for its six-second looping videos, was announced as being "discontinued" by Twitter on October

[1] Halalblackguy, "I'm Semi I stay automatic VINE," YouTube video, 0:06, December 5, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFVK1cd9P2k

[2] Al Shipley, "An Interview With Semi, the Vine Famous Rapper Behind 'Another 6 Sec Rap'," *Noisey*, February 21, 2014, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/6wkgw6/an-interview-with-semi-the-vine-famous-rapper-behind-6-sec-rap

27, 2016.[3] This took place on a day in which I was to present in a course called "Issues in Electronic Culture" led by Professor Steve Anderson. This came as a shock to me as the company itself was largely responsible for the growth and development of a number of trends, jokes, and even vocabulary that were immediately wrested away from creators for corporate marketing. While the app was well known for its patented looping feature, the way that video creation, specifically on phones, evolved to take advantage of the short format was also quite exhilarating. To me, the most interesting, innovative, and indispensable aspects of Vine came from its Black users. From live coverage of Ferguson to perfectly comedic usages of six seconds, the creation of legible Black visual aesthetics and slang carried a particular heft in my mind — comparable to that of Black Twitter. Unlike Black Twitter, however, Vine was a seemingly understudied repository of Black online creativity. As I began to shift my focus to the incongruous fact of Vine's popularity and Twitter's disinvestment, I began to formulate the question: what power does the Black content creator hold in the business of the Internet?

Furthermore, considering the quick reception and veneration of Semi's "M.A.T.H." Vine, I noticed that the Black women and girls who bless the Internet with their, at once, spectacular and quotidian creative genius don't often get the quick recognition of those products. These products are more often than not completely associated away from them and takes weeks, months, years for them to get the credit for producing new ways of thinking, being, and feeling for everyone else. Following this, I began to wonder: what power does the Black woman or girl creator wield in shaping the aesthetics *and* business of the Internet? As Catherine Knight Steele says "[b]ooks about race are often about Black men, books about technology are often about

[3] Janko Roettgers, "Twitter is Shutting Down Vine," *Variety*, October 27, 2016, https://variety.com/2016/digital/news/twitter-vine-shutting-down-1201902457/

white men, and books about feminism are often about white women."[4] This project is about Black women and girls.

This dissertation, "Niggas on the Internet: Scenes of a Black Social Life," considers cases across TikTok, Instagram, and the now-defunct Vine to investigate how Black women and girls have contributed to the broader culture, syntax and visual language of the Internet from 2013 to the present. In this project, I look at memes, videos, and caption posts to investigate how people, Black or not, "pass" through a deep knowledge and masterful utilization of Black cultural logics. I interpret specifically racialized signs in audiovisual media online, to analyze racial performance and the (im)possibility of Black self-determination toward an ethic of fabulation and redress for Black digital creation. *Critical fabulation* is a term offered by Saidiya Hartman to describe a methodology of de-centering the status of the "event," its authorization and authority in tow, to imagine what might have been, *despite* the imposition of "fact" and "truth" upon narratives of Black life as captured by archival practices.[5] The use of fabulation and redress as guiding modes of digital analysis is a critical intervention in my work, as I make the quotidian media creation of Black women and girls central to analyses of Black sociality, digital or otherwise. I fabulate the conditions that may have led to the creations that I analyze in order to provide some mode of redress.

This project contributes to studies that highlight what Terrion Williamson calls "black social life."[6] As Williamson so eloquently states, "to speak of black social life is to speak of this

[4] Catherine Knight Steele, *Digital Black Feminism*, (New York: New York University Press, 2021): 1.

[5] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no.2 (June 2008): 11.

[6] Terrion Williamson, *Scandalize My Name: Black Feminist Practice and the Making of Black Social Life,* (New York: Fordham University Press): 11.

radical capacity to live — to live deeply righteous lives even in the midst of all that brings death close…"[7] I hold the beauty of Black creative output in the same time that I contend with the violence of theft, theft of self-expression and acknowledgement. A central aspect of the Black social life I outline is a tension between interracial developments between Black and non-Black people and also the intramural activities of Black people. I find that this tension can best be sifted through by focusing on Black women and girls as "neoliberal white everyday supremacist modes of domination" depend on "the symbolic erasure and degradation of Black female bodies on our social media platforms."[8] Black women and girls provide a lot of creative heft to social media content, form, trends, and language, and by focusing on who is excluded and denigrated, I provide a different vision of the history of social media that is necessary for our understanding of social media, gender, and race.

Focusing on Black sociality allows me to expand upon work within Black digital studies that exposes the mechanisms of erasure that have largely left Black people out of the narrative of the Internet's technological growth and creative development. Specifically, I am thinking of work by Ruha Benjamin, André Brock, Charlton McIlwain, Safiya Noble, and Catherine Knight Steele.[9] My work wouldn't have a place without their work, for which I am extremely grateful. My project, instead, privileges an analysis of form over impact to assert the stakes of the content's materiality, retaining Black aesthetic and creativity as central in any consideration of

[7] Williamson, *Scandalize My Name,* 9.

[8] Aria S. Halliday, "Miley, What's Good?: Nicki Minaj's *Anaconda,* Instagram Reproductions, and Viral Memetic Violence," in *Girlhood Studies,* 11 no.3 (Winter 2018): 79.

[9] Specifically, the texts that I am thinking of Ruha Benjamin's *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*, Andre Brock's *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*, Charlton McIlwain's *Black Software: The Internet and Racial Justice, From the Afronet to Black Lives Matter*, Safiya Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, and Catherine Knight Steele's *Digital Black Feminism*.

the Internet and its attendant substance. I, thus, posit that Black women and girls have become a crucial pathway in navigating the Internet — a, or even *the*, way to get into the Internet. I will consider how the utilization of these creative sources is necessary to the proliferation of a profitable Blackness. The content on these sites and apps are understood as being intellectual property of the creators of the software, not the creators of the content itself, and oftentimes jokes and words become removed from their racial and cultural contexts to become palatable commodities to sell more to the (non-Black) masses.

Furthermore, centering on Black women and girls creates the possibility for the (re)creation of a world that is unburdened by the oppression we face as the unthought. Hortense Spillers indexes the impossibility of the Black woman (to say nothing of the Black girl) by stating that Black women become chaos, all that stands against order, ourselves. I take her development and revelation of the Black woman as chaos as the basis for my centering on Black women and girls. She states:

> "Having encountered what they understand as chaos, the empowered need not name further, since chaos is sufficient naming within itself. I am not addressing the black female in her historical apprenticeship as an inferior social subject but, rather, the paradox of non-being. Under the sign of this particular historical order, black female and black male are absolutely equal. We note with quiet dismay, for instance, the descriptive language of affirmative-action advertisements, or even certain feminist analyses, and sense once again the historical evocation of chaos: The collective and individual 'I' lapses into a cul-de-sac, falls into the great black hole of meaning, wherein there are only 'women,' and 'minorities,' 'black,' and 'other.'"[10]

By centering on Black women and girls, I reveal how we are not, at the moment, subservient to the "social subject" or human, but rather the very manifestation of chaos. Moving Black women and girls to the center remaps, backing out of cul-de-sacs and reversing from black

[10] Hortense Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words" in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003): 156.

hole to supernova to star, the very routes of categorization we have.[11] We know nothing about these categories if we can not grasp the always imploding being that is the Black woman or girl. This focus if seen all the way to the end, inevitably leaps to the inarticulate and dissolves woman, minority, Black or other. There we find everything and nothing. In the following sections, I route us through the central Black feminist texts that inform my understanding of worlding and temporality. I connect these to how Blackness has been understood in relation to the digital, which encapsulates the Internet, social media, and technology. Finally, I end with a breakdown of the subjects of the chapters that comprise this dissertation.

Black Feminist Time

Exploitation of Black creation by white corporations is nothing new, but is accelerated by our current digital culture which largely relies on the de-centering and emptying of Black subjectivity from Black online invention, to make it more legible at the register of mimetic reproduction and performance. Rather than limiting my analysis to exploitation, I consider *what* Black people create online. Specifically: what does this content look like, sound like, and what are its modes of travel across sites? As a Black feminist scholar, I argue that antiblackness has conditioned the field of media studies so thoroughly as to lead to its impoverishment, such that Black sociality is depreciated, invisibilized, and un-studied. I argue, then, that any rigorous engagement of the Internet — its content, racial logics, and algorithms — *must* center Black sociality at its genesis. How is that sixteen-year-old Kayla Newman, seated in the front seat of her mother's car, can *animate* the phrase and signifier "on fleek" in a 2014 Vine, yet, at present, her name, originality, and sociality are all but detached from its contemporary digital invocation?

[11] With regards to supernova, I am thinking with Philana Payton's dissertation, "Celestial Bodies: Black Women, Hollywood, and the Fallacy of Stardom."

My work seeks to create the conditions for redress for creators like Newman by making a Black feminist intervention into digital media studies, imagining a future where they are afforded the recognition of the genius of their work and are appropriately regarded.

This dissertation is also built on a set of provocations. I believe that Black people are the most prolific and influential creators on the Internet. Thus, my main argument is that Black people's creative output on the Internet has created the foundational set of logics by which to navigate the Internet. All websites and apps are situated around a set of logics you must use and understand to "get" anything from the app. I would further assert that Black women and girls have taken the scaffolding of these platforms and built upon them through language and a socially enforced understanding of how one is seen and, possibly, surveilled. A certain legibility in Black language and culture (African-American vernacular English, clips from Black sitcoms, previous interactions in Black sectors of these apps, etc.) is necessary to be able to engage with the broader Internet's culture. As Professor Lauren Michele Jackson has stated "we know that internet culture depends on Black people" to create the best jokes and words.[12] Interestingly enough, this certain requirement of learning how to "pass" through the language of Blackness has also become something that inevitably disrupts the reality of Black identity building on the Internet. Furthermore, I follow Andre Brock's assertion that "Black folk have made the internet a 'Black space' whose contours have become visible through sociality and distributed digital practice…"[13]

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[12] Laur M. Jackson, "The Blackness of Meme Movement," *Model View Culture*, March 28, 2016, https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/the-blackness-of-meme-movement

[13] Andre Brock, *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*, (New York: New York University Press, 2020): 4.

In Nicole Fleetwood's *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness,* she presents ways that "blackness becomes visually knowable through performance, cultural practices, and psychic manifestations."[14] Her main assertion is that Blackness troubles concepts of vision in Western discourse. I build on this as I assert that Blackness has been the way of seeing online and that this vision is predicated on a mastery of a Black visual language. Fleetwood argues that Blackness can be knowable through a singular performing subject. The subjects in her book cover art objects, hip-hop memorabilia, music videos, and photography. Her coda considers how Michael Jackson was publicly mourned following his untimely death. However, she doesn't turn her ideas of performance to social media in a significant way. But I take as an initial stance her provocation of thinking about the visuality of Black subjects in public, as well.

Public and private are concepts that are deeply important to visual studies, Blackness, and social media. The Internet.0 provided a series of blogs, seemingly floating islands of personal musings acting as digital diaries. Social media took over these logics where your "profile" on Facebook, Instagram, tumblr, and Twitter could be understood as your privates turned outwards. This distinction is relevant to my project, but such a focus on the public often erases the interior. Historically, Black people have been denied the privileging of an interiority through a denial of subjectivity and individuality. Tina Campt and Kevin Quashie provide two texts that begin to fill in these gaps by taking up ideas of quiet. Kevin Quashie's *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* is an exploration of "what a concept of quiet could mean to how we

[14] Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness,* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2011): 6.

think about black culture."[15] By separating expressions of resistance from Black existence, Quashie opens up the possibility to explore the interior of the human individual who happens to be Black. Quiet, here, is not apolitical, still, or without social value.[16] If we consider these concepts of quiet and interiority, we can understand that Black expressions on the Internet are worth a consideration that is not solely based on exploitative readings. They can be read as fun, everyday happenings that create joy in the life of the creators and consumers, as well. This concept of the quiet as it relates to a formulation of the everyday that builds on Black feminist thought is essential for my formulation of analysis of the everyday fact of being online.

Tina Campt builds on this by considering moments of quiet images. Campt looks at identification photography across a set of archives of the African diaspora to consider a number of questions. She asks, "what is the relationship between quiet and the quotidian?"[17] Ideas of quiet, quotidian, and refusal are foundational to understanding images of those who are dispossessed but it is also essential in thinking about the futurity of Black subjectivity. Campt theorizes that the quieted focuses are what make up the grammar, the tense, for thinking of a Black feminist future. *Tense* here has a double meaning as it can mean *a building block for grammar* but also *to think of the tensing of a musculature in a still image*. To fully develop her brilliant understanding of futurity I must quote it at length. She states:

"The grammar of black feminist futurity that I propose here is a grammar of possibility that moves beyond a simple definition of the future tense as *what will be* in the future. It moves beyond the future perfect tense of *that which will have happened* prior to a reference point in the future. It strives for the tense of possibility that grammarians refer to as the future real

[15] Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture,* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 2012): 3.

[16] Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet*, 6.

[17] Tina Campt, *Listening to Images,* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017): 4.

conditional or *that which will have **had to** happen.* The grammar of black feminist futurity is a performance of a future that hasn't yet happened but must."[18]

This theorization of a Black feminist futurity is based on listening and hearing the quiet movements of everyday imagery and as such is essential to considering why a Vine or an Instagram post that anyone can scroll past is as necessary to a Black future as policy, structural change, or the, even more eventual, look of justice. This project moves by the future real conditional.

I return to Terrion Williamson for an example of how to consider all aspects of a Black social life. Williamson centers Black feminism as a practice that is generative to Blackness across a number of oft-dismissed topics such as reality television, teenage mothers, and sexuality within the church. The focus on the cultural happenings of Black women provides a different set of iconographies that continues the work of practicing understanding stereotypes of Black women in line with Black feminist scholars such as bell hooks, Michele Wallace, and Patricia Hill Collins. This meditation on the "scandal of representation" that always haunts Black women furthers conversations around how Black feminism and Black social life theory work in unison.[19]

Using Hortense Spillers' concept of the intramural, Williamson masterfully moves through several pathologized aspects of Black feminine social life to consider the possibility for radical change in imagining Black sociality. Williamson begins with 'a story,' situating parts of her personal life with the texts' topics as a political move that elevates the lived experiences of the Black woman who "both is and causes a scandal within the field of representation."[20]The

[18] Campt, *Listening to Images*, 17.

[19] Terrion Williamson, *Scandalize My Name: Black Feminist Practice and the Making of Black Social Life*, (New York: Fordham University Press): 132.

[20] Williamson, *Scandalize My Name*, 19.

mobilization of "autoethnography" by Williamson throughout situates the embodied with the social as a political project to privilege the lives of Black women in academic study. Indeed, a focus on the social lives of Black women inevitably juts up against the contemporary concern with Black social death theory, or Afro-pessimism. Williamson manages to acknowledge and rehabilitate components of the arguments around Afro-pessimism by first stating that her definition of Black social life is not Afro-pessimism's opposite, as Afro-pessimism is rightly concerned, with "the modern world system('s)" view of Black people.[21] Instead, Williamson is concerned with how Black people see their lives as this privileges "the vantage point at which it is lived."[22] These considerations of the alternate iterations of Black sociality in areas that are considered to be the Black woman's are central to Williamson's project of expanding Black studies' topical scope. I follow her on this journey as I also find myself increasingly needing to engage with Afro-pessimism in order to further expand the areas where Black feminism has not been able to go. Williamson's careful and loving approach in *Scandalize My Name* makes a strong case for the necessity to reconsider the alternative modes of sociality as they relate intimately to what is considered "appropriate" within academia, as well. The "irreducible sociality of black life" is presented in this text as a whole and necessary field of study which will undeniably shift the topics presented in future instances of the practice of critical race theory and more specifically within Black feminist thought.[23] *Scandalize My Name* asks that we consider

[21] Williamson, *Scandalize My Name,* 15.

[22] Williamson, *Scandalize My Name,* 15-16.

[23] Williamson, *Scandalize My Name,* 19.

"the possibilities of the extralegal, the amoral, the improper, the uncontained, and the dislocated" in order that we may begin to alter institutional topics and types of knowledge.[24]

Black Is, Black Ain't

But who or what are Black people? Within this dissertation, I am looking at Black people, that is people of the African diaspora, who are located within the United States. It is almost impossible to really define Blackness as the definitions have shifted over time, splintering into many different genealogies. Blackness seems easily seen by the visual phenotypical fact of Blackness but "up close, Blackness evanesces, revealing no one shared quality that justifies such frequent and assured use of this signifier."[25] While this assertion may seem to destabilize the foundation I lay for this project, I believe that it actually strengthens it. Thinking of Blackness phenomenologically, Blackness becomes immense, "simply too many things to be anything but everything."[26] And I mean everything literally. By focusing on not just Blackness but the moments where Blackness and femininity brush against and interpenetrate each other, I am meditating on an ushering in of the End of the World. Black feminist studies allows me to consider different theorizations of time and subjectivity. I am specifically grateful for the work of scholars who are challenging and rearranging ideas around the "human" and the human's attendant rights and mode of being that construct the World, as such. Sylvia Wynter and the students of her work (Katherine McKittrick, Denise Ferreira da Silva, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, Candice Chuh and Bedour Alagraa) have informed my belief that any revolution that would

[24] Williamson, *Scandalize My Name,* 134.

[25] Michelle M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015): 2.

[26] Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 3.

resolve the oppression Black women and girls face must be born out of an attention to dismantling the humanist theories that support and sustain the idea of the universal human subject which informs such concepts as time, space, reason, justice, and truth, among many others. Additionally, Black feminist studies makes clear the necessity of considering the Black female figure as the litmus test for the structures of humanity and animality, rendering Black female flesh "…as the limit case of 'the human' and its matrix-figure."[27]

Following this understanding, Blackness comes to be through slavery and must be understood as a "total (past, present, and future) value" that was created by "the expropriation of the productive capacity of the conquered lands and enslaved bodies."[28] Blackness holds a radical capacity to rip apart category that I *must* follow and explore. As Denise Ferreira da Silva says:

> "…such an understanding of total value requires a suspension of the view that all there is is in Time and Space, as appropriated in by the tools of universal (scientific) reason, the radical force of Blackness knowing and studying announces the End of the World as we know it. My point is that the known and knowable World and our critical intellectual tools modeled after the Category of Blackness consistently reproduce the effects of efficient causality. Stuck in the always already there (of) Thought- as reproduced in concepts and categories- where the Category of Blackness (like other social categories), because it refigures formalizations (as laws, calculations, or measurements), arrest's Blackness's creative potential (that which slavery has never been able to destruct), boycotting the impact of the exposure of violence (symbolic and total), which is…the Black Feminist Critic's recurrent task."[29]

In order for any of the women and girls that I study to not be arrested by a lack of imagination that considers alternate modes of being/knowing/feeling, The World — the one we understand through humanist ideology which is made legible through Time and Space — must

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[27] Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*, (New York: New York University Press, 2020): 4.

[28] Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World," *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research*, 44:2, (June 2014): 83. The second "is" in the first sentence is in the original text.

[29] Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics," 84.

end. The being that da Silva is outlining in order to distinguish from, is only able to Reason — that is, make sense of —The World through Time as linear and Space as plottable through the physical measure of the Human body. Thinking with being/knowing/feeling as Zakiyyah Iman Jackson states it creates a new being that is not understood through any humanist vocabulary, meaning at this time it is unnameable. This being exists outside of Time as linear and Space as plottable. Not coincidentally, Time and Space, as categories that are made plottable by the white cisheteropatriarchal subject, make this World chartable to a certain extent at the expense of everyone else, but especially the Black female figure. These other modes of being/knowing/feeling are best understood as theories of Black (female) being that is often only able to exist and be expressed through creative outputs such as literature, poetry, music, and digital audiovisual content. Thus, when I am thinking with these outputs in my dissertation, I take them very seriously as new ways of being outside of The World. I saw things I imagined.

Blackness and the Digital

Transitioning to scholars within digital studies who have also interrogated the universal subject with specific regard to race and the digital. Alondra Nelson and Lisa Nakamura are two scholars whose thought informs my understanding of critical race digital studies. Nelson's introduction to the Summer 2002 issue of *Social Text*, "Future Texts," outlined the early conversations and contradictions that formatted studies about race and gender in early Internet and technology conversations. The issue was covering Afrofuturism, and Nelson artfully covers conversations and thinkers around ideas of the digital, the Internet, the "future," and Afrofuturism. The introduction begins by considering the many contradictory ideas that surrounded the Internet and its possible impacts on a social progress that would finally render social categories moot. As Nelson and countless others note, the identificatory categories do not

create oppression; rather, those who are in power create the oppression by deciding what is human, and said human needs to always give the impression of progressing. Nelson notes that early Internet studies that considered blackness and technology were primarily dominated by fantasies of "a utopian (to some) race-free future" on one side and "pronouncements of the dystopian digital divide" on the other.[30] Either way, this preoccupation and any subsequent "solutions" revealed the same fundamental assumption: "In each scenario, racial identity, and blackness in particular, is the anti-avatar of digital life. Blackness gets constructed as always oppositional to technologically driven chronicles of progress." Nelson outline show not only are these assumptions not true, but how other theorists arrive at these assumptions by lacking the ability to consider identity and being outside of whiteness's limited frame. Reading with Allucquère Rosanne Stone's *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age,* she clarifies how Stone's development of "contemporary identity" within the text can't "show how the dialectic between defining oneself in light of ties to one's history and experience and being defined from without…determines the shape of computer-mediated aggregate identities as much as more than the leisurely flux of personality."[31]

The impact of Nelson's clear and concise repositioning of Blackness when thinking about technology can not be overstated. Nelson's larger project within "Future Texts" was to introduce a new understanding of Afrofuturism with regards to the Internet and how the Internet causes us to reconsider or rehearse subjectivity. While this project does not rely on Afrofuturism as a major framework, I remain grateful for Nelson's demonstration of sifting through fields in order to

[30] Alondra Nelson, "Introduction: FUTURE TEXTS," *Social Text*, 1 June 2022; 20(2(71)): 1, https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-20-2_71-1.

[31] Nelson, "Future Texts," 4.

study Blackness's relation to technology as not lacking but extremely productive and worthwhile.

Lisa Nakamura articulates the connection between racial formation and digitality in her text *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet.* Nakamura engages with Omi and Winant's racial formation theory and creates what she calls "digital racial formation theory," which "would parse the ways that digital modes of cultural production and reception are complicit" with creating race on and offline.[32] Nakamura does this while also presenting an intervention into Internet studies through visual cultural studies. She shifts away from thinking solely of submerged histories between raced peoples and technology and moves towards a "discussion of the popular Internet and its involvement in the process of digital racial formation by examining the ways that visual capital is created, consumed, and circulated on the Internet."[33] Nakamura's utilization of visual cultural studies when studying technology and social media guides this project, in part. Her analysis of Jennifer Lopez's "If You Had My Love" in the introduction of the book in particular shapes my approach to thinking of things on the Internet and things that *represent* the Internet. However, her text, while considering audiovisual texts, tends to be ocular centric during analysis, very rarely adjusting to hold the audiovisual within the same moment of analysis. Furthermore, Nakamura's project considers all races online, not just Blackness. What is most salient for this project is Nakamura's presentation of the Internet as an interface that makes and destabilizes race. This presentation is dependent on the connection between the subject and the object online.

[32] Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008): 14.

[33] Nakamura, *Digitizing Race*, 15.

Anna Everett is another early Internet scholar who worked to center Blackness at the forefront of her study. In *Digital Diaspora: A Race for Cyberspace,* Everett provides a history of early African diasporic Internet engagement and positions this within a longer history of the creation of African diasporic consciousness. The introduction of the text is dedicated to demonstrating Everett's ambivalence and seeming irritation with conversations about the digital divide as this and other conversations about Black people as specifically technology averse is divorced from history. Everett's text provides an analysis of racial performance online, how Black spaces online were created, and, perhaps most importantly, political organizing in these spaces through wielding the Internet. *Digital Diaspora* undoubtedly established a mode of thinking of Blackness and the Internet with regards to political maturation. There are a number of scholars who follow behind her who are also thinking of the Internet as a political possibility, a possibility for radical change and revolution. Catherine Knight Steele, Ruha Benjamin, Safiya Umoja Noble, and Moya Bailey present works that are not just thinking of the Internet as a political tool and place for community building but also contextualizing their studies through Black feminist thought, specifically. This project has no investments in considering or mobilizing resiliency or resistance as major frameworks through which to understand the subjectivity of Black women and girls. Instead, my project considers more a visual culture and aesthetic investment that is not dependent on ideas of being shaped or resistant against those who are non-Black.

Catherine Knight Steele's work to provide a history of Black women bloggers and Black women's involvement with social media history in *Digital Black Feminism* provides a clear and contemporary example of a text that is mobilized by Black women, first. Digital Black feminism seeks to present a frame that understands that Black women have been and always will be central

to the "future of communication technology."[34] Steele guides the reader through a number of case studies and histories that demonstrate a heavy to hip hop feminism. Hip hop feminism was largely formulated online outside of traditional academic spaces in order to provide an even more grounded generational engagement with feminism that was born out of Joan Morgan's, the creator of the term, desire to connect academic Black feminist thought to the Black women in her everyday life. While I do not identify as a scholar of hip hop feminism, I am obviously indebted to the field and to these women who were maybe a generation or two before me who sought to outline how one can be against patriarchy "while embracing the culture of hip-hop."[35] Steele's digital black feminism comes from an intimate intermingling between traditional Black feminist thought, hip hop feminism, and communication and technology studies. While my project mirrors her desire to uplift Black women and also begin from our being as the point of theory, Steele embarks on a much more traditional technological study, whereas this dissertation is more concerned with the analyses of objects. However, Steele's previous work on the history of Black women bloggers heavily influences the final chapter of this dissertation, "*Every* Nigga is A Star?: Reading 'The Shade Room' Through Black Feminist Care."

Andre Brock's *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* is perhaps the text within this field that is most similar to mine. Brock presents a discursive analysis of the Internet, largely via Twitter, to question "how and why Blackness and Black culture are easily and pungently performed, absent embodiment, when mediated by technologies – specifically information technologies, the online, and the digital."[36] In his pursuit, Brock positions Black

[34] Catherine Knight Steele, *Digital Black Feminism*, (New York: New York University Press, 2021): 2.

[35] Steele, *Digital Black Feminism*, 57.

[36] Andre Brock, *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*, (New York: New York University Press, 2020)*:* 2.

people as having a "natural affinity for the internet and digital media," that is not tied to an essentialism but to a history of demonstrated manipulation of language. Brock presents an idea of "distributed Blackness" that is "articulated through pathos about everyday life, centered on embodiment, and mediated by the digital."[37] The text is invested in both an Afrofuturism, that fits within Nelson's text and an Afro-optimism that speaks against Afropessimism, that this dissertation makes no claims to model itself after. However, Brock and I both marvel and find ground for theorization when considering the everyday. He states that he is "much more interested in the ways Black folk use the internet as a space to extol the joys and pains of everyday life – the hair tutorials, the dance videos…using its capacity for multimedia expression and networked sociality to craft a digital practice that upends technocultural beliefs about how information, computers, and communications technologies should be used."[38] Brock's project, while privileging and utilizing Black feminist thought, is not a Black feminist project. Several of his objects of study are Black women, most notably his analyses of Ayesha Curry's tweets, which adds to the importance of his project within communication studies.

Perhaps most saliently, Brock defines "ratchetry" as a frame through which to understand online Blackness, demonstrating an awareness of contemporary and regional Black feminist thought. Brock defines ratchetry as "the quality of being ratchet" using it to refer to "digital practice born of everyday banal, sensual, forward, 'deviant' (Cohen, 2004) political behavior that is rooted in Black culture and discourse."[39] I find this definition to be generative and while I do not necessarily seek to outline or define ratchet behavior, online or elsewhere, I do study people

[37] Brock, *Distributed Blackness,* 221.

[38] Brock, *Distributed Blackness,* 6.

[39] Brock, *Distributed Blackness,* 126.

in this dissertation who may be considered ratchet. Those who are ratchet and those who are not are most certainly within the "niggas" that this project addresses. Ratchetry has been previously defined by Southern Black feminist scholars like Regina S. Bradley and L.H. Stallings. While their developments arise from a gendered understanding of the term, Brock's does not. Primarily Brock and I's project differs in the scope of project but also given Brock's focus on the discursive where my project is centered on the discursive within the audiovisual.

Within more traditional media studies, there are two texts that have influenced my dissertation: *Convergence Culture* by Henry Jenkins and *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media* by Alice Marwick. Often the internet is discussed as a "post" place, in that it is meant to be post-racial, post-misogyny, post- any other oppression that may exist. Or at least, this is how the Internet was thought by the white majority at the time of Obama's first election. Obviously, this is far from true. Most of the reason why this language prevails is in large part due to technological determinism, or the belief that technology has no biases and as such the internet and its technological servers can do no wrong. This is incorrect. In order to understand the intricacies of the internet I have selected texts that themselves deal with the cultures that created the Web 2.0 we currently operate on. Web 2.0 can now largely be understood as "social media."[40] Web 2.0 comes after the "dot.com" bubble burst and has managed to persist to this very day. It is supposed to describe and open up a "world in which technology creates greater cultural participation, where creativity and control are disseminated throughout the population rather than concentrated in the hands of a few large corporations."[41]

[40] Alice Marwick, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age*, (New Haven: Yale University, 2013): 4.

[41] Marwick, *Status Update*, 7.

Alice Marwick's *Status Update* is largely working to analyze the way that social media has created subjects[42]. This is done by looking at all that has gone into creating Web 2.0, from looking at how entrepreneurs built the internet in Silicon Valley to how subjects have wielded the Internet for monetary gain. As it came out in 2013, the subjects are sometimes very dated. But what Marwick manages to do is give a broad history of the Internet before it became what it is today. This history differs from the first iteration of the Internet that was supposedly predicated on communal coding and a Silicon Valley version of libertarianism which depends on a "'do it yourself' ethic" and "an idealized view of the internet as a utopian space."[43] The internet as a culture and as a business has a specific theoretical point: neoliberalism. Neoliberalism can be defined in a number of ways as it was originally an economic term that can be attached to Reagan and Bill Clinton. It's meant to be a sort of critique of the economy as is but has now come to be understood by leftist thinkers as "the worst excesses of capitalism or as a general criticism of market economics."[44] Somehow what we have come to understand as a critique has become inextricably interwound with the shift from factory work to service work in these past 40 or so years. As such, neoliberalism exploits everyday workers, those who become responsible for going through hours of repetitive tasks, setting them at a disadvantage while simultaneously and disproportionately propelling to success the "active, entrepreneurial risk-takers" who operate outside of this system.[45] This creates the conditions for the perfect storm, in which uber-rich

[42] Marwick, *Statue Update*, 5.

[43] Marwick, *Status Update*, 50.

[44] Marwick, *Status Update*, 11.

[45] Marwick, *Status Update*, 13.

entrepreneurs can establish subjects on their social media sites to be exploited as those subjects try to become uber-rich entrepreneurs themselves.

Connecting Marwick's discussion of neoliberalism to the concept of convergence that Henry Jenkins puts forth in his book, the collision of "media convergence, participatory culture, and collective intelligence" provides us with a place where we can be the generators of online personas but ultimately a group of probably white men are largely going to profit from that cultural capital.[46] Buzzfeed and even Huffington Post can be seen as places where the "free" content that can be found online gets turned often into a "listicle" that highlights the supposed "best" and "worst" of any given quick trend that happened online. However, oftentimes, the people who put those articles together for Buzzfeed are not doing the actual labor of crafting jokes or making cultural commentary, but simply plucking these things selectively for a job. And more specifically, Buzzfeed employees are selecting content from Black women and girls who never get to be known as content creators, as such. At the time that *Convergence Culture* came out, most of the contemporary social media sites that I focus on in this project did not exist and the Internet was at the end of its first Web iteration. Convergence culture has taken hold of how we navigate the internet. Black people's jokes have inevitably taken this culture to new heights with jokes that flow "across multiple media platforms" with people "who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want."[47] These entertainments may mean web series, a thread of jokes that may cross from Twitter to tumblr to Facebook over a span of days, or even other more niche elements of fan cultures. As mentioned above discussing

[46] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture, Where Old and New Media Collide,* (New York: New York University Press, 2006): 2.

[47] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture,* 2.

Buzzfeed, Jenkins was thinking about how this media convergence eradicates the distance between media producers and consumers and the labor confusion that this causes.[48] This participatory culture can be a blessing for often forgotten communities, but it can also mean that content gets into the hands of a select few individuals "dominating all sectors of the entertainment industry."[49] This leads to a loss of agency for the American public even as it fuels and reshapes American popular culture. The good within the bad seemed to be an element that Jenkins was grappling with in a rather prophetic way.

Jenkins and Marwick are the two scholars whose work gave me the technological frameworks to work within, but their work is outside any real consideration of race. When considering how these often-exploited groups would continue to be exploited it is shocking to think of how their analyses would've been stronger by further elucidating the benefits and drawbacks of racial community-building across social media sites. Black people have consistently been changing the culture of the internet by crafting a niche for themselves on apps that are not necessarily meant to hold these types of intricacies. As such, we sit in a perfect American storm of exploitation where neoliberal promises fuel our desires to cultivate online content that we inevitably do not own. It is becoming glaringly evident that all we will be able to do in years to come is look back and wonder, "what was the Internet"?

Malleability and the Digital

Throughout my research of the Internet, ideas of malleability (sometimes elasticity and, other times, plasticity) emerged consistently when thinking of race and the digital. This project understands these analyses of plasticity as being a central aspect of understanding precisely what

[48] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 3.

[49] Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 17-18.

makes many of the situations I consider that arise online viable. I first noticed this phrase in Lisa Nakamura's analysis of "If You Had My Love," focusing on how, in the music video, the male subject creates and moves Lopez through gendered surveillance and racial erotic performance. Nakamura states that the video "addresses the audience by figuring [Lopez's] body as plastic, part of a racial project of volitional racialization through interface usage."[50] Nakamura held this digital manipulation against Lopez's material movement from racialized subject through her movie roles like *Selena* (Nava, 1997) to deracinated actress in films like *The Wedding Planner* (Shankman, 2001). Nakamura's connection of the virtual to the material and digital is essential in understanding how race is made plastic.

Within Black studies this malleability is explicitly connected to the Black subject. Brock in mediating on what the mythos of a Black technoculture could mean states that "Mosco (2005) writes that one of the primary sources of a myth's power is elasticity, which has a dual meaning for digital Blackness." He segues into a discussion of antiblackness, as defined by Frank Wilderson, in order to maintain his argument for Blackness as not formulated by racism, antiblackness, or antiracism resistance strategies. He is able to make this move through and because of the digital. Building on elasticity, he asserts that a theory of Black technoculture must hold these tensions. He says:

> "…a theory of Black cyberculture is necessary to examine how information and communication technologies afford Blackness a differently circumscribed space to luxuriate and grow – never free from white racial ideology but no longer materially coerced by it. This possibility exists *because* of the disembodiment enabled by virtuality – that is, when participating in an online space, Blackness lives as an existential 'here' (Yancy, 2005) that is largely unrestricted by the fixity and pejorative reduction of the Black body that occurs offline."

[50] Nakamura, *Digitizing Race*, 28

Brock's connection of the elastic in mythos to the virtuality of Blackness on and offline is a major frame through which I understand the genius of the Black everyday. However, unlike Brock, I do not believe that this theory diminishes "the theoretical power of antiblackness."[51] I instead see it as a major force that creates antiblackness even *as* Black people have used this plasticity in insurgent ways. In Chapter 1, I connect plasticity to memes, digital blackface, and blackfishing, as Blackness as ontologically plastic makes these things possible.

Two Black feminist thinkers, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson and Jayna Brown, extend the definition of plasticity and connect its possibilities specifically to the vexed role that the Black female has been forced to play. Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's definition of plasticity informs my understanding of plasticity and its relation to Blackness and antiblackness. Jackson situates Blackness' plasticity as a result of the creation and maintenance of liberal humanism, which necessarily abjects Blackness, "which is not based on formations of blackness as 'animal-like' but rather casts black people as ontologically plastic."[52] Jackson's reasoning for connecting plasticity to the ontological comes from an understanding of a humanism, "our" humanism, that "in its desire to universalize, ritualistically posits black(female)ness as opacity, inversion and limit."[53] Jackson sees plasticity as "a mode of domination" that has unfortunately molded race, sex, and gender. Plasticity came from the imagination of liberal humanism and was made through slavery as a playground for white subjectivity to be rehearsed. Jayna Brown, in analyzing how Henrietta Lacks' cells ushered in "utterly new mode(s) of existence," connects plasticity to science, technology, and the essence of life. Brown formulates the Black female

[51] Brock, *Distributed Blackness,* 229.

[52] Jackson, *Becoming Human,* 18-19.

[53] Jackson, *Becoming Human,* 10.

body as consistently being conceptualized as part of what she calls the "plasticity of life." Like Jackson, Brown critiques and attempts to move away from liberal humanism and its limiting effects onto what we know to be biological or scientific. Instead she, like Jackson, seeks to detach life from heteronormative practices born out of liberal humanism's autopoesis.

In this dissertation, I hold these understandings of plasticity as part of the Internet, as a digital technology, and the Internet's environment. If Brock's ecological assertion about the Internet is true, then Blackness is made as the Internet through its plasticity *and* vice versa. Even as these two concepts, Blackness and the Internet, can be understood as being a part of one another, I follow Jackson and Brown's focus on the Black female figure as the essential cellular component of Blackness, the Internet, and the digital.

Chapter Breakdown

All of these ideas and theories merge together in this project through an understanding of theft. The following three chapters are all connected through thefts that are only made possible through misogynoir. Misogynoir, as defined by Moya Bailey, describes:

> "…the anti-Black racist misogyny that Black women experience, particularly in US visual and digital culture. Misogynoir is not simply the racism that Black women encounter, nor is it the misogyny Black women negotiate. Misogynoir describes the uniquely co-constitutive racialized and sexist violence that befalls Black women as a result of their simultaneous and interlocking oppression at the intersection of racial and gender marginalization."[54]

Black women and girls are the ground upon which the subject (or the human or Man) makes itself and as such any violence, theft, or dismissal of them is not only normal but necessary in the maintenance of order. As the opposition between order and chaos is "essential to the autopoiesis, or institution and relatively stable replication, of Man as a dynamic system," I

[54] Moya Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance,* (New York: New York University Press, 2021): 1.

look to these lovely agents of Chaos to question what it would mean to create a digital world that exists outside of this World. I do this across three chapters. The first two chapters are dedicated to outlining interracial issues between Black people and non-Black people. The last chapter is centered around an intramural concern.

In Chapter One, "Fear of a Black Computer: Blackness as the Uncanny Valley," I outline the development of the online racial performances known as digital blackface and blackfishing. I trace the history and definitions of the two terms to at once crystallize them and destabilize the two terms as the only violent modes of performing Black being online. By providing a brief history of memes and their utility in constructing and disturbing online personas, I connect digital blackface to a mobilization of language that betrays those who attempt to pose as Black online. I provide a definition of blackfishing, or "niggerfishing," that emerges into the material world from a purely online digital blackface. I consider two cases of blackfishing before I turn to a consideration of a racial performance that is impossible to index. To do this I analyze two online influencers, Vena E. and Landon Romano. I demonstrate how Landon Romano has lifted many aspects of Vena's personas that she develops from her lived experiences as a Black woman. I end the chapter with a meditation on the uncanny as a mood of the Internet that facilitates these performances and deranges Black women's ability to create and explore Black female aesthetics.

Chapter Two, "'Oh My Fucking God, She Fucking Dead:' The Fall of Vine and the Rise of TikTok," considers two young Black girls who created trends on Vine and TikTok, Kayla Newman and Jalaiah Harmon, respectively, and how they were disassociated from those very creations. Kayla Newman, a Black then 16-year-old girl, created the phrase "on fleek" in a six-second Vine on June 21, 2014, a term that became a viral sensation. Jalaiah Harmon, a then 14-

year old girl, created the Renegade dance on Dubsmash, with the help of her friend, Kaliyah Davis. In this chapter, I provide a history and structure of both Vine and TikTok in order to contextualize how this theft happened. In outlining the history of Vine, I theorize "the loop." Vine's looping feature is what established it as unique from other short-form video apps. I think about the loop as a disturbance in linear time that fits nicely with the grammatical tense, the future real conditional or "that which will have had to happen," as presented by Tina Campt. I focus on time, movement and sound in this chapter to at once highlight the stunning creative output of Black girls but also to consider the expanse and bounds of the possibility for redress outside of linear time.

Chapter Three, "*Every* Nigga is a Star?: Reading 'The Shade Room' Through Black Feminist Care" is where I look at The Shade Room, a Black celebrity news and media source that was created as an Instagram account by Angelica Nwandu, a former accountant and screenwriter. The Shade Room has been called Instagram's TMZ, boasting an impressive following of 22 million followers. I place The Shade Room in Black social media history as a successful hybrid business synthesis that builds on Black social media platforms, such as BlackPlanet, gossip bloggers like Perez Hilton and Black gossip blogs, such as Media Take Out, Lipstick Alley, and Necole Bitchie. While this successful account ostensibly serves Black people by covering Black culture, I argue that TSR's investment in representing a universal Black online culture causes harm to Black women and girls. If the Shade Room purports to not only create content that covers celebrity life, but also "allow every nigga, rich or poor, to be a star," to borrow from the great Boris Gardiner, then one has to wonder why the Black woman-created platform actively contributes to the trivialization of the violence that Black women and girls experience. I trouble the idea of Black online culture building on the work of Hortense Spillers

and Stuart Hall. I then analyze the coverage of rapper Megan Thee Stallion's shooting by performer Tory Lanez on the account, before meditating on the coverage of Zaya Wade's transition, also on the account, in order to discuss the material violence that Black women and girls, both cis and trans, regularly experience on the account.

Finally, I must address my decision to use this title. The N-word is obviously and rightfully a taboo word for any and all people who are not Black. That there are Black people who don't like or encourage the use of that word or Black people who think that anyone can use it does not matter. I include the word in my title for this project because it is a refrain that is often used in Black intramural discussions online. There is a sort of sociality on the Internet that is not present IRL that can be signaled to, by nodding to them "niggas on the internet," and those are the people who I am writing about and for. Tl;dr: If you not Black, don't say my title.

Fear of a Black Computer: Blackness as the Uncanny Valley

"Niggerfishing is Caucasians posing as black and beautifuls on social media. If we catch you in the streets niggerfishing we will jump you and take your social."[55]
-Vince Staples

"Damn, this is some scurry shit!"
-Brenda (Regina Hall) in *Scary Movie* (2000)

"Well, you see, it's like this. When we were first married, she was as white as- as- well as white as a lily. But I declare she's getting' darker and darker. I tell her if she don't look out, she'll wake up one of these days and find she's turned into a nigger." – Jack Bellew in *Passing* by Nella Larsen

On November 7, 2018, Wanna Thompson, known as @wannasworld on Twitter, outlined a rather sinister phenomenon. She posted, "Can we start a thread and post all of the white girls cosplaying as black women on Instagram? Let's air them out because this is ALARMING."[56] Thompson had captured a threshold for passing as Black, one that had hitherto not been seen on a grand scale. Maybe as a society, we were more attuned to such odd performances, following the reveal of Rachel Dolezal and years of middling conversations on the definition of "cultural appropriation." This threshold, revealed by the limitations of cultural appropriation, and blackface's traditionally non-digital (audio)visuality, came to be known as "blackfishing." Just a few years prior, scholar and cultural critic Lauren Michele Jackson *re*introduced the phrase "digital blackface" into the popular lexicon in a *Teen Vogue* article titled "We Need to Talk About Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs." Jackson defined a type of social media performance wherein people either claim they are Black or are, more insidiously, non-Black people who solely express their emotions and reactions through Black GIFs and memes. What do these

[55] Vince Staples (@vincestaples), "Niggerfishing is Caucasians," Twitter, November 7, 2018, https://twitter.com/vincestaples/status/1060395956493987842

[56] Wanna Thompson (@WannasWorld), "Can we start," Twitter, November 6, 2018, https://twitter.com/WannasWorld/status/1059989652487069696

kindred terms that capture and highlight a sensually immersive performance of race do for our conceptualizations of anti-blackness and the internet? Blackface, digital blackface, blackfishing; these terms are often used in close proximity to one another to be able to better pinpoint the development of a seemingly new subjectivity. Indeed, as Thompson states above, it is all rather alarming.

I find myself captured by the anxiety that surrounds the need to grasp the general mood of uncanniness that haunts a statement such as "she's passing for Black." The historical assumptions that produce the phenomenological experience of "passing" online and offline demonstrate the need for an unraveling of the environment and lexicons buried therein. There are two terms in particular that need to be teased out in order to further unpack and understand the (im)material performances of Blackness. In the following chapter, I connect the definitions and genealogies of digital blackface and blackfishing to blackface minstrelsy broadly in order to better understand what online and offline performances they capture and rehearse. I argue that there exists another performance that takes place on and offline that does not fit into either the definitions of blackface, digital blackface, or blackfishing. These performances are even more insidious as attempting to pinpoint them tends to reveal the unsteady grounds of race and being upon which they rest. By trying to index the visual fact of Blackness, I can easily fall into a biological essentialism that means at once nothing and everything in the face of Blackness as a sociopolitical category. It is not my desire or attempt to define or categorize what this performance could be called, but rather to call attention to what makes this performance *possible*.

Following Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's definition of the word, I argue that the logics of antiblackness arrange black(ened) people as plastic, infinitely mutable, such that the racial schema of Blackness can, and must, always hold attempts to include non-Black people. This

plasticity can be understood as "a mode of transmogrification whereby the fleshy being of blackness is experimented with as if it were infinitely malleable lexical and biological matter, such that blackness is produced as…a form where form shall not hold: potentially 'everything and nothing' at the register of ontology."[57] Because of this plasticity, black(ened) people become the medium and technology through which non-Black people can create their own conditions of subjectivity off and online in order to become human. It is from this context that digital blackface and blackfishing become more than cultural appropriation but instead become a mode of plasticization. Within this world made possible by "antiblackness's auto-institution and stable replication as a system," Blackness, this elastic form, becomes almost impossible to define in the consumption of the Internet because it will continuously be re-formed into the given shape of those who wish to possess it.[58] While such a fact of being is not foreign to me, I continue to find myself moderately to extremely unsettled to witness these acts of violence posing as stepping stones to clout.

Definitions for blackface and blackface minstrelsy abound. It is beyond the scope of this project to provide a shape of that field of study. For this project, I turn to the definitions of blackface minstrelsy as provided by Saidiya Hartman and Eric Lott. Eric Lott's *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy & the American Working Class* centered on contextualizing blackface minstrelsy as something born out of interracial cultural exchange, particularly between Northern Black and white, working class people. He defines blackface minstrelsy as "an established nineteenth-century theatrical practice, principally of the urban North, in which white men

[57] Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*, (New York: New York University, 2020): 3.

[58] Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 5.

caricatured blacks for sport and profit."[59] His analysis of blackface minstrelsy as a performance that depended on assumptions and subsequent developments of (enslaved) Black people's language, music, and physical comportment is more concerned with "how precariously nineteenth-century white working people lived their whiteness," as he sees this focus as "a matter of the greatest consequence in the history of America's racial cultures and their material or institutional transactions."[60] While Lott's positioning and focus on white ethnics, whiteness, and white working class people is useful for framing the white subjects in this study (all of the white people who I study as blackfishers are white ethnics), his framing that centers around Black men does not offer much to my analyses of digital blackface and blackfishing which both tend to be centered on expropriating the Black female body.

Ultimately, I agree with Saidiya Hartman's framing of blackface minstrelsy in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America.* Hartman connects the "terror and enjoyment" that was born on the plantation to the emergence of blackface minstrelsy in the antebellum era.[61] This centering is central to confronting the impact is has on the American psyche as slavery is where the Black figure became the site of terror and repulsion that creates an aura of uncanniness. Lott's focus on whiteness inevitably presents a development of blackface minstrelsy, by white people, as being born out of "romance and repulsion", when as Hartman shows this relation was also made through "derision, ridicule, and violence."[62] And this

[59] Eric Lott, *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy & the American Working Class*, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013): 1.

[60] Lott, *Love & Theft*, 4.

[61] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997): 23.

[62] Hartman, *Scenes of* Subjection, 29

refusal to center the violence of slavery inevitably leads to a reading of blackface minstrelsy that limits a deeper understanding of that same performances' violence. Lott asserts additionally that blackface minstrelsy's content and style came from "northern interracial contexts," distancing the actual proximity blackface minstrelsy has to the absolute violence of slavery.[63] While in the archive these narratives may emerge by northern freed Blacks, this does not dismiss the fact, that these Black people's very being is cast against the only other American referent for Blackness: the slave. As Hartman says of Lott's interracial contexts "the seeming transgressions of the color line and the identification forged with the blackface mask through aversion and/or desire ultimately served only to reinforce relations of mastery and servitude."[64] Hartman's framing allows me to pursue an engagement of digital blackface and blackfishing with this same understanding of their subsequent relation to the afterlives of slavery.

This chapter will contend with the definitions of digital blackface and blackfishing in order to capture the general uncanny mood of the Internet as part of and separate from the aforementioned performances. First, I will be outlining memes and their relationship to digital blackface. After discussing the fundamental blackness of memes, I will investigate the limits of the definition of blackfishing, by outlining a few examples of those where exposed to be blackfishing. I look at Instagram influencer Landon Romano's theft of fellow influencer and comedian Vena E.'s (Pretty Vee) persona to reveal the porousness between blackface, digital blackface, and blackfishing. Finally, I close by reckoning with the (digital) uncanny that animates the possibilities of being Black online. When I consider the implications of attempting

[63] Lott, *Love & Theft,* 42.

[64] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection,* 29.

to capture such performances at all, I find myself repeating Brenda's statement from the epigraph: this is some scary shit!

The Memefication of Everything

A central aspect of my analysis of the aforementioned terms depends on a firm definition of a "meme" and how its meaning has transformed over time. Of course, this is difficult to do as "what makes defining memes especially challenging is the growing ambiguity around the term 'meme' compared to its spread."[65] Meme was first defined by Richard Dawkins in his text *The Selfish Gene* in 1976, wherein he was attempting to think about evolution and genes as its basic unit of measurement, thus shifting evolution from a large scale to an individual model. When coming to think about "human culture," as a unique and quickly shifting evolution, he wanted to express a new unit of this evolution. He states:

> "[w]e need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*. 'Mimeme' comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like 'gene'. I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to *meme*…Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation."[66]

In its original context, meme seems to have more in line with the definition of trend or style. However, as Lauren Michele writes "the internet gives memes more structure and formal constraints, a grammar."[67] Anything can become an internet meme, distinct from just a meme, which is an endless mutation of form that serves, generally, to express a message through affect

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[65] Constance Iloh, "Do It for the Culture: The Case for Memes in Qualitative Research," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 20 (2021): 2.

[66] Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene,* (London: Oxford University Press, 2016): 249.

[67] Lauren Michele Jackson, *White Negroes: When Cornrows Were in Vogue…And Other Thoughts on Cultural Appropriation,"* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019): 90.

or mood. Most commonly, that form is humor. Even more expansively, memes can come in the form of audio clips, audiovisual clips, GIFs, text-based images, or even grammatical structures.[68] Memes can become endless, with a good image or clip being able to serve multiple iterations ad infinitum. For example, there are endless uses for the "Crying Jordan" meme, which is a photo still of basketball superstar Michael Jordan crying while being inaugurated into the Hall of Fame in 2009. This meme is mentioned in several texts that focus on memes and was even referenced by Jordan himself when he was beginning to cry during his speech at Kobe Bryant's funeral in 2020. Perhaps it has remained a central meme to center on because it has persisted across the Internet, shifting from being a local meme in sport communities online, to being more omnipresent over a number of years, a testament to the versatility of the image.

Given the layered capacity to express that mobilizes the meme, it is of no surprise that memes have increasingly become important to understand and utilize. Constance Iloh in her article, "Do It for the Culture: The Case for Memes in Qualitative Research," argues that memes need to be allowed to be used in academic research as "memes have great potential to amplify and support social science work and qualitative research."[69] Using content image memes, or memes that have an image and text superimposed on top where "the text conveys the content and image sets the tone," Iloh creates five potential uses for memes within research.[70] These five categories (memes as reflective of everyday communication and expression, memes as valuable cultural units and symbols, memes as forms of rapport building and cultivating relational

[68] There is quite a bit of scholarship across popular critical writing and academic various fields on memes. I would like to gesture to the bibliography of Constance Iloh's "Do It for the Culture: The Case for Memes in Qualitative Research" for a more complete list of these works.

[69] Iloh, "Do it for the Culture," 3.

[70] Prasad Bodhisattwa Majumder et al, "What's in a 'Meme'?: Understanding the Dynamics of Image Macros in Social Media," 2017, 2.

research, memes as approach that support remote data collection, and memes as methods that infuse agency, creativity, and humor into the research process) demonstrate the many ways that memes can connect individuals and also express the inexpressible.[71] The ability to transmute and translate emotions, moods, and affect across a number of potentially disparate cultural circles is what makes a meme its most powerful, as attested to by the Crying Jordan meme.

Memes, due to their ease and mode of transmission and seemingly infinite mode of alteration, have quickly been associated with Black people themselves. This is not just because many memes tend to feature Black people. At the level of ontology, Blackness and Black people's way of utilizing memes have been connected as being a particularly good example of what Cedric Robinson calls "ontological totality," or collective being of blackness. This is to say that even as Blackness does not exist as a monolith, its reach, stretch, and, ultimately, its (in)voluntary dispersal is usurped by the digital, and more explicitly, memes. Aria Dean states that this collectivity depends on a relatability between memes and their consumers, maintaining "a kind of cohesion in 'collective being,' a collective memory that can never be fully encompassed; one can never zoom out enough to see it in its entirety."[72] Being able to assess the collective while remaining an individual, memes and Blackness are indeed closely related. However, it goes beyond just relatability.

Speaking about the blackness of meme movement, Lauren Michele Jackson (Laur M. Jackson) contends "the way memes change, adapt, fold into themselves, make old like new…their movement looks very very Black," quickly associating memes and blackness through

[71] Iloh, "Do it for the Culture," 3-6.

[72] Aria Dean, "Poor Meme, Rich Meme," *Real Life Magazine*, July 25, 2016, https://reallifemag.com/poor-meme-rich-meme/

plasticity and, what plasticity makes possible, transience.[73] Nicholas Whittaker crystallizes this connection between memes, Blackness, and fungibility stating "[f]ungibility reveals the ways in which the black persons that memes capture are being 'annihilated', so to speak; the meme is reducing away their personhood so they can be endlessly circulated and projected upon."[74] The definition of fungibility that Whittaker mobilizes comes from Hortense Spiller's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" and can't be exactly exchanged for Jackson's definition of plasticity. Fungibility can be understood as relating to the mutation of the value of Black people while I see plasticity as being related specifically to the very matter of Blackness. Black people become plastic at the cellular level and can be fit into any image and/or text that creates a meme and Blackness' fungibility makes it possible for any meaning to emerge and be exchanged for another depending on the situation. Thus, in memes, Blackness is made plastic for the consumption of anyone and becomes the ultimate mutable currency. Black(ened) memes become a collective grammar through which the Internet speaks.

A collective grammar is inaugurated as a central aspect of this collective being through which one can endlessly format and alter memes to fit into any moment, not unlike some deranged Madlib. This collective grammar often follows with the tradition of what some call a "black vernacular" or African American Language (AAL). However, I find that this grammar more closely aligns with what artist and poet Manuel Arturo Abreu calls Black English, which they define as "the set of linguistic behaviors available to American members of the African

[73] Laur M. Jackson, "The Blackness of Meme Movement," *Model View Culture*, Issue 35, March 28, 2016. https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/the-blackness-of-meme-movement

[74] Nicholas Whittaker, "What's So Bad About Digital Blackface," *Aesthetics for Birds: Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art for Everyone*, April 14, 2021, https://aestheticsforbirds.com/2021/04/14/whats-so-bad-about-digital-blackface/

diaspora."[75] They outline this definition in order to discuss what they call an "online imagined Black English" that is the "phenomenon of non-Black English speakers with no fluency using real *or imaginary* linguistic features of Black English."[76] They make the distinction of online imagined Black English to separate from previous definitions of this same phenomenon (borrowed Blackness, mock Ebonics, and linguistic minstrelsy among their examples) because these models created a mediatized/non-mediatized distinction that is no longer stable when considering the internet.[77] Those who create viral memes or run meme accounts tend to indulge in Black English, whether they themselves are Black or not. The collective grammar of the Internet can be understood as an offshoot of online imagined Black English, running parallel to online Black English. While many memes and general viral content come from Black people using Black English, there are many occasions when viral memes come from non-Black people who *utilize* online imagined Black English and, sometimes, Black English. Being able to properly utilize online Black English is a central rhetorical aspect of, also, crafting a persona in digital blackface.

Digital Blackface, or We Finna Be Hella On Fleek

It is important to note that from the very beginning the term digital blackface was infused with digital interface and gendered racial performance. The term digital blackface first appears in Joshua Lumpkin Green's 2006 master's thesis, "Digital Blackface: The Repackaging of the

[75] Manuel Arturo Abreu, "Online Imagined Black English," *Arachne* 1 (Fall 2015), https://arachne.cc/issues/01/online-imagined_manuel-arturo-abreu.html

[76] Abreu, "Online Imagined Black English,", emphasis my own.

[77] Abreu, "Online Imagined Black English."

Black Masculine Image."[78] Green's focus within this thesis was highlighting how Black masculinity is created in the video game franchise *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas,* given that the game only allows users to play with a Black male avatar, CJ. He writes:

> "'Digital blackface' is a term by which to frame the current appropriation of the black masculine body. In his chapter the digital blackface will be given historical context by first looking at the commodification of the black masculine image through several transmedial phenomenon (the stage). The historical context of the digital blackface furthers the assessment of this analysis that objectification and exploitation found in GTA:SA is not a new form of racism but rather an ongoing historical reiteration of a dominant ideology."[79]

Grand Theft Auto is a role-playing game (RPG) meaning that players are made to interface through a persona within the game that has a narrative that guides the larger structural aspects of the game. Thus, within this immersive and interactive digital world, players are expected to in many ways become this person, in the process of moving through the game. GTA: San Andreas is not unique within the franchise for making players engage in illegal activities or creating scenarios for players to engage in violent behavior. It is the first game within the GTA series, however, to center around a Black character, building on the success of the ethnic difference presented in GTA: Sin City.[80] Set in the 1990's with a California "gangster rap" soundtrack, GTA: San Andreas not only asks players to become a Black man for any given amount of time, the game is also constructed with racial tropes that are meant to intensify player immersion. Green was outlining how this immersion is dependent on trafficking in stereotypes of Black men, to create a narrative reality within the game, that does not exist in the actual world. Green makes the distinction that digital blackface must be made distinct from traditional

[78] Joshua Lumpkin Green, "Digital Blackface: The Repackaging of the Black Masculine Image" (Master's thesis, Miami University, 2006), http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=miami1154371043

[79] Green, "Digital Blackface," 22-23.

[80] GTA: Sin City had Italian main characters.

blackface performance in that through the contemporary digital moment "representations of the ethnic 'Other' have shifted from 'performing' ethnicity to 'being' the ethnic other."[81] It is the shift between the performative register to a question of ontology that I find to be of the most importance to note for my project.

While Green was the first to be documented making this distinction, digital blackface was not entered into common parlance until 2017, some 12 years later. Professor Lauren Michele Jackson, then still a graduate student at University of Chicago, published an article in *Teen Vogue* titled "We Need to Talk About Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs." Describing a series of tweets made by conservative talk show host Meghan McCain, Jackson first defines "digital blackface" as a term used "to describe various types of minstrel performance that become available in cyberspace."[82] Gathering a grouping of tweets from infamous white woman Meghan McCain from June and July 2017, Jackson puzzles with the juxtaposition of McCain using reaction GIFs featuring only Black women to express a set of emotions and commentary. The GIFs that are used by McCain are fairly popular and common, including two GIFs featuring then *Real Housewives of Atlanta* star Kenya Moore and the always referenced Tiffany "New York" Pollard.[83] These two Black women are often used by people of all races as they have become popular culture icons due to their roles on certain reality TV shows. Yet, the issue, for me and Jackson, is when reaction GIFs starring black women become the only way for non-Black people to express their own emotions that they feel might be in excess. It is in the expression of

[81] Green, "Digital Blackface," 20.

[82] Lauren Michele Jackson, "We Need to Talk About Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs", *Teen Vogue*, August 2, 2017, https://www.teenvogue.com/story/digital-blackface-reaction-gifs

[83] In a different or maybe future project, I would want to further explore the affective genius of reality stars Nene Leakes and Tiffany "New York" Pollard as their personas and sound bites have become, along with Oprah, some of the most relevant and useful audiovisual media on the Internet.

"extreme joy, annoyance, anger and occasions for drama and gossip" online that creates "a magnet for images of black people, especially black femmes" to be used by nonblack people.[84] Jackson centers on reaction GIFs on Twitter in this piece specifically because the GIFs can easily be held in contrast to the Twitter user profile pics. But also, because reaction GIFs are essential to cultivating an online persona on certain social media platforms. This returns us to a meditation on digital ontology.

Relying almost solely on reaction GIFs that feature Black people is something that, while odd, is seemingly innocuous. What makes digital blackface more insidious is when one begins to wonder how is that Black people become the medium through which to develop one's sense of self. When questioning "what's so bad about digital blackface" one must consider a number of things. There are, of course, stakes in being able to successfully create an online persona. Becoming an online persona can bring about any modicum of micro-celebrity status or even financial success in the form of brand partnerships or shuttling one into a performance career (acting, film or television writing, or a record deal). If a nonblack person's success becomes contingent on how well they are able to manipulate, perform, or otherwise play in and with blackness, that undeniably creates a binary wherein the black person is needed to create affect and interest even as they then immediately become unable to access their own affective registers. However, where one might be tempted to conclude that the violence of digital blackface comes from fungibility, the manipulations of meme format and/or manipulating a Black person's life

[84] Jackson, "We Need to Talk About Digital Blackface," https://www.teenvogue.com/story/digital-blackface-reaction-gifs

into a vestibule to meme virality. However, as Nicholas Whittaker suggests "this is unsatisfactory: because such a reduction or annihilation *is the nature of memes*."[85]

Secondly, the more skilled nonblack people become at inhabiting a black persona, the more likely that they are able to shift in and out of the already semi-permeable boundaries of Black online communities. This results in the alteration, derailment, and obfuscation of intramural conversations that may be critical for certain members within the Black community to have. Catherine Knight Steele uses the metaphor of the "virtual beauty shop" to explain that there are and always have been online spaces shaped by and for Black women to share with each other.[86] Building off of an implicit understanding of the importance of Black women's hair care practices, the beauty shop acts as place where Black women and femmes can come together to learn how to care for one another. Knight Steele outlines specifically that black hair blogs like, "Black Girl with Long Hair" and "afroBella," were her introductions to the Black blogging sphere. Black hair blogs of the late 2000s and early 2010s were essential in ushering in the Black natural hair movement, demonstrating a marked relation between the digital and the material world. Given that "Black feminist technoculture develops in spaces wherein Black women and nonbinary folks find safe harbor," it goes without saying that those who attempt or manage to infiltrate these spaces, create a sense of unease that dispels possible life-altering community building.[87] Outside of cultural exchanges, non-Black infiltration of Black online spaces through digital blackface can also have political implications.

[85] Whittaker, "What's So Bad About Digital Blackface?"

[86] Catherine Knight Steele, *Digital Black Feminism*, (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 16-17.

[87] Knight Steele, *Digital Black Feminism*, 49.

Since the 2016 Presidential elections, Black women's political power has recently become a panacea for liberal politicians. When it became statistically evident that Black women consistently and in large numbers vote for the Democratic party, many began to herald Black women's ability to save America.[88] However, many white supremacists had already known this and had been engaging in digital blackface to create discord among online political organizing communities by posing as Black women. Following the 2016 election, Black people began to notice that certain Twitter accounts were claiming to be Black women, and utilizing Black women in their profile pics, but were discursively not able to pass, through conversation construction (AAVE) and also in conversational *content.* For example, Vann Newkirk, a writer for *The Atlantic,* noticed "an account bearing an image of a black woman" saying that "she would be okay with her son being subject to police brutality if he misbehaved."[89] Another account even said that Emmett Till deserved to die.[90] The purpose of digital blackface here is to purposely cause discord within Black online spaces. Even though Black people do not hold monolithic beliefs, these statements would be so uncommon and unwelcome that they would stand out to other Black people. As Jackson so clearly states "online minstrels are no more believable than their in-person counterparts to anyone who knows black culture and black people, rather than *a series of types*. Unfortunately, digital blackface often goes unchecked unless a black person does the work to point out the discrepancies in someone's profile."[91]

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[88] Taylor Crumpton, "Black women saved the Democrats. Don't make us do it again." *The Washington Post,* November 7, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/11/07/black-women-joe-biden-vote/

[89] Neha Rashid, "The Emergence Of The White Troll Behind A Black Face," *NPR.com,* March 21, 2017, https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/03/21/520522240/the-emergence-of-the-white-troll-behind-a-black-face

[90] Rashid, "The White Troll Behind A Black Face."

[91] Jackson, "We Need to Talk about Digital Blackface," emphasis added by me.

Aside from the content of these moments on Twitter, the way that Black people are able to tell which users are engaging in digital blackface often comes back to language. AAVE has long been degraded as a viable dialect but in all online spaces, not just Black ones, it has become an essential part of being understood as culturally literate. For example, Brittany Broski, a white influencer who went viral for a TikTok wherein she mimicked drinking kombucha for the first time, described certain AAVE terms and phrases as "internet culture."[92] Given that Broski posted the video as a supposed defense for her overreliance and overusing these phrases in her comedic TikToks, she seemed to miss the point of the critique. Even as AAVE is necessary to know how to use in order to move in "internet culture" successfully, there continue to be people who use AAVE incorrectly.

One of the many reasons for this is often people are witnessing Black people use AAVE and thinking that the grammatical structures that sustain it are not intricate in their own sense. AAVE also relies on regionality, such that certain phrases are legible to Black people in one region, but not to those in another. To illustrate this, I often use the distinctions between finna and gonna. "Finna" clearly comes from the South as it is a contraction of the words "fixing to," meaning preparing to do something. "Gonna," however, has a more widely regional utility, as it is a contraction of the words "going to," which has a more definite intentionality and assumptive motion attached to it. While these two words can be used within sentences similarly, they can't always be used interchangeably. So, when people, often non-Black people, use finna in a sentence wherein one should use gonna, the sentence feels clunky and awkward, disrupting any sort of affinity between them and native-AAVE speakers, and this would differ across region.

[92] Bria Overs, "An influencer got backlash for claiming Black slang terms belonged to internet culture. It highlights a common problem online." *Insider*, August 8, 2020, https://www.insider.com/brittany-broksi-tiktok-aave-internet-culture-slang-appropriation-chile-2020

This is made even more stark when certain phrases that are city specific, like "jawn" or "boul" from Philly, or how to properly use "hoe" like a Black Texan. These jumbled speech patterns exhibited by non-black English speakers fall into the aforementioned "online imagined Black English."[93] They instead reveal themselves as interlopers by missing "…that linguistic concealment of intent, but not meaning, that Black folks have mastered as a manner of communication through centuries of enslavement and white supremacy."[94]

Affinity becomes essential when considering the use of Black language as it also demonstrates the threshold upon which Black people feel a repulsion that indicates that someone we may be interfacing with online is not actually Black. I will return to the importance of affinity with regards to Blackness and im/material interactions. Notably, digital Blackface does not include a material alteration of one's physical body. To be clear, digital blackface can have the simpler manifestation of a non-Black person using Black gifs or expressing solely in a "Black" dialect online or can be someone who is portraying a Black person, by using profile pictures of actual Black people and falsifying the facts of ones' background. It is not simply Internet play. Digital blackface is "…an act- the act of inhabiting a black persona."[95]

Finally, digital blackface diminishes the possibility of what Black imagery and Black life can come to mean. Memes are made legible through their ability to be fungible, to be endlessly made to have new meaning across time and digital space. Black people are inherently tied to fungibility as well, given the history of the transatlantic slave trade that has made possible our contemporary capitalist society possible. The fungibility of the Black female figure, in particular,

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[93] Manual Arturo Abreu, "Online Imagined Black English."

[94] Laur. M. Jackson, "Memes and Misogynoir," *The Awl,* August 28, 2014, https://www.theawl.com/2014/08/memes-and-misogynoir/#.o0onkibdn

[95] Jackson, "We Need to Talk About Digital Blackface."

must be understood to understand how digital blackface's ultimate expression invariably immaterializes as an idea of the black woman. As Ann duCille says "I am alternately pleased, puzzled, and perturbed- bewitched, bothered, and bewildered- by this, by the alterity that is perpetually thrust upon African American women, by the production of black women as infinitely deconstructable 'othered' matter." Digital blackface shows that black womanhood continues to be infinite in terms of analysis, capture, dissection and dissemination. I will now shift to an even more interesting and dynamic racial performance that takes place offline and online: blackfishing.

Blackfishing, or Vikings Had Braids, Too!

In early November 2018, cultural critic Wanna Thompson, known on Twitter as @WannasWorld, tweeted the following in a now deleted tweet: "Can we start a thread and post all of the white girls cosplaying as black women on Instagram? Let's air them out because this is ALARMING."[96] The tweet became trending and the subsequent thread was full of Black people posting images of white women who were, for all intents and purposes, passing as Black online. To be explicit, this was not simply engaging in digital blackface, using GIFs and AAVE behind Black profile pictures. No, these women had light brown skin, plumped lips, and textured hair, demonstrating a somewhat anthropological knowledge of various phenotypes associated with Black people. They engaged with hashtags that were meant to amplify or connect Black women such as #BlackWomenSmiling, which was meant to show Black women smiling to combat ideas of Black women only appearing disgruntled or angry online. The phenomena became known as

[96] Wanna Thompson, "How White Women On Instagram Are Profiting Off Black Women," *Paper Magazine*, November 14, 2018, https://www.papermag.com/white-women-blackfishing-instagram-2619714094.html?rebelltitem=1#rebelltitem1

niggerfishing, a play on the phrase "catfishing." "Catfishing" is "the act of creating a false identity in order to lure people into relationships online."[97] The purpose of catfishing can be to scam someone out of money, to catch someone cheating on their partner or spouse, or simply to gain access to any entry to relationships that one may otherwise be excluded from if they were to simply be themselves online. The practice was entered into more mainstream conversation due to Nev Schulman's 2010 documentary, *Catfish*, that led to an MTV show by the same name that is currently still airing new episodes. Given the possibly problematic usage of the term "niggerfishing," the more palatable phrase, "blackfishing," is now more commonly used by news sources.

Even with the foundational description of catfishing, blackfishing does not perfectly transfer. Catfishing remains a largely digital performance that is reliant on a manipulation of *online* facts. Blackfishing, however, is an analog *and* digital performance that was only able to be caught and discovered by blackfishers' own online *documentation*. Thus, we must acknowledge that blackfishing is something that exists offline as well, an anxious thought. Who can forget the revelation of the life of Rachel Dolezal, now legally Nkechi Amare Diallo, a white woman who was revealed to have been passing as Black for years, even going so far as being the President of the Spokane National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapter.[98] In 2020, there was the case of Associate Professor Jessica Krug who was

[97] Adryan Corcione, "9 Signs You're Being Catfished," *Teen Vogue*, January 21, 2020, accessed February 23, 2022, https://www.teenvogue.com/story/signs-youre-being-catfished

[98] Chris McGreal, "Rachel Dolezal: 'I wasn't identifying as black to upset people. I was being me.'," *The Guardian*, December 13, 2015, accessed March 3, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/13/rachel-dolezal-i-wasnt-identifying-as-black-to-upset-people-i-was-being-me

revealed that she had been passing as Black, or more specifically Afro-Latina, for years.[99] Krug was a historian of Africa and African diaspora, which makes the situation even more interesting, to me, given that her desire to pass as Black was not needed for her to be a successful historian of the African diaspora.[100] If anything, being white would have helped her become a largely well-respected name within the field. While Dolezal has remained firm in her decision and right to claim Blackness, Krug outed herself to get ahead of being outed by actual Afro-Latinx women and used the claim of "mental health issues" to explain away her decade long grift.[101] But what mental illness diagnosis could explain away this behavior? Perhaps it is the general mental illness that this country suffers under: white supremacy.

What I find remarkable about all of these revelations about blackfishing is that none of these women are passing for unambiguously Black women. Like those Black people who pass for white, these women are only able to pass for Black through an understanding of multi-raciality that is dependent on an aesthetic assumption of what a racially ambiguous person looks like. It is this ambiguity that makes any blackfishing case possible and passable. The racially ambiguous woman over the past few decades has come to stand in for, what I will clunkily call, the unambiguously Black person. This is easy to see in most castings of Black families in television commercials and television shows, wherein all Black men and boys are generally

[99] Colleen Flaherty, "White Lies," *Inside Higher Ed*, September 4, 2020, accessed March 3, 2022, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/09/04/prominent-scholar-outs-herself-white-just-she-faced-exposure-claiming-be-black

[100] Ann duCille, "The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies." *Signs*, vol. 19, no. 3, (Spring 1994): 601. As duCille says "for many scholars trained in these well-mined fields, the shift to African American studies has yielded more prominent positions at more prestigious institutions."

[101] Jessica A . Krug, "The Truth, and the Anti-Black Violence of My Lies," *Medium*, September 3, 2020, https://medium.com/@jessakrug/the-truth-and-the-anti-black-violence-of-my-lies-9a9621401f85

darker skinned and all women and Black women and girls are played by lighter skinned, mixed-race Black actresses. This creates a metric through which we come to audiovisually process Black women as only being racially ambiguous and/or lighter skinned. This is all working within the larger project of colorism, certainly, but I would be even more specific and say that colorism is only one building block of what Ren Ellis Neyra calls "multiracial white supremacy."[102] Neyra's definition of multiracial white supremacy comes from an analysis of the Kardashians as "a commercial enterprise posing as a family" who are "hell-bent on extracting financial gain from Black people and Black culture, even as they stigmatize, in particular, Black women through their project of multiracial whiteness."[103]

Indeed, the Kardashian-Jenner family are the original blackfishers, so easily assimilated into popular culture as cosmetic creators, fashion models, and television stars. Thus, I agree with Neyra's definition of multiracial and even consider it an essential critical statement in order to further understand how those who are blackfishing become legible to others as potentially multiracial white subjects. Neyra's definition too relies on an understanding of plasticity, by any other name. They accuse the Kardashians of "aesthetically and biologically *incorporating* selective, 'soft' variations on tropes of Blackness: be it in the form of an ass implant, a cheekbone restructuring, or a mixed-race child."[104] Like the Kardashians, those who blackfish are not interested in making themselves Black, or becoming part of "black(ened) people," for real. They are, instead, invested in producing "raced reality and value for, not apart from, the

[102] Ren Ellis Neyra, "The Kardashians' Multiracial White Supremacy," *Public Books,* October 22, 2020, https://www.publicbooks.org/the-kardashians-multiracial-white-supremacy/#fn-38987-2

[103] Neyra, "The Kardashians' Multiracial White Supremacy."

[104] Neyra, "The Kardashians' Multiracial White Supremacy."

homogenous project of the (white) human." This raced reality becomes the grounds for blackfishing, wherein the non-Black human can affirm *their* humanity by playing in the dark.[105] The few non-Black women who darken their skin to a startling degree do not pass for Black nor one is actually "blackfishing." They are more easily read as white people who are clearly darkening their skin or altering their hair to have a texture that is associated with Black women.

There are several prominent cases of blackfishing that have been used as paragons of this movement. First, there is Emma Hallberg (@eemmahallberg), a Swedish model and influencer, who one of the primary examples in Thompson's exposé thread.[106] Hallberg's Instagram follows the typical Instagram influencer format: various selfies taken in mirrors during "golden hour," sporadic text posts expressing one's character ("Self love isn't selfish, it's important"), and so forth. She has about 633k followers, putting her in a category of influencer who is asked to do collaborations, one of which she has with Fashion Nova. Currently, Hallberg's account shows pictures from as far back as 2016. In her first picture, posted New Year's Day 2016, Hallberg is shown in a tilted-frame closeup selfie. She's wearing a black top and pearl studs, with straight hair and a full face of makeup (brows, smoky eye, contour, highlight, and lipstick). Notably, this is the lightest skin tone that can be found on her profile, an olive tone. Hallberg's style begins to evolve from that point on, shifting with the fashion trends of the contemporary moment she finds herself in. Gradually, her skin tone darkens over time. Her hair, normally straight, becomes wavy at first before shifting towards curly, within the matter of ten days from October 21, 2016 to October 31, 2016. In May 2017, she debuted one of her signature makeup looks: an extremely

[105] "Playing in the dark" is a reference to Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness in the Literary Imagination.*

[106] Emma Hallberg (@eemahallberg), Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/eemmahallberg/

pronounced highlighter on the cheeks and brow. The highlighter here does double work to emphasize not just her bone structure but also creates a contrast between her subtlety darkening skin and the glow of the highlighter. This gives Hallberg an almost artificial appearance, like a digitally created person. By the year 2018, Hallberg had definitively created an aesthetic profile that mimicked those of Black women influencers. To me, it is no surprise that she was one of the primary to be exposed as she is just innocuous and prominent enough to jut out. Once the process of calling out and identifying those who were blackfishing began, it gained a lot of traction. One other remarkable revelation of blackfishing commenced from an Instagram post on a fashion brand's account.

Beyoncé Knowles-Carter launched her fashion brand, Ivy Park, in partnership with Topshop in October 2014. The brand became fairly popular and was part of a larger arc of luxury athleisure proliferation by celebrities and other traditionally ready-to-wear brands. After some time, Beyoncé bought the line from Topshop in 2018, before beginning new production on the line with athletic powerhouse, Adidas, in January 2020. The brand became known not just for their designs but for their creative social media advertisements that featured Beyoncé, her daughter Blue Ivy, and a host of other celebrities. As part of their second rollout in late October 2020, the Ivy Park/Adidas team sent garment rack sized boxes full of the collection to a number of celebrities and public figures such as Ciara, Mo'Nique, Reese Witherspoon and others.[107] Many noticed that the team was privileging and prioritizing mostly celebrities of color, and mainly Black celebrities. Following the second drop, Ivy Park, Beyoncé's athleisure clothing line, was continuing promotions for the second capsule by posting everyday people and

[107] Nandi Howard, "Beyoncé Drops Date for Second Ivy x Adidas Release," *Essence*, November 4, 2020, https://www.essence.com/fashion/beyonce-drops-date-second-ivy-park-release/

influencers who were wearing the collection to their Instagram. Just as the original celebrity posts featured people of color predominantly, so did these Instagram posts. On December 8th, 2020, the account posted a seemingly innocuous photo of two women.

In the photo, the two women are standing in a white photography space, typical of a professional photoshoot. One woman towards the left of the frame is squatting wearing a forest green Ivy Park bra top, high waisted bikes shorts, and socks with a grey Ivy Park/Adidas fanny park. She has hip length jumbo sized box braids. The second woman is in the foreground of the photo to the right side of the frame. She is standing with her left hip jutted out towards the camera with her right arm bent and resting on the top of her head. She's wearing a kinky-curly wig with gold layered necklaces and earrings. Her outfit is a mirror of the other woman but in black, accessorizing with black ankle boots instead of gold open-toed, strappy sandals. Their skin is a tawny color with the woman squatting, appearing a shade darker, perhaps because of the shadow cast by the standing woman. These women are perfectly racially ambiguous. When the now-deleted post went live, almost immediately users, many Black women, began to call out that these women were actually white women. The issue wasn't that white women were being posted on the account, as there were other white women posted, but that these were white women posing as Black women on the account of a Black woman owned fashion brand. One user @lusttforlifeex said "I hope y'all delete this before Blue see it *sad emoji with tear from nose*," referencing the Beyoncé fan inside joke that Blue Ivy is actually Beyoncé's manager, and a strict one at that.[108]

[108] Atahabih Germain, "Beyoncé Fans Call Out Ivy Park Models for 'Blackfishing,' Models Respond: 'We are Darker Than Most Russians'," *Atlanta Black Star*, December 10, 2020, https://atlantablackstar.com/2020/12/10/beyonce-fans-call-out-ivy-park-models-for-blackfishing-models-respond/.

The two women, @alena_biuni and @Anastasia1102, are Russian influencers who proclaim they are "inspired" by Black culture and style. Of the two women, Anastasia's blackfishing is the most passable, whereas Alena tends to appear just as she is, a white woman donning Afro-textured wigs and styles. Their accounts show that they tend to make posts together often, modeling clothes or being shown out together at dinner and in clubs. In addition to comments that were undoubtedly left on the post bashing the two, Alena and Anastasia also received commentary on the posts of their personal accounts. Alena came forward with a statement in Russian, the same day, to accompany a post featuring a photo that appears to have been taken during the same photoshoot that generated the Ivy Park post. I have provided a rough translation below:

"It was a funny day today, it started when I saw our photo in the brand's official account @weareivypark. At first I was delighted, and then horrified by the comments under our photo. Black women (and whites too) began to scribble comments from the category: "WTF?! Delete this!!!", "These white Russians are insulting our rights", "why the hell are they wearing braids and braids?!", "This is racism" and blah blah blah...They have the concept of Blackfishing - they say, when whites try to mow down like blacks: style, hairstyles, dances and everything that is connected with their culture in order (God forbid) to get some nice things. But I don't understand what's wrong with being fascinated by this culture, their style, music and dancing since childhood. And I don't understand why the hell I can't dress the way I like, do the hair that I like ...It turns out that I had to take a picture in Evie in a kokoshnik and with a long Russian braid, but no, braids are also theirs, in general, ours ... but they don't know 😅What's next ? Forbid me to listen to hip hop, wear low jeans and go to the solarium? Yes, yes, the fact that I'm too tanned also offends them 😂😂😂 Kamoooon, there are not only "black" and "white" guys in the world, there are also southern girls with gypsy and Caucasian roots. And yes, we are darker than most Russians. Well, now, frantically smear yourself with SPF +100 so that not a single dark-skinned woman is upset?!😅Why don't I feel that wild disrespect and discrimination when you wear wigs that are made from the hair of white women and Asian women? Or when you use things in life that weren't invented by African Americans: maybe because it's nonsense and absurdity?😅 It seems that they just need to to 🌸 get on))) There is nothing wrong with being inspired and using the heritage of other races. It seems to me that there are more important problems in the world than lashing out and bullying people because of hair, style and other garbage. I think for an adequate person this is not a problem))) And to all inadequate from whom bile spurts, I send fiery 😈"[109]

[109]@alena_biuni, December 8, 2020 https://www.instagram.com/p/CIiyYnPsX09/

The post is full of typical misogynoir that is offered whenever a non-Black person is accused of any variation of cultural appropriation. Perhaps the most common statements relate to hair. The first statement about who "braids" belong to is a common refrain white people use, especially white ethnic people from the Nordic region. Her acknowledgement of blackfishing and the lack of care for the implications of, "(God forbid)," gaining "some nice things" on the utilization of Black women's aesthetics is refreshing as more often than not those who are exposed either deny what they're doing or make some other disingenuous apology. Even after this post was made, and many were commenting about the racism from the two women, the post remained up for days until it was finally deleted on December 12, 2020.[110] It would be difficult to figure out who exactly was responsible for posting the picture of Alena and Anastasia. To assume that there is more than one Black person working for Ivy Park's social media team, as Beyoncé's team tends to be predominantly Black, it is shocking that no one looked at the image and realized these were not Black women. Furthermore, it is more interesting to me that we meditate on the possibility that someone Black did realize and simply didn't think there was anything of issue. Perhaps even more unsettling, what if no one Black on the team *did* notice that these were not Black women? Blackfishing has the potential to make it difficult for other Black people to identify one another, disrupting the possibility for community building among other things. Not unlike digital blackface, blackfishing disrupts and deranges the cultivation and advancement of Black women's aesthetics by Black women themselves.

I wanted to outline digital blackface and blackfishing because the conversation around the terms never managed to capture a far more insidious phenomenon. There are a number of

[110] Kecia Gayle, "UPDATE: Ivy Park Deletes Image of Two Models Accused of 'Blackfishing' On Instagram," *Hollywood Unlocked*, December 12, 2020, https://hollywoodunlocked.com/update-ivy-park-deletes-image-of-two-models-accused-of-blackfishing-on-instagram/

non-Black people who don't alter their appearances at all to appear Black but rather adopt the accents and comportment of Black women, regardless. They wield these to create content for social media or to gain access to Black intramural spaces. This isn't blackface, nor digital blackface, nor is it blackfishing either, but it is significantly more widespread and increasingly difficult to indicate.

This brings me to my final example. I present two different influencers, Landon Romano and Vena Excell, also known as Pretty Vee. Vena Excell or Vena E. is an established comedian from Miami known for her videos on Instagram, boasting an impressive 5.7 million followers. Vee's comedic performance originally took place in the digital space, where she became known for recording videos in her kitchen and developing a number of personas. While in interviews she states that she didn't start officially doing comedy until 2017, her Instagram, which goes back as far as 2012, shows that Vee has been cultivating her craft since at least 2015 when she first started posting short skits. Her humor is marked by a profound silliness and goofiness, exhibiting Vee's elastic facial features and physical strength and flexibility, making it no surprise that some of her inspirations are Jim Carrey and Eddie Murphy.[111] This is particularly interesting given that her background is in radio, as she ran a show in college and even interned at popular Atlanta radio station, V-103 The People Station. As is the case for most comedians, but especially online comedians, her personas are attuned to certain body comportments and wardrobe items. For example, one of her well-known characters is Peanut's Mama, a character that is demarcated by a pink fluffy bathrobe and black silk bonnet. A scene from one of the many videos featuring Peanut's Mama wherein Vee walks up to a driver's side car window to knock

[111] Rosa Escandon, "27-Year-Old Vena Excell is Making Instagram Laugh," *Forbes*, March 9, 2019 11:58am EST, accessed March 3, 2022, https://www.forbes.com/sites/rosaescandon/2019/03/04/27-year-old-vena-excell-is-making-instagram-laugh/?sh=688b5aab7b2e

while wearing the signature robe and a black bonnet has become a commonly used reaction GIF to signify confronting someone to make a complaint.

From these humble beginnings, Vee has managed to transform her online act into a real career. She is a common guest star on Nick Cannon's *Wild N'Out* (2005-), an improvisational comedy show that breaks up comedians into teams of two to compete with one another. She created a collection of luxury bathrobes, appropriate given her signature hot pink fluffy robe, called The VXL Collection. She has done promotional work for Fenty Beauty. She is also supported in her business ventures by fellow Miami native, rapper Rick Ross. She briefly had an original show on the Zeus Network, featuring fellow Instagram comedian B. Simone called *You're My Boooyfriend*. She currently co-hosts a podcast series "MTV's Women of *Wild' N Out*" with other comedian Justina Valentine. Vee is not struggling by any definition even though her notoriety remains largely intramural. As usual, given the way that Black people are removed from their own creative innovations on and offline, Vee has at least two commonly used GIFs and memes from these Instagram skits, even though most who engage with them probably do not know she is a working comedian, let alone know her name. I, myself, came to know Vee through someone connecting her work to the persona of a white gay man named Landon Romano.

Describing himself as an Italian Southern belle, Landon Romano gained notoriety during 2013 in the midst of the peak of the Vine era. In a 2013 Huffington Post article titled "Landon Romano: Vine Famous?," Romano is interviewed to capture the then new phenomena of being "Vine famous." At the time of the interview he had about 350,000 Vine followers, which is nothing compared to his now 2 million followers on Instagram and I million followers on TikTok. Romano has been able to maintain a steady following and interest across multiple platforms which, while necessary in today's media landscape, is not easy to carry out. He is

regularly featured as a guest on a number of daytime and shows including *The Talk* and *Afterbuzz Tonite*. I remember when Romano's Instagram videos went viral, appearing to me on Twitter with people posting a thread of some of his funniest. The videos struck me as interesting, in the sense that this white gay man was seemingly impersonating the persona of a Black woman, which is not an unusual connection or experience. When I mentioned Romano by name to a friend, he said "Oh, I love him! I know it's a little cringe but he is funny." To which I inquired if he knew that Romano was impersonating a Black woman. He said, "well I mean yeah he's definitely performing a Black woman." This situation is more precise though as the impersonation is not of some imagined Black woman; Romano is stealing the performance of one of Vee's personas, specifically.

Jay Versace, influencer and music producer, also emerged as a Vine famous youth, creating a host of scenarios that were at once unique and relatable. On Vine, he was pubescent and played with modulating his voice and facial features to create added layers to his comedic performances. Like most Black male comics, Versace also had a number of videos where he was also undoubtedly inhibiting a Black female persona for some of his comedic videos in the interim between Vine and Instagram and Twitter virality. This phenomenon of Black male online comics utilizing the sign and stereotypes of Black women and girls has been remarked upon by many scholars. I take up Moya Bailey's assessment of Jay Versace's performances online as performances of Black femininity that is a celebration rather than a mockery. Speaking of Versace's infamous minute long impersonation of a Black woman listening to Erykah Badu's "On & On," she writes that Versace "lip sync[s] and impersonate[s] Black women in ways that seem to be in the spirit of laughing *with* as opposed to *at* Black women" because he relies on "viewers' knowledge of these cultural touchstones and do not seek to render the Black women as

caricatures."[112] Which is why I also find it very fitting that he was the one to point out Romano's theft. He tweeted the following on September 8, 2018: "fuckk.. you be taking my girl vena's whole shit. mannerisms, style, words, and dances. But it's cool she gonna shine regardless."[113] As is typical because of the rate of turnover on the Internet, this tweet was attached to a retweet of a video that Romano had posted which is now deleted.

The video of Vee was still visible which allowed me to go to her Instagram and see when she posted the video, which was on August 7, 2018. Following that, I went to Romano's Instagram page to see what he had been posting before and after that date. Romano's first Instagram post, a still image of him in a deep squat reminiscent of Nicki Minaj's infamous album cover for "Anaconda," is from 2014. Romano's second post is a video from May 2, 2018 and the subsequent videos reveal a new persona that seems demarcated will now analyze in connection to a video of Vee's. Romano's video was posted on his Instagram account on the same day, August 7, 2018. Looking further on Vee's account, this unnamed persona that she uses has been one of her skits since at least October 2017. The first video and second post on Romano's account, where his version of this character appears, is from May 3, 2018.

In the posted video, Romano is seen in a colorful stripped button up shirt, turquoise shorts, backwards black baseball hat, sunglasses, and faded black low-top Chuck Taylors.[114] He standing near what appears to be a viewpoint, with a hilly landscape behind him. He's standing in a pose that many strike in order to emphasize their body: back towards the camera while the

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[112] Moya Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance,* (New York: New York University Press, 2021): 45-46.

[113] @jayversace, Twitter, September 3, 2018, https://twitter.com/jayersace/status/1036674965011976192

[114] Landon Romano, Instagram, August 7, 2018, https://www.instagram.com/p/BmM7BZGnLz_/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_lin

body rotates around to face the camera, which emphasizes the shape of one's legs and posterior and curve of the back. He beckons the camera to come closer, saying "come here closer, right now," before pointing down at his protruding behind. Throughout the video he, ironically, indicates how big his butt his as part of the overall joke of the video. He goes on to talk almost in a rap-like cadence, about his butt as he strikes various poses, at differing angles. He says, "got a ass so big like the sun. How much competition? None. Look, if I drop them rocks gonna come down," here he points at the mountains. Then he drops down into a deep squat saying "whahp!," before bouncing back up in a spread open, braced stance, while remaining bent forward at the waist. When he walks over to the railing of the viewpoint, he addresses the unknown cameraperson, whose shadow is visible, saying "come here" while making a "come on" gesture with his hands. Halfway through the video, he walks towards the camera before turning and showing his backside again, because making his butt "clap" before slapping it. This moment is almost exact to moments in Vee's videos.

In Vee's video, she is wearing a red matching top and skirt set with a matching hat.[115] She wears a cropped black studded jacket and black thigh high boots. This video is a sponsored ad for Pretty Little Things, a fast-fashion retailer. The opening shot begins focused on her lower half with her hand, flicking off the camera, is at her waist. Her legs are splayed with her feet intoed. As she raises her hand up towards her face, the camera pans up to follow the motion. She addresses the camera person, walking towards them, saying "pussy ass hoes, crusty and rusty, nevertheless, no fucking stress," as she finishes this she pulls her jacket off of her shoulders. Here she stops, legs splayed, hands near her shoulders both flipping the camera off, while she shakes her legs to make her butt, which is not visible to the camera, shake. She stops and says

[115] @yesiamprettyvee, Instagram August 7, 2018, https://www.instagram.com/p/BmMc2y6H6lZ/

"follow me, hoes!," backing up from the cameraperson before advancing saying, "don't follow me," while making a "come here" gesture. She turns and walks towards a shirt flight of steps. She squat jumps up the stairs one at a time, demonstrating an impressive command of her physical comedy, but also performing one of the central motions of this unnamed persona. All of her videos where she performs this persona have these features: strike a pose while flicking off the camera, "follow me/ don't follow me," and an emphatic address to her butt. All of these very same aspects are featured in Romano's work.

The issue in outlining exactly what is going on here is that both people are performing a persona. Additionally, it is quite common in comedy, or in performance generally speaking Vee, in speaking about the inspiration for her famous persona, Peanuts' mama, said "I think about my upbringing from young, my mama used to yell at me…Everything I take from my upbringing, that's why I try to stay creative. I take everything from what I've been through."[116] In another interview on *The Breakfast Club*, Vee always credits growing up in the hood in Miami where she really witnessed people who had the affects and attributes of the characters that she embellishes.[117] Similarly, Romano attributes his persona to growing up in Louisiana and Mississippi, two states with the highest population of Black people in the United States at thirty-three percent and thirty-eight percent, respectively.[118] In this same interview, Romano is asked who raised him, not in the sense of the traditional family structure, but who informed his sense of self. Jesse Janedy, the host and interviewer of *AfterBuzz Tonite*, asked this question because he as

[116] Shirley Ju, "Pretty Vee | Unapologetic, God-Fearing Comedian, Actor & Entrepreneur," *Flaunt*, July 3, 2020, https://flaunt.com/content/pretty-vee-unapologetic-god-fearing-comedian-actress-amp-business-woman

[117] Breakfast Club, "Pretty Vee On Her Journey To Insta Fame, Almond Turds + Full Circle Being On The Breakfast Club," YouTube video, October 8, 2019, Accessed February 21, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2WE5V_YRyJk&t=826s&ab_channel=BreakfastClubPower105.1FM

[118] https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/black-population-by-state

a gay man growing up turned to his friends and television to learn how to be his queer self. Romano responds as following:

> "I've never really thought about that but I know the answer: reality TV. That was my thing. I remember I used to watch Disney Channel and all that but as I got older like late elementary, early junior high, I started watching reality TV so, 'New York' Tiffany Pollard, the OG, the baddest bitch in the game. I mean I was obsessed with her and so *pauses* now that I think about it I can kind of see a lot of her in me, so it's interesting that you say that."[119]

Even as Romano is asked about his influences or his reaction to people accusing him of cultural appropriation, he never acknowledges Vee as an inspiration, or really any comics by name as his major influence. That he does acknowledge Tiffany "New York" Pollard, one of the television most prolific personalities birthing countless memes and GIFs, as being "in" him further intrigues me. A white gay man claiming that a Black woman raised him is almost too easy to explicate. Romano sees Black femininity as "in" him, at once unique and natural. While it is impossible to know for sure if Romano is stealing the Black female persona of Vee, it is the absorption of the black femme into himself that creates a feeling of trepidation. For how long can one assume racial derangement as being? Furthermore, in interviews, it is clear that Vee is performing some version of Black femininity that she might not actually move through in her day to day experience. I see Vee's performances as fitting into what Daphne Brooks calls "Afro-alienation acts." These acts "recur as a trope that reflects and characterizes marginal cultural positions as well as a tactic that the marginalized seized on and reordered in the self-making process."[120] Vee in her performance of her personas does the work of looking at herself through

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[119] AfterBuzz Tonite, YouTube, July 16, 2019, "Musician arrests, Twitter Tea, and Landon Romano Live in studio!" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1HdzrbJm7s&ab_channel=AfterBuzzTV

[120] Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910,* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006): 4.

how others could see her because of her (first-generation) Blackness: possibly someone's ratchet mama, a silly seductress, or a contestable ghetto girl. Romano, however, could never be seen as those things through someone's eyes. His performances then derange rather than reflect. Both performers usher in a question about realness and reality as a result, leaving those who engage to question who is the real nigga here?

#realniggahours?

One of my personal favorite memes is "real nigga hours." A tweet or Instagram post might indicate that it is now "real nigga hours" anytime one is up late working, grinding and hustling. Manuel Arturo Abreu traces the phrase back as far back on Twitter as October 2009.[121] They describe "real nigga hours" memes as "overcompressed, Steyerlian 'poor images' styled after black digital content to index masculinity through Blackness."[122] What Abreu calls poor image memes, I refer to as "deep fried memes," memes whose text and image has been edited and filtered multiple times such that the image has a grain that is neither from the passage of time nor the dissolution of the pixel. Tracing the meme from obscurity to relative public knowledge, Abreu says that these images "generally marry the trope of late-night internet use with the instruction to 'smash that like'."[123] Late night internet users tend to have a certain sort of performance which tends to include declarations of "realness," the appearance of in-app conversations that are generally NSFW, and other unchecked manifestations of horniness. Multiple times, I have woken up to find a new viral meme that seemingly appeared overnight yet managed to already become viral by daybreak. Yet even a meme such as "real nigga hours" gets

[121] Arturo Abreu, "Online Imagined Black English"

[122] Arturo Abreu, "Online Imagined Black English."

[123] Arturo Abreu, "Online Imagined Black English."

memefied or, confusingly, deracialized. Abreu analyzes the 2015 Medium article posted by controversial white internet artist, Ryder Ripps, called "11 Wild Reasons Why #RealNiggaHours Is the Greatest Meme Of All Time."[124] How can a meme that calls out quite clearly for "real" "niggas" end up representing "the ultimate shared experience" that Ripps is always included in?

Outside of the clear stakes of these flights of racial performance, I must also consider the emotional impact of these things as well. Digital blackface, blackfishing, and the ever-more insidious classical blackface minstrelsy become increasingly creepy, maybe even scary, to me the more I think of it. I believe that these performances create an undeniably uncanny feeling, this time from the perspective of the "non-human" Black person projecting onto the human Western subject. Because for what reason would a human choose to pass as non-human, a person walking around rotting like a zombie? Even in asking this question, I know the answer. Thinking with Alexander Weheliye, Aria Halliday states that "the pleasure derived from inflicting violence on bodies based on race distinguishes the full human from the not-quite-human and the nonhuman."[125] By manipulating oneself into a Blackness adjacent, the human can further demarcate what he is *not*. Manipulation as subject-making is perhaps the most haunting aspect of the creation of the human, which caused me to think of the uncanny. The uncanny, or unheimlich, represents a collapse in category wherein the familiar becomes just unfamiliar enough to create an unsettling feeling or mood.

In the process of my research around the ideas of the uncanny and Black studies, I came across an article "Towards a Definition of Black Cinematic Horror" by Nicholas Whittaker. In

[124] This article is now deleted

[125] Aria Halliday, "Miley, What's Good?: Nicki Minaj's *Anaconda*, Instagram Reproductions, and Viral Memetic Violence," in *Girlhood* Studies, 11, no.3 (Winter 2018): 76.

this article, they are thinking about how "black horror films (often, perhaps always) present or perform a certain theory of what blackness is, ontologically and phenomenologically."[126] They are thinking with Afropessimist works (specifically those of Frank Wilderson and Calvin Warren) to argue that actually the only extant genre in which blackness can be performed is horror as horror needs to express "a *mood of uncanniness*." By understanding Andrea Sauchelli's assertion that horror films affect us by "cultivating a pervasive, global mood, by way of cinematic form, place, and technique," Whittaker explains that this mood lends itself to being able to express that which is "*dangerous* or *violent*."[127] "The uncanny, though, is an affect that cannot be understood as an emotion the way that affects usually can." (8)

Speaking of this mood or atmosphere, "[e]ntire cinematic worlds thus become suffused with a horrific quality. The environment develops an *atmosphere,* a global aesthetic character, that can contribute to the uncanniness of horror cinema."[128] If Black existence, under Afropessimist theory, is "defined by a) gratuitous violence and b) subsequent excess over intelligibility"[129] then a mood of uncanniness, born out of one's forced inability to make sense of the organizing structures of one's world, is to be expected when attempting to make sense of digital blackface, blackfishing, and, most importantly, the mode of existence that many others, like Landon Romano, live in. But plasticity makes Blackness hold this as "[t]here is no terror or

[126] Abreu leaves Black in lower-case.

[127] Nicholas Whittaker, "Towards a Definition of Black Cinematic Horror," *Film and Philosophy*, Vol. 26 (2022). 5. I am working from an unpublished version of the article that was graciously provided to me by the author and will use that pagination as I can't gain access to the official version.

[128] Whittaker, "Towards a Definition of Black Cinematic Horror," 5.

[129] Whittaker, "Towards a Definition of Black Cinematic Horror," 7.

taboo too hollowed or obtuse to be gestured or worn by Black people by a Black body…"[130] And yet, the closer one gets to the Black body, neither nonhuman or human, the more likely one falls into, or rather becomes, an uncanny valley. Here presents the issue at hand that manifests in an uncanniness, Romano and others create a type of performance, and maybe even existence, that becomes impossible to index. A collapse in perception and a failure in grammar. I can't tell you what it is that they are doing, exactly, and I don't even want to. But I wanted to decentralize the current conversations around digital blackface and blackfishing as the most insidious online racial performances because at the very least they can be indexed. But indexicality does not promise resolution.

Tavia Nyong'o interrogates the formulation of "the uncanny valley" in a chapter of his book, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life*. Nyong'o interrogates the transhumanist technofuturist subject (or object), Bina48. Bina48 is the "mind-clone" of Bina Aspen, the corporeal Black wife of Martine Rothblatt, a white "telecommunications-turned-pharmaceuticals tycoon."[131] Bina48's existence rehearses, more than creates, a number of already known connections between "the robot or cyborg as worker, slave, prostitute, and minstrel," making her overdetermined and over-indexed before she is able to really exist, especially as she is created by a white person.[132] Rothblatt and Aspen's relationship is queered through their investment in a transhumanism that seeks to evade death through a symbiotic relationship between human and artificial intelligence. Bina48 presents an uncanniness that can't

[130] Harmony Holiday, "The Quick and the Deathless" in "The Black Catatonic Scream," *Triple Canopy* 26, August 20, 2020, https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/the-black-catatonic-scream

[131] Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life*, (New York: New York University Press, 2019): 186.

[132] Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations*, 185

be underestimated but not for simply her proximity, at once so close and so far, to the "human" Bina Aspen, but because her proximity reveals a crack in an investment in the uncanny valley. As Nyong'o states plainly: "when we consider, with black scholars like Sylvia Wynter and Paul Gilroy, how the figure of the figure of the negro has long been separated from the fully human by the uncanny valley of race."[133] I put pressure here as I want to posit that the uncanny valley of race, as Nyong'o calls it, still relies on a disavowal of Blackness that inevitably places Blackness as *the* uncanny valley. Thinking only of Moto's development of the uncanny valley causes one to realize that "it assumes a 'we' with one universal standard for relating to other humans."[134] Furthermore, part of the fear that Bina48 ushers in also comes from her clear demarcation as a technical subject, something potentially digital as a base, perhaps also the digital uncanny.

The digital uncanny as formulated by Kris Ravetto-Biagioli "does not refer to human anxieties projected onto nonhuman devices (automata, dolls, avatars, body doubles) but rather to how nonhuman devices (surveillance technologies, algorithms, feedback, and data flows) anticipate human gestures, emotions, actions, and interactions, thus intimating that we are machines and that our behavior may be predictable precisely because we are machinic."[135] Yet, as Nyong'o and I indicate, the "we" in the last sentence assumes quite a bit about who "we" are. Some of "we" have been machines, are machines, will be machines. Furthermore, there is no increase in the uncanniness, the excess violence, for some of "we" as contemporary machines, analog and digital, have always already been made to anticipate, capture, and arrange our being. Ravetto-Biagioli's definition of the digital uncanny emerges as separate to the uncanny of the

[133] Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations,* 188.

[134] Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations,* 188.

[135] Ravetto-Biagioli, *Digital Uncanny,* (London: Oxford University Press, 2019): 5.

cinema, emerging out of a study of interactive art works which immerses viewers and can directly address the spectator while keeping them "within the sensory, within the aesthetic element."[136] Bina48 presents multiple uncanny experiences through gauging and traversing Nyongo's uncanny valley of race which, of course, given Blackness's digital and technological connections, also requires an understanding of the digital uncanny.

Understanding the uncanny valley (of race/of Blackness) within the Internet as a cause of the Internet's general mood of uncanniness, I posit that the expression of that which is violent or dangerous online is not solely generated by the racial performances of Blackness by non-Black people but from the way that trying to index these performances disrupts and destructs the creation of Black women's aesthetics. Instead, given the Black female figure's Worldly determination as the very "plasticity of life," Black women as we create and reproduce ourselves through beauty, comportment and language, inevitably produce the tools for our self-determination to become overdetermined, over-indexed.[137] This ouroboros confounds, troubles, and frightens. Yet, I still must, I *must*, ask *when* and *where* are the real nigga hours?

"Oh My Fucking God, She Fucking Dead": The Fall of Vine and the Rise of TikTok

[136] Ravetto-Biagioli, *Digital Uncanny*, 8.

[137] Jayna Brown, "Being Cellular: Race, the Inhuman, and the Plasticity of Life," *GLQ* 21:2-3 (2015): 323.

"Hips tik tok when I dance
On that Demon Time, she might start an OnlyFans"
-Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter, "Savage (Remix)" by Megan thee Stallion

This chapter honors the creations of two young Black girls, Kayla Newman and Jalaiah Harmon. These girls' creations both manifested and played out on Vine and TikTok, respectively. Kayla Newman, a then sixteen-year-old girl, created the phrase "on fleek" in a six-second Vine on June 21, 2014, a term that became a viral sensation. Jalaiah Harmon, a then fourteen-year old girl, created the Renegade dance on Dubsmash with the help of her friend, Kaliyah Davis. The dance traveled from Dubsmash to TikTok and was quickly associated away from Jalaiah. However, both girls experienced a gap in time wherein their own works were not credited to them while simultaneously those very creations gained tremendous traction. Their stories are not at all new. These creations and their dissemination into the broader public imagination provides a realm to analyze Vine and TikTok, as well.

Part documentation, part media archaeology, I outline the structure of both Vine and TikTok to better understand how the business and design of these apps allowed for the extrapolation of these girls from their creations. In order to do this, I wrestle with movement, sound, and time as they relate specifically to the videos that capture Newman and Harmon's creations as well as the content of various clips from Vine and TikTok I have selected. I stay with movement, across apps and the viral movement(s) of meme culture that constricts and expands time. By gathering this information through these aesthetic forms, I read the two cases of Newman and Harmon through what Tina Campt calls the "future real conditional" and use my analysis of these moments to consider the expanse and bounds of the possibility for redress outside of linear time.

Three approaches from within Black feminist thought inform my temporal analysis of various Vines and TikToks in what follows. First, Saidiya Hartman's method of "critical fabulation," as introduced in her seminal article "Venus in Two Acts," allows me to consider the moments of Black life that escape capture or measure within the archive.[138] Meditating on two Black girls murdered aboard a slave ship, one named Venus and the other unnamed, Hartman posits that a critical fabulation is needed in order to de-center the status of the "event," its authorization and authority in tow, and to imagine what might have been, despite the dominant imposition of "fact" and "truth" upon narratives of Black life.[139] Hartman suggests a raucously "conditional temporality" that imagines "what cannot be verified, a realm of experience which is situated between two zones of death ― social and corporeal death ― and to reckon with the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance."[140] The content that I analyze is always suspended in the chasm between linear time and the otherwise, and Hartman's method grants me the audacity to consider them there, rather than attempting to pin it down on a static timeline. What *might have been* instigates a different relation to time that cannot be underestimated as a necessary frame within which we must consider Black digital content. An archive of a Black life on social media is almost impossible to create given the rate of theft from Black women and girls, the speed of evolution on apps, and app migration. Thus, *what might have been* allows me to consider a truth centered on acknowledging the impact of Black women and girls' creativity on these apps even as this history is diminished or ignored.

[138] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no.2 (June 2008): 11.

[139] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 11.

[140] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 12.

Emerging from "the fabulative," Tina Campt's formation of the future real conditional (or "that which will have had to happen") as a tense of Black feminist futurity is central to this project (Campt 2017), as it extends what words can do in time, over time.[141] Confronted with a "photographic archive of precarious and dispossessed black subjects" spanning the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, Campt, like Hartman, knew that in order to really consider the archive of these subjects meant tinkering with the violence of linear time.[142] Like Hortense Spillers does in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar," Campt seeks to liberate us from the current constraints on time by seeking a new grammar that gives a new relation to the future that is neither "innocent nor naïve."[143]

In this extended quote, she states:

"The grammar of black feminist futurity that I propose here is a grammar of possibility that moves beyond a simple definition of the future tense as *what will be* in the future. It moves beyond the future perfect tense of *that which will have happened* prior to a reference point in the future. It strives for the tense of possibility that grammarians refer to as the future real conditional or *that which will have* ***had to*** *happen.* The grammar of black feminist futurity is a performance of a future that hasn't yet happened but must."[144]

Thinking with the future real conditional, I am able to perceive the elemental nature of the quotidian practices of Black women and girls online not just for media analysis, but for imagining a future where their lived experiences are not extrapolated. While the people who expand, occupy, or rearrange the objects I study are "visible only in the moment of their disappearance," as Hartman says, I refuse to let them stay that way.[145] With what *might have*

[141] Tina Campt, *Listening to Images*, 17.

[142] Campt, *Listening to Images*, 11.

[143] Campt, *Listening to Images*, 17.

[144] Campt, *Listening to Images*, 17.

[145] Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 12.

been, I can create a speculative past that *that which will have had to happen* anticipates and acknowledges. The two girls that are the center of this study, Newman and Harmon, came to be known publicly as already dispossessed subjects, and I believe it is my duty to listen to the quiet facts of their life that jut out at the moment of audiovisual capture.

I am thinking of time contrapuntally, that is "as both tensed and tenseless," as Tavia Nyong'o states.[146] Tensed time can best be understood as linear time, meaning things have cause and effect, made legible through causality and sequence. This thing happened and, *as a result,* this other thing then happens. A linear progress model, following tensed time, has been essential to stabilizing identities of Blackness in space and time with regards to what Michelle M. Wright calls "the Middle Passage epistemology." She cautions "against overreliance on the exclusive use of linear progress narratives to define Blackness and urges equal consideration of the moment of interpretation…" in order to explore a new sense of time that better suits the expansiveness of Black identity.[147] By merging the historical with this "moment of interpretation," Wright proposes a new sense of time, Epiphenomenal time, which I understand as tenseless time. Wright arrives at this new time in the following manner:

> "Bringing together Blackness as constructed and Blackness as phenomenological is not as difficult as it might first appear, because both modes comprise notions of space and time, or 'spacetime.' Our *constructs* of Blackness are largely historical and more specifically based on a notion of spacetime that is commonly fitted into a linear progress narrative while our *phenomenological* manifestations of Blackness happen in what I term *Epiphenomenal time,* or the 'now,' through which the past, present, and future are always interpreted…In *Physics of Blackness*, 'Epiphenomenal' time denotes the current moment, a moment that is *not* directly borne out of another (i.e. causally created)."[148]

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[146] Tavia Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life,* (New York: New York University Press, 2019): 10.

[147] Michelle M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015): 5.

[148] Wright, *Physics of Blackness,* 4.

Epiphenomenal time and the future real conditional, surprisingly, merge together as made possible through the now of interpretation. What will have had to happen (the future real conditional) is entirely dependent upon the perspective (and one's perception of that perspective) of the Black person who is giving an account in the form of speaking or writing. While Wright is thinking of spacetime and thus epistemologies, I wonder if this same conception of time can hold shape when considering the ontological. Through the loops wherein self and self-definition fall into one another, I find an enticing concept of time and its duration that lends itself to understanding the impact of Vine's looping feature on my ability to recount a true history of Vine or TikTok. This tenseless time builds on *what might have been* and *that which will have had to happen* to elucidate how moments of creative theft happen within and create a loop wherein the theft is always already happening. Thinking of the loop, I present a history of Vine and TikTok that concurrently bears in mind Epiphenomenal time and the fabulative facts of Black girls' creativity, my "now." It is through thinking with Wright's understanding of Epiphenomenal time that we can move "toward an elsewhere and elsewhen that is black performance's constant recourse and standing reserve."[149]

My attention to Black girls in this chapter rests atop an engagement in the field of Black girlhood studies, specifically scholars such as Aria S. Halliday, Aimee Meredith Cox, and Ruth Nicole Brown. By focusing on Black girls specifically, I am able to provide a "critique of the social conditions that influence the most intimate aspects of Black girls' lives" and rely "on specificity to enable comparative understandings."[150] Black girls stand at several intersections

[149] Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations*, 92.

[150] Ruth Nicole Brown, *Hear Our Truths: The Creative Potential of Black Girlhood,* (Champaign, Il: University of Illinois Press, 2013): 6.

that work to rob them from places of thought at the social level. I am not the first to note this and certainly will not be the last. I am mobilized in part to think with the two Black girls who are my subjects by those who have started with Black girls from the position of first thought.[151] I am particularly indebted to the work that scholar Aimee Meredith Cox presents in her text, *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship*, which allows me to know that Black girls are more than capable of developing their own sense of self that is at once against stereotypical ideals about them and informed by those very antagonistic bounds.

Finally, I closely consider the sound and the image of the media that I select and analyze from Vine and TikTok. Often in post-classical studies, the study of the image drives the study of sound, putting sound as reactionary to the image. However, as can be argued by a number of scholars, the sound, particularly clear in Hollywood productions like *Transformers* (Michael Bay) and *Kill Bill Vol.1* and *2*, often drives the image thanks to new possibilities in digital media production and post-production. I find this distinction to be particularly salient for thinking about the audiovisual digital media that is the basis of these apps. I demonstrate a way of analyzing these as being both specific to their category of "video apps" and begin to tease out the elements of the new cinematography and narrative they usher in for more traditional media like television and film. I am largely indebted to scholars who are dedicated to the sound *and* image like Carol Vernallis and Amy Herzog who give me language, in the form of music video studies.

These theories, when mixed together, lay a sturdy foundation upon which I can begin my larger interrogation into the business and utility of Vine and TikTok. In what follows, I provide a guide through the immense known and unknown archives of Vine and TikTok, sifting through

[151] Here I am thinking of *Algorithms of Oppression* by Safiya Noble, *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* by Aimee Meredith Cox, and *Misogynoir Transformed* by Moya Bailey, principally.

these enclosures to provide a Black creative history of Vine and TikTok. The videos I have selected to outline in this chapter represent the "now" from whence I understand social media, as a place wherein Black creativity is generated and subsequently purloined. To begin, I start with a focus on Vine's business before I analyze a short selection of Vines. I then discuss Newman's creation of the phrase "on fleek" and its subsequent impact on time. From there, I will discuss TikTok and Harmon's impact on the trends of the app. I will conclude with a meditation on what is made possible and what is foreclosed as potential modes of creativity online for Black girls.

The Rise and Fall of Vine

Vine was created by Dom Hofmann, Rus Yusupov, and Colin Kroll in 2012,[152] where it was quickly acquired by Twitter for a reported 30 million dollars.[153] The app was meant to act as a natural extension of the mainly text-based expression of Twitter. Similar to Twitter's character limit that encouraged brevity and creativity of thought, a Vine had the maximum length of six seconds but could loop, meaning the video would immediately replay on its own. The looping feature was the major feature that separated Vine from other video apps. Furthermore, looping allowed for a curious expansion of time as one could either incorporate the loop into the narrative of the Vine via cinematography, editing, or verbal cues. Initially, this production and post-production work had to be done solely within app. On the homepage of Vine, there were "channels" on the platform where one could post a Vine to enhance potential viewership. Two of the top "channels" were "Comedy" and "Also Comedy," which seems to telegraph that the

[152] Kendra Calhoun, "Vine Racial Comedy as Anti-Hegemonic Humor: Linguistic Performance and Generic Innovation," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 29, no. 1 (2019): 33.

[153] Casey Newton, "Why Vine Died," *The Verge*, October 28, 2016, Accessed January 21, 2021, https://www.theverge.com/2016/10/28/13456208/why-vine-died-twitter-shutdown

majority of Vines were comedic either on purpose or subsequently imbued with comedic value without the intent of the poster.

However, there were food Vines, magic Vines, and political Vines, including both Michelle Obama's infamous "Turn Up For What?" Vine and Vines from the ground in Ferguson, but it is quite difficult to capture the breadth of Vine's communities. The popularity of the two aforementioned channels comes as no surprise since the time limit of the videos resulted in extremely creative videos. A lot of these "popular" videos were extremely affective, expressing common feelings or reactions to a certain scenario, while other videos managed to gain a lot of "loops," or replays. Linguistics scholar Kendra Calhoun notes that "…creating unique, memorable vines was one way to stand out among millions of Vine users, but new, unfamiliar content was not guaranteed to be popular, since other users might be unsure how to interpret it."[154] In 2013, the app allowed users to utilize a phone's front-facing camera, which caused usage numbers to surge. Since Twitter owns Vine, they controlled the data on how many people were actually using Vine. However, it was noted that the app had more than 200 million people watch Vines across the Internet every month and more than 1.5 billion Vine loops a day.[155]

Vine stars began to emerge by gaining a fandom that grew as the posters developed personas, characters, or built up scenarios within an established Vine narrative universe. The top ten Viners as of October 2016 were King Bach, Nash Grier, LeLe Pons, Rudy Mancuso, and Brittany Furlan, Cameron Dallas, Curtis Lepore, Logan Paul, Jerry Purpdrank, and Josh Peck.[156] Of these top ten, only Josh Peck was already a known media star, given his success as a child

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[154] Kendra Calhoun, "Vine Racial Comedy," 33.

[155] Steven Perlberg and Mike Shields, "Vine Stars Are Leaving for Facebook and Other Platforms," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 13, 2016, https://www.wsj.com/articles/video-stars-are-withering-on-the-vine-1463152655

[156] Variety, "Top 10 Vine Creators," https://variety.com/gallery/top-10-vine-creators-king-bach-nash-grier/

actor on the popular Nick sitcom, *Drake & Josh* (2004-2007). Of the top ten, only two people, King Bach (Andrew Bachelor) and Jerry Purpdrank, are Black. Everyone else is white. Strikingly, no one is a Black woman. Like many other social media platforms, many everyday people are able to rise to microcelebrity level in a years' time. However, unlike many other user generated content apps, Vine never had a system for working with creators to get them money and thus continue posting within the app specifically.

These Viners were also in part responsible for accelerating the end of Vine. While Vine was owned by Twitter, they never implemented a substantial advertisement protocol like competitors Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. Viners were able to make "sponsored Vines" however, the app's owner never seemed to warm to the idea of changing aspects of Vine such as the six-second limit, even as Twitter eventually expanded its character limit for posts. While Vine was at its most potent potential in 2013 and 2014, businesses quickly noted that due to Vine/Twitter's reticence to make advertising deals that benefit both the company and the creators, Viners were beginning to post more on other apps, or double-post on Vine *and* separate apps in order to bring in revenue. Twitter had minimal support to help Viners make a profit off of their creations: a service called Open Amplify, "which allows Twitter users to open up their videos to pre-roll advertisements and share in revenue," and an in-house division called Niche "that helps connect creators with brands willing to pay them to create sponsored content."[157]

On March 14, 2016, *Buzzfeed* became the first source to report on meetings between Viners and Twitter over these specific issues.[158] Viners wanted to be compensated for their work

[157] Alex Kantrowitz, "Vine Stars Want To Be Paid, And Twitter is Considering It," *Buzzfeed News*, March 14, 2016, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/alexkantrowitz/twitter-in-discussions-with-top-vine-creators-about-payment#.taMZo0n90

[158] Kantrowitz, "Vine Stars Want To Be Paid."

as they felt that they were bringing a lot of money and popularity to Vine, and not seeing that return to them at all, *within* the app itself. One anonymous Viner stated "Three and a half years is a long time to have us posting on your platform for free."[159] The next few months were spent in suspense between Twitter and top Viners as some waited for a potentially mutually beneficial deal and as others completely shifted from Vine to platforms with more guaranteed returns like Instagram and YouTube.

Aside from the influencers leaving and the limited advertising integration onto the app, the features that made Vine distinct were surpassed in utility by other app competitors. First in 2013, Instagram introduced their own short video element to their app, Instagram Video. This feature allowed users to post fifteen-second long videos, which alongside their established business models that allowed advertisers to work directly with influencers, made Instagram a natural alternative for Vine creators to move to. Additionally, Snapchat had the same target audience as Vine, offering short form videos with the added enticing feature of the video disappearing upon viewing. Snapchat started to add on other features, such as image filters and voice calling, that Vine was not adding, as a result of the brand's dedication to its niche premise, further emphasizing Snapchat's ability to shift in order to maintain relevance in an ever-evolving market. In May 2016, Vine was ranked as no.166 in the App Store whereas Snapchat was no.1, a sharp decline for Vine from the previous August when it was still ranked in the top 100. With all of these various factors happening on the business side of Vine, it was no surprise that certain publications began to question, "Is Vine dying?"[160]

[159] Kantrowitz, "Vine Stars Want To Be Paid."
[160] Adrienne LaFrance, "Is Vine Dying?," *The Atlantic*, May 25, 2016, accessed June 29, 2022 https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/05/vines-death-knell-gets-louder/484301/

On October 27, 2016, Twitter announced that they would be shutting down Vine. That day was filled with the stereotypical "RIP" posts that are normally reserved for major celebrity deaths, but it was for an app. Many news sources included within their announcement a collection of their own favorite Vines, a Vine greatest hits. In a four-paragraph statement signed by "Team Vine &Twitter," they stated that "[n]othing is happening to the apps, website or your Vines today" leaving many users in the lurch wondering when the app *wouldn't* be available any longer.[161] The statement ended with a promise that they would be consulting with creators to "make sure your questions are answered and will work hard to do this the right way."[162] As of that day, one could no longer post Vines but the app remained active, allowing users to still download media before that option would no longer be available. January 17, 2017 was the last day of Vine.[163] After this day, the app became a pared down version of itself, more of an archive, named "Vine Camera." Vine Camera had many of the same functions as the original Vine: six-second loops, ability to post to Twitter and download other Vines.

It wasn't until the app was announced to be terminated that there seemed to be a real attention, at least in non-academic circles, to the *aesthetics* of Vine rather than simply the business or political mechanisms that fueled them. Articles began to herald the way that Vine had changed the Internet forever,[164] claiming that the day Vine died was the day "the laughter

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[161] Nathan McAlone, "Twitter is shutting down Vine," *Business Insider*, October 27, 2016, accessed June 29, 2022, https://www.businessinsider.in/Twitter-is-shutting-down-Vine/articleshow/55099666.cms

[162] Vine, "Important News about Vine," *Medium*, October 27, 2016, accessed June 29, 2022, https://medium.com/@vine/important-news-about-vine-909c5f4ae7a7

[163] David Renshaw, "Today Is The Last Day Of Vine," *Fader*, January 17, 2017, https://www.thefader.com/2017/01/17/vine-is-now-officially-vine-camera#:~:text=January%2017%20is%20the%20day,comes%20into%20effect%20from%20today.

[164] John Herrman, "Vine Changed the Internet Forever. How Much Does the Internet Need It?" *The New York Times* February 22, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/22/style/byte-vine-short-video-apps.html

died."[165] Perhaps it was because of its brevity, or its emergence in the app world during an unprecedented time of app production, but there has been little research published that focuses on the impact of what Carol Vernallis calls "intensified audiovisual aesthetics" that can be witnessed in many Vines and TikToks.[166] Vernallis understands these aesthetics to be a part of a turn in understanding "post-classical cinema" which she believes is a break with the past of classical cinema "as narrative shapes have become more complicated, bullet-holed, and deformed, our relationship to cinema has changed."[167] While narrative and cinematography are often centered in these post-cinema analyses, Vernallis sees these changes ultimately being driven by the sounds of digital media. She believes that most post-classical cinema theories are deficient in their ocular centricity, and as such these theories are missing "the audiovisual turn" of the new sound/image relations that are formed by the seemingly endless mutable capabilities of digital media.[168]

I believe that this coincides with the fact that Vine's comedic wealth and evolution was largely driven by the genius of Black kids, whether they got credit for those innovations or not. That the aesthetics are diminished at the edge where Blackness and social media meet is of no surprise. In most analyses of contemporary social media, there tends to be an evacuation of aesthetic analysis, a sort of inattention to the sensorium that belies a guilt. Ignoring the aesthetics of social media to focus on the harm that algorithms cause to online cultural ecosystems rather

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[165] Sammy Nickalls, "On the Day Vine Died, Here are the 20 Most Hilarious Vines," *Esquire*, October 27, 2016, https://www.esquire.com/entertainment/news/a50078/the-very-best-vines-on-the-day-vine-died/

[166] Carol Vernallis, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013): 6-7.

[167] Vernallis, *Unruly Media*, 33.

[168] Vernallis, *Unruly Media*, 33.

than discussing how those algorithms are represented and utilized audiovisually, indicates a moral distancing that leads to a meager understanding of how our accepted media (film, television, video, etc.) are being altered and reinterpreted by swaths of teens. Perhaps there has been an anxiety that as cultures and their attendant medias begin to converge, there will be a great unification wherein there is no differentiation, no specificity. However, what is at stake when aesthetics are developing out of the convergence of various media forms but no one is addressing the specificity of those very forms?[169]

There were many other moments of flight across Vine that involved Black creators finding their work become subsumed within the very meta-body of Vine itself. While the app is no longer extant, if one managed to save an original link to a Vine it does still open in a web browser showing the Vine, the user name of the creator of the Vine, the title given to the Vine, and how many likes, reVines, and loops the Vine had at the time of the Vine ending. Most notably for my project, at the bottom where one finds the Help panel that also lists the terms, privacy rules and the copyright, there is a short phrase also listed: "Did it for the Vine." I know the phrase to come from two viral Vines, starring Black kids, one a Black teen boy and the other a little Black girl. I trace the development of this phrase below as it reveals the concealment measures of Vine as a lost archive and allows me to tell a different story about that very archive.

The notion of "doing it for the Vine" comes from a 2013 song titled "Do It For The Vine" by a Youtuber named Kaye Trill; it was a semi-instructive song that described the process of creating a Vine on a phone. As was usual for Vine, the song began to be used in Vines such that

[169] This is a question born out of thinking with Vernallis and also provocations that Vivian Sobchack raises in "Nostalgia for a Digital Object: Regrets on the Quickening of QuickTime," *Millennium Film Journal*, no. 34 (Fall 1999): The Digital. http://mfj-online.org/journalPages/MFJ34/VivianSobchack.html In a longer project, I will expand this question in order to outline moral hierarchy that organizes theories of aesthetics and of theory, itself.

the hashtag "#DoItForTheVine" became a searchable trend on Vine. To do it for the Vine means doing something so outrageous or remarkable within the six seconds that a Vine allows in the hopes that the resulting Vine will go viral. Many of the Vines that were created under this trend aren't unremarkable, with just a few standing out. One such standout is a Vine where a young Black man attempts to jump over a moving car. The Vine opens with him standing in the driving lane of a park parking lot with two parked cars behind him. With his body turned away from the camera in profile, he turns his head to address the camera saying "People think because I'm Black I can just do athletic stuff, I don't get it." He then crouches down to jump, just as a moving car becomes visible in frame, which he tries to jump clear over. He does not succeed and gets hit at the shins, as the camera person exclaims in shock, pivoting the camera towards the car they're next to as the Vine cuts. The next frame is taken from the young man's front facing camera, where he is clearly in an ambulance with two EMT's visible in frame. He says loudly "DON'T do it for the Vine!" before the Vine ends. The Vine uses continuity editing and cuts that are within our realm of cinematic understanding to create shock and humor within the allotted six seconds, an instant classic.

However, arguably the most viral "#DoItForTheVine" Vine comes from a Vine that features a young Black girl, posted by user Dom on January 26, 2014. The Vine starts with two people in frame, a young Black girl dressed in what one would expect a burgeoning ballet dancer to be wearing (black cap sleeved leotard, with tan flesh colored tights and ballet slippers) and a Black woman seated in a black office chair. The little girl is standing in front of a closed door that has a mirror attached, in which we can see the reflection of an older Black girl seated in a folding chair and the legs of another girl who must be standing to the right of the person who is recording. The Black woman sitting in the office chair says "Do it for the Vine" in a cajoling

tone, to which the little girl responds "I ain't gone do it," while bringing her right arm around her body in a waving away gesture. This is repeated once, both motion and utterance, before the woman seated begins to beat out a syncopated cadence on the arm of her chair. The little girl begins to dance along to the beat where she repeats her final "I ain't gone do it." It is this Vine that it is most associated with the phrase "Do it for the Vine."

During my research, I came across various sources that credit Viner LeLe Pons with creating the #DoItForTheVine. Pons' Vine account still exists in URL format, surprisingly, so I was able to track back to the day the hashtag was first used on her page. On December 9, 2013, Pons posted a Vine titled, "Life, in an elevator *crying laughing emoji* #doitforthevine," wherein she is recorded by an anonymous cameraperson who captures her lying on makeshift bed on the floor of the elevator, brushing her teeth in a pink bathrobe, and screaming randomly.[170] This credit strikes me as odd. During my time on Vine, I did not know who LeLe Pons was, nor had I seen the aforementioned December 2013 Vine until I began doing research for this project. However, I had seen the Vine of the little Black girl on Vine, have seen it circulating outside of Vine in recent years, and continue to see it referenced verbally and in written form. This is no testament to the "truth" of who really can be credited with the creation of the phrase and its dissemination.

Instead, I take a fabulative turn, and posit that no matter who "actually" created the phrase, the little Black girl with whom I associate it with *did* create it. I know this to be so now because of what I know about the history of Vine and the presence of TikTok. Black girls and women drive the content no matter what. From the "now" where and when I currently find myself, I know this is true *because* the phrase appears on Vine's dead homepage with no

[170] LeLe Pons Vine, https://vine.co/Lele.Pons/

accreditation. If LeLe Pons was its creator, that would simply not be so, given Pons' microcelebrity within the app and the inherent celebrity that her whiteness provides her. She would undoubtedly be linked to the tag at the bottom of the Vine URL. What *might have been* true, that the little Black girl created the phrase *becomes* true because we know the story of Harmon and Newman, making the fact of her (re)creation something that *will have* ***had to*** *happen*.

The next Vine I'd like to think with starts with a lone figure in the foreground of the frame in a parking lot that has three shipping crates in the background. The figure, assumed a man, stands out from the drab parking lot and dark night sky in a black, white, and yellow Bruins flat brim baseball hat, a Nashville Predators jersey, ribbed jean shorts, and black and purple sneakers. He is leaning forwards towards something directly in front of him, but to the left of the camera person. An unidentified narrator urges, "Bro, just go bro, right now, hurry up" as we hear the metronome-like tsk-tsk-tsk of a beat playing from an unidentified sound system, which remains constant throughout. He begins to catch the beat with a snap of the fingers, that propels the arms into a rotation at the elbow, reminiscent of the motion one uses to jump rope. Adding in a tap forward in front of the body with the right foot, he then sweeps this same right foot across the front of the body before turning his torso to follow, as the narrator catches this same beat and says, "Hoe, don't dooo it." Just as a noise like a boom comes from the ever-pulsating beat, he swings the right foot back to where it began, the left arm bends at the elbow coming up, while the torso begins to dip down with the right shoulder leading the descent. He then bobs and pulsates in time as the narrator exclaims, "Oh my god!" Following the circulation of this Vine, the sound became separated from the visual and undeniably effortlessly cool moment of the

original Vine. In its simplicity, there are endless routes for imagining what led up to the framing of this Vine. Yet still, I wonder.

What strikes me about this Vine is the afterlife of the call and response of "Hoe, don't dooo it/Oh my god." The two statements remain coupled in written meme format and also as a sound on TikTok, enjoying a healthy life cycle. These sounds can be mobilized without the context of the everything and nothing of the original Vine, yet the contingent pleasures that comes from peeling back layers upon layers of signification can not exist without the knowledge of the original motions. The motions, subtle and tight, were emblematic of a type of Black vernacular dance that sought to at once de-emphasize and emphasize the possibilities of the stripped-down beat. While the Vine only captured one person's movements, I argue that there are more unseen Black figures dancing and crafting new styles of online dance, not unlike the Myspace and YouTube-generated Black dances of the early to mid-2000's. Indeed, the cross-body foot tap motion is the same step found within the Soulja Boy dance. Moving and its movements are near impossible to own or trace, yet it's the minor anacrusis, that guiding note that precedes a complete measure in music, that the motion negotiates. Without this incomplete measure, we are suspended before the music (hoe, don't dooo it), waiting for the down beat (oh, my god). This revelation is lost before the machinations of viral meme content on and off of Vine, but is found in Harmon's Renegade choreography.

Another undeniably impactful Vine that has managed to persist as a meme or meme referent is the "Ms. Keisha" Vine. In this Vine, we see a young Black girl dressed in a white graphic tee and black leggings. She is kneeling on the ground next to the lower level of a bunk bed. In her hands, she has a black baby doll cradled. She turns to look at a bigger Black doll in a green floral print dress that is propped up on the foot of the bed. The girl, in play, attempts to

wake up the doll, with a verbal nudge, “Ms. Keisha? Ms. Keisha?” The girl rises up on her knees to lean over the doll and the next nudge is a bit more urgent, “Ms. Keisha?!” She turns just so that her body is now facing the cameraperson, without making eye contact with the camera, and looks down at the doll in her arms while saying in an undertone, “Oh my fucking God, she fucking dead.” The Vine ends just as she begins to start a new statement directed at the cameraperson. This simple Vine also went viral as people began to use the audio as the accompaniment to their own distinct and separate visual narratives. I use it as fodder for the very title of this chapter. Furthermore, the audio (“oh my fucking God, she fucking dead”) in classic memetic fashion also become the written word, stretching into standard referential limits. A viral tweet posted by user @shaunreidman1 in 2017 reads: “If nobody says Oh ma fucking god he fuckin dead at ma funeral a will honestly be flabbergasted n haunt people til they die.”[171] The tweet was retweeted by 37,500 accounts and liked by 126,400, demonstrating that while there was no visual referent in the form of the original Vine attached, the sentiment and reference was known or understood by a large number of people, and continues to live on years later. This media convergence is standard practice across social media platforms, wherein a Vine’s content can go viral, then become referenced in a Tweet, which also goes viral, and then this tweet will be posted on meme accounts on Instagram which will then be engaged with by another group of people, where it will also enjoy a viral life, endlessly looping.

My final and last example of viral Vines by Black girls will be hitherto known as the “Bitch, where?” Vine. The Vine starts with a close up of a Black girl, perhaps teenaged, taken from the perspective of the front facing camera of her phone. She’s seated in either the front or

[171] Shon, @shaunreidman1, Twitter, October 21, 2017. 7:45pm, https://twitter.com/shaunreidman1/status/921885245921783810

passenger side of a car wearing a mint green top with pink accents along the piping of the collar. She addresses the camera while smoothing down the edges of her hair, one side at a time, while saying "This bitch called me ugly, I said bitch, where?" She turns her head to her right to look out of the window, then quickly turns her eyes to look out of the opposite window, before looking back at the camera. She continues, "She said 'Under all that make up.' I said –" Taking a pause, she wipes her right hand down the right side of her face and inspects it, as if to see if any makeup has come off. When it's evident that there's no makeup on her hand nor her face underlining that she is beautiful all the time, she concludes by holding the palm of her hand up to the camera saying "Bitch, where?!" I distinctly remember watching a version of this on Vine: a young white girl in her teens was using the audio. On Vine, one could follow the history of a hashtag, not unlike Twitter. Given the voice and the phrasing of the spoken aspects of the Vine, I was certain that this white teen was not behind the vocals. It took me about twenty minutes to find the original video that I described above. At the time, I thought nothing of this exchange and the racial and labor implications. However, now it is one of the many moments of my social media history that brought me to this very research project. The Vine is simply an affirmation of one Black girls' beauty, which is unremarkable on its face. However, when we consider the history of ugliness as built upon the degradation and de-racialized dissemination of Black women, this affirmation becomes more. It becomes a moment of selfhood that, even when removed audibly from the visible fact of her beauty, always disrupts.

What is worth noting is that the very function of Vine is precipitated on not just ease of dissemination but also repetition. The looping function of Vine was the aspect of the app that made it so successful and also such a standout such that the feature was sold to Twitter within the first year. As aforementioned, Viners would often ingeniously construct narratives that

incorporate the loop to give the narrative meaning. The two girls above, keeping loops in mind, remain unnamed and stuck ever repeating punch lines that come to represent them. The now from whence they exist becomes tensed, *beginning* again and again in the loop. The hungry loop bites its own tail such that it becomes impossible to determine where to stop, as it upends beginning and ending. Within the app itself, the loop is infinite, and outside, it is too, in collective memory. Stopping abruptly, wondering when and where to exit, all time becomes scattered and the cartographic desire becomes useless. This compression of time marks all attempts to retrieve those, like these two girls, from a broken archive and tears at the tenseless maneuvers of redress. To know these girls now as self-defining subjects is, incongruously, the only path out of the loop.

The (Re)Creation of Fleek or "On Fleek," she's ours

The phrase "on fleek" was created by Newman in a six-second Vine on June 21, 2014, a term that became a viral sensation. In the Vine, Newman is seated in the passenger seat of a car. The crop and tilt of the video is such that it is difficult to determine where Newman is, but from interviews, it is known that Newman was sitting in the parking lot of a store and waiting for her mom to return. A buckled-in Newman wears glasses, a floral headband, post earrings, and a yellow shirt. Her left hand adjusts the middle of the headband, before sliding down to her left eyebrow, which she smooths down from center to edge. She then flips her hair with this same hand, saying, "We in this bitch, finna get crunk." Leaning forward slightly, camera jostling gently, the hand then returns to the brow which she again swipes to bring attention to it saying "Eyebrows on fleek." The last second of the video is punctuated by a "da fuck?!" and another hair flip. Watching the video is quite uncanny as the afterlife of the phrase moved far beyond the intimate and playful space of this car's interior.

The phrase began to travel across Vine. Others would use the sound bite of "We in this bitch! Eyebrows on fleek, da fuck?!" in their Vines to highlight their own freshly articulated eyebrows or for other less expected uses. The phrase appeared in chart topping songs like Feelin' Myself by Beyoncé ft. Nicki Minaj and in viral company ads by many companies including, quite peculiarly, IHOP. In the early stages of conceptualizing this project, a friend from Spain sent me a startling picture of a salon near her Madrid home entitled "On Fleek." As the phrase traveled from app to app, to person to person, the question of the meaning of the word orchestrated the flow of proper discursive utility by different races and, certainly, by people of different ages.

By viewing the Vine, it is evident that for something to be "on fleek" means that the thing is excellent, something that looks good, or, to remain within slang, on point. However, since most people who were using the phrase and later, just the word "fleek," had never actually seen the Vine, the meaning was quickly lost. Black people who regularly use AAVE (African American Vernacular English) or AAL (African American Language) know that using AAVE has as much to do with understanding certain words as it does with using context clues to figure out meaning or how to use certain phrases or words.[172] The words move and shift across time and space, but generally speaking, remains blackened. The necessary context of the visual motions of Newman's body alongside the audio proclamations create the impact and thus the meaning of "on fleek." Without the presence of Newman's physical presence, the phrase became like mist in the wind, everywhere and nowhere, evacuated of form. AAVE or AAL gives us a

[172] There are recent discussions and debates within linguistics about the effects of using AAVE versus AAL. AAL is used as a more neutral term that may better encapsulate dialects that are quite different like Gullah and AAVE. For more on this conversation, see "From African American Vernacular English to African American Language: Rethinking the Study of Race and Language in African Americans' Speech," by Sharese King (in *the Annual Review of Linguistics*, 2020, 6: 285-300, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-linguistics-011619-030556)

way to talk about "the past-of-the-past-that-aint-past that does not exist in Standard American English."[173] The phrase moved from online Black English to online *imagined* Black English. As Manuel Arturo Abreu states "[w]hile reasons for [using] imagined Black English range from affinity to mockery to monetization, they generally follow the same pattern: by 'reshaping the meaning of the borrowed material into forms that advance their own interest,' borrowers make the material 'useless or irrelevant, or even antithetical, to the interests of the donor community.'"[174]

Quickly, the word and phrase became a central vehicle for commerce and social clout online. Even as numerous sources questioned what it meant and rushed to explain its movement across social platforms, Newman, normally listed as her Vine user name Peaches Monroe, if listed at all, was somehow consistently sidelined from her own moment. The phrase was associated with Ariana Grande, who sung rather than spoke the phrase on Vine, modeling the Vine after the original.[175] It was used in viral company ads by IHOP and Taco Bell. It appeared in chart topping songs like "Feelin' Myself" by Beyoncé ft. Nicki Minaj. However, Newman never managed to gain any benefits that come from contributing to viral meme culture. There were, for example, no appearances on mainstream programming like *Good Morning America* or *Ellen*, no lifetime supply of eyebrow gel or tweezers. Many who uttered the phrase in earnest or jest, never knew who created the word or knew its contexts. Many never even bothered to know

[173] Eve L. Ewing, "Black Life and Death In A Familiar America,", *Fader*, November 20, 2016, https://www.thefader.com/2016/11/10/black-life-and-death-in-chicago-race-in-america

[174] Manuel Arturo Abreu, "Online Imagined Black English," *Arachne* 1 (Fall 2015), https://arachne.cc/issues/01/online-imagined_manuel-arturo-abreu.html

[175] According to a *Racked* article that was published November 5, 2014, Newman's Vine had 34 million loops, Grande's had 3 million. Upon checking the Vine through a web brower, Grande's remains frozen at 5.9 million loops. Tiffany Yannetta, "A Brief History of Fleek, from Taco Bell to Kim Kardashian," *Racked*, November 5, 2014, Accessed June 29, 2022, https://www.racked.com/2014/11/5/7570183/fleek

her name, period; if they did she was only Peaches Monroe. There seemed to be a force that kept Newman's personhood detached from the phrase that she brought to life. Newman herself posted the Vine every year on her Twitter on the anniversary of the video, June 21, a day she calls "Happy Fleek Day."[176] Through a number of consistent interviews, and their dissemination on social media over the years, Newman finally received her first collaboration wherein she was asked to advertise for Fenty Beauty's Brow MVP, an eyebrow gel pencil, on September 9, 2019.

The ad had Newman recreate elements of the video to further emphasize the importance of her corporeality in Vine, re-connecting Newman to the word, the cadence, and even visual composition of the original Vine. Newman shared the video from her Twitter with the caption: "From the OG so you know it's real," signaling again her connection to the creation of the modern meaning of the phrase and using that as a double verification of the quality of the product.[177] In the video, Newman is seated in the passenger seat of a car, again wearing a yellow shirt, recording from a phone using a forward-facing camera. A buckled-in Newman wearing reflective-framed glasses and utters the beginning line of the original Vine, "We in dis bitch finna get crunk." She reaches out of frame to grab the Fenty product and swipes it across her right eyebrow saying, "eyebrows on fleek." She continues to derivate here, adding "Fenty beauty on fleek, Brow MVP on fleek," while still holding the product in frame. She ends it like she does in the original with a "da fuck?!" and makes a face at the camera that is somewhat in between a question and a mean mug.

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[176] Kayla Newman, (@peaches_monroee) Twitter, June 20, 2015, Accessed June 29, 2022, https://twitter.com/peaches_monroee/status/612508456801579008

[177] Kayla Newman, (@peaches_monroee), Twitter, September 9, 2019, https://twitter.com/peaches_monroee/status/1171212324579004416?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1171212324579004416%7Ctwgr%5E%7Ctwcon%5Es1_c10&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nylon.com%2Fpeaches-munroe-fenty-brow-fleek

The design of the ad is quite genius in that it indicates back to Newman, both in written word and audiovisually, in a way that few other sources have done. When looking to find articles or mentions of "on fleek" that were published around the same time as the Vine was first circulating, many may mention Newman, but many more center on the (non-Black) celebrity circulation of the word. A *Racked Magazine* article indicates the genesis of *fleek* but titles the article "A Brief History of Fleek, from Taco Bell to Kim Kardashian.[178]" A *Vice Magazine* article actually traces the first appearance of "fleek" to an 1801 text where it appears to be a leaner term for "sleek." Of the 11 paragraphs that create the article, only one centers on Newman specifically.[179] It wasn't until years later, around 2017, that Newman started to be interviewed as the creator of the phrase, rather than just briefly mentioned or omitted entirely.

Vine, through its functionally, created a sensation of the "compression of time" meaning that each second had to become more. This sense of "more" underpins the form of a Vine, meaning more than just the limit of the unit of time, as things loop, and more with regards to expression. Newman, in an innocent moment of self-regard, found herself compressed within the moment of her 2014 Vine as she become a meme. The Vine's reception and subsequent dissection could, and has been, understood and analyzed from the perspective of appropriation, or more clearly in terms of theft. However, appropriation not only does not capture what is transpiring between Newman and those who could not credit her, it also doesn't quite fit. If, as Lauren Michele Jackson writes, appropriation can be understood as "an act of transport- some item or motif or a bit of property changing hands," then Newman herself can be understood as

[178] Yannetta, "A Brief History of Fleek, from Taco Bell to Kim Kardashian."

[179] Alex Russell, "On Fleek: A Definitive History," *Complex*, November 14, 2014, accessed June 29, 2022, https://www.complex.com/music/2014/11/what-is-fleek

appropriating the *word* "fleek."[180] As aforementioned, the standalone word has been located within the nineteenth century. There is an Urban Dictionary entry dating back to 2003, where it was defined as "smooth, nice, sweet." A differing entry from 2009 defines it as "amazing."[181] With "on fleek," Newman infused herself into the word, now a phrase, seemingly pulling it out of thin air. In a 2015 *Newsweek* interview, Newman says "[i]t just came to me out of the blue…I never heard of the word, and nobody else had heard of the word. I just said it, and I guess that's what came out. That's about it." That she never heard of the word before doesn't negate that records show that the word did indeed already exist at some point in time, at some place in space. And after she added "on" to "fleek," the word not only changed meaning, but it became, as a result, further racialized and thus gendered.

Following Hortense Spillers, it is clear that Newman tripped "…down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time, over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of [her] own inventiveness."[182] Spillers, in her own attempt to articulate a desire to "speak a truer word" concerning herself, crafts a ground upon which language and thus grammar are signifiers that must be and *can* be shifted in order for the Black woman be able to speak of herself. Newman, a dark-skinned, thick femme, is already caught in a bramble of signifiers through which any type of engagement would cause her to recoil, pulled and scratched upon. To take the word "out of thin air" and redefine the word on the surface of

[180] Jackson, *White Negroes*, 1.

[181] Wiubundibuntuos, "Fleek," Urban Dictionary, April 3, 2015, accessed June 29, 2022, https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Fleek

[182] Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003): 203. I altered the original quote changing "my" to "her."

her body, she rends the word anew, demonstrating an innate grasp of innovation and improvisation that highlights Newman's knowledge of herself as a determining subject. The delay in acknowledgement is the loop wherein a hundred possible other Newman's never get known *and* creates the conditions for Harmon's similar detachment from her creation.

The Introduction of TikTok

The same month that Newman was creating an ad with Fenty Beauty, in Fayetteville, Georgia, a suburb of Atlanta, fourteen-year-old Jalaiah Harmon was dancing. Jalaiah had at this point in her life been trained in a number of dance styles including hip-hop, ballet, lyrical, jazz, tumbling, and tap.[183] On September 25, 2019, Jalaiah choreographed a dance with a friend, Kaliyah Davis, to the song "Lottery" by K.Camp. She posted the video to Funimate, a looping video sharing app that was created in 2014, as a competitor for Vine.[184] In the video we see a vertical split-screen with Jalaiah on the left in a Black tank bodysuit and Kaliyah in a pink tank top on the right. They are seen from the waist up in a medium shot taken on what can be deduced to be a phone, that appears to be propped up and tilted up. The dance is so fast it is difficult to attempt to describe each movement as it lines up with the song. Within the dance, Harmon and Davis interspersed other already popular dances like the Woah (a dance that involves a concentric circular motion of the arms in front of the body that ends with a very quick, tight circular rotation generated from an axis of the wrists rather than shoulders), the Wave (which is a tight wave-like motion of the arms), and the Dab (a move reminiscent of coughing into the crook of ones' arm with the addition of extending the opposing arm out and away from the body) into

[183] Taylor Lorenz, "The Original Renegade," *The New York Times,* February 13, 2020, updated August 28, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/13/style/the-original-renegade.html

[184] It is worth noting that the app didn't become popular until after Vine was discontinued.

the sequence, offering a way of entering into the choreography. The following sequenced dance is very quick paced, at different measures, certain dance movements hit on the down and upbeat of K.Camp's 149bpm "Lottery." Their moves are smooth, even at the quick moments, aided by the metronome-like stepping that they maintain throughout this extremely arm and torso centered dance. Jalaiah and Kayliah also add their own flair to the dance, faces shuttling between smug, shocked, and laughter. In the way of dancers, they fill the spaces up between the counts of the choreography such that every moment is brimming with movement, alive. All twenty seconds of the dance sequence seem almost like it flows from their bodies, making the difficulty one experiences trying to mimic them even more marked.

The girls posted the video to Funimate and cross-posted to Instagram through Kayliah's page. The dance made waves, with people starting to post their attempts to get the dance down. One Instagram fan of the dance posted his version of the dance to TikTok under the handle Global.jones (@0g.global) with some of the moves simplified, removing many of the extra hand claps and waves in addition to not keeping the beat with his feet for the first five seconds of the dance. When the dance appeared on TikTok, where dance trends often become extremely popular as people post versions of themselves attempting easy *and* difficult choreography, it started to get a lot of traction. During that time, a white teen girl named Charli D'Amelio was building her career on TikTok and had gathered a large following. When D'Amelio, who is currently the most followed person on TikTok with a staggering 130 million followers, posted her version of the dance on October 20, 2019, it exceeded the bounds of virality making it the dance to know. In part, the D'Amelio version more than likely took off given that it was even *further* simplified from Global.jones' version, meaning that compared to the original Funimate version the moves appear muddy, sluggish, so much so that the dances look like distinct

versions. Gone are the metronome legs, motions are carried out in almost half-time to allow time for those not able to access Harmon's breakneck time to complete the central motions of the dance. Notably, in D'Amelio's version, there are no metronome legs and the last two seconds of the dance, which includes a rolling dice motion that accompanies the lyric "Like I hit the Lottery" and an emphatic Woah, are completely removed.

Suddenly, the Renegade dance was everywhere, and the ambient soundtrack provided by KCamp became almost inescapable. It is undeniable that D'Amelio and one of her "collaborators," Addison Rae, gained their massive following after they became associated with the dance. D'Amelio at one point was hosting dance workshops where she was teaching the dance. All of this was happening without a mention of Jalaiah or Kayliah. If this arc of the travel of the Renegade dance across these short video apps is eerily similar to what happened with the movement of fleek, that is of no surprise. Like Vine, this sort of thing, creative thefts and flights of accreditation, happened to Black people on TikTok all the time. Some might even argue that this type of evasion was built into TikTok.

TikTok was founded in 2017 by Zhang Yiming, owner of ByteDance. To create TikTok as we know it, Yiming acquired Musical.ly, a short video app where you can create fifteen second lip syncs to popular songs, and meshed it with another app called Douyin, a short-form video app that is popular and remains situated in China. This version of Musical.ly, which was created in 2014 by Alex Zhu and Luyu Yang, became TikTok. The history and user base of Musical.ly was a definite addition to TikTok as all users rolled over to TikTok at the time of the merge. However, what has really made TikTok is its format which make it extremely easy to get caught in an "endless scroll." There are two tabs on the TikTok home page, one called "Following," which shows you TikToks of users you are following, and one called "For You."

The "For You" page is driven by TikTok's algorithm and fueled by metadata that is created as you scroll and interact within the app. A pause to watch a TikTok video or a pause and scroll away from a video are both ways that TikTok creates a community within itself, by pulling others in who might otherwise not be interested. This feature has been extremely successful in that it reveals very niche communities to an interesting mix of people. One of the more prominent examples of this was the rise of Sea Shanty TikTok, which began when Nathan Evans, a twenty-six-year-old Scottish postal worker, began uploading videos of himself singing sea shanties, which are nineteenth century "sailing songs" that blended "the traditions of enslaved Africans mingled with English, Spanish, French" to highlight life at sea.[185] The songs went viral as others began to stitch (meaning they take an original TikTok and either add cuts or integrate themselves into the frame of the original TikTok via editing made possible in-app) themselves into Evans' TikToks, adding warm layers of vocals at varying registers.

Like Vine, TikTok began to build its own culture that was dependent on certain TikTokers developing a following through cultivating a niche. There are TikToks by doctors dispelling vaccine misinformation, TikToks for late-diagnosed ADHD adults, cooking TikToks, and more, but what is particularly relevant for this project are dance TikToks. What is unique to TikTok is that, unlike Vine, the top TikTokers see an immediate return on their popularity as they get paid by sponsorships through the app. Thus, there is a distinction between who is the most *followed* on TikTok versus the highest *earners* on TikTok. The highest paid TikTokers are Charli D'Amelio, Dixie D'Amelio (Charli's older sister), Addison Rae, Bella Poarch, Josh Richards, Kris Collins, and Avani Gregg. But the most followed TikTokers are Charli D'Amelio,

[185] Kyle Piscioniere, "Sea Shanty TikTok Is on Fire," *Slate*, January 13, 2021, accessed June 29, 2022, https://slate.com/culture/2021/01/sea-shanty-tiktok-wellerman-trend-explained.html

Khabane Lame, Bella Poarch, Addison Rae, Zach King, Will Smith (the actor), TikTok (itself), Kimberly Loaiza, Dixie D'Amelio, and Burak Özdemir. There is only one person who could be considered a Black woman or girl on either list —Avani Gregg. Gregg, made popular through her humorous makeup tutorials, is a mixed-race woman with Indian, Mongolian, and African-American ancestry and tends to be externally identified as "white."[186] Three Black men are present, (Khabane Lame, Kris Collins, and Will Smith) with Will Smith being the only previously established persona. Remarkably, the second most followed person, Khabane Lame, a Senegalese immigrant residing in Italy, makes significantly less than the highest paid TikTokers, only earning 2 million dollars compared to Charli D'Amelio's 17. 5 million, even though their following count differs only by 5 million.[187]

Unlike Vine, TikTok has become a household known app for two major reasons. First, TikTok became one of the most downloaded apps from the Apple App Store during the early months of the pandemic, when many across the world were sequestered in their homes for extended periods of time. This, in conjunction with the popularity of the Renegade and the Savage Challenge (a dance challenge that was centered on doing the choreography from the music video of Megan thee Stallion's chart-topping hit "Savage"), drove many to download the app and begin to interact with the communities within. A second reason for the app's popularity

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[186] Kori Williams, "Here's Everything You Need to Know About TikTok Star Avani Gregg," *Seventeen* April 28, 2020, https://www.seventeen.com/celebrity/a32256083/avani-gregg-tiktok/

In a book-length version of this project, I would expand here on how Gregg's categorization as mixed-race may work into a larger social project of "multiracial white supremacy" as articulated by Ren Ellis Neyra in "The Kardashians' Multiracial White Supremacy," Jared Sexton's *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism,* and Ralina Joseph's *Postracial Resistance: Black Women, Media, and the Uses of Strategic Ambiguity.* This project creates a visual regime wherein the only people who appear unambiguously Black are men and every iteration of Black women and girls are filled by actresses who are mixed-race and/or white-passing. This is briefly discussed in the Chapter One of this project.

[187] Charli D'Amelio's follower count is 135 million and Khabane Lame's follower count is 130.9 million. For added context, the third most followed person Bella Poarch has 87.8 million followers, a sizeable step down, even though she ranks as the number four highest paid TikTokers.

comes from then-President Donald Trump's attempt to ban the app in the United States. When President Trump announced that he would be holding a rally for his run for a second term in Tulsa, Oklahoma on June 19th, 2020, many saw the act as disrespectful to the Black community on several counts. One offense was that Tulsa, Oklahoma was home to what was known as "Black Wall Street," an area of unprecedented financial success for a segregated Black community in Tulsa. In 1919, Black Wall Street was tragically destroyed and descended upon by violent white mobs that murdered anywhere between thirty and three hundred people, decimating a thriving community that was never able to regenerate. The second offense was holding the rally on June 19th, which is known as Juneteenth by Texans who are descendants of slaves, as that is the day that news of the Emancipation Proclamation reached Texas in 1865. Given that both of these cultural events were being made widely known in light of the George Floyd protests earlier that month, many saw Trump's decision as a blatant taunt to Black people. So, when Trump's campaign released a website allowing people to reserve their seats at the rally, teenaged Korean pop fans (more colloquially known as K-pop stans) came together on TikTok and organized to reserve many of the seats in order to tank the actual attendance. When Trump came to the rally, much of the stadium he had proclaimed as being fully occupied were empty. This large scale organizing caused not just Trump but Senators Chuck Schumer and Josh Hawley to become loud supporters of the need to suppress the app in the US.

While TikTok is understood as Vine's most successful successor, many of the cultural problems that developed on Vine become intensified on TikTok, namely the lack of accreditation and renumeration for Black creators. The racial divide is so fraught on TikTok that the app is mostly associated with white suburban teens more than anyone else, even as the trends that Black teens create within TikTok are never associated with those teens as they reach non-Black teens

and adults. About TikTok, music producer Polow da Don says "Dubsmash catches things at the roots when they're culturally relevant. TikTok is the suburban kids that take things on when it's already the style and bring it to their community."[188] Suburban, in Polow da Don's assessment, comes to stand in as a racial signifier for whiteness, given that the suburbs were literally created as a way for white people to leave ethnically diverse and dense cityscapes.[189] More specifically, apps like Dubsmash and Funimate are understood to be the place where trends are created by inventive Black teens, before they are secreted away to TikTok by white teens, as happened with Harmon. The way that Harmon's creation was wrested away from her is similar, but not a twin, to Newman's. Aside from the fact that Harmon's theft happened *across* multiple apps, there was a moment of acknowledgement that Harmon was largely responsible for the creation of the Renegade dance within months rather than over years as happened for Newman.

The New York Times published an article entitled "The Original Renegade" on February 13, 2020, just under six months from Harmon posting the dance on Dubsmash. The article interviewed Harmon and those around her to get a grasp on the creation of the dance, in addition to the aftermath of the dance becoming viral without Harmon attached to it. While the article doesn't explicitly cite that D'Amelio and Rae *stole* the dance, the author charts a path from Harmon to the two TikTokers while also highlighting the difference between how dancers and their creations are credited on dance apps like Dubsmash and Funimate. The article had a wide reach, I remember reading the article and seeing it on my Twitter and Instagram accounts. Many mused on how D'Amelio and Rae's fame skyrocketed, specifically D'Amelio as she was

[188] Taylor Lorenz, "The Original Renegade," *The New York Times* February 13, 2020, updated August 28, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/13/style/the-original-renegade.html

[189] It is interesting to note that Jalaiah herself is actually from the suburbs of Atlanta, making this statement quite ironic.

credited as the first and was actively capitalizing off of this association, even calling herself the "C.E.O. of The Renegade."[190] Many also recalled the similarities between Harmon's story and Newman's story. Twitter user @fandxms aptly captured many others' thoughts in a now deleted tweet which reads: "So you mean to tell me I was doing the gentrified version of the renegade dance and this whole time the original had this much flavor? I hate it here…"[191] Just one day after the article went viral, rapper K.Camp, who created "Lottery," invited Jalaiah and friend Skylar to what appears to be a music studio and had them perform the dance while he sang along, directly crediting Jalaiah for the success of the song. The caption of the video on Twitter reads: "Thank you Jalaiah and Skylar for helping make lottery the BIGGEST song in the world. Tell the blogs to eat it up!"[192] A few days later, on February 16, 2020, D'Amelio posted a video on her TikTok, which Harmon reposted on her Instagram, crediting Harmon with actually creating the dance. D'Amelio's caption reads: "guys I would like to introduce you to @_.xoxlaii I am so happy that she was able to teach me the original choreography that she made she is the best!"[193]

The video is quite remarkable. The performances within demonstrate the stark difference in dance ability as well as how much harder Harmon's version is from the version that D'Amelio and Rae popularized. Given this is Harmon's version, the dance now requires D'Amelio and Rae

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[190] Beatrice Forman, "Digital blackface led to TikTok's first strike" *Vox,* June 29, 2021, https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2021/6/29/22554596/digital-blackface-megan-thee-stallion-song-tiktok-first-strike

[191] Article where tweet was found: https://hundidsmag.com/the-internet-bullied-charli-damelio-into-crediting-the-original-renegade-dance-creator-jalaiah-harmon/"

[192]K.Camp. @kcamp, "Thank you Jalaiah and Skylar for helping make lottery the BIGGEST song in the world. Tell the blogs eat it up!," Twitter, February 14, 2020 https://twitter.com/kcamp/status/1228506154650734593?s=20&t=ZbDQTq0yC-fo-v95AcjDfQ

[193] Charli D'Amelio, TikTok

to incorporate the metronome legs, which they both struggle to execute in tandem with the accelerated arm movements, and the additional moves at the end of the dance. Next to Harmon's smooth moves and ever elastic facial expressions, the other two appear stiff and ever so slightly behind Harmon and the beat. Harmon also posted the video of her dancing with the other two onto her own Instagram page.[194] One commenter @lynna.rey aptly describes the takeaway of the video: "You can tell who created it by watching this…" Another comment made by @paytonlocklin_ reads: "You can tell you made this up they were trying hard to stay on beat and missed a step never let anyone take what's yours." What other viewers and myself can tell about the discrepancy between the two parties is that Harmon knows something intimately that the other two do not, something beyond the steps. As a young Black girl, Harmon knows that there is a quiet frequency of Black sociality that animates her moves. I wonder how many weddings and family reunions Harmon attended in her young life. When she was there, did they perform certain line dances like the electric slide or the wobble? It is in these spaces, performing these dances, that young Black girls learn how to hear the beat, feel the melody, and from there execution and embellishment (dipping in a turn on the electric slide or adding a heel-toe movement to one's step forward in the wobble) become natural extensions of self-making. The other two girls, in their inability to catch the beat, hear the frequency, or extend themselves in the dance, demonstrate their outsider status in relation to this very same Black sociality. And of course, Harmon is a trained dancer, adding to her ability to move beyond simply performing choreography to speaking through dance.

[194] Jalaiah Harmon, @jalaiah, "Like we hit the lottery…" Instagram video. February 16, 2020. Accessed January 28, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/B8pKZeXD0Y4/?utm_source=ig_embed&ig_rid=edf275b0-3201-4e62-9541-22870ca52bc8

TikTok proves to be the ultimate litmus test to our current understandings for race and social media, as it continues to build on decades of whiteness shaping the popularity of apps. Danah Boyd captures this construction brilliantly in her chapter, "White Flight in Networked Publics?: How Race and Class Shaped American Teen Engagement with MySpace and Facebook." When she asked white 14-year-old Kat why she and her friends were moving from MySpace to Facebook, Kat responded, "It's not really racist, but I guess you could say that. I'm not really into racism, but I think that MySpace now is more like ghetto or whatever."[195] Kat's damning statement shows a prescient awareness of the presence of race, here specifically Blackness coded as "ghetto," on social media apps. What is interesting in the case of TikTok is that its algorithm creates this visual segregation on the app even as its cultural movements and successes are predicated on the presence and suppression of Black teens within the app. Dubsmash, Funimate, Triller, and Musical.ly (before being bought by TikToks owner, ByteDance) are all more "like ghetto or whatever," as can be understood by the large presence of Black teens using these apps. Dubsmash, for example, was on the brink of failure after a successful 2015 year, on the heels of Vine's success. In 2017, the three execs of the company completely re-oriented their design and business model to cater to the only demographic that was keeping the app alive: Black teens "posting dances and lip-syncs to indie hip-hop songs on the rise," songs like "Lottery."[196] The catering to Black teens continues to be a major success as

[195] Danah Boyd, "White Flight in Networked Publics?: How Race and Class Shaped American Teen Engagement with MySpace and Facebook," in *Race After the Internet*, edited by Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White, (New York: Routledge Press, 2012): 203.

[196] Josh Constine, "How Dubsmash revived itself as #2 to TikTok," *TechCrunch*, January 31, 2020, accessed January 31, 2022, https://techcrunch.com/2020/01/31/dubsmash-songs/#:~:text=Dubsmash%20stretched%20its%20funding%20to,been%20bought%20by%20China's%20ByteDance

Dubsmash continues to be #2 in comparison to TikTok in the app store, and is understood to be the most popular app among Black teens today.[197]

TikTok's powerful algorithm that is built into their exploratory "For You Page" (FYP) is undeniably a major tool in helping create the conditions for Black suppression on the app. Even with the endless FYP scroll, TikTok does also have content moderators, those who monitor the content that is uploaded for content that may be against company policy. One would assume that banned content might include scenes of violence, sexual assault or other such things. However, it has been revealed that these moderators were instructed by the makers of TikTok to suppress those "deemed too ugly, poor or disabled for the platform" in addition to censoring "defamation…towards civil servants, political or religious leaders."[198] The details are as follows:

> "Under this policy, TikTok moderators were explicitly told to suppress uploads from users with flaws both congenital and inevitable. 'Abnormal body shape,' 'ugly facial looks,' dwarfism, and 'obvious beer belly,' 'too many wrinkles,' 'eye disorders,' and many other 'low quality' traits are all enough to keep uploads out of the algorithmic fire hose. Videos in which 'the shooting environment is shabby and dilapidated,' including but 'not limited to…slums, rural fields' and 'dilapidated housing' were also systematically hidden from new users, though 'rural beautiful natural scenery could be exempted,' the document notes."[199]

These restrictions work together to fulfill TikTok's aspirational aesthetics that are meant to attract and keep new users. Simply put: "Aspirational content, as it seems in the TikTok world, revolves around Whiteness."[200] This aspiration continues to be clear when looking to see how TikTok is attempting to craft and cultivate an interior culture that is born out of material

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[197] Trevor Boffone, *Renegades: Digital Dance Cultures from Dubsmash to TikTok*, (Oxford University Press, 2021): 22.

[198] Sam Biddle, Paulo Victor Ribeirro, Tatiana Dias, "Invisible Censorship: TikTok Told Moderators to Suppress Posts by 'Ugly' People and the Poor to Attract New Users," *The Intercept,* March 16, 2020, https://theintercept.com/2020/03/16/tiktok-app-moderators-users-discrimination/

[199] Biddle et.al "Invisible Censorship."

[200] Boffone, *Renegades*, 30.

relation. In December 2019, TikToker Chase Hudson, aka Lilhuddy, alongside Thomas Petrou, a YouTuber, created Hype House, a collaborative content house wherein a number of popular and popular-aspirant TikTokers live together in a Los Angeles mansion.[201] About 19 members lived in the home permanently, with several others keeping rooms for when they were in town. Collab houses are nothing new in the influencer world. In 2015, for example, all of the top Viners were living with one another in a large apartment complex at 1600 Vine Street.[202] The point of living together is supposed to help content creators build ideas off of one another and also collaborate on content together in order to boost followers. Notably, all of those invited to live in the house are White or White-passing, conveying a message that these are the TikTokers who fit and fulfill the appropriate "aspirant" look that TikTok executives support.[203]

However, these exclusionary practices have not stopped Black people, and specifically Black girls, from creating challenge after challenge that continues to boost TikTok as The App to download. The Renegade Challenge, the Savage Challenge (created by Keara "KeKe" Wilson, a 19-year-old from Ohio), The Don't Wait Challenge, The Buss It Challenge, and the Silhouette challenge were all either created by Black women and girls or made viral by their participation. Their participation, however, inevitably leads to white TikTokers managing to still go viral, even if they are expressing support of Black TikTokers, more than likely simply due to the algorithm

[201] Taylor Lorenz, "Hype House and the Los Angeles TikTok Mansion Gold Rush," *The New York Times*, January 3, 2020, updated May 21, 2020, accessed June 29, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/03/style/hype-house-los-angeles-tik-tok.html

[202] Daisuke Wakabayashi, "Inside the Hollywood Home of Social Media Stars. (Don't Be Shy.)" *The New York Times*, December 30, 2017, accessed January 31, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/30/business/hollywood-apartment-social-media.html

[203] Boffone, *Renegades*, 29.

of the FYP. Furthermore, Black teens are becoming increasingly aware of their power on the app and have at varying intervals began to withdraw their creative labor.

When Megan thee Stallion released her single "Thot Shit" in June 2021, many Black TikTokers decided to not create a dance to accompany the song, birthing the hashtag #BlackTikTokStrike. The point of the hashtag was to refuse labor that would boost white TikTokers who would look to Black content creators to know the coolest new moves. The chorus of "Thot Shit" features what can only be described as instructions that would make the creation of a dance challenge quite easy: "Hands on my knees/shaking ass, on my thot shit." Humorously, when white TikTokers attempted to fill this large void and create a dance to accompany the single, following these simple instructions seemed out of their grasp. One dance video that went viral, due to many Black TikTokers and Twitter users mocking it, features a group of three white teens who fall behind each other in a single line. Once the first person in the line does a hip check to accompany Megan's trademark "Ah!," the other two fall into a flank formation, forming a triangle. They turn around, backs to the cameras, and walk on beat towards the back of the room, swaying arms stretched upwards from left to right. One white TikTok user @xosugarbunny reacted to the impressive lack of good dance videos for the song saying; "I don't want to hear another fucking white woman ever say that TikTok dances and TikTok trends aren't entirely stolen from Black women. Because a Black woman has yet to give a dance to this song and…hear me out! Megan says 'Hands on my knees. Shaking ass, on my thot shit' and the white women said [Here there is a cut where she gets up and faces away from the camera, while

she sways her arms left to right, while the caption in her video reads 'You could not have possibly gone so far in the opposite direction'] The instructions are right there!"[204]

Following Harmon being revealed as the creator of the dance, she was afforded the typical "went viral online" circuit. She had two major publications, *The New York Times* and *Teen Vogue*, do profiles on her chronicling her story. She was invited to perform the dance at a professional basketball game, something that D'Amelio also did at the 2020 All-Stars halftime. She was invited onto *Ellen* where she also performed the dance and told her story. Following that, in May 2020, she announced her first official brand partnership with Warner Brothers' Studio to create a dance to highlight their new film, *SCOOB!* The video of Harmon performing her original choreography alongside a digital Scoob "more than a half billion views in less than two days and have now crossed an amazing 1 billion- *and counting*- in just over three days" of its posting on TikTok.[205] Jalaiah looks to be developing a promising career, harnessing the moment of her viral debut. This is what Newman deserved, too.

The Futility of Black Excellence

I recall Campt's notion of the future real conditional, that which will have had to happen, to juxtapose the foreclosure of Newman's accreditation and the, albeit delayed, citation of Harmon's genius. These two girls were not extracted from their works, but rather we witness attempts to detach them from their works. It is as Aria S. Halliday states:

"The circulation of an image, detachment from the original context, and recirculation of the same image constitutes a new arena of meaning-making between the powerful and the powerless because of the possibility of these images being shared rapidly and globally."[206]

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[204] The TikTok has since been deleted but was reposted on Twitter. @stillnaima June 21, 2021 "She sees it…" https://twitter.com/stillnaima/status/1406981217879212033?s=20&t=dRen-fNxJd4yQjHyMzhu3Q

[205] Geeksofcolor, "Jalaiah Harmon's First Official Brand Partnership with WB's 'SCOOB!' Exceeds 1 Billion Views on TikTok," May 6, 2020 https://geeksofcolor.co/2020/05/06/jalaiah-harmons-scoob-tiktok-challenge/

[206] Aria S. Halliday, "Miley, What's Good?*,"* 71.

Halliday is creating a way of understanding of the violence that often befalls Black girls when they, or rather their creations, become viral. They were removed from their moments of self-regard and instead became an occasion for what Zakiyyah Iman Jackson calls "the theater of sovereign power and manipulated matter."[207] This rupture in both matter and meaning cuts straight through time and thus space, making it only comprehensible through the now of the future real conditional. This allows me to understand these violent moments as being necessary for the maintenance of the loop of time we find ourselves in and unfortunately a now from which I can understand the next Black girl who will create the next amazing thing on social media. Between Harmon and Newman was no gap, but a pause, that was shortened. Perhaps, next time a Black girl genius will not have to contend with that hesitancy. Maybe she will be able to craft the conditions of her virality and grasp the opportunities that can come with it. Newman's story had to happen, the way it did, in order for Harmon to have the career that she has had. And Harmon's career and experience are setting the stage for the next Black girl, whose subjectivity, and all that comes in tow, will never be disassociated from her. At least, this is a comforting thought.

Realistically, harboring a desire for Black girls to gain access to financial remuneration plays into a capitalist logic that it is always already predicated on theft of Black (creative) labor. Harmon and Newman, even when crafting new discursive grammars and becoming connected through the ever-shifting possibilities of time, looked within themselves and created, letting their interior shine out. If I focus on this interior, I can begin to process not just an end to the injustices they face, but an end to the world and its systems that make these injustices possible. To honor their personhood, I can not simply stop at imagining remuneration. Their ability to retrieve their

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[207] Jackson, *Becoming Human***,** 66.

digital iterations tells a different story about who gets to be the source of their own regard. It provides "an account of an always already-mediated being that rather than obscuring the glassy and transparent grounds of the (White) Subject denounces the fallacy upon which it rests its authority."[208]

The following quote comes from one of my favorite TikTokers, @bigekane. She has amassed a fairly large following due mainly to her extremely humorous TikToks that are, seemingly, off the cuff. I find the entirety of her TikTok to be of extreme importance as it highlights the limits of success on TikTok for Black women and girls, given the many structures that are working against them. In this TikTok, she is seen standing in her kitchen addressing the camera, wearing a black and brown scarf and long-sleeved red shirt. She says:

"It's like y'all think just because somebody gained a lot of followers on TikTok, they supposed to be this role model, this *perfect* young Black woman that everybody can look up to. No! I only did blow up on TikTok from talking about catching a hundred bodies before eighteen. What about that gives role model? I caught chlamydia before! Wow! Is that giving role model? No! I'm just a regular…a regular hoe. Y'all think TikTok followers change somebody life, I'm not white! I'm not Charli, baby, renegade, renegade! *does two beats of the Renegade dance* No! I got some fucking wigs, that's what I get. I ain't get no brand deals, no sponsorships, I ain't out here living life good, living life like that. You see them dishes?! *moves to her right to reveal a sink full of dirty dishes* I'm trifling! Like TikTok don't change nothing in my life but how many wigs I got. Thank you but damn! Listen, I'm only human. Y'all expect me to be this perfect influencer and bumpadah- no. Y'all gave the wrong muhfucka a platform because baby I'm not social media responsible, I'm not politically correct. Imma end up offending a lot of you hoes, but I love y'all for following me, but at the end of the day, I'm not perfect! And that's what it's gone be."[209]

In this very candid video, @bigekane captures the way that popularity does not always equate material change in one's life, specifically when one considers racialization. Her calling

[208] Denise Ferreira Da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics," 84.

[209] @bigekane, "Im not a role model leave me be," TikTok post, February 1, 2022, accessed February 2, 2022, https://www.tiktok.com/@bigekane/video/7059139505281961263?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id6895992221088056837

attention to how she became popular through an abject lens (catching one hundred bodies before she was eighteen, meaning she had had one hundred sexual partners), more than likely limited the possibility of brand sponsorships that would allow her to be "out here living life good." Most saliently, her referencing Charli D'Amelio, and not Jalaiah, drives home the point that even if one knows the real creator, the association will always remain with the powerful over the powerless. As she reminds us, the powerful are those who are white, no matter how perfect one young Black woman or girl may be. On the same hand, her connection makes me wonder if her indicating Charli is in itself a demonstration of her awareness of the material limit of redress via social media fame. Campt's articulation of "reassemblage in dispossession" as an amplifier of "the practices through which racialized subjects redeploy relations of power in unintended ways, with unexpected consequences" comes to mind.[210] The association stopped me and caused me to think about the trajectory of remaining entangled with social media at all. If Black women and girls worked together to stop the loop of time-theft that is capitalism by refusing to provide creative content to the public, then what can we imagine the future as?

[210] Campt, *Listening to Images*, 60.

Every Nigga is a Star?: Reading 'The Shade Room' Through Black Feminist Care

"See a bitch got more coins than a game room
So we ain't ever hatin' in The Shade Room"

- Nicki Minaj, "Good Form"

On July 12th, Houston-bred rapper Megan Thee Stallion (Megan Pete) was allegedly shot multiple times in the foot by Canadian musical artist Tory Lanez (Daystar Peterson) during an altercation in the Hollywood Hills.[211] Both artists had recently reached new heights in their fame during COVID-19, as evident with Megan's chart-topping hit "Savage" soundtrack to the popular Savage Challenge on TikTok and Lanez having performed on the Instagram-hosted virtual DJ battle series, Verzuz. However, the shooting received minimal and stilted coverage from typical news and celebrity news sources, some even speculating Megan thee Stallion provoked the incident. Eventually, Megan Thee Stallion herself spoke out to criticize the coverage, hosting an Instagram Live to state clearly that Lanez shot her weeks later. The coverage is even more curious given that the details of the event were, at the outset, extremely murky. The night unfolded on Instagram with Megan Thee Stallion, Lanez, and celebrity Kylie Jenner going "live" with one another.[212] Megan Thee Stallion started an Instagram Live stream on her account, letting her fans and followers know what she was up to. Later the next day, Tory Lanez announced that he had been arrested on a gun charge. Over the next few weeks, Megan Thee Stallion revealed that Lanez had indeed shot her. A story of this magnitude should have been trending news, but it wasn't until October 8th that traditional news sources like CNN, the *New York Times*, and NPR started to cover the story as a serious incident.

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[211] Sarah Moon, "Rapper Tory Lanez charged in shooting of Megan Thee Stallion," *Cnn.com*, updated 11:55pm ET, October 8, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/08/entertainment/tory-lanez-megan-thee-stalling-shooting-charges-trnd/index.html

[212] There is a feature on Instagram wherein one can go "live" meaning they are streaming live from their phone so that any users can view their stream through the app.

The suffering of Black women, even the suffering of a Black woman celebrity, is suspended between "…hypervisibility and invisibility…presence and absence…"[213] In "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color" legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw describes how Black women's social location "…at the intersection of race and gender makes our actual experience of domestic violence, rape, and remedial reform qualitatively different than that of white women."[214] Black women's abuse remains invisible and difficult to locate in law proceedings which led to Crenshaw introducing intersectionality as not just an analytical tool, but also as a way of seeing Black women within juridical contexts. With this in mind, the traditional news sources' delayed response to covering Megan Thee Stallion's experience with violence and abuse is not so much surprising as it is disappointing.

Outside of the law, popular culture renders the Black woman's body as hypervisible. In 2009, images of her battered face in global print, digital and television media reintroduced Rihanna into visual cultural memory, not as a chart-topping recording artist, but as a victim of domestic violence. Even under this deluge of images, Robyn Fenty, the person, was invisible, even as her corporeal being was suddenly everywhere. The images circulated without Rihanna's consent, facilitated by the "investigative tabloidism" of celebrity news source *TMZ*, violating her again.[215] Rihanna attempted to wrest her public persona back under control, as she faced intense media victim-blaming, even as her abuser Chris Brown received minimal to no critique by the same media apparatus, with media entities only caring to sanction Brown as much as encroached

[213] Krista Thompson, *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African American Aesthetic Practice*, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press): 14.

[214] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no.6 (July 1991): 1244.

[215] Kevin Glynn, *Tabloid Culture: Trash Taste, Popular Power, and the Transformation of American Television* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press): 124.

on their ability to earn advertising money. Rihanna appeared on *20/20* on November 9, 2009 wearing a white, turtleneck dress appearing calm, in control, and still, unlike the tearful, beaten, and highly mobile image that visually narrativized her assault. Her highly-anticipated television interview on *20/20* illuminated the subject-making power of whiteness as she was technically evacuated of her skin color by both the high-key light of the television studio and her dress which made her legible to viewers' visual and cultural eye.[216] Rihanna's Black body was made hypervisible, for sure, but Rihanna's suffering was not-seen. This not-seeing, as theorized by Andrea Smith, took the distributed abuse of Rihanna's material body and sanitized it through whiteness to inculcate public empathy and sympathy.[217] As Kelli D. Moore writes, "the performance of not-seeing that the camera flash enacts of skin color creates a visual code that organizes the regime of domestic-violence governmentality, centering a normalized female body that is white. Rihanna, as racial other, is "held by the light, cordoned by the flesh, existing at the edge of juridical universality."[218]

Hypervisibility and invisibility have thus orchestrated not only Black women's recourse for justice in the aftermath of domestic violence, but also how this domestic violence is covered in the popular public. Megan's story is not isolated from this history. In the past decade since Rihanna's violent abuse, TMZ remains a major name in celebrity news coverage.[219] In that time,

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[216] Kelli D. Moore, "Held in the Light: Reading Images of Rihanna's Domestic Abuse," in *Feminist Surveillance Studies,* ed. Rachel E. Dubrofsky and Shoshana Amielle Magnet (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2015): 122.

[217] Andrea Smith, "Not-Seeing: State Surveillance, Settler Colonialism, and Gender Violence," in *Feminist Surveillance Studies,* ed. Rachel E. Dubrofsky and Shoshana Amielle Magnet (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press,2015): 24.

[218] Moore, "Held in the Light," 123.

[219] It would be remiss of me to not mention that if one takes the TMZ Bus Tour in Hollywood, they directly associate their success and credibility to breaking news of Michael Jackson's untimely death, making an explicit connection to benefitting from Black death.

a few Black news sources have risen to purportedly combat TMZ's disrespectful coverage of Black celebrities. Even still, TMZ covered Megan's shooting the day after, breaking the silence from the aforementioned news sources. However, only one other news source covered the story before TMZ, posting almost simultaneously to the events themselves: The Shade Room.

This chapter offers a study of The Shade Room (TSR), a media company that highlights Black culture which began as an online celebrity new source, in order to emphasize its particular position at the intersection of Black social media history and celebrity news history. TSR began as an Instagram account created by Angelica Nwandu in 2014[220], and since then has spread to include a web domain[221], as well as Facebook[222] and Twitter[223] accounts that are edited by the seven TSR moderators and Nwandu. TSR built its following and base, known as "the roommates," on covering niche Black celebrity news but has since expanded to include fashion, music, and politics. Given TSR's coverage of Black celebrities, now niche (like influencer Rollin' Ray) or mainstream (like Megan Thee Stallion), the coverage of these Black, and sometimes non-Black, people are supposed to be done with a care that is often not found in traditional news or celebrity news sources. Interestingly, roommates drive the content of the page, helping TSR gain a level of notoriety within certain Black communities for creating opportunities for roommates to engage directly with each other and the celebrity at the center of the news coverage.

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[220] Heather Wood Rudulph, "How I Started My Own Company Using My Instagram Account" *Cosmopolitan*, June 20, 2016, accessed March 19, 2017, http://www.cosmopolitan.com/career/a58915/angelica-nwandu-the-shade-room-get-that-life/

[221] https://theshaderoom.com/

[222] https://www.facebook.com/theshaderoom

[223] https://twitter.com/TheShadeRoom

Guided by a Black feminist ethics of care, I argue that TSR's mission to cover a cogent "Black culture" *causes* harmful intramural discourse in that it asserts a universal Black online culture that does not exist. By desiring to represent this universality, the subsequent discourse in TSR comments and posts is often heteropatriarchal, transphobic, fatphobic, and colorist. As such, The Shade Room reveals the limits of the politics of representation, and forces more difficult questions about "culture" and the nature of its function in the face of capital and the digital world. My analysis of this harm is made possible by picking up Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's challenge to conceptualize Black women's materiality beyond representation, as such, and its attendant logics and terminology which animates "normativizing and hierarchical arrangement and rearrangements of sex-gender in the globalizing West."[224] First, I provide critical contexts of TSR's Instagram account, its most popular platform, to establish its uniqueness among established social media formulas, and to provide context for its place in the history of Black online communities. I will then trouble the foundational logic of TSR, which presumes a stable and coherent Black cultural identity, to put forth a nuanced analysis of Black celebrity news media and its grammars of community and culture. I present analyses of Rihanna's domestic abuse reception, Megan the Stallion's assault and conclude with a brief meditation on how Zaya Wade was covered following the announcement of her transition.

This chapter presented a host of difficulties with regard to methodology. As TSR is a company that is hosted on another company's platform, Instagram (and this company is owned by *another* company, Facebook), it is difficult to get some of the more typical data points that were available to those doing cultural critiques of sites and blogs in the Internet Zero Period. In

[224] Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, "'Theorizing in a Void': Sublimity, Matter, and Physics in Black Feminist Poetics," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 117, no. 3 (2018): 621.

this iteration of social media data points *are* the means of capital for the companies and their stakeholders. As such, this information is highly protected and purposely obscured. Furthermore, the very thing I aim to capture here - harm - is something even more ephemeral and omniscient in these spaces. How do I capture this? How many posts and their sometimes tens of thousands of comments do I need to archive in order to capture the digital weather of antiblackness? Is the mandate for enumeration and its impossibility (due to sheer ubiquity) in and of itself a form of violence? I believe that all I can do is care enough about Black people that I can begin to unravel the conditions that bring about the world order wherein those questions need to be asked. I take a posture against the sociological impulse of capture that mirrors the proclivity to market a singular and "representable" Black culture. These tendencies limit the imagination and seek to project a stability and comprehensibility of Blackness that can or cannot exist on TSR and beyond. While I know that this Black feminist ethic of care takes a posture *toward* the end of the world as such, I also know that TSR, somehow, still has a role in this dismantling.[225] If TSR's material investment in Black "culture" wasn't to make a return, it is possible that it could become a space for Black online discourse and relations to happen that are full of care. TSR could easily solve some of their issues by removing harmful comments from posts or, more holistically, disabling comments under tumultuous posts. Without making Black communal harm-reduction a central part of their business model, TSR's legacy will continue to be known as a repository of (trans)misogynoiristic vitriol.

Setting the Stage: Rihanna as Metric

In order to contextualize Megan's attack and the coverage of it, I include a brief discussion of Rihanna's media coverage following rapper Chris Brown's assault of her in 2009. I

[225] Denise Ferreira Da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics," 82.

assert that the coverage of Rihanna set the contemporary tone for how Megan could be covered more than a decade later. Because the event happened during a moment of social media expansion, it was not yet covered outside of the more traditional avenues of news. Gossip blogs such as Perez Hilton, Lipstick Alley, and Concrete Jungle, that had emerged during the blog era of 2007-2014 covered the event, and were responsible largely for the victim-blaming that Rihanna endured. I see the digital violence against Rihanna as standing in a longer genealogy of public domestic violence events with other Black female stars such as Tina Turner and Robin Givens. I provide a detailed discussion of Rihanna's abuse at the hands of Chris Brown and the coverage of the case via TMZ to provide a genealogy to better place Megan Thee Stallion's coverage by The Shade Room. Given that The Shade Room is known in more mainstream (read: non-Black) spaces as "Instagram's TMZ," I argue that these two women's assaults are undeniably connected. Both women were assaulted by fellow musicians during a moment of meteoric success. I believe that my analysis of Rihanna's case will highlight the dead end presented to Black women who stand up for themselves following physical assault.

Rihanna and Chris Brown began dating in 2008. Both stars had notable careers prior to dating one another however their relationship only developed their careers more. The physical altercation took place on February 8th, 2009 as the two were preparing for the 51st Annual Grammy Awards, where they were both nominees. According to the firsthand accounts of Rihanna, the two were in a car, with Brown driving and Rihanna in the passenger seat. Brown began to hit Rihanna while still in the drivers' seat, causing bruising along the left side of her face. Brown then pulled over, got out of the car, walked around to the passenger side and began to hit her all over her face and upper body. The night the two were set to appear at the Grammy's, the information about this assault had not yet been made available to the general

public. However, the next day, TMZ released a leaked police image of Rihanna that went viral.[226] Given that TMZ has once already violated Rihanna's privacy, I will not be circulating the image here.

In an article that discusses the way that Rihanna was covered by tabloids, "U.S. Tabloid Magazine Coverage of a Celebrity Dating Abuse Incident: Rihanna and Chris Brown," the authors gathered the coverage from select publications into five discrete framing categorizes to outline the attitudes and messages being delivered in coverage through content analysis.[227] The five categories are: 1) abuse is wrong and objectionable, 2) victim-blaming, 3) abuse is sexualized and romanticized, 4) myths about batterers, and 5) abuse is normalized. Along these five categories they split the types of coverage in two: articles in which the frame appeared and articles in which the frame was dominant. Out of the total number of articles, the two dominant frames were abuse is wrong (40%) and victim-blaming (36%), even though the frame "abuse is wrong" *appeared* in 83% of the articles. This demonstrates that while a dominant frame is what I consider to be the correct frame, "abuse is wrong," there are several moments of conflicting frames that may appear in any given article, thus muddling the overall message to readers.

Another article, "(Mis)Perceptions Around Intimate Partner Violence in the Music Video and Lyrics for 'Love the Way You Lie'" by Jonel Thaller & Jill Theresa Messing, does a similar categorization wherein they analyze the music video for "Love the Way You Lie" featuring

[226] It is worth noting that the event that TMZ touts as being the start of their unshakable affiliation with actual news coverage was their breaking the death of Michael Jackson's death, later that year. However, I would offer that their releasing of Rihanna's face following the assault actually gave them the validity for even that event to stick. That this is not discussed as a formative moment in the history of TSR also demonstrates how unimportant Black women's suffering is to others even as it creates the conditions for capital and social gain.

[227] Emily F. Rothman, Anita Nagaswaran, Renee M. Johnson, Kelley Adams, Juliane Scrivens & Allyson Baughman, "U.S. Tabloid Magazine Coverage of a Celebrity Dating Abuse Incident: Rihanna and Chris Brown," *Journal of Health Communication*, 17 no. 6 (2012): 737.

Rihanna and noted serial abuser Eminem (Marshall Mathers). They view the video through what they call "six common myth-based beliefs" about intimate partner violence. These myths track very closely to the frames used in the previously discussed article. These striking similarities as they relate to Rihanna specifically are of particular interest to me as I believe that these same frames and/or myths will be very useful terms through which to understand TSR's coverage of Megan thee Stallion in forthcoming sections. The six myths that the authors outline are: 1) most women could get out of an unsafe relationship if they wanted to, 2) some women who are abused secretly want to be treated that way, 3) some women initiate partner violence by treating men badly or taking the first swing, 4) most intimate partner violence occurs when a man has been drinking or has lost control of his mind, 5) much of what is referred to as intimate partner violence is a normal reaction to relationship conflict, 6) intimate partner violence is low-class, not something that happens in my neighborhood.[228] Along these six myths the authors further break down the message of these myths into three categories: 1) direct victim blaming, 2) perpetrator exoneration and 3) minimization or normalization of violence. The categorization laid out by the two articles will prove to be useful in terms of analyzing and processing the messages that are left by those on TSR. The amount of research that I was able to surface that centered on the Rihanna/Chris Brown incident indicates that it was a major moment that allowed for scholars of feminism, intimate domestic violence, and popular culture to be able to speak about how the media relays and intervenes in messages about intimate domestic violence.

Nevertheless, the coverage of Chris Brown's assault on Rihanna undoubtedly established the metrics for how an entire "postfeminist" generation would be able to understand the intimate

[228] Jonel Thaller and Jill Theresa Messing, "(Mis)Perceptions Around Intimate Partner Violence in the Music Video and Lyrics for 'Love the Way You Lie'" *Feminist Media Studies* 14, no.4 (2014): 626.

domestic violence that may be initiated between two celebrities. This is particularly important as "in the absence of personal experience with IDV, individuals often consult popular representations to develop their conceptions of the phenomenon and how it should be addressed."[229] If even as there has been extensive feminist organizing around eradicating the means that can lead to partners to become violent to one another, these results demonstrate that many individuals would rather understand IDV as a result of individual and personal actions rather than actions that are made logical and legible through a culture that systemically allows for the violence to not only occur, but evade justice. Perhaps most crucially, this culture of violence becomes intertwined with what we may come to understand as Black culture.

What is This "Black" in Black Online Culture?

Given TSR's innovation and influence, I have been apprehensive to be critical about TSR's reliance on *an idea* of Black culture. The intended purpose of TSR is to engage Black culture and thus become part of that same culture. Nwandu expresses TSR's reliance on and investment in Black culture:

> "The purpose of The Shade Room is to celebrate and report on Black culture and Black culture is not all positive. It's not all positive. We're just trying to report the truth of Black culture, you know, the funniness, the hashtags, the trending news, the opinions. So, when you're looking at The Shade Room, you're looking at a snap shot of Black culture. And the purpose is to continue to highlight it and put Black culture on the stage."[230]

The "truth of black culture," for Nwandu, makes it necessary to cover, or rather represent, *all* Black people, regardless of their histories of abuse and *all* opinions, regardless of their baseless or harmful foundations. The idea of a singular and calculable Black culture haunts the

[229] Thaller and Messing, "(Mis)Perceptions Around Intimate Partner Violence," 625.

[230] Complex Hustle, "How The Shade Room's Angie Nwandu Reinvented Celebrity News & Gossip," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xb3gwU1iMpc

motivations of TSR such that, I argue, it invites antiblack behavior in the form of homophobia, transphobia, and, most importantly for this chapter, misogynoir. This Black culture crushes Black variance in its plea to universality as a condition of culture that "…demarcates a universe defined by a certain kind of social formation and what is, therefore, excluded from it…"[231]

The title of this section and my argument with regards to Black culture is informed by others who have puzzled this same tension, specifically Hortense Spillers and Stuart Hall. In "The Idea of Black Culture," Spillers embarks on a bipartite project: 1) outlining how the *idea* of culture has been defined by other cultural theorists (Williams, Marcuse, Du Bois, de Certeau, and Chandler specifically) and 2) using these threads of thought to suture together exactly what the idea of black culture is and is not. She states:

> "Culture, as a term, might adhere to a certain stillness and predictability on *paper*, but beyond its nominal evocations, it is visible only in its effects, and its contents show forth a repertoire of implements, from the fantastical/imaginal to the actual/material that splinter in pluralness and considerable variation. From this vantage, there are, perhaps, only [black] *cultures*."[232]

In this quote, Spillers works with the paradox of black culture. There are many layers within these two sentences that further my argument with regards to TSR. The pinned-down and, assumed, immobility of culture in theory, or as Spillers states it "on *paper*," indicates already a tension between assumption and fact with regards to how culture is able to be mobilized discursively. Spillers points us to this tension with her astute observation to that beyond the paper; we must understand not the definition of culture, but how that definition is mobilized in society by individuals, thus we must center on its "effects." These effects, through a mobilization that does the uncanny work of turning culture away from theory and towards praxis,

[231] Hortense Spillers, "The Idea of Black Culture," *The New Centennial Review*, 6. No.3, (Winter 2006): 21.

[232] Spillers, "The Idea of Black Culture," 12.

splinter as definition can be redefined across time, space, and nation to reveal that bubbling beneath the very immaterial surface of culture are many cultures, always into infinity. Any such sort of desire to make the immaterial fact of culture into a singular Culture has already introduced a fracture onto the mirror that is "culture," and there many cultures reflect back.

This understanding of the inherent multiplicity of culture is central to my critique of TSR's guiding logic. Furthermore, TSR's plea to represent *the*, not *a*, truth of black culture means it was doomed to cast into unobstructed relief the fissured and often contentious fact of living while Black. There are many people, Black or not, who themselves are shackled to the assumed behaviors that would induct them into Black Culture.

Spillers also outlines that culture, here meaning white Western culture, itself is a term that is always in constant flux due to the cultures that are subsumed into that one word. Hall's echo of this is even more specific for an American context stating that "…when viewed from outside the United States, American mainstream popular culture has always involved certain traditions that could only be attributed to black cultural vernacular traditions."[233] The clash of a subordinate culture and a dominant culture are always implicit in the idea of Culture, which must always be understood in the context of historical, social, and political formations.

More explicitly, TSR falls into a trap wherein the idea of Black culture is not understood to mean multiplicity (Black *cultures*), but rather it collapses even the potential to comprehend the constant contestation that creates the very grounds for a culture and that cultures' politics. Sure, this sounds great, or not, but how can I stand to accuse TSR of doing this when TSR is a company comprised of independent actors who work for the interest of that company? What evidence can I possibly stake my claims on with regards to this? The simple answer to this is that

[233] Stuart Hall, "What is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture," *Social Justice,* 20, no.1/2(51-52) (1993): 105.

TSR exists on Instagram, which is a subsidiary of Facebook/Meta. There is no way for a company to really support the black cultures that Hall and Spillers clarify for us as that would confront Facebook's power as a cultural tool. And *that* culture depends on dominating the conversations that circulate on these apps that do not feed the white cis-hetero patriarchal capitalist system that organizes our World. As such TSR must abide by the dominant cultural logics AND politics of Facebook which is to say it must serve capitalism's organizing logics. This materializes in the form of "analytics" (how many likes? How many comments? How many shares? Et cetera) and the best way to get analytics that demonstrate a well performing platform-based company would be to always create a little bit of scandal. This is doubly so given the fact that TSR is a gossip news platform specifically.

The power of the dominant culture constructs the shape and possibilities of the intramural engagement of TSR. To further comprehend this one must understand that the accumulation and application of power is never static; it is in constant flux. This flux is understood by Hall as being "dialogic," not essentialist, and this dialogue between "dominant" culture and "subordinate" cultures must be understood as always shifting in order to shift the "balance of power in relations of culture."[234] Hall writes:

> "However, as popular culture has historically become the dominant form of global culture, so it is at the same time the scene, par excellence, of commodification, of the industries where culture enters directly into the circuits of a dominant technology – the circuits of power and capital. It is the space of the homogenization where stereotyping and the formulaic mercilessly process the material and experiences it draws into its web, where control over narratives and representations passes into the hands of the established cultural bureaucracies, sometimes without a murmur."[235]

[234] Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?," 106-107.

[235] Hall, "What is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?," 108.

In service of having a "protected space" on Instagram to discuss and represent Blackness, TSR becomes the "dominant technology" wherein "control over narratives and representations" of Black celebrities replicates the same "established cultural bureaucracies," that they seek to get away from. In this discussion of hegemony and power, Hall and Spillers are in agreement. Spillers emphasizes that "[i]f subordination, then, is already imminent in the hegemonic posture and the hegemonic posture in the subordinate, there is no longer "black" or "white" culture, per se, if there ever were, or the power monopoly implied in the formulation but, rather, 'only differences of force'(282)."[236]

The Black culture that is being mobilized by Nwandu and her team are applying force with regards to coverage of Black women celebrities in the sense that they cover them. However, they are not applying a *different type* of that force with regards to the construction of the posts they make that center on Black women and girls. As such, I continue to find Hall and Spillers' stances quite necessary as grounding for my future discussion of some of these posts (that cover Megan thee Stallion and Zaya Wade) and the comments that accompany them. Their reminders to consider the dialog between dominant culture, in this instance Black cis-heteronormative culture, and subordinate culture(s) is captured in the dialog that TSR's followers create on the account among each other. I follow Hall's call to center on "the diversity, not the homogeneity, of black experience" as these diverse identities within Blackness "refuse to be neatly aligned…"[237] I will now provide a brief history of Black online celebrity blogs and their

[236] Spillers, "The Idea of Black Culture," 24. Number 282 is from Spillers' quotation from Nahum Chandler's "Originary Displacement."
[237] Hall, "What is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture," 112.

connection to early social media history in order to contextualize TSR presence in both contemporary Black online celebrity coverage and social media.

A Brief History of Celebrity Gossip Rags and Blogs

The ideas of celebrity and stardom came from the theater stage and was mutated to during the classical Hollywood era to the all-consuming, never-private system that we know today. Scholar Richard Dyer based his early accounts of the Star on two books that cover the time period of the twenties to the forties.[238] *Photoplay, Modern Screen,* and *Silver Screen* were early fan magazines that gave a general format to reveal the "real" personality of stars[239]. Yet as Dyer and communications scholar Erin A. Meyers both discuss, often times the "real" side of celebrities can be cultivated to "idealize the glamorous and extraordinary lifestyles of the Hollywood elite as the norm to which all should aspire."[240] As media sources began to develop over time so did the range of representing celebrities and their lives. Big celebrity and gossip columnists such as Walter Winchell, Hedda Hopper, and Ed Sullivan had television and radio series during the studio era of Hollywood, allowing celebrity news to be brought right into ones' homes. Yet these shows were in a sense predicated on the celebrity of the hosts themselves.

A major shift in pace, and thus coverage, of celebrity news began with television. The first celebrity news television show, "Entertainment Tonight," first aired September 14th, 1981. The show was novel in that it aired every night, indicating that not only was there enough celebrity news to cover each night, but also that entertainment news was profitable. This was a

[238] Richard Dyer, *Stars*, (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 154.

[239] Erin A. Meyers, "Women, Gossip, and Celebrity Online: Celebrity Gossip Blogs as Feminized Popular Culture" in *Cupcakes, Pinterest and Ladyporn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century*, ed. Elana Levine, (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2015), 73.

[240] Myers, "Women, Gossip, and Celebrity Online," 74.

notable transition from most other popular magazines or shows that were generally released weekly or biweekly. The constant demand for celebrity news was also fueled by the advent of cable news and its national news broadcasts.[241] This near constant news cycle also paved the way for the advent of the celebrity news blog on the Internet.

The undeniable leader of early social media blogs in the Web 2.0 era is Perez Hilton. Hilton, whose real name is Mario Lavandeira, is a self-proclaimed "Queen of All Media" whose blog, PerezHilton.com, drew about 7 million- page views per day at its height.[242] He is also credited with being one of the blogs who ushered in "24-hour celebrity 'info-tainment'," which resulted in Perez updating the blog an average of 40 times a day.[243] The site was originally called PageSixSixSix, a genius riff on the well-known *New York Post* gossip section Page Six. The name was changed as a result of a lawsuit initiated by the *Post.* Given the *Perez Hilton* maxim "any press is good press," the lawsuit only catapulted the site to new levels of fame. Hilton's often-problematic way of framing the news shaped a new era of celebrity news and he is perhaps the most famous celebrity news blogger to this day. Most celebrity news sources were blogs or, as they were originally conceived as, "weblogs." Weblogs in the early 2000's were socially coded as being masculine since they sought to create this serious versus personal dichotomy by distancing themselves from the more female centric "online journaling"[244]. Even as blogging began to take off as a viable career choice for some, it still faced the stigmatization of

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[241] For more on the impact of cable news in television history see John Caldwell's *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television.*

[242] Andrea Chang, "Turning a blog into an empire," *Los Angeles Times*, June 13, 2008. Accessed November 23, 2020 https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2008-jun-13-fi-howimadeit13-story.html Surprisingly, the website is still active and being updated.

[243] Chang, "Turning a blog into an empire."

[244] Alice E. Marwick, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age*, (New Haven: Yale, 2013), 46.

feminization, meaning that often time the work of focusing on celebrity news is taken for granted and thus cheapened. While Hilton was the most popular, he was not the only man leading celebrity gossip blogs. Two other prominent sites, Dlisted and Just Jared, were also led by men, Michael K and Jason Eng, respectively. The crux of celebrity news coverage is that the labor needed to gather and present information about celebrities is considered to be meaningless or trivial but this coverage must still be done in order to maintain a sense of celebrity and a healthy Hollywood promotion culture.

Black people have managed to carve out communities in these predominantly uber-white tech spaces since the beginning of the Internet era. Predating the explosion of social network sites (SNS), there was a popular site dedicated to Black people called BlackPlanet. This was co-founded in 1999 by Omar Wasow, a Stanford alumnus and current Assistant Professor of Political Science at Princeton, who launched the site in 2001. While originally conceived as "… a place to post personal web pages, then… matchmaking and, more recently, job postings," the site also included news pertaining to the Black community, with polls and discussions about "political and social issues."[245] At its peak, BlackPlanet had 15.8 million registered users[246]. It is worth noting that while Wasow was the co-founder and public face, BlackPlanet was owned by Community Connect, Inc. (CCI) which hosted other community specific social networking sites such as the Asian-American targeted site AsianAvenue, the Latino targeted site MiGente, and the LGBTQ targeted site GLEE. Data on BlackPlanet is hard to come by as user data, changes to platform design, special features, or the names of advertisers from CCI was not made public,

[245] Cate T. Corcoran, "BlackPlanet's Universe," *Stanford Magazine*, March/April 2004, Accessed March 19, 2017. http://www.omarwasow.com/Stanford_Magazine_04.pdf

[246] Dara N. Byrne, "Public Discourse, Community Concerns, and Civic Engagement: Exploring Black Social Networking Traditions on Blackplanet.com," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication.*

which is hard to imagine in today's social media landscape. However, the estimated revenue CCI expected to net was about $20 million across the three race-specific sites in 2006, with a breakdown of 15% from its dating services, 50% from advertising, and 35% from job notices.[247]

This was one of the few primary spaces for Black people to engage in conversations about issues that pertained to them without having to filter them through mainstream cultural idioms.[248] The site also set the rubric for the sorts of conversations that Black people would have with each other online. As the business of the Internet picked up, very few of these sites was able to compete against rising mainstream social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook. BlackPlanet is still extant but rarely used by many. Interestingly, it was recently used as a marketing tool for musical artist Solange's newest album *When I Get Home.*[249] What is seminal about the site is that it gave voice to Black Internet stars who have managed to transition from era to era. Online personalities such as Mikki Kendall, Feminista Jones, and Kid Fury have recently blithely mentioned their interaction with Warsaw's site in the early 2000's via Twitter within the past year. BlackPlanet was meant to serve Black people looking for community on their website and as such the built-in security for people posting conversations within the Black radical tradition on the site was much more accommodating than many social media platforms are today. Mikki Kendall and Feminista Jones have both been extremely vocal about the fact Twitter doesn't protect its users from racist trolls or any other mid-level online harassment.

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[247] Jeffrey Gangemi, "A MySpace That Speaks Your Language,"*Bloomburg,* September 19, 2006, Accessed January 16, 2020. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2006-09-19/a-myspace-that-speaks-your-language

[248] Other defunct sites that were specific to the Black community that predate BlackPlanet include NetNoir (established in 1995) and BlackVoices (established in 1997). In *Distributed Blackness: African-American Cybercultures*, Andre Brock Jr. states that these sites "sustained Black online communities for only a few years before faltering." (18)

[249] https://solange.blackplanet.com/ I will discuss the possible implications of Solange's use of the site with regards to her persona and performance of it in a future project that is gestured to in the Coda.

Given that However, as SNS sites like Myspace and Facebook started to flourish, the site fell out of popularity. Still, its community message board left a lasting impact on the shape of Black online intramural activity. In the early 2000s, a proto-era of social media developed, something that Catherine Knight Steele calls the "Black blogosphere."[250] The Black blogosphere "…created and maintained spaces for Black folks to learn, to dialogue, and to build community," which continued to bloom into our current era of social media.[251]

A number of Black celebrity blogs, that is celebrity blogs run by Black people who focused on Black people, emerged at this explosive era. Blogs like Concrete Loop, Media Take Out, That Grape Juice, Lipstick Alley, Sandra Rose, Necole Bitchie, and the Young, Black, and Fabulous (YBF) emerged to fill in the lack of coverage on Black celebrities. Each of these blogs had their own particular flair. For example, the Necole Bitchie blog, run by Necole Kane, was were one could find, among other things, paparazzi photos of Black stars and also "who wore what" red carpet coverage. Interestingly, several of these blogs were led and created by Black women. Catherine Knight Steele is one of the only scholars to provide a deep analysis of Black woman led celebrity gossip blogs, specifically, YBF and Necole Bitchie.[252] Many of these blogs have digitally shuttered or changed hands due to the inability to keep up with the increased rate of demand that fuels our current news cycles. Necole Kane specifically states, when speaking about contemporary social media based blogs like TSR, "they were churning out news at a faster rate because they didn't have to license the images or check all the facts and things…I was like,

[250] Catherine Knight Steele, *Digital Black Feminism*, (New York: New York University Press, 2021): 1.

[251] Steele, *Digital Black Feminism*, 65.

[252] Catherine Knight Steele, "Signifyin', Bitching, and Blogging: Black Women and Resistance Discourse Online," in *The Intersectional Internet: Race, Sex, Class, and Culture Online*, ed. Safiya Umoja Noble and Brendesha M. Tynes. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2016).

There's no way we could keep up with this pace."[253]While blogs and other celebrity news websites were, and in some instances, continue to be, primary sources, since the advent of platforms such as Instagram and Twitter, they can now be considered somewhat obsolete as celebrity news sources shift to being hosted primarily on social media apps.

Enter The Shade Room: The Ultimate Business Synthesis

Instagram creator Angelica Nwandu was working in an accountant's office in Los Angeles when she received an opportunity to attend a screenwriting workshop at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival. During her time at the workshop, she was granted a fellowship to pursue screenwriting.[254] Having lost her accounting job due to her attending the workshop, Nwandu was quickly thinking how she could make her modest $5,000 grant stretch. Nwandu has been a poet and writer since the age 13 and as such she was wondering how she could monetize her writing skills outside of the sometimes years-long process of producing a film. She began to research how to make money doing a blog. She said: "Every site was like, 'Don't do it! It's a dying industry! Go walk away from it!"[255] Having limited technological skills, she turned to Instagram. Her first post in March 2014 reads: "Welcome To the Shade Room. It may be called The Shade Room, but it's the truth room! When you tell the truth, people can misconstrue it as shade, but sometimes it's really truth."

[253] Michael Blackmon, "Is The Shade Room Too Toxic to Function?," *BuzzFeed News*, October 9, 2020, accessed October 20, 2020. https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/michaelblackmon/the-shade-room-homophobic-gay-trans-cardi-b

[254] Jenna Wortham, "Instagram's TMZ" *The New York Times Magazine*, April 14, 2015, accessed March 19, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/19/magazine/instagrams-tmz.html

[255] Complex Hustle, "How The Shade Room's Angie Nwandu Reinvented Celebrity News & Gossip," Youtube video, 25:50, Posted September 25, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xb3gwU1iMpc

From these humble beginnings, the media company The Shade Room was born. TSR originally started by "…posting about people at the bottom of the celebrity hierarchy…"[256] but quickly attracted significant attention and amassed an amazing 10,000 followers in just two weeks. As of today, TSR has 21.5 million followers and has made about 101k posts.[257] The constant pace that Perez Hilton's site ushered in continues to fuel the admittedly impressive pace of the TSR which on average produces 50-70 posts per day. As aforementioned, the company also has accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. The Shade Room's Facebook profile states: "We are the leading source for Black entertainment and celebrity news. Got tea? Let us know! info@theshaderoom.com."[258] Both terms "tea" and "shade" are Black queer ballroom phrases that mean gossip and an entertaining insult, respectively.[259] The slang inherent in the title of The Shade Room aligns the company as being angled at black people, primarily. The call to have followers provide information has been foundational in the company as that is how the account has been able to gather celebrity news or catch quickly deleted Instagram posts, modeling a type of citizen journalism.

[256] Wortham, "Instagram's TMZ."

[257] Instagram, The Shade Room, accessed October 7, 2018. When accessed for the first draft of this chapter in March 21, 2017, the account had 8.6 million followers and 37.1k posts. When edited for a presentation on February 14, 2019, the account had 14.8 million followers with about 71,000 posts. On October 27, 2020, the account had 21.1 million followers and about 99, 600 posts.

[258]The Shade Room, *Facebook*, accessed March 21, 2017. https://www.facebook.com/shaderoominc/

[259] Tavia Nyong'o more generously defines "shade" in *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life*.

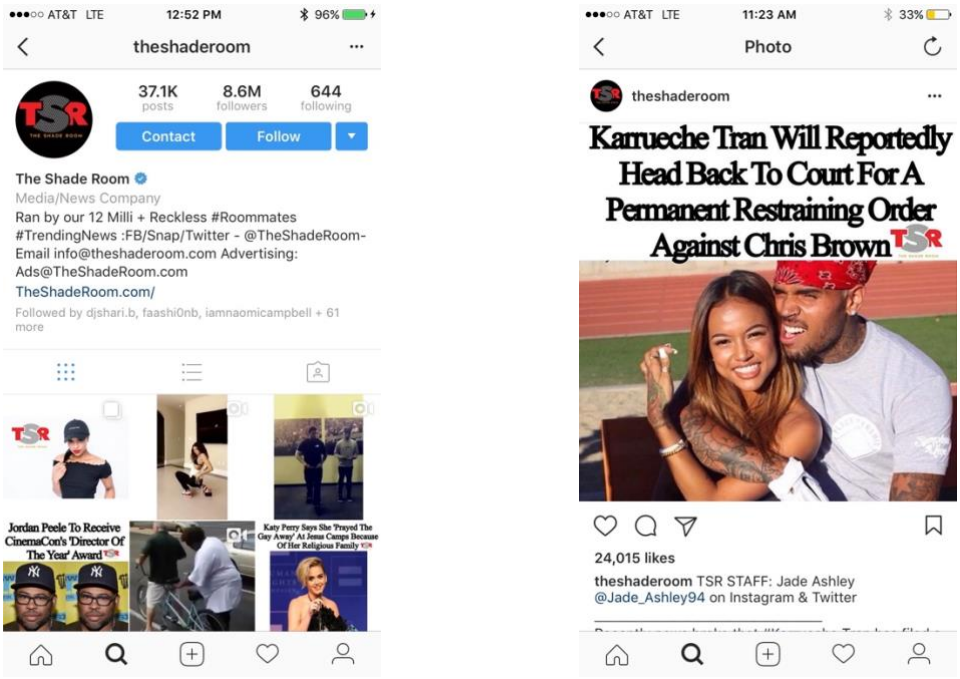


Fig. 3.1-2. Screenshots of The Shade Room, March 19, 2017.

TSR covers a truly astonishing number of topics on any day, fully utilizing the capabilities of Instagram. TSR uses a number of hashtags to categorize the content for each post. For instance, a cute video of a male celebrity playing with his kids might be affixed with the hashtag #TSRDaddyDuties, a reoccurring tag on the site. Videos posted to the account may be watermarked with one of the most used hashtags #PressPlay. If a rapper goes on Instagram Live while in the studio and a portion of an unreleased song is heard in the background of the stream, TSR chops the videos length and posts it with #TSRTunez. There are upwards of one-hundred hashtags like this that indicate a category of content one could find on TSR.

The account's posts and comments sections are often the point of focus, fueling conversations about its content while simultaneously generating content itself. While this is how every Instagram account works, what makes TSR unique is how community is formed around these posts, as the conversations that take place in the comments become almost as important, if not more, than the posts themselves. Followers get both entertainment news and also a discursive

space within which they can directly engage. The Shade Room is a source of gossip information for a number of entertainment sources, such as The Read, a successful popular culture podcast-turned-FuseTV show that centers Black popular culture and at its height had over 85 million listeners worldwide.[260] There have been instances where gossip that has developed and been covered by The Shade Room becomes more drama when the celebrities discussed in the post contribute to the comments section. Chris Brown, who is often covered on TSR for a number of offenses from harassing his ex-girlfriend, Karrueche Tran, to custody battles over his daughter, is very well known for commenting on TSR posts about him. The impulse to interact directly with the gossip is a highlight of the Instagram profile, and also a way that Nwandu originally built the community inherent in TSR. This is also a unique feature as it would be hard to imagine celebrities calling in to TMZ regularly, making TSR not just an aggregate source of news but a source in and of itself. The inception of TSR on Instagram first, rather than a website, distinguishes it from all other celebrity news blogs.

TSR has harnessed another cultural source of Instagram: the reproduction of memes. Instagram meme accounts have become an insular community within their own right, similar to how food accounts or travel accounts on Instagram are. A meme is "an element of a culture or system of behavior that may be considered to be passed from one individual to another by nongenetic means, especially imitation."[261] Critic Aria Dean takes this even further stating that "[r]elatability helps memes sustain a kind of cohesion in 'collective being,' a collective memory

[260] Erik Pederson, "Fuse unveils Upfront Slate: New & Returning Series, Premiere Dates, More," Deadline.com, March 19, 2019, accessed October 20, 2020, https://deadline.com/2019/03/fuse-unveils-upfront-slate-new-returning-series-premiere-dates-more-1202574591/

[261] Google Definition Search Result.

that can never be fully encompassed; one can never zoom out enough to see it in its entirety."[262] The integration of memes onto TSR makes sense given its claim to market Black culture, as most memes are inherently Black. Professor of English Lauren M. Jackson has stated that "blackness is the living tissue of memes," and I can't help but agree. The circulation of memes recalls Fouché's "disembodied consumable" in that while many memes in circulation may actually portray Black people, "the actual authors remain largely absent from the monetary benefits of their own creations."[263] Outside of "Black" memes specifically, memes have become such a prevalent instance in society that it was a viable rumor that 15,000 people wrote in Harambe, the gorilla that was killed in the Cincinnati Zoo, for the 2016 Presidential elections, due to the popularity of Harambe memes circulated on Instagram.[264] The Shade Room has tapped into this market as well and posts memes that relate to the celebrities that they often cover, or other memes that "represent" the Black community. To get around the possibility of having their own generated content reproduced they "watermark" their posts with the "TSR" red and gray logo, visually distinguishing their intellectual property.

The iconic TSR watermark has not shielded TSR from being penalized for intellectual property infringement. The biggest blow to The Shade Room was perhaps the deletion of their Facebook profile in 2016. Coincidentally, TSR began pivoting from purely covering gossip to

[262] Aria Dean, "Rich Meme, Poor Meme," *Real Life Magazine,* July 25, 2016, Accessed November 23, 2020. https://reallifemag.com/poor-meme-rich-meme/

[263] Laur.M. Jackson, "The Blackness of Meme Movement," *Model, View, Culture,* March 28, 2016, Accessed November 23, 2020. https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/the-blackness-of-meme-movement

[264] Allison Graves, "No, 15,000 people did not vote for Harambe in 2016" *PunditFact,* November 22, 2016, accessed March 19, 2017. http://www.politifact.com/punditfact/statements/2016/nov/22/blog-posting/no-15000-people-did-not-vote-harambe/

posting other aspects of Black pop culture and politics in 2016.[265]At the time of the deletion, TSR had about 4 million followers and was also posting regular advertisements on their profile. The account was supposedly taken down for copyright violations, after multiple reported complaints from intellectual property owners.[266] Nwandu stated that the reports were "excessive" and often times for things that didn't violate any rules.[267] Nwandu assumed the deletion came from a bias against TSR due to its unapologetically Black content. Either way, the deletion of TSR indicates a larger issue wherein a large and powerful page could be deleted for seemingly no reason from a platform. Furthermore, that TSR was deleted as an issue of IP violations allows Facebook to seem somewhat benevolent as they are apparently seeming to champion for the "real" content creators of the Internet, when in actuality Facebook is more than likely trying to protect itself from any lawsuits.

The Shade Room has generated enough revenue that Nwandu has hired twenty employees to operate the account with her[268], with locations in both Los Angeles and Atlanta. There are currently eight content moderators on the Instagram account.[269] TSR sells clothes that range from baby onesies to hats to sweatshirts. The company also uses product placement in

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[265] KC Ifeanyi, "How The Shade Room turned Instagram gossip into a media empire," *Fast Company,* May 16, 2019, Accessed October 27, 2020. https://www.fastcompany.com/90345296/how-the-shade-room-turned-instagram-gossip-into-a-media-empire

[266] Peter Kafka, "Popular gossip publisher Shade Room is back- for now- after Facebook ban," *Recode.net,* April 20, 2016, accessed August 21, 2018. https://www.recode.net/2016/4/20/11586290/shade-room-facebook-returns

[267] Tom Kludt, "Why Facebook gave the boot to The Shade Room" *Cnn Money,* April 16, 2016, accessed August 21, 2018. https://money.cnn.com/2016/04/19/media/facebook-shade-room/index.html

[268] Heather Wood Rudulph, "How I Started My Own company Using My Instagram Account," *Cosmopolitan,* June 20, 2016, accessed February 11, 2017, http://www.cosmopolitan.com/career/a58915/angelica-nwandu-the-shade-room-get-that-life/

[269] I gathered the names of the moderators from TSR and use the names as they were placed on the account. The moderators are as followers: Tanya P. (@tanyaxpayne), Brianne D. (@beedev_), Jade Ashley (@Jade_Ashley94), La'Janeé (@_lajanee_), China (@china_lovelace), Christina (@delafresh), Danielle (@prettyaries16), and Thembi (@ThembiTV_)

some of their posts to gain revenue as well as advertisement for "Instagram boutiques" such as Love Yourz, a plus-size clothing company based on Instagram, and Fashion Nova, arguably one of the most popular Instagram clothing stores. In exchange for visibility these companies pay a fee of anywhere upwards of 1,000 dollars to have their merchandise marketed by the media company.[270] These are clothing companies that tend to cater to people of color or are owned by people of color. This is how The Shade Room has situated itself on a platform (Instagram, for example) as a separate force that utilizes the very platform it's built upon as part of its navigational logic. This is not particularly revolutionary as these platforms are created with the hopes that accounts will generate such business as it inherently generates more capital for the company itself. This model of Instagram celebrity news account has been picked up by other companies, particularly the company Baller Alert, (this company was originally a text-message system that alerted subscribers of celebrity sightings at nightclubs, restaurants and other public spaces) Bossip (which is more successful on Twitter thanks to their side-splitting headlines), and The Neighborhood Talk (which was started by an ex-Shade Room employee who was fired for starting arguments with rapper Cardi B on TSR's account).[271] However, none of these accounts have anywhere near as large of a following as TSR.[272] What is intriguing about The Shade Room is its synthesis of all the factors I've touched on while also obscuring the majority of its business practices under the guise of community.

As aforementioned, the followers *can* impact what is covered or what remains on the account. "Roommates" can provide information that the employees of TSR may not be quick

[270] Quora, https://www.quora.com/How-much-does-it-cost-to-advertise-with-Shade-Room

[271] Wortham, "Instagram's TMZ."

[272] Baller Alert has 5.9 million followers and 33.3k posts. Bossip has 536k followers and 14.7k posts. Neighborhood Talk has 324k followers and 12.2k posts.

enough to catch. Chris Brown is known to comment under photos of Rihanna, his ex-girlfriend whom he brutalized in 2009.[273] These comments may be captured by roommates and sent to TSR via DM, where they might be posted onto the account. This sort of fan labor is what led to Nwandu being pushed from posting on the account herself.[274] But TSR is first and foremost a business headed by Nwandu and the other employees who are actually paid to generate the captions and posts on the account.[275] While Angelica Nwandu is the creator of the account, she herself is not what media scholar Alice Marwick defines as a "micro-celebrity." Marwick states that there are two ways of becoming internet famous "by consciously arranging the self to achieve recognition, or by being ascribed fame by others due to one's accomplishments."[276] A micro-celebrity is thus *someone* who operates in a state of celebrity, differing from "normal" celebrity where one is known. Since one must perform micro-celebrity to *be* a micro-celebrity, the status is always in flux and must be done.[277] As a matter of fact, for a number of years she only gave interviews under the name "Angie", choosing to instead stay shrouded in mystery. Anonymity protected Nwandu but also allowed for the followers to feel like they are more responsible for the shape of the account than they are. It was not until her most recent round of interviews in the summer of 2016 that she began to give out her full name and be photographed as part of the interview. Yet, her own personal social media accounts are nearly impossible to

[273] "Chris Brown speaks about Rihanna assault," *BBC.com*, August 16, 2017, Accessed October 27, 2020. https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-40948006

[274] Complex Hustle, "How The Shade Room's Angie Nwandu Reinvented Celebrity News & Gossip," YouTube video, 25:50, Posted September 25, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xb3gwU1iMpc&ab_channel=ComplexHustle

[275] I have not been able to get any figures on the salaries of any of the employees at TSR.

[276] Alice Marwick, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013): 114.

[277] Marwick, *Status Update*, 115.

find on the internet. For this reason, she, herself, does not fit into the definition of "micro-celebrity." By hiding behind the actual product of the company, the labor of "the roommates," Nwandu has managed to place the role of micro-celebrity onto the followers or perhaps the contributors who provide "tea." Despite the enthralling and unprecedented nature of TSR, there are aspects that emerge that are less than favorable. In order for the business to maintain its financial returns, the account needs engagement in the form of views, likes, comments, and shares. There are fewer things that will get engagement than controversy. In the following sections, I center on the deeply troubling fan labor that fuels TSR by analyzing two scenarios wherein a Black woman (Megan thee Stallion) and girl (Zaya Wade) were harmed by conversations held in TSR comments.

The Burden of Truth

Megan's assault by Tory Lanez and the subsequent story is not isolated from a longer history of celebrity intimate domestic violence, as aforementioned. In the past decade since Rihanna's violent abuse, TMZ remains a major name in celebrity news coverage.[278] In that time, a few Black news sources have risen to purportedly combat TMZ's disrespectful coverage of Black celebrities. Even still, TMZ did cover Megan's shooting the day after, breaking the silence from the aforementioned news sources. However, only one other news source covered the story before TMZ, posting almost simultaneously to the events themselves: The Shade Room. What could have become a moment of intramural care, with many coming to support Megan during this difficult time, became something else entirely. The best of Instagram's design features (liked comments rising to the top of posts, ease of sharing posts, inter-user comments, etc.) came

[278] It would be remiss of me to not mention that if one takes the TMZ Bus Tour in Hollywood, they directly associate their success and credibility to breaking news of Michael Jackson's untimely death, making an explicit connection to benefitting from Black death.

together to overshadow any care towards Megan and instead shaped an impoverished and harmful conversation around IDV.

What was so interesting about the lack of coverage outside of TSR was that the conditions of the shooting were revealed over time. TSR was covering the event from the very beginning, July 12th, because the night with Megan and Tory started quite innocuously. TSR was highlighting how Megan and Tory were hanging out with Kylie Jenner, another mega-celebrity who they both are not normally seen with. The next day The Shade Room posted that Lanez had been arrested on a gun possession charge. Hours later, it was revealed on The Shade Room in a now deleted post that Megan had been taken to the hospital with foot injuries, following Lanez' arrest.

During this time, the news from TSR traveled to Twitter, where it exploded. Aerial video footage of Megan limping out of a car towards police, (who unnecessarily had their guns drawn) bleeding from her feet leaked to Twitter. #WhoShotMeg began to trend on both Twitter and Instagram, even as it was not covered by mainstream news sources. In the screenshots below staffer Tanya P. writes about the story. The information that TSR was able to gather came from a police report and provides speculation, "A source alleges that Megan Thee Stallion was also present…" Eventually on July 15, 2020, Megan herself spoke out on her Instagram account in a now deleted post saying, "[t]he narrative that is being reported about Sunday morning's events are inaccurate and I'd like to set the record straight. On Sunday morning, I suffered gunshot wounds, as a result of a crime that was committed against me and done with the intention to physically harm me." (fig 3.9) Megan, like Rihanna in days past, had to come out and present a narrativization of the harm done to her material body *and* her public persona. Most importantly, Megan here re-positions herself as the victim because her claim to this position is already being

contested. In this sense, TSR is not willing to provide Megan the space to claim her positionality of victim, even as it is covered on the account. Instead, through a poorly edited compilation of posts from Megan's personal Instagram account, TSR absents Megan's agency again by overwriting *her* narrative of abuse in order to make a popular post on *their* account.

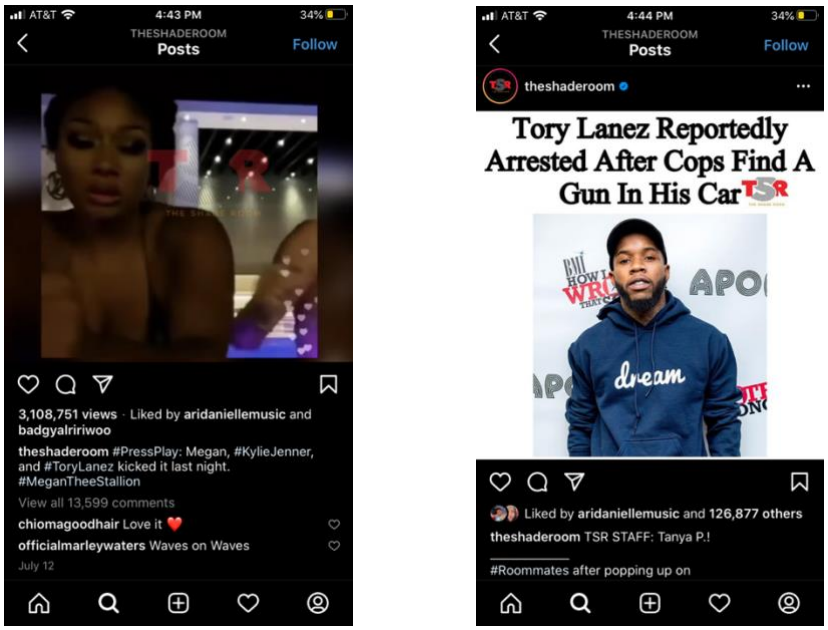


Fig. 3.1-2. Screenshots from TSR, October 27, 2020.

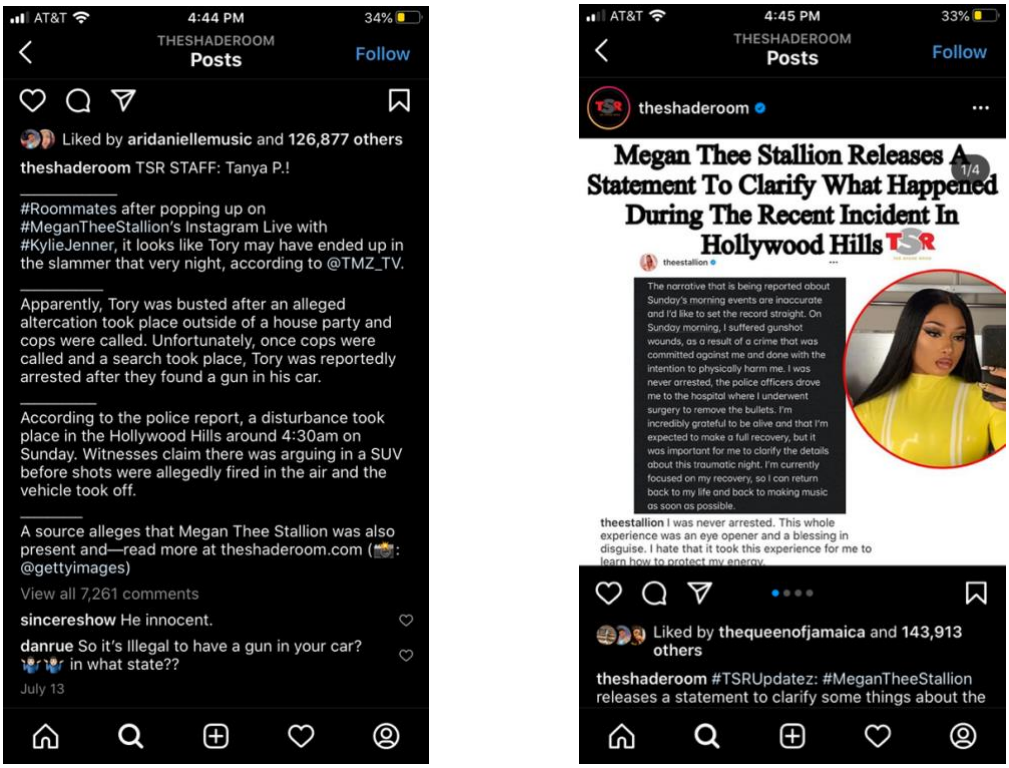


Fig. 3. 3-4. Screenshots from TSR, October 27, 2020.

Shade Room, in their effort to cover the news as it unfolds, used this release as part of their post, adding a more sedated caption then the earlier speculative one. While this coverage provides attention to Megan, the comments in the Shade Room have been and continue to be a hotbed for arguments. The comments range from people rooting for Megan's recovery and also excusing the shooting, even saying she deserved to be shot. The latter form of comments signals a consumer base not entirely knowing any of the circumstances of the event but prepared to justify violence against a woman no matter what. Too few people in the comments provided Megan with care when she needed it, as is customary for Black women, especially tall, thick, outspoken Black women. Physicality plays a large part into how Black women are received in and out of Black spaces as she doesn't fit into the preferred presentation of Black women as dictated by what Patricia Hill-Collins calls "controlling images."

In the case of the coverage of Megan Thee Stallion's assault at the hands of Tory Lanez, the desire to create the environment of Black culture comes at the expense of providing intramural care to those who are rendered the most vulnerable by the conditions of society. She doesn't slouch or cock one leg out to the side while standing to drop down an inch or two. She stands tall with both feet firmly planted on the ground during award ceremonies, interviews, and on-stage performances. She exudes confidence even while being quite humble and sweet during interviews. Her talent as a rapper is undeniable, rising to popularity off of the strength of her freestyles, first, before she began to top the Top 40 charts. It is because of her refusal to shrink that many find Megan to be less than palatable. Despite having an extremely curvy body, a body many might associate with femininity, many often "joke" that she is a man. A Black cis-woman facing transmisogynoir is not so confusing when we consider that Black women are understood as not being "real" women, like white women. The further that a Black woman finds herself from the physical make and comportment of a white woman, the more they are maligned in the eyes of those around them. Radically and theoretically, this disconnect from womanhood could create a break in the possibility for Black women wherein we might find escapes from the white cisheteropatriarchy that creates the categories "wherein there are only 'women, and 'minorities,' 'blacks' and 'other.'"[279] This process of categorization but also the (in)voluntary contortion to fit into them is always a violence, a most naturalized harm. These contortions play out in TSR comments all of the time, which has caused many Black people to unfollow the account and leading some to question "Is The Shade Room Too Toxic to Function?"[280]

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[279] Hortense Spillers, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," in *Black, White, and Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 156.

[280]Michael Blackmon, "Is the Shade Room Too Toxic To Function?," *BuzzFeed News*, October 9, 2020, Accessed October 20, 2020. https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/michaelblackmon/the-shade-room-homophobic-gay-trans-cardi-b

I agree with what Moya Bailey when she says that "[b]lack feminist thought has expanded to be more inclusive of Black women who are not interested in respectability because not only does it not produce different affective treatment of Black women in society, it delimits comportment and leads to intra-group policing that is more harmful than helpful."[281]I turn to TSR comments about Megan thee Stallion to pinpoint the moment when Black Culture collides with Culture. I attempted to follow the process that Bailey follows in her first chapter, "Misogynoir is a Drag," in order to create a corpus of comments and posts to work with. Using a third-party Instagram app named Instabro, I gathered every post and the attending comments from TSR that mentioned Megan Thee Stallion or Tory Lanez starting from the night of the incident, July 12th 2021, until the day that Tory Lanez was formally charged with assault, October 8, 2021. There were 141 posts during that bound that commented directly on Tory's assault on Megan. Hilariously, during that time, TSR also posted three ad posts that featured Megan thee Stallion's collaborations with the brand, showing that while they would not outright offer her support, they have no problem using her to further boost their business profile. There were days where the frequency of these posts corresponded to live events that themselves developed outsider understanding of the assault, to a limited degree. Rather than attempted to categorize or collate all posts and comments, I selected posts from high frequency days that had the highest comment count. For example, I start the analysis with the post from the day after the incident when it was announced Megan was in the hospital for foot injuries and Tory was named as a possible assailant.

[281] Moya Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance*, (New York: New York University Press, 2021): 15.

My plan was to have the comments scrubbed of all emojis and user handles, leaving just the written content of the comments. I would run these through the word-processing app, Voyant, to be able to find the frequency of certain words that appear in the corpus to be able to better gain a grasp on the verbal abuse, questioning, and doubting that Megan or Tory may be receiving. My third-party app, woefully, stopped allowing me to save all of these comments forcing me to abandon this approach. Following the example of Bailey in her book *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance*, I instead provide a critical discourse analysis of comments from selected posts.[282] I collected the comments from the posts in which Megan confirms the shooting on July 27, 2020. I used this cluster of posts for analysis at this point in this project. The framing I use to analyze the comments is derived from the three categories that Thaller and Messing present: 1) direct victim blaming, 2) perpetrator exoneration and 3) minimization or normalization of violence.

Following much speculation on Twitter and discussion in TSR comments, Megan took to Instagram Live ten days later to confirm that a shooting did take place. Up to this point, many speculated that Megan had lied or that the reporting was skewed to either target Tory or generally make him look bad. When the charge against Tory was upgraded to "assault with a deadly weapon," the conversation got more pointed *against* Megan. This is unsurprising considering how often Black women are victim-blamed when they attempt to rightfully claim victim status. Typically, Black women are not only met with victim-blaming when they speak out against victimization, they are also often accused of being the cause of the violence, or the aggressors themselves. As Alisa Bierra asserts in an article discussing Rihanna's reception in

[282] Bailey offers no methodology for her approach to discussing certain hashtags and comments from YouTube videos. I too hesitate to clearly demarcate one.

media following her assault at the hands of Chris Brown, "Black women who are victims of violence are not simply accused of bringing it upon themselves they are dis-positioned as its *perpetrator*."[283]

In the posts, Megan is visible in a close up, with ombré lilac hair done up in a high bun with a curled bang. She wears a 425k chunky chain that says one of her trademarks, "Hot Girl," and a white V-neck top.[284] The Instagram Live recording was long enough that TSR broke it into four separate posts, with two to three clips per post, totaling over an hour of footage. The four posts were labeled as such: "Megan Thee Stallion addresses fans and gives an update confirming she was shot in both her feet (12,853 comments)," "Megan Thee Stallion explains why she hasn't addressed much on social media (8,755 comments)," "Megan Thee Stallion has words for those making jokes about her situation (9,557 comments)," and "Megan Thee Stallion gets emotional as she talks about being 25 & not having both of her parents (18,685 comments)."

Thinking through the lens of "direct victim blaming," there are many comments that elucidate some common themes of victim blaming. Some of these comments are undoubtedly meant be "innocent" jokes. @dunkcity_ld2 says "can't be going around beating up short rappers without consequence lol," at once taking a dig at Tory for being notoriously short and making the false claim that Megan assaulted Tory first and thus should not complain or be upset about being shot. This also intrigues me as Megan being not just tall but significantly taller than Tory is brought up often to provide basis for a potential reason why Tory would attack Megan.

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[283] Alisa Bierra, "Where Them Bloggers At?: Reflections on Rihanna, Accountability, and Survivor Subjectivity" *Social Justice* 37 no.4 (2011-2012): 106.

[284] Marisa Petrarca, "Megan Thee Stallion's 'Hot Girl' Diamond Necklace Cost Nearly Half a Million Dollars," *Us*, July 28, 2020, https://www.usmagazine.com/stylish/news/megan-thee-stallions-hot-girl-necklace-price-details-pic/ Funny enough, this article was written the day after Meg's live. In the pictures they use of Meg, she is wearing the same makeup, hair and clothes, yet there is not a single mention of the fact that Meg was rocking this look to get on Instagram Live to discuss her assault.

@krushgrove_99 leaves a comment that needs no analysis: “I thought she was a Savage and Bad Bxtch?? Now she a victim after her thug Boo shot her in the foots? What you thought Lanez was a joke??? This ain’t no joke, he from da mean streets of Canada wit Drake…You ain’t no real salvage, Tory Lanez is the Salvage!!!!”

Several users bring attention to Megan’s discography, specifically her song, “Savage,” in which she speaks with her normal stage braggadocio. The song features typical facets of Megan’s music. She makes reference to her body(“I don’t shop on Insta’ boutiques/ All them lil’ ass clothes only fit fake booties”), her sexual prowess (“And any nigga I let hit is still attached, ooh/That body right, but you know this pussy fat, ooh”), and her wealth (“Beefing with you bitches really getting kinda boring/If it ain’t about the money, then you know I’m gon’ ignore it”). Nowhere in the song does Megan request for violence to be brought onto her nor does she brag that if she were to encounter such violence that she would be able to handle it herself (“I make a call and get a pussy nigga smacked, uh”). Still @1mashia._ says “thought she was a savage,” which attempts to dismiss the possible shooting as something that Megan should deal with as a result of her brash countenance within the song. @brytsun_roog says “Let’s protect Black women *Black fist emoji*…oh and yes let’s not channel and promote ‘Savage’ energy to your Black women. Because ‘feral,’ untamed, wild beasts get shot sometimes *Black man shrugging emoji*. Shout out to the a universe for providing our greatest lessons in divine time. Heal.” This comment manages to repeat the then popular refrain (“protect Black women”) while immediately showing that that protection is conditional on the part of Black men coming only if the Black women do not appear “’feral,’ untamed, wild.” Such a statement is meaningless as respectable, appropriate women get and have been assaulted and violated every day since the invention of woman. It is as Bailey has pointed out “[w]hile Black people were perhaps initially

invested in a strategy of proving their humanity through self-policing behavior and comportment (like that of the turn-of-the-century club women), the overwhelming evidence – in the form of continued disparate treatment- shows that *these efforts did not mitigate misogynoir*."[285]

Another way that victim blaming appears in the comments comes in the form of questioning Megan's gender. Many comments across the four posts accuse Megan of being a transwoman or a man, suggesting that Tory assaulted Megan when he found out the "truth." @b.graham22 says "I heard Tory saw that *eggplant emoji* and started shooting *shocked emoji*," using the eggplant emoji to signify a penis, thereby insinuating an reinforcing rumors that Megan is secretly cis-male, because of her physique. Similarly, @thatboykemp says "Sorry that she got shot but I just want to ask if the tranny rumors are true?" Another person @ag_0618 cut simply to the chase leaving behind a single "Trans!!" Many, many more people question if these rumors about Megan are true, if it's true that Tory found out "the truth," in the comments. Holding aloft for a moment the violence of questioning Megan's gender in the face of her tearful confession, there is also the magnificent revelation that this violence is compounded by the resulting rhetorical sum of trans person + *potential* confirmation of trans identity = admissible violence bounded by no scale. While this sort of rhetorical evasion is indeed a type of victim blaming, it is also demonstrative of perpetrator exoneration. Because in the echoes of words not said in comments made by @b.graham and others I hear "if she's really a man, it's ok" and, even more disturbing, "if I were Tory, I *would do it too*."

Perpetrator exoneration, or "indirect victim blaming," takes an interesting shape within these comments. Perpetrator exoneration "frames the male perpetrator as inflicted with obsessed,

[285] Bailey, *Misogynoir Transformed,* 18. Emphasis my own.

addiction, mental illness, or generally being 'out of control'."[286] There are the clear and expected comments such as "Still don't think Tory shot her" left by @seldmade103. @theology562 says "Imagine writing a letter to someone you don't know. We need the real story. Free Tory," degrading Megan's decision to even discuss any details via Live (a letter) to the general public (someone you don't know). If Megan chose to say nothing, that silence would have inevitably caused many to further accuse her of lying or trying to frame Tory. Despite a lack of real evidence that would suffice for those who want to excuse violence against women. Another person @mz_howard28 took on a kinder tone but still absolves Tory of possible wrongdoing saying "I'm glad she okay but she didn't clear anything up…. prayers for both involved bc no one knows what actually happened." While kind, a statement like this destabilizes the perspective of Megan who, as the victim, has first-hand experience of what actually happened. Despite the fact that Megan confirms her assault and gives details that she doesn't have to, for many individuals posting in the comments section the fact that she doesn't name exactly who shot her means that she was not shot by Tory. Commenters who asked Megan who shot her or insinuated that she shared nothing of consequence because she didn't explicitly state who the name of the shooter represent a good amount of the corpus of comments. This is an interesting iteration of perpetrator exoneration as if one knows that Megan was shot, they also know that Tory was at the scene and also charged with the assault. It becomes clear that individuals would rather perform mental gymnastics in order to refuse to acknowledge a Black woman, one who does not align with traditional standard of femininity at that, as a victim. As @ollietted says "does she really have to mention his name? I think we can use logic to come to conclusions." Charges, of course, do not equate to a conviction or a confession but the mass demand to have

[286] Thaller and Messing, "(Mis) Perceptions Around Intimate Partner Violence," 626.

Megan state who shot her gives me pause. I would like to believe that if she were to name Tory as her assailant that would have changed the conversation and caused more people to offer their support of her. However, we can look to the case of Chris Brown and Rihanna to know that that would more than likely not be the case.

Finally, the minimization and normalization of the violence done against Megan takes interesting shape. There is the very flat comment left by @xbeautyb saying "[b]ro people get shot everyday like," mirroring the popular statement "niggas die every day" that is often uttered when an infamous someone dies in order to not honor or privilege their death. Niggas do die every day, this we know, but are we to not be in arms when those deaths are brought about by unjust measures? Many joked about Megan being shot in both feet, quoting lines from *Harlem Nights* or Biggie Smalls' "Who Shot Ya." @cghostlol was more a bit more creative saying "I think Torey wanted to see her dance so he was shooting at the ground. I seen it in cartoons before." Equating Megan's assault to cartoon antics clearly minimizes the fact that Megan was actually shot and not the ground. Explicitly, it reduces her assault and subsequent pain, transforming it into a joke. The shooting is also framed as accidental and normalized in service of a collectively assumed and imagined scenario in which Tory just "wanted to see her dance" for his own pleasure. In reality, shooting at someone's feet for any reason is, generally speaking, not normal and not typically thought of as pleasurable. @andioopbitch provided a comment that is rich in content to think with as they manage to victim blame, exonerate the perpetrator and minimalize violence in one fell swoop: "She's milking this on. Didn't she say she only got shot on one foot? And now it's both? In the video of her coming out of the truck she was on both feet but limping on one. And why is she tryna avoid telling the whole story? Obviously she was part of the problem. She's shady asf...Leave Tory alone and stop tryna ruin his career even more."

This user accuses Megan of "milking" her situation before questioning if she "only" got shot in one foot, which is a minimalization since being shot in "only" one foot would be a perfect occasion for moderate to extreme complaint for most. To continue, the user never fully denies that Megan was shot, the main issue at hand, but rather makes her complicit in her own assault ("Obviously she was part of the problem") before seeking to completely excuse Tory even though if Megan was part of the problem, that leaves the possibility that Tory is as well.

These comments are disturbing and do not even represent some of the worst that I gathered. Taken out of the context of this incident between Megan and Tory, these comments boggle the mind as they demonstrate the lengths to which people go to justify violence against Black women. One must acknowledge the way that Black women are meant to hold and transmute any violence thrown their way when one considers a question like "Didn't she say she only got shot on one foot?" The harm that Megan experienced at the hands of Tory and then many others on TSR is incalculable, to be sure. I would love to even say that these attacks on Megan are unprecedented, however, an attack on a different person of this scale happened months before Megan on TSR. In the following section, I explore the attack on Zaya Wade and her parents, Dwayne Wade and Gabrielle Union. These two cases, Megan and Zaya, are brought together through transmisogynoir, interestingly enough.

About Zaya Wade

On February 11, 2020, retired NBA superstar Dwyane Wade announced that his then 12-year-old child had come out as trans and from that point forward should be addressed as Zaya.[287] The announcement was made on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* (2003-2022) as part of Wade's press tour for his then soon to be released documentary *D-Wade: Life Unexpected* (2020). For

[287] Dwyane mentions Zaya's assigned gender and former name in interviews, however, I will not do so here.

many who had been followed the Wade family, this affirmation of Zaya as a queer child was of no surprise. In previous years, the Wade family attended Pride parades with Zaya. However, there had also been the Thanksgiving family photo scandal, before Zaya's came out. On Thanksgiving 2019, actress Gabrielle Union, wife to Dwyane and stepmother to Zaya, posted a photo of herself with Dwyane, Zaya and baby Kaavia. In the photo, Dwyane holds Kaavia while Zaya leans against him and Gabrielle places her cheek on Zaya's shoulder. Zaya wore black combat boots, black skinny jeans, a grey long-sleeved crop top and sporting light colored almond shaped acrylic nails. The picture caused more than a little commotion as many noticed Zaya's nails and cropped top. So, when the formal announcement came, I was not only not surprised by Zaya but moved by the Wade family's support. Nor was I surprised by the subsequent transphobic and homophobic conversations that emerged online. One commentator, however, did circulate a video that did have me at a loss. Of course, this video was recirculated and therefore amplified by TSR.

Rapper Boosie Badazz (Torrence Ivy Hatch Jr.) also more colloquially known as Lil Boosie has been a known adversary to the LGBTQ community, specifically towards the Black LGBTQ community, for quite some time. Known for the African-American classic "Wipe Me Down" and somehow managing to evade a murder charge, Boosie is not known for ever not making his voice heard. Boosie is a father to eight children. He has announced proudly that he hired sex workers to perform oral sex on his son and nephews, who were 12 and 13 at the time, because he wanted to train them "right," meaning to train them up into heterosexuality, ostensibly through sexual abuse.[288] With this stellar moral compass, Boosie felt that he had to

[288] Joshua Espinoza, "Boosie Badazz Faces Backlash After Claiming He Got 'Grown Woman' to Give His Underage Son Oral Sex," *Complex*, May 12, 2020, https://www.complex.com/music/2020/05/boosie-badazz-backlash-claims-he-got-his-underage-son-nephew-oral-sex-from-woman

speak up about Zaya's transition, but addressed his comments to Dwyane Wade, instead. I have provided a transcript of the video that was posted on TSR. The video was taken inside of Boosie's local Planet Fitness, a gym chain known for their budget prices ($1 to $10 a month), crowded spaces, and, once upon a time, their free pizza Fridays. He is seated and viewers see him from a close-up tilted angle that reveals the ceiling above him, wearing a white t-shirt. The TSR post also included the caption from Boosie's original post at the bottom of the video frame. The caption reads: "IM GO SAY IT SINCE THIS PUSSY ASS WORLD AINT GO SAY SHIT *two red exclamation point emojis* U TRIPPIN NIGGA #period." TSR's post caption reads: "#PressPlay: #Boosie has a few things to say about regarding #DWade and his daughter #Zaya." The fifty-six second video goes as follows:

> "I gotta say something about this shit, bruh. Dwyane Wade, you gone too fuckin far, dog. That is a male! A twelve-year-old! At twelve, they don't even know, they don't even know what they next meal gone be! They don't, they don't have shit figured out yet. He might meet a, a woman, anything, at sixteen and fall in love with her. But his dick'll be gone! How he gone- Like bruh it's—you goin too far, dog. Don't cut his dick off bruh. Like bruh for real. If he gone be gay, let him be gay, but don't cut his dick off, bruh. Like don't address him as a woman, dog. He twelve years old, he don't, he's not, he's not up there yet. He hasn't made his final decisions yet. Don't cut his fucking dick off, Dwyane Wade, bruh. You fuckin' trippin', dog. You trippin', dog. You trippin', dog."[289]

This video itself rife with many things that are clear harms against Zaya. First, not once does Boosie address Zaya by her chosen name or pronouns. He never actually even addresses Zaya directly, by any name. He even goes so far as to overwrite what Zaya has made of herself ("That is a male!"). His misgendering and refusal to acknowledge all that constitutes Zaya's new life is a violence, maybe even a murder. The *need* to crush her own right to subjectivity is within

[289] The Shade Room, February 18, 2020 https://www.instagram.com/p/B8t15ehhM-J/

the atmosphere of violence that constitutes the sociopolitical shape of TSR.[290] The curse words that are in the transcript and accompanying caption were censored, ostensibly because the foul language ("fuck," "shit," "dick", etc.) is a violation of the account. Notably, the disrespectful address of Zaya as "he" is left intact throughout the video. Boosie's claim that his concern is for the safety and concern for the child is lazy in its inability, or rather unwillingness, to differentiate gender expression *as separate* from sexuality, and not something that anticipates, always, the moment of sex. Furthermore, we also know that Boosie does not actually believe himself that "at twelve, they don't even know" given the statutory rapes he has set up for his male relatives multiple times. If at twelve "they don't even know" then how could his relatives have known that they want to consent to oral sex with grown women? How could they know that? In and of itself, the plea creates a violence that comes from a libidinal desire to reproduce a heteronormativity.

Reproduction is indeed the major preoccupation here. Boosie begs Wade to not alter Zaya's genitalia four times. Not once in the interviews with Dwyane Wade did the discussion of Zaya's *potential* physical transition come up. So, for Boosie's main preoccupation to be centered on Zaya's genitalia, a twelve-year-old child's genitalia, and her sexuality was perplexing to me at first. Eric Stanley argues in *Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable* that racialized and gendered violence against trans, queer, and/or non-conforming people is not a result of individuals but instead is the main structuring force of the Western social world. About this violence they say "[m]uch of the violence that gets marked

[290] The term "atmosphere of violence" comes from Eric A. Stanley's phenomenal text, *Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable*. Stanley argues that racialized and gendered violence against trans, queer, and/or non-conforming people is not a result of individuals but instead is the main structuring force of the Western social world.

as homophobic is retaliation against an assumed gender transgression; relatedly, more often than not, anti-trans violence is accompanied by what might otherwise by understood as homophobic utterances."[291] The assumed gender transgression for Boosie is altering genitalia, certainly, as he says that Wade should let Zaya "just" be gay. Based on Boosie's actions, he is against the genitalia alteration because that would be a foreclosure for child reproduction in the future ("He might meet a, a woman, anything, at sixteen and fall in love with her"). However, that does not override the fact that Boosie is fantasizing about a child's genitalia in this video and that TSR shared it with the mildest caption possible when such content is, at best, a gross violation of a child.

The preoccupation with the reproduction of gender and the rhetorical production of sexuality in this scene is made acceptable *because* Zaya is a child. Indeed, this plea to the twelve-year-old child works, becomes acceptable enough to leave the video on the TSR account, because of the "…social consensus that such an appeal is impossible to refuse."[292] Lee Edelman outlines what he calls "reproductive futurism" in his impactful text, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive.* Reproductive futurism, Edelman asserts, imposes "…an ideological limit on the political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable…the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations."[293] Boosie's appeal to a future Zaya who falls in love with a woman, and of course would reproduce, holds absolute value over the violation of Zaya that Boosie does in order to even make the appeal. That this is an intramural conversation

[291] Stanley, *Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable*, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2021): 4.

[292] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004): 2.

[293] Edelman, *No Future*, 2.

between two Black fathers in front of the expanse of Instagram more than likely intensifies Boosie's ire. To a person like Boosie, Black fathers are the trainers, the protectors, of their children and communities in service of reproducing not just heterosexuality, but Black culture itself. If Zaya were to remove her genitalia, thus rejecting not only her "maleness" but also her Blackness, for some that would be an attack on Black culture and community as a whole. @sabree1118 makes this connection better clearly than I can leaving this under the video: "There's no transgender in black people, it's white man inventions to destroy black communities."

Many comments under this video support Boosie and also compile the violence made upon Zaya's person. This video was actually extremely popular and heavily engaged with. For context, the most comments made under any post about Megan and Tory was 45,743, which was under the post that confirms that Tory was charged with assaulting Megan. Astonishingly, there were 66,442 comments under Boosie's post. @just_cantsettle says "You can't vote at 12 You cant smoke at 12 you can't drive at 12 but you can make a gender change at 12 no I'm not homophobic I just need it to make sense how is this not child abuse of some form age limits are put on everything except this please give me clarity." Again, homophobia is brought up and not transphobia. The confusion surrounding what constitutes child abuse is also particularly discordant because Boosie himself has facilitated multiple sexual assaults of children. Furthermore, voting, smoking and driving are all external utilizations of the human body, while a "gender change" is first and foremost internal. Among those who agree with Boosie, there are also those who find the content and delivery of the speech humorous. @booski_mula says, "Boosie beat 8 bodies escaped death row and beat cancer he can say wat he want *crying laughing emoji*!!," using Boosie's evasion of the law for murdering eight people and his cancer

survival as legitimate evidence for why he can speak however he wants. @realiam_ says "I agree w boosie but on another note…why he have to repeat it so many times bout cutting the shut off *crying laughing emoji*," noting that they agree with Boosie's violation of Zaya but begins to become uncomfortable, rightly so, by Boosie's focus on a child's genitalia.

If You Can't Go to The Shade Room, Where the Hell Could You Go?!

The Zaya Wade post and the subsequent conversations that developed on TSR, Instagram, and Twitter caused me to reconsider how I was talking about TSR. I could no longer just focus on the impressive and ingenious business model of TSR without attending to the violence that goes into sustaining it. Megan's treatment and coverage, months later, further cemented my need to understand what was happening on TSR. When I would tell people about my project and its focus on TSR, the first thing many asked was if I was going to talk about how "fucked up" it was. I was apprehensive to get into exactly how fucked it is because I did not want to be possibly accused of attacking an important pillar in Black culture. Furthermore, I didn't want one of the first full length studies of TSR to be bashing it. But as I have hopefully shown, this is not a pillar of Black culture that can remain standing. And I am not the only one. People are beginning to change the conversation around TSR, on Twitter in particular. But even on TSR people are beginning to express discontent with the shape the account is taking. Under the Boosie video, @chearrybomb says "literally all u see in TSR comment section is uneducated and ignorant ppl, and im sick of it."

The title of this conclusion comes from a viral video featuring two Black women, Hazel London and Jerhonda Henderson. The video, more colloquially referred to as "Bella Noche," features an interview with the two women after a shooting occurred in a Baton Rouge nightclub, named Bella Noche. When expressing disappointment and shock at the shooting, Hazel asks "if

you can't go to Bella Noche, where the hell can you go?" This question became a joke, a meme, and has on more than one occasion served me in creating friendships with other lovers of the video. But in the humor, there remains a much larger message. Hazel London was expressing how the space, Bella Noche, has been known as a safe space for communal gathering and how if even this place can erupt into violence, then no place is safe. I find myself wondering a similar question about not just The Shade Room but the Internet at large. If we can't turn to The Shade Room, a place made to showcase Black people, where the hell *could* we go? What would an online space for all Black people by Black people even look like? Given the stakes of the Internet and social media as a tool of white supremacist maintenance, is that even possible anymore? In my dreams, this space would be a place that covers and dedicates itself to celebrating the expansiveness of Blackness. Queerness, disability, and class variance: I want to see it all because I believe Blackness is all. It is everything. I envision a place where truly *every* nigga could be a star.

Coda: Not for Caucasians

Conclusions have always been hard for me as I struggle to at once not say anything new and also not completely repeat myself. Here I attempt a new mode of ending, which is to say, I will open up. I came to UCLA with a desire to write about music videos directed by Black women and the worlds that emerge from those works. I was particularly interested in the music videos of Solange Knowles. Looking at the careers of Sanaa Hamri and Melina Matsoukas, I noticed a path wherein Black women get access to the means to direct music videos and then leverage their music video work into larger productions. My original project was meant to consider these two women's careers, and others, to better understand the impact of music videos in creating contemporary possibilities of Black female subjectivities. Of course, this all changed with the end of Vine.

In this dissertation, I have sought to provide a Black feminist intervention into digital studies to provide another way of deepening the connection between the online creative production of Black women and girls and Internet history. I do this because I know Black women and girls are central to the logics of the Internet. My central intervention in this project is to consider objects and networks that are normally the subject of media studies texts through Black feminist studies. Through an engagement with Black feminist critique of humanism, I push past conclusions or solutions that maintain the humanist ideals that create the conditions for the oppression of Black women and girls while still marveling at how these creators create and shift Internet logics. These Internet logics inevitably reflect back the material world we live in. The material and the digital are always connected through an exchange of information. As Wendy Chun posits "[i]nformation – if it exists – is always embodied, whether in a machine or an animal. To make information appear disembodied requires a lot of work, work that is glossed

over if we just accept the digital as operating through 1s and 0s."[294] Thus, we arrive at the digital as a part of one's life, whether that's on social media or not, as an embodied experience. I engage (new) materialist theories within this dissertation about the human from this understanding of the reciprocal relationship between the digital and the material. I follow the example of Safiya Noble in elevating this relationship. Noble repositions our frame of thinking away from the digital and material as separate and towards thinking of the material with the digital through her assertion that algorithms (digital) are made by imperfect, biased (material) humans.

However, even the project that I ended up pursuing has shifted across time in ways I did not anticipate or want. All of my chapters are as connected through a desire to show a new type of history of the Internet they are all, also, centered on a type of theft. Whether that is a theft of being (digital blackface and blackfishing), theft of time and creation (Kayla and Jalaiah) or theft of a right to care (Megan and Zaya), this dissertation has been shaped into something significantly more pessimistic than I wanted. I wanted to write about the beauty and joy of being a Black girl or Black woman. I wanted to write about the openings that our being creates in a world dead set on creating foreclosure after foreclosure. But to do so without holding at once the devastation and loss that comes with our being would be disingenuous to me and, honestly, disrespectful to the people that I do discuss within these pages. As such, the tone changed from joyous to petulant, from celebratory to funereal. In this sense, my very own tone and vision for this project was stolen. The more I read, the more I saw, the more I heard, the more I weathered I became, beaten down and trodden on my dreams made miniscule. In many ways, this comes as

[294] Wendy Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Boston, M.A.: MIT Press, 2011): 139.

no surprise as I take Christina Sharpe's assertion that "the weather is the total climate; and that climate is antiblack."[295]

I often found myself backed into a corner of my own thoughts. First came my desire to create a method, something I came to define as "digital iconology." Digital iconology came to me as a method during my independent study with Professor Shelleen Greene in Fall 2019. I sought out this method as a way of connecting the case studies across my chapters. Coming from my love of medieval art and admiration of Erwin Panofsky, I wanted to propose a method that would allow me to understand the iconography that Black women and girls have created. Bobos, gold slugs, multiple inch coffin shaped nails, edges that wafts the smell of EcoStyler, stacked gold nails, a perfectly laid wig; I know us when I see us and they know me when they see me. However, as I began to try and outline the aesthetics of Black women and girls, specifically the aesthetics of Black women and girls in the United States, I ran into a worry. How do I outline these objects and icons without engaging in the anthropological practice that non-Black people have been using to surveil Black women and girls since at least the antebellum age? How do I categorize these icons without entering into an essentialist mode? Furthermore, as I was thinking in Chapter One, if digital blackface is simply a derivative of blackface minstrelsy, then how does digital iconology differ from iconology? For the time being, I have left this method behind with the hope that I can resolve my own questions over the course of translating these dissertation musings into book answers.

Indeed, this project, even as it tickles me, prickles with the unresolved. I am eager to expand my knowledge of the numerous studies that develop ideas of the uncanny across media studies, philosophy and psychology. The idea for Blackness as an uncanny valley came as I was

[295] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2016): 104.

attempting to chart a progression of online racial performance. This thought when it came to me first pleased me before it became my tormentor. Originally, I wanted to try and chart the performances along the two graphs that Masahiro Mori provided in his original essay. I tried to create a flow, something like: nonhuman (Black person) -> unknown racial performance -> digital blackface -> blackfishing -> human. However, the humanity that Mori presents as the end goal, the ultimate achievement of human, is not reached by most "humans." Furthermore, within Black studies, there is currently a move to push past rendering Black people as *just* nonhuman, no longer thinking from the place of a denied humanity. Blackness creates Black people as "sub/super/human at once."[296] So any sort of meditation on the flow from nonhuman object to human being is already made illegible by the very presence of Blackness. I continue to wonder about Blackness *as* the uncanny, as Blackness is at its very essence a collapse in ability to categorize. I look forward to further untangling this miserable web of subjectivities, as I believe that it will also reinvigorate my previous meditations on whiteness and femininity in contemporary postfeminist horror films.

I continue to want to gain access to some sort of reconstruction of the Vine app, as it once existed. I believe that access to not just the app but a number of the Vines that never become viral would deepen my analysis. I am also interested in performing ethnographic research using the "snowball method" to gain more clarity on which Vines people think of as emblematic of Vine. I could not embark on this for this iteration of the project as it would have simply taken too much time and would have been too difficult to coordinate as a graduate student struggling to simply write one paragraph a day during a global pandemic. Interviews with a number of the

[296] Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*, (New York: New York University Press, 2020): 3.

"stars" of Vine and TikTok would deepen my development of the loop and its disturbance of self-determination for Black girls. It is also possible that a future iteration of this chapter would be better suited for a multimedia display, as having the analyses of the Vines and TikToks be present beside the clips themselves would only enhance the viewing experience.

Similarly, I continue to reach out to a number of employees at The Shade Room, not with the hopes that I will get any real secrets, but to get a shape of what these employees *can* tell me about their work environment. This production studies approach would undoubtedly provide dynamic information about how posts are made and how the employees decide to articulate the information that goes into the posts. Any further analyses of lack of care on The Shade Room depends on my continued ability to amass the comments from posts on the account. I believe that in order to create a truly diverse analyses of TSR as a place where Black cultures are crushed in service of Black Culture, I would need to track the coverage of other public figures who also invite ire. People like Amber Rose, Blac Chyna, and Kehlani would also provide depth to my assertions. Megan thee Stallion and Tory Lanez case continues to be a trending topic as the two now find themselves actually heading to court over the allegations. Recently, on April 25, 2022, Megan sat with Gayle King for her first interview discussing the shooting.[297]As this case continues to develop, not only will I have to attend to the proceedings but also I must attend to the subsequent posts that TSR will make. While my third-party app, Instabro, is no longer operational, I believe I will be able to find or develop another aggregate tool that will allow me to capture the captions and comments on TSR.

[297] CBS Mornings, "Megan Thee Stallion on 2020 shooting: 'I'm the victim'," *YouTube* video, 12:25. April 25, 2022. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-MvRvX03HE&ab_channel=CBSMornings

Another aspect that connects my chapters is that most of the people under study come from the American South. The South as a necessary region of study and a fount of creativity can not be understated. I, along with others like Regina S. Bradley and C. Riley Snorton, am intent on thinking through the South in sonic and tactile terms. What does it mean to center on the South, often posed as backwards, as a forerunning region in Black online creative production? What does it mean to focus on Black Southern women and girls?

Finally, I want to end this project as I wanted to start it, with Solange. This dissertation was meant to end with a fourth chapter, wherein I discuss a number of Solange's music videos from 2012 to 2019. Solange's aesthetic worlds have been major contributors to my sense of self since I first heard her song, "Losing You," in my dorm room Winter quarter 2013. Had I had the mental strength and intellectual fortitude this past year, I would have merged Iris Marion Young's "Throwing Like a Girl" and Charles Johnson's "A Phenomenology of the Black Body" together to create a new phenomenology from the viewpoint of the Black woman. Both texts perform what we already know: all the women are white and all the men are Black. But some of us fight tooth and nail to stay brave. Solange's work makes me brave. In her sonic world, I am as expansive as a Senga Nengudi sculpture. I become aerial riding on her upper register. In the intimate exchange of breath, my tenor tone pitched below hers, I become immense. And I am not alone. In the next phase of my career, I will study with phenomenology to parse through the sensorial impact of Solange's audiovisual oeuvre in order to delineate a Southern Black femme experience. Specifically thinking with her most recent work, *When I Get Home*, I know my academic work must serve a greater purpose in illuminating my background, *my* home. Where others may turn to the mythic West, Solange instead is able to situate herself firmly in the South, where things is *real* slow. Syrupy, stuttering, slanged beats syncopate the progression of the

seemingly singular song that becomes our heartbeat. The home is a felicitous space, in the spirit of Gaston Bachelard. The space that Solange invokes is a strange mix of Third Ward/Houston/Texas that still manages to be a "…. space that may be grasped, that may be defended against adverse forces, a space we love."[298]

The home is the place that most of us are most able to orient ourselves in relation to. As Sara Ahmed has stated "we only know which way to turn *once we know which way we are facing.*"[299] Solange's music has always been about the experiences of the self: love, heartbreak, self-reflection. In order for her to be able to move forward, she has to go back. *When I Get Home* was released after a three-year break but also following, more recently, images and clips from Solange's website on BlackPlanet, a major connection between this current dissertation and my imagined one. The images felt like glitches, the videos smelled like open plains and horses. Where Solange's previous albums have all been abstractions of pop, this album is, in several senses, abstract minimalist architecture. The beats are slow and stripped down, highlighting the abstract style of production that is chopped and screwed. The lyrics are sparse and repetitive lending the auditory experience to meditation. In short, the album is an experiment in minoritarian performance. As Joshua Chambers-Letson states, minoritarian performance can "take what it needs from the major and disorganizes/reorganizes it so that we can improvise new means without end."[300] The major expression of Southern rap becomes minor in the music but because of the improvisation that Solange used to reach this end the effect remains major. A

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[298] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Zolas *(*New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 19.

[299] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006), 7.

[300] Joshua Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life,* (New York: New York University Press, 2018): 56.

song like “Almeda” that is produced by Solange and Pharrell Williams with features from Playboi Carti, The-Dream, and Metro Boomin sounds nothing like it should given those major musical artists. But due to the inclusion of certain minor facts of Black life (Florida water, zydeco, black cowboys) in the visual language of the songs, the song is free to provide the Texan experience that Solange wants.

When I Get Home was followed a week later by what Solange called a “Texas Film.” The visuals are all promises of what Solange’s hints on her social media accounts and BlackPlanet had shown in the month or so before its release. Every song, even the interludes, has an accompanying portion in the film, with no footage included that is not overlaid with music. The film is rife with the same repetition that is evident in the music. Images of black cowboys in documentary style footage connects to footage of black ranch hands riding a bull out on a piece of land in the seeming middle of nowhere. The same strange silver or chrome face adornments appear on various people throughout the film. Volunteers for the film walk back and forth, writhe to the beat, and strike a variety of poses. The work is undoubtedly informed by the visual pieces that Arthur Jafa has presented but is also indebted to the photographic work of Deana Lawson. There are endless images of Houston, Dallas, and Fort Worth. Things that seem incongruous to mainstream images of Black people such as the rural, horse riding, and cowboy hats are placed at the center of the narrative and setting of the film. We are asked to imagine and know this place. As a Texan, these images are not new to me. Men would ride their horses down the paved road behind my house, tipping their hat at my curious eyes peering over the top of my backyard fence. My grandma bought me a new pair of cowboy boots every single year of my adolescence. To be a Black Texan means to hold these images in tension with the visual world of Southern rap. Her magnificent expressions of experience have urged me to further consider the

ways that I can bring a Southern intentionality into my work. Solange has managed to determine herself despite the many other versions of herself that may crowd our collective memory. And she's doing it all through the digital.

Building on my understanding of Solange's musical work and the tentative utterance of a Black Southern femme experience, I end this dissertation with another Black Southern genius, Bbymutha. In "Not for Caucasians," the last song on her first album, *Muthaland,* musical artist Bbymutha gives a benediction that makes my project feel urgent, necessary. She provides a provocative understanding of Black social life that is not always conventional or pleasing to the mind. To me, this song is the radical, musical soundtrack to the imagery of Arthur Jafa's *Dreams are colder than death.* She says: "A nigga is a nigga even when he ain't a nigga/ If you educated, extra decorated, still a nigga/ If you incarcerated, got a bunch of babies, still a nigga." It remains important to me to never ever lose sight of who I am thinking with and who I am writing for. I write for all my niggas in the whole wide world, whether decorated or incarcerated, because death waits for us at every corner and I won't waste a second not loving and highlighting the life we create to taunt it. Whether that life is played out online, on the page, on the street, at the rave, or in the bedroom, I want to be there, at the edge of life and death, praying that no matter what side I fall into, I emerge as my Black self, always. I love us, for real.

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