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Digital Disidentifications: Affective Circuits of Meme Exchange, Viral Counterpublics, and Queer Ironic Consumption

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Doctor of Philosophy in Feminist Studies

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Abstract

Digital Disidentifications: Affective Circuits of Meme Exchange, Viral Counterpublics, and Queer Ironic Consumption

By Anna Paulina Wald

My dissertation, "Digital Disidentifications: Affective Circuits of Meme Exchange, Viral Counterpublics, and Queer Ironic Consumption" confronts obstacles and contentions in contemporary feminist praxis that arise in digital spaces such as racial appropriation, whitewashing, political activism, and call out culture. My research demonstrates how online discourse and the circulation of internet memes provide unique objects of analysis in cultural theory, namely affective circuits of digital exchange and queer models of media consumption and reception. I analyze digital meme-scapes that disrupt understandings of contemporary gender and race relationships.

I employ a theoretical frame of "digital disidentifications" drawing on José Esteban Muñoz (1999) and apply the multiple uses of Muñoz's heuristic to digital counterpublics, the analysis of new "archives," questions of representational correctness, and humor as a resistance strategy within online spaces. Considering how queer digital communities coalesce through racialized and gendered imagery and online media, I argue that application of Muñoz's analysis of subcultural performance can be adapted to fit the events I define as constituting digital disidentificatory practice.

I take new media theories and rework them through an intersectional feminist lens specifically to highlight the creation and movement of memes in my dissertation. The theoretical frames I use in my research position contemporary memes within larger

contextual frames and media genealogies such as studies of popular culture, music, film, and television studies. In these ways, my dissertation participates in an ongoing conversation about viewership, spectatorship, race, and gender, while applying new media theories to objects that have not yet been analyzed.

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Digital Disidentifications

My most recent iPhone screentime report showed me I averaged 4 hours 25 minutes per day on my phone. Texting, Instagram, and Twitter were my top three most used applications. The magical thing about the internet is sometimes when I feel alone in experiencing a certain form of exhaustion and sense of doom with the state of the world I'll come across a post or a meme that perfectly encapsulates my exact state of mind. When I'm able to share a meme with a friend, perhaps about a something we were just discussing, it is one moment that makes me laugh or smile to share a joke or something we can commiserate about together. It's a glimmer of hope or laughter in my daily routine.

Pinpointing the unique historical moment and position of attempting to explain and make others understand that interwoven systemic issues and power imbalances have led us to see issues like a global pandemic, Black Lives Matter, and climate change as separate issues, the meme in Figure 0.1 shows what it feels like to try to explain these things on your phone. A long iMessage, feeling like you are rambling, overcome with an abundance of words to say so much so that you cannot possibly fit them in the span of a text message.

Figure 0.1 shows a screenshot taken from my phone of a meme posted by a mutual Instagram friend @malefragility, whom I have not met personally but follow across both Instagram and Twitter. Both the act of making a copy through screen-shotting this meme, as well as my distant connection to the user who posted this meme, offer an example as to the many webs of feeling that make up distinct online

digital publics and memetic networks. I feel closeness to this user for a number of specific reasons connected to how I have pieced together her identity, our group of mutual friends, shared political alignment, and frequency with which she posts content that I am likely toengage with. I have without ever speaking to this person determined we are alike. This interpretation of and reaction to 'alike-ness' is central to my analysis of online engagement and networks of communication in contemporary digital spaces.

Fig 0.1

Source: https://www.instagram.com/malefragility/, repost from @climemechange Screenshot by author June 29, 2021

As a feminist media studies scholar, I am interested in the ways that ideas, images, and information are shared through the many screens we interact with daily. This work is informed by a fundamental belief that working toward identifying the many nodes and patterns within emerging and in-real-time online engagement is a necessary and timely feminist project.

While there is a temptation to claim some forms of online media studies as "new," it is important to note that the genealogies of feminist media studies have grappled with questions of "newness" for decades (Gitleman 2008). The legacies of feminist media theorists work on gender, race, and sexuality through discussions of representation, exploitation, the gaze, and circulation inform my arguments and continued application of these theoretical backgrounds to new sites of analysis within the digital (Mulvey 1975, Van Zoonen 1994, McRobbie 2004, hooks 1992, Spigel 2007).

This dissertation demonstrates how online discourse and the exchange of internet memes provide new objects of analysis in cultural theory, namely affective circuits of digital exchange and queer models of media consumption and reception. Undertaking close readings of digital meme-scapes that disrupt understandings of contemporary gender and race relationships, this is a feminist project of reinterpretation and criticism that subverts and complicates existing power inequalities. This work is in conversation with but purposefully not focused on violent and radically right wing digital life-worlds that also circulate internet memes to create digital counterpublics. Looking to sites of resistance to systemic power imbalances, the objects I examine run parallel to important contemporary research

on alt-right memes, messaging and social network apps such as Parler, 8chan, contemporary trolling and the leverage built within digital networks toward aims of white supremacy in this country.[1] (See: Jakubowicz 2017, Daniels 2018, Munn 2020, Bleakly 2021)

But while "well meaning" leftists, and I include myself in this group, are all too eager to shake our heads at what the alt-right has built online, we spend ample energy on criticism and analysis toward our foes. A very small portion of that critical attention has been focused on the networked behaviors of those considered peers and colleagues, who we assure ourselves "mean well." In the meantime, while our insular networks and echo chamber opinions rattle and reverberate, the same platforms and applications are collecting our data regardless of political affiliation or righteous intent.

From missing the mark on a collective criticism surrounding "whitewashing" an anime to live action film, to toeing the line in queer nostalgic appreciation of Black women's comedic performance on digital platforms, there are some patterns I've noticed which highlight the shortcomings and pitfalls of good intention from well meaning progressives. If there is an inability to determine and identify what patterns of behavior are harmful within an imagined community of one's own digital creation, a lack of identification will hinder future capacity for analysis on hate speech and rising inequalities online, as well as limit scholarly capacity to ascertain affective registers that are created through online engagement. I look at repeating signifiers that circulate through memes and GIFs and analyze how racial, gendered,

and sexual categories are either reinscribed or deconstructed within digital counterpublics.

Internet memes

In order to focus on one popular aspect of online discourse, this dissertation uses internet memes as a lens through which to begin to grasp the tone, audience, and reception of arguments and controversies centered in gender and race. Internet memes can be bits of text, images, videos, looping GIF files, or any other widely encompassed definition of a trend or sentiment that is replicated and exchanged in online discourse. As digital files that are easily copied and shared, the widespread increase in usage of this medium, which is both an aesthetic style and a format for entertainment, information, or political message, co-evolved with the increase of personal computer ownership and the emergence of smart phones. Through memes, bits of content or cultural information that travel digitally are able to build a public around a joke; these jokes become a currency of exchange that allow for a number of affective resonances, or what I call *affective circuits*. By *affective circuits*, I mean the interchange between digital discourse and the affective network that is created through the movement of visual and textual information within the various digital mediums I detail. The figures and templates used by memes carry "sticky" (Ahmed 2004) affective reverbs upon which particular emotions or feelings can be transmitted on both an individual and group basis. I use an expansive definition of memes and what qualifies as viral digital content to speak to the movement and exchange of contextual memetic 'events,' meme trends, genres, and formats.

This research examines the exchange of internet memes from a queer, feminist, anti-racist perspective in order to consider questions of affect, media consumption, and the creation of online communities or "counterpublics." (Warner 2002) Undertaking close readings of digital meme-scapes that disrupt understandings of contemporary gender and race relationships, this is a feminist project of reinterpretation and criticism that subverts and complicates existing power inequalities. My use of the term "meme-scapes" follows Arjun Appadurai's (1990) definitions that categorize the range of "-scapes, including "mediascapes" and "technoscapes," to describe the global movement of "historically situated imaginations." As I look to meme-scapes as sites of digital contagion that exceed the bounds of temporal or physical location, I define the memes I analyze as objects that exist as snapshot or glimpse into larger conversations that may very well continue past the point of when I capture these images.

Specific events that took on a viral capacity or "went viral" in both pre and post social media-specific exchange are central as well to my analysis of online discourse and cultural contagion. Viralness, which denotes contagion and replication, in turn is understood to "infect" certain populations (oftentimes with racializing tactics). This creates distinct "communities" of those who are impacted by a viral phenomenon and those who are immune (Blas 2012). Affect, which "is produced as an effect of its circulation" (Ahmed 2004, 45), operates in a viral capacity and is dependent on circulation and multidirectional movement.

Political-cultural trends both influence and are influenced by online discourse, causing a multi-directional flow of opinions, knowledge, and

understandings. Memes may comment on the "real world" and their consumption impacts opinions and actions offline, as memes work to affectively navigate non-digital social worlds. Particular memes can function as "subcultural litmus tests" (Phillips 2015, 63), a measurement of in-group knowledge within a constantly evolving online collective. In particular meme-cycles, the in-group that is created through the exchange of this form of humor and mockery mimics the ways that marginalized groups create their own counterpublics to articulate their own understandings of identities, needs, and interests. These groupings can be empowered counterpublics using resistance strategies to critique majoritarian cultural hegemony, or they can be discursive communities that use digital technologies and meme-scapes to reach like-minded interest groups who have little to no stake in critiquing dominant culture. In-group knowledge and humor when created in digital spaces can exist as either critical or supportive of the status quo.

These multi-directional relationships between the virtual and the analog that flow vertically, horizontally, linearly and non-linearly open up new frameworks to discuss how these media affect one another and how they can be used as instruments of social change. Critiques of structural power through intersectional analysis, queer critiques of cultural norms and presumptions, and a critique of racial capitalism all amplify an understanding of the movement and exchange within digital cultures. These frameworks are also informed within larger historical media theories, and this project is contextualized within an understanding that while technologies may change the pace and possibility of certain discourse that there is nothing especially "new" about the new media of memes and internet discourse.

Like all media, the digital is not culturally unidirectional, but unlike film, television, and literary theory, online discourse makes apparent the flows of intercultural exchange and the rapid speed of transmission across physical distances through the technology platforms themselves. Digital users invent and employ tactics of resistance through internet memes within these multidirectional flows of media through a set of practice I gather under the term *digital disidentifications*.

Defining Digital Disidentifications

Twenty years after José Esteban Muñoz published *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), I adapt a mode of cultural disidentification and queer counterpublics that operationalizes a queer ironic consumption model of digital mutation and distribution. I also consider this mode of queer ironic consumption as a Muñozian "survival strategy" for navigating a popular online culture that erases or misrepresents minoritarian identities. Rather than the need for representation and "seeing oneself" on screens small and large, finding popular figures from media to disidentify with utilizes a mode of resistance and humor that works to combat exclusionary and mis-representative media strategies. Humor as a tool of resistance must be taken seriously as a mode of social refusal and as a functional weapon to refuse annihilation and erasure within a politically violent landscape for certain populations. Figuring humor as a refusal posture for minority identities, my model of queer ironic consumption is positioned as a tactical strategy for resistance to mainstream normative cultures.

While an abundance of new scholarship is emerging to understand and analyze the harms and violences enacted within digital spaces, one of the ways my

research addresses a gap in feminist, queer, and critical race scholarship is through an updating and re-imagining of Muñoz's germinal theory of "disidentifications" (1999) in order to revise examples of memetics today that can be seen as "devising technologies of self-assertion and summoning the agency to resist"(Muñoz 10). A Muñozian disidentificatory practice facilitates "recycling and rethinking encoded meaning" within dominant media in order to "use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture" (31). I will therefore employ a theoretical frame of *digital disidentifications* to critique how conversations about mainstream media, race, gender, and sexuality are being traversed and discussed by distinct communities within digital realms and what the medis and the messages of these interventions have to do with shifting cultural opinions within a time frame that spans the emergence of internet memes in the early 2000's to the present.

One distinct example of what I encapsulate as digital disidentifications is the continued circulation of images, gifs, or short video clips accompanied by the phrase "it me." Both as linguistic appropriation of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), as well as a phrase that has garnered it's own new meaning through meme exchange, "it me" often allows user to disidentify or cross-identify with a figure to which they are not necessarily represented. "It me" rhetorically functions to signal relationality from internet user to the content they post, which can extend the boundaries of race, gender, sexuality, ideology in order to cross-identify with a node of feeling or sentiment with which a user finds resonance.

Fig 0.2

Source: https://me.me/i/well-it-me-4179f7581bd54433855cba625e5ac1d1

The wide usage and functionality of identifying an image, thought or emotion as "that's so me"/ "it me" is useful to understand cross-media identification models for identifying affective resonances. Ranging from innocuous sentiments of similarity or shared emotional responses to more specific examples that demonstrate how far distanced the user is from the sentiment or image, the "it me" meme genre encapsulates a number of arguments I make through this research. Central to any discussion of internet affect that examines questions of belonging, community, and feeling 'seen,' various internet memes function to universalize public sentiment or find commonalities. Rather than internet discourse research that focuses on the alienating impacts of so much time spent in digital spaces, focusing on memes points to sites of digital counterpublic creation and the exchange of concepts and ideas that create feelings of commonality and a sense of representation.

Internet memes function as research objects that extend beyond the point of screen capture. In the case of the memes I identify, the majority have been screencaptured by myself. The act of screencapture or screengrabbing as an online discourse analyst allows me to glimpse into a conversation as it is happening and to observe the context that has been created through the many iterations of a particular meme format before the moment of capture. Employing a feminist methodology of auto-theory (Fournier 2021), I look at many of my own personal social media feeds to identify objects of analysis. Oftentimes, the meme will continue on to create new contexts and reach new networks or digital communities long after myself as researcher has 'grabbed' the image and saved it to my hard drive. I liken my usage of screencapture to Muñoz's (1996) definition of ephemera:

> Ephemera, as I am using it here, is linked to alternate modes of textuality and narrativity like memory and performance: it is all of those things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself. It does not rest on epistemological foundations but is instead interested in following traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things. It is important to note that ephemera is a mode of proofing and producing arguments often worked by minoritarian culture and criticism makers (Muñoz, 10)

Positioning internet memes as "traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things" in relation to moments taken from online discourse as occurring in real-time allows me to theorize memes as digital ephemera. As Muñoz troubles the question of scholarly "proof" particular to queer and minoritarian cultural criticism, I too am

circulating “Work that attempts to index the anecdotal, the performative, or what I am calling the ephemeral as proof is often undermined by the academy’s officiating structures.” (7) The index of the anecdotal I participate in through the identification of particular memes, viral content, and online discourse as indicative of online ‘events’ places me in the role of the observer, as well as cultural critic. This is also similar to Lauren Berlant’s (2008) query of affect and the “problem of writing the history of the present”: “a problem of apprehending heightened moments in which certain locales become exemplary laboratories for sensing or intuiting contemporary life.” (845)

The objects and instances that ground each chapter show the ways memes and online debate surrounding issues of gender, race, and sexuality create contemporary affective circuits. These examples function as case studies in considering the complicated ways that digital platforms impact how people argue, and what is being argued about online. To analyze them, I look at the way memes unfold as specific cultural events. In naming memes as events, I mean to highlight their public nature and the number of participants involved in the emergence and distribution of digital information within meme genres. Thus, my chapters offer new considerations regarding representation and whitewashing, cultural appropriation of black female affectation, expressions of existential neoliberal depression, and call out culture. In my chapters I uncover changing concepts of exchange, currency, community, belonging, and acknowledgement to accompany viral moments and meme-able celebrities, alongside anti-capitalist trends and activist rumblings framed as dissatisfied mockery. Dissatisfaction and virality create sets of groups

online as distinct from majoritarian ideologies or mainstream communities through the creation of digital counterpublics.

Platforms and Public

A "digital counter-public" (Hill 2019) can operate as a so-called digital community that forms around an in-group joke or knowledge that is built through the sharing and alteration of a meme format. Meme humor operates through the exchange and manipulation of text and image files in order to convey oftentimes ironic or knowingly entertaining messages. As opposed to a group of fans celebrating "good art," any entertainment medium which takes itself seriously but is easily ridiculed, from reality television to the democratic debates, can be consumed ironically. The community members that I consider here are participants in what I classify as "queer ironic consumption," which is closely related to but extends the limits of camp aesthetic and camp humor (Sontag 1964, Muñoz 1999, LaBruce 2014).

Consumption of ironic content is the basis upon which many digital counterpublics are built. Self-reflexivity and satirical mockery operate to form a shared template through which those who are privy to this in-group joke partake and distribute comedic material. Central to the production is the investment in exchange and distribution. Humor is one node of insider knowledge and belonging to a community, and humor as engagement becomes one travelling commodity of meme exchange. (Morreall 1989, Solomon 2003, Bailey 2012)

As the code and platforms upon which viral content spreads and creates engagement, search engine and social media algorithms have become the subject of

criticism in relation to how these technologies reinforce racist power relations, and embed inequalities into software (Noble 2013). As Safiya Noble's work illustrates, public trust in technologies such a search engines as neutral tools makes invisible the ways in which the technologies at our finger tips come instilled with human bias and driven by profit and advertising marketability. When a complaint is lodged companies often claim a singular glitch or bug in their coding rather than addressing the larger context of how the codes were written. Algorithmic bias in online platforms is formed through the language that is being used and the position of the programmers, the project managers, and the company executives. (Benjamin 2019).

Bias in virtual media infrastructure puts minority populations at risk through mediums such as criminal risk assessment tools and facial recognition technologies for surveillance. These technological "innovations" continue to invisibilize the processes through which racist power dynamics are reordered and recirculated. The search engine is a central node of analysis for digital racialization studies, which takes on particular weight in considering how the limitations of search engine algorithms can and have impacted recent increase in the alt-right white supremacist communities online, or what some call "the alt-right pipeline"(Munn 2019). Rather than focusing on search engines, I look to how algorithms and digital infrastructure undergird meme exchange and online humor primarily via social media platforms and the affective circuits generated therein. In order to understand the exchange of ironic content upon existing online platform structures, I theorize a modern relationship to online engagement through a lens of techno-pessimism.

Techno-pessimism

A techno-optimistic perspective considers the positive potentials and advantages to equality, labor, and education that come with new innovations in technology. In the beginning of the internet age, the dogma of open access, world-wide information sharing, and digital democracy alongside the concept of the digital citizen was romanticized (Allen 2006, Phillips 2019). In contrast, contemporary research focusing on surveillance technologies, Facebook and the 2016 election, the rise of the alt-right online, trolling, the correlation between anxiety and social media, and targeted advertising has shifted both academic language and cultural sensibilities toward a lens of techno-pessimism (Shifman 2013, Milner 2017, Hillis et. al 2015). No longer understood as "the great equalizer" (Schradie 2020), techno-pessimism's critiques of digital technologies creation of insular knowledge networks, devaluation of certain labors and dehumanization of laborers, and fast-tracking of surveillance operations address the cultural importance and political potential of formats such as the memes I analyze.

Fig 0.3

"My assigned FBI agent" tweet. Source: https://twitter.com/bgcslave

As seen in Figure 0.3, features a GIF of Tanisha Thomas from the reality TV show *Bad Girls Club* reading something on a laptop and then pushing the laptop away and standing up. This image presents the popular in-group joke within memes of the acceptance of internet surveillance, and the idea that whatever government agency is surveilling you through your computer usage is forced to observe banal behaviors. This sort of ironic relationship toward surveillance demonstrates the affective sensibility I speak to throughout this research, one that acknowledges how user data and behavior is being tracked and recorded, and also pokes fun at the idea that we are being constantly watched online.

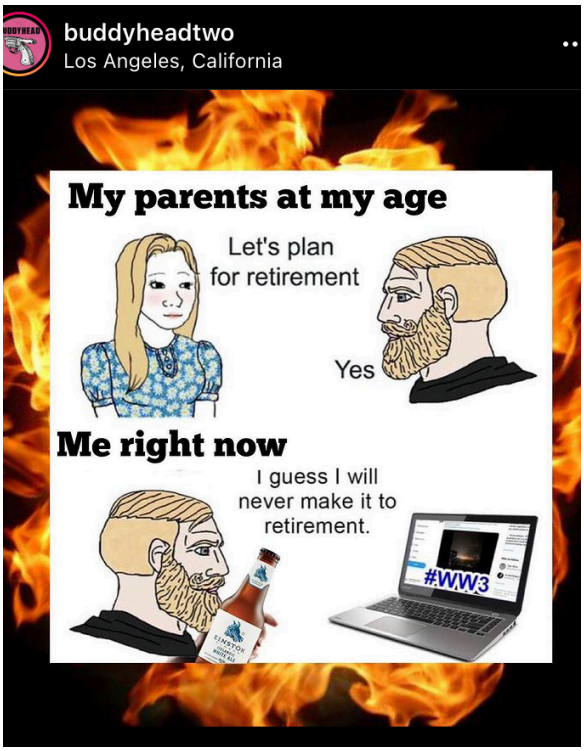

Fig 0.4

"my parents ay my age/ Me right now" meme. Source: instagram.com/buddyheadtwo

Fig 0.4 denotes another affective realm of meme exchange, namely resentment toward inflation, political instability, pessimism, and belief in cultural decline that presents a generational difference in relationships toward the future. The gap between "My parents at my age" planning for retirement, and "Me right now" alone and looking at a laptop with Twitter open to a photo captioned "#WW3" indicates an identifiable feeling of lack of future options or: "I guess I will never make it to retirement." Collective sentiment in digital spaces of apocalyptic timelines for the future and ironic pessimism toward the mode through which depressing information is received parallels techno-pessimistic attitudes toward our dependence and continued usage of online social networking platforms.

A techno-pessimistic frame takes into account the affective-distancing inherent to isolationist behaviors that are exacerbated through increased time in digital spaces. This pessimism alongside the loss of faith in the democratic process epitomizes Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism": "a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be *im*possible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic" (2011, 24). Memes exchanged through techno-pessimistic standpoints do so through relations to current social and political positions as exemplifying the end of American exceptionalism and future progress narratives. Commiseration is a central node of exchange in memes and digital counterpublics unwilling to accept the status quo of resigning to fates of doom and downfall. The conditions of possibility available through internet meme exchange trade in the affective realms of the snarky, mocking and dismissive in relation to a realization of future *im*possibility. The chapters in this dissertation speak to differing nodes of commentary on racist and sexist power imbalances through meme-scapes foregrounded in post-ironic humor.

Chapter Organization

Chapter One: *The Ghost in the Shell Remake Controversy: Scarlett Johansson and the Meme-ability of "Problematic" White Womanhood* explores the specifics of this meme event as a case study in theorizing how conversations around race and gender online are determined by interlocking factors such as type of media being discussed (anime to live action reboot) and fan cultures associated with source material genre. In considering the 2017 controversy surrounding the "whitewashing" of the live-action remake of *Ghost in the Shell*, there are multiple

levels from which to analyze the cultural backlash as an "event" (Schechner 2002). Using the history of yellowface and Hollywood whitewashing, along with an examination of how feminist cyborg theory beginning with Haraway (1984) informs understanding and commentary about the female cyborg character in the film, I outline the details of how human-machine hybridity informs various perspectives on the casting of a white actress for the role. Meme cycles that situate the white actress as symbolic of the larger issue of Hollywood casting choices further my discussion of the endurance of a meme-able Johansson. I theorize the stakes of these events through discussions of queer ironic consumption, racial controversy and online discourse surrounding representation strategies, transnational racial stakes within U.S. based Hollywood projects, and post-feminist criticism of archetypical "white feminism" within digital spaces. Memes that continue to mock Johansson employ digital disidentification to undermine and hold accountable a Hollywood casting politic that does not meet the expectation and desire of online fan communities.

Chapter Two, "The Use of Black Women as Reaction GIFS: Tiffany Pollard and Enduring Potentials of Reality Performance" deploys digital disidentifications to analyze Black women as reaction GIFs within online discourse. Black women's performances on reality television of the early and mid 2000's, finding new incarnations in "spreadable media" (Jenkins 2013) such as GIFs and memes, has been labeled by some as perpetuating "digital blackface" (Jackson 2017). Examining the usage and exchange of the mid-2000's reality television star Tiffany Pollard within the context of Twitter networks and communities, this chapter compares

appropriation of black women's humor within digital spaces through the lens of race as technology (Chun 2009, Nakamura 2007) alongside discussions of appreciation of "bad television" (McCoy & Scarborough 2014) and reframing of "ratchet reality" (Gates 2018). Defining "digital blackface" as the propagation of stereotypical depictions of Black people in order to gain online social capital in relational proximity to blackness, discussions often fail to contend with usage by other marginalized identities. Centering GIFs of Pollard as a case study, this chapter offers new sites of digital racialization, popular culture criticism, and examination of digital affect as it corresponds with gendered and racialized identities.

Chapter Three, "Memes for the End of the World: Considering Climate Change and Anti-Capitalist Memetics" looks at how the academic discourse of the anthropocene has found a foothold in memetic exchange among online leftists who refuse to continue participation in neoliberal environmentalism's framing of climate change as a matter of personal responsibility and "choice." This chapter also examines how political campaigns such as Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez's digital framing of the Green New Deal works to bring awareness of climate solutions through online digital infrastructure.

The final chapter, "Branded Affect and Corporate 'Woke-Washing'" explores how following the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in 2020, many companies and brands chose to address systemic racism and their support of the Black Lives Matter movement through issuing statements on social media. Personification of brands mirrors social media's demands for individualized self-branding, further embroiling an affective relationship to biopolitical self-promotion.

This chapter complicates the usefulness of meme exchange models for creation of counterpublic discourse when for-profit institutions employ these formats.

I conclude this dissertation with a further analysis of the multiple levels from which to understand techno-pessimism and the "doom-scroll" as a relationship to consuming digital media that causes feelings of despair. Turning to nodes of digital affect that arise from addictive technologies, 24 hour news cycles, and constant media consumption, I point toward the doomscroll to inspire continued analysis of affective relationships with technology in an arena that feeds constant crisis.

Chapter One

The Ghost in the Shell Remake Controversy: Scarlett Johansson and the Meme-ability of "Problematic" White Womanhood

This chapter explores the controversy surrounding the casting of Scarlett Johansson in the remake of *Ghost in the Shell* (2017) as a case study in theorizing how conversations around race and gender online are determined by interlocking factors such as type of media being discussed (anime to live action reboot) and fan cultures associated with source material genre. Upon announcement of the casting of Johansson, a flurry of memes, petitions (Fig 1.1), and online think pieces arose to criticize her acceptance of the role and situate this casting within a pattern wherein Hollywood relegates Asian actors to the margins. The online campaigns worked both to draw attention to the casting as an issue as well as possibly encourage a soft boycott of the film, offering an example of one of the possible dimensions of the internet "call out." Online fan cultures offer a useful entry point to discuss the exchange of internet memes that seek to change opinion or circulate information about a specific issue to which a digital counterpublic hopes to call attention.

Ghost in the Shell was published originally as a manga comic created by Japanese artist Masamune Shirow in 1989. It first gained international notoriety as a feature length anime film by Japanese director Mamoro Oshii in 1995.[2] In 2016, controversy arose surrounding the live action remake of the film directed by Hollywood director Rupert Sanders (*Snow White and the Huntsman*) as those opposing this remake made claims that the film's casting choice of A-List Hollywood actress Scarlett Johansson whitewashed the film's main character, Motoko Kusanagi (the character name is changed to Mira in the 2017 version). The plot of the remake

further complicates the role of race in the film and leads to questions about separation of actors from their celebrity and what happens when the actor becomes the focal point of the controversies they bring to their films.

Fig 1.1
Care2petition, "DreamWorks: Stop Whitewashing Asian Characters!" Source: https://www.thepetitionsite.com/683/366/733/dreamworks-dont-whitewash-japanese-films/?z00m=22503826

Examining the relationship between international media, racial representation, online discourse and science fictional imaginings of technological futures, this chapter points out the many nuances and complications of this memetic event. Since 2017, a number of notable high-budget films including *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) and Marvel's *Shang-Chi and the Ten Rings* (2021) have partially addressed the gap in Asian representation as lead characters in Western box office blockbusters. I position the memetic event of the racial scandal of the *Ghost in the Shell* remake to examine the impact of fan cultures in online communities, and the

ways online discourses complicate and conflate source material with representational 'correctness'.

Fig 1.2

Source: https://www.pinterest.com/pin/dish-nation-memes--435652963935347598/

In considering the 2017 controversy surrounding the "whitewashing" of the live-action remake of *Ghost in the Shell* starring Scarlett Johansson, there are multiple levels from which to focus analysis upon the cultural backlash as an "event" (Schechner 2002).[3] Scarlett Johansson, arguably one of the most famous American actresses since her debut in films such as *Ghost World* (2001) and *Lost in Translation* (2003), was the highest paid actress in the U.S. in 2018 and 2019, largely due to her role as "Black Widow" within the Marvel superhero film franchise (the first female Avenger). In Fig 1.2, a meme jokingly references Johansson playing "a Japanese woman" and in doing so makes a pun as to what has been "lost in translation" through this miscasting. This meme is representative of the type of humor

exchanged in a plethora of digital content that arose to bring attention to the casting of the remake of *Ghost in the Shell*. Although Johansson does not actively use social media for self-promotion or personalized content, her celebrity coincides with the rise of digital celebrity culture in a manner where she will be subject of online discussion due to the weight of her celebrity alone: "Johansson is highly visible across social media nevertheless, where she is subject to the waxing and waning of public approval and the controversies that inevitably beset anyone working in the public eye" (Palmer & Warren 2019, 128). I contend that examining this moment of racial controversy within online discursive communities formed around fandoms and prevailing opinions surrounding Hollywood casting and racial politics demonstrates the usefulness of ironic mockery and holding powerful institutions of Hollywood celebrity accountable. Defining the whitewashing controversy as "affective event," becomes "a problem of apprehending heightened moments in which certain locales become exemplary laboratories for sensing or intuiting contemporary life." (Berlant 2008, 845) This memetic event demonstrates a collective response of disappointment, anger, and refusal to accept the status quo of casting expectations. This specific instance of outrage toward Hollywood casting's racial politics exemplifies new modes of "heightened" debate and discussion that transpire in virtual spaces.

Whitewashing and Yellowface

The meme controversy surrounding Johansson's casting is based on the idea that her character, the Major (also known as Mira in the 2017 version), is of Japanese descent in the original anime property. The term "whitewashing" frames whiteness

not as a static or singular category, but a cohesive racial categorization created through the constant reestablishment of whiteness as a natural and essential category (Gabriel 1998). Whitewashing establishes white subjects as the norm and non-white races as 'others'. Through this process of framing and naturalizing whiteness as superior while systematically erasing non-white others, whitewashing makes whiteness appear as the unmarked and unnamed position.

Fig 1.3
Side by side, Motoko in 1995 anime, Johansson in 2017 version, Source: https://screenrant.com/ghost-shell-movie-2017-scarlett-johansson-whitewashing-plot/

In order to locate the discourse around whitewashing within a historical context, I must address the significance of yellowface performances in media. Notable examples of yellowface in film include iterations of the Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan characters, and Mickey Rooney as Mr. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.[4] Distinct from the traditions of minstrelsy and blackface, yellowface refers to historically situated relations between figures of Asian descent within American media. Examples of stereotypical and damaging depictions of Asian characters by Asian actors would comprise another list, including Gedde Watanbe as Long Duk Dong in

Sixteen Candles. Jill Lane (2008) problematizes how performances of black-, red-, and yellowface function historically as a technological of national representation within the Americas. Lane places racial impersonation within historical contexts that were foundational to identifying a national character. She contends that "somehow, racial impersonation is the key to a persuasive sense of authentic national performance" (1730). Following Lane's concept of the matrix of racial performances in media as tied within historical and cultural understandings of identity and "citizenship," yellowface falls within visual regimes of racialization and media.

In theorizing visual regimes of racialization, I follow Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's (2009) definition of "race as technology" to unpack the meme event surrounding *Ghost in the Shell* and its situation within the long history of yellowface performances. Racial identity defined as biologically and/or culturally located becomes a technology through processes of interpersonal identificatory classification, enabled in part through visual regimes of knowledge.[5] Debate surrounding racial "essence," "authenticity" (Johnson 2003), or "truth" is embroiled in person-to-person perceptive modes of identification. Observing a person's phenotype, skin tone, style of dress and speech can be conceived of as a two-dimensional equation. When a third dimension such as film, television, or digital image depicts a person's subjectivity, the categories of racial identification are further distanced from the living self-defined identity of the person whose image has been captured. Chun argues that conceiving of race through "epidermal logic," links the visible (what is on the outside and perceivable) to what is invisible (a

person's identity). These racializing logics are further essentialized through media technologies. A "real" person (as themselves or performing as a character) is represented visually and removed from the reality of that person's quotidian life.

Chun argues that viewing race as a technology allows a negotiation between theorizing race as a biological category and/or race as a culturally determined identity. "Race, either conceived as biology or as culture, organizes social relationships and turns the body into a signifier" (14). Race as an organizational tool functions in race as biology narratives as well as race as culture narratives. Perception of race is a process through which the body of the other is signified and endowed with meaning. The process of seeing, determining, and placing the signifier within historicized regimes of racialized and gendered logics of power takes place in person-to-person interactions, as well as through the dimension of screens. As Chun explains, race functions as a tool and a technology for classification.

> Race as biology and race as culture are similarly mobile and flexible technologies. Focusing on race as a technology, as mediation, thus allows us to see the continuing function of race, regardless of its essence. It also highlights the fact that race has never been simply biological or cultural, but rather a means by which both are established and negotiated (15).

This linkage between mediation and functionality demonstrates the usefulness of thinking through race as a technology for determining meaning. Processes of racial signification are entrenched in visual indicators of race and the associational matrix of understanding what race "is," through which a web of meaning is projected onto the body of the racialized subject. Understanding how visual regimes of racialization

are structured and facilitated through media, first with TV and film, and then with images on internet platforms, expands a reading of race as a technology.

To historicize yellowface and look specifically at the displacement or invisibility of actors of Asian descent in the recent past, Jane Chi Hyun Park (2010) describes the roles of Asian characters as based in "conditional visibility." The terms of this "conditional visibility" demand that Asian characters in Hollywood films are often relegated to peripheral roles, fetishized or underdeveloped, or visible as signifiers rather than full characters. Following the historical precedence of the "yellow peril" narrative in the nineteenth century, Park asserts that by the 1980s the "oriental other" of Japan was posed as more of an economic than military threat. As narratives of globalization and transnational economies replaced those of internment camps and post-WWII xenophobic discourses, Asia, and particularly Japan, became synonymous with concepts of technology and innovation (Turner 2002, Sohn 2008, Roh et al. 2019). The shifting of narratives of Japan in the late twentieth century pivoted on concepts of the nation's technological superiority: "…at the time news and popular media began to depict Tokyo as the quintessential postmodern metropolis while reactivating World War II stereotypes of the Japanese as less human and more machinelike. Linked with new technologies, Japan…grew to represent the notion of futurity in the national imaginary" (Park 2010, 8). Stereotypes of the Japanese as machine-like and sub-human during WWII are linked with and have evolved into their association with technology and futurity as another form of dehumanization. Park also explores how the tropes of "yellow peril" alongside the stereotype of the Asian-American population as model minority are

two sides of the same coin, measuring personhood and citizenship based on economic efficiency (42). Identifying racial groups as in proximity to machine and being machinelike, and therefore less human, is a tool of dehumanization. Park differentiates between older forms of Orientalist media such as Madame Butterfly (Degabeiele 1996) and "Oriental Style" in contemporary film, what has also been described as "techno-Orientalism".

While the practice of donning blackface or yellowface in film is understood as no longer culturally acceptable, the history of white actors playing characters of minority races informs how we discuss whitewashing in casting decisions today (Lane 2008). These discussions, ranging from journalism, film theory, to online discourse by fans or observers come from many perspectives. Not all of these observers have the historical groundwork to contextualize the multi-faceted politics of race-based casting choices.

Recent live action remakes of anime properties offers a comparison of the frequency and ubiquity of the tendency within Western media to race anime characters as white, as was the claim against 2017's *Ghost in the Shell*. 2008's *Speed Racer*, directed by the Wachowski's, is a pertinent case study. This film in recent years has been deemed a "cult classic", though it faced negative critical reception upon release. The original subject material had crossed over to U.S. television sets in the 1960s, colorful and complete with bad dubbing and gimmicky cartoonish storylines. The success of *AstroBoy* and *Speed Racer* in the '80s sets up the move from human-like robots, to cyborgs of mecha-anime, and can be seen as "proto-mecha narratives" (Schaub 2001, 82). *Speed Racer* was also criticized at the time of

its theatrical release for whitewashing when Emile Hirsh was cast as the titular character, though the main character in the original cartoon can be read as an unmarked racial subject. Speed Racer is a character with black hair, blue eyes, and a signature outfit complete with red neck scarf. Other anime-to-live-action films that received criticism for whitewashing in the last fifteen years include *Dragonball Evolution* (2009) and *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2010) (Fig 1.4). These films, like *Speed Racer*, were reboots of beloved television cartoons that flopped at the box office.

Fig 1.4

Avatar: the Last Airbender, live action, original animation side by side. Source: https://io9.gizmodo.com/the-ten-worst-examples-of-whitewashing-from-the-last-fi-1749960081

Fig 1.5

Tilda Swinton as "the Ancient One" next to original depiction in Marvel comics' *Dr. Strange*. Source: https://www.quora.com/Was-casting-Tilda-Swinton-as-the-Ancient-One-in-Doctor-Strange-a-good-idea

A comparison could be made between the anime to live action *Ghost in the Shell* and the comic to live action superhero blockbuster Marvel's *Doctor Strange* (2016), which came under scrutiny for its casting of Tilda Swinton in what had been a role of a Tibetan male "The Ancient One" in the comic (Fig 1.5). The justification by the studio for this casting was twofold, one: that the original character was a stereotypical depiction (along the lines of Fu Manchu) and it was the politically correct move to alter it, and two: that substituting a female character would be celebrated by fans as a sign of gendered progress. As Leilani Nishime (2017) has argued:

> Within that frame, the studio can promote itself as an agent for social change by transforming an Asian stereotype into an empowered white woman to move the audience past racist representations and by acknowledging the power of Asian audiences…More disturbing still is the persistent and

> pernicious linking of whitewashing to stories of racial progress so that imagining a nonracist future means imagining a white future. (30)

The move that Nishime explains points to a number of harmful notions, the first being that there is no way to cast an Asian character in a role that was previously too "stereotypically Asian." Following this logic, if a white female actress is to replace the role altogether, the problem will solve itself and the audience will be grateful to have a strong (unraced, meaning white) female character in the place of a stereotypical Asian character. Racial ambiguity is a trait of anime characters, but this does not eliminate the issue of white actors being cast in these remake roles (Lu 174). Rather, the attachment that audiences have to anime in all of its "cult" appeal (Silvio 1999) and the outrage that follows these remakes cannot be separated from the way we interpret and speak to fan cultures at our present moment.

Yellowface on stage and screen informs discourse on whitewashing and is separate but intertwined with theories of racialized animation, which is has its own complicated history (Sammond 2015, Lee 2019, Lei 2019). Whitewashing has replaced a lot of discourse on yellowface since there are less prosthetic and stereotypical fake-Asian characteristics; rather a white actor just replaces the character and race either is taken out of the story or character arc all together. Whitewashing is within and oftentimes an extension from the same lineage as yellowface, which positions white actors as the natural and neutral casting choice, regardless of story, origin, character. While whitewashing Asian characters covers a larger Western context from stage to screen, looking particularly to scifi illuminates a specific trope of Orientalized difference.

Scholars such as Nishime (2017) situate whitewashing of Asian characters in scifi as relational and interconnected with other issues of racism and representation that takes place within a globalized situating of "Asianness." Examining recent Western scifi films such as *Cloud Atlas* (2012) and *Ex Machina* (2014) that position Asian women as not only stereotypically robotic, but performing as robots:

> The films reconcile the contradictions between technology's promise of high-status, disembodied labor and the perpetuation of low-status, embodied, 'unskilled' labor under globalization by racializing, gendering, and therefore naturalizing labor stratification. Asian female bodies are figured as the product rather than the producers of technology, built to fulfill their role as devalued service laborers in the globalized future. (Nishime 31)

The role of technologically advanced and therefore less human laborers is a theme in science fiction texts and films that considers questions of automation and technological enhancement. The frequency with which Asian cities and characters are symbolically associated with fears of technological futures has been defined as Techno-orientalism.

Techno-orientalist Scifi and Racialized Animation

"Techno-Orientalism" is a phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asian peoples in "hypo- or hypertechnological terms"(Roh, Huang, Niu 2015, 2) within cultural and political discourse. Roh, Huang and Niu extend and draw from Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) when he asserts that in the construction of the Orient the West constructs itself. It follows that techno-Orientalism "produces and reproduces an oppositional 'East' in order to cement Western hegemony" (8). The discursive

production of an East that is oppositional to the West operates in multiple and multi-directional dimensions, including equating Orientalized subjects with advanced technological resources and ability.

The concept of techno-orientalism has been used to critique contemporary science fiction, especially within the cyberpunk genre.[6] Cyberpunk narratives, including *Ghost in the Shell*, often position Asian cities and identities as markers of a (often-dystopian) future. The "techno-Orient", whether produced within Japanese animation or in Western science fiction, becomes a consumable signifier of technological futurity. Park defines what she designates as "oriental style": "the representation of Asiatic tropes through the discourses of technological advancement and racial progressivism"(2010, 29). Park looks at American science fiction such as *Blade Runner* and *The Matrix* (both films intimately in conversation with *Ghost in the Shell*) to locate an "oriental style" that conflates Asian cityscapes and identities with technologically advanced futures.[7] New Port City, the fictional city in which both the anime and the 2017 remake version of *Ghost in the Shell* are set, distinctly inhabits these perimeters of the techno-orientalist Asian city.[8]

Mecha-anime such as *Ghost in the Shell* and techno-orientalism are intertwined. According to Joseph Schaub (2001): "Mecha-anime combine science fiction and animation, and are therefore ideally suited for narratives which depict escape from oppressive gender roles as they reimagine the human body merging with technology" (Schaub 84). Even though the authors and producers of many anime properties are Japanese, the physical appearance of anime characters does not always represent Japanese phenotype, but rather often appear to represent

racially ambiguous characterizations. Scholars of anime (Napier 2001, Iwabuchi 2002) characterize this ambiguity as "mukokuseki": the Japanese word for "stateless," also translated as "without nation." The term "mukokuseki" is used in English to demonstrate the trend of the of manga/anime characters being drawn as deliberately lacking "ethnic" features. Brain Ruh summarizes the scholarship of "mukokuseki":

> Napier describes the term as 'meaning 'stateless' or essentially without national identity,' while Iwabuchi writes that the term is used 'to suggest the mixing of elements of multiple cultural origins, and to imply the erasure of visible ethnic and cultural characteristics.' Probably the most salient reference point for anime's *mukokuseki* nature is the physical appearance of many anime characters. Even when an anime series is supposed to take place in Japan, often many of the characters do not look "Japanese" (Ruh 2014, 67).

As Alistair Swale argues regarding the interpretation of anime aesthetics, and the conflation of style with genre, "There is a 'manga' or 'anime' look—disproportionately large heads with disproportionately large eyes, with manes of hair that are often totally unnatural in hue, and a proclivity for skimpy clothing—all of which has become sufficiently identifiable so as to reach the point where the 'look' is sometimes relates as a 'genre' of graphic design" (Swale 2015, 61).

Fig 1.6
Motoko street art. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paste-up.jpg

Looking at other characters within this anime film that are visually read as "not white" does not signal that therefore they must be Japanese. Anime characters may be "read" by viewers as Japanese in cases when an anime is produced in Japan, or because a visual reading of anime determines the race of the characters based on the position of the viewer, and his or her familiarity with anime "style" or "look." Viewers of anime may perceive anime characters to be a certain race based on "physical features" and by identifying the aesthetic style of characterization as an anime "look" (Swale 2015, 61) or "manga style" (Berndt 2008, 299).[9]

Terry Kawashima (2002) asserts that Western viewers who view Japanese anime for the first time often wonder why the cartoon characters are "white." Kawashima considers how the question of what constitutes "whiteness" can complicate how race is constructed visually. While whiteness can function as a discursive categorization, the visual bases for racial classification operate deterministically. Western viewers of Japanese anime tended to "read" blonde hair

and blue eyes as markers of "white" identity for the animated characters in question, which Kawashima complicates:

> What I wish to do here is to further problematize the racialization of specific individual features that act synecdochically (such as blue eyes) and thereby supposedly serve as universally-understood markers of particular races. The question is not only whether it is 'natural' to assume that blue eyes signify 'white' and 'almond' eyes signify 'Asian,' but also why we tend to assume the validity of these equations. (166)

Kawashima's example pinpoints a number of concerns that arise within representational regimes of race. This synecdochal reading, where blue eyes become equated with the whole of whiteness, demonstrates that visual regimes of reading race can parse and disembody features or indicators of racial type. Seeing the part (blue eyes, blonde hair) for the whole (Anglo-European whiteness) presumes whiteness as the neutral and primary subject. Speaking of the character S*ailor Moon*, Kawashima argues, "If she looks exclusively 'white' and not at all 'Japanese' to a viewer, it is only because that viewer has been culturally conditioned to read visual images in specific racialized ways that privilege certain cues at the expense of others and lead to an overdetermined conclusion…" (161-162). Privileging features or attributes as indicators of race based on visual interpretation, visual images, whether of cartoon characters or live action actors playing characters, are viewed through privileged cues of characterization that are biased by culturally determined "meaning" of racial signifiers.

The way animated characters are racially represented and understood, from Japanese anime to *Disney*, is always dependent on story, location, authorship, and relative signification rather than stereotypical racial signifiers (Ruh 2014). Although it is true that not all characters that are seen in *Ghost in the Shell* adhere to the usual Japanese phenotype, it would be false to infer that, because of this, such characters look "Western" or "Caucasian." Rather, the characters are drawn as representations of the human body that can be more or less legible along the lines of racial identities depending on the creator as well as narrative and genre tropes (Ruh 2014, 167).

Fandom and Online Fan Activists

Assuming that those with a strong opinion on the casting of the 2017 remake of *Ghost in the Shell* would have been fans of the original anime, a presumption of male viewership is in line with the model of "otaku" fandom. Annalee Newitz articulates that "anime otaku," roughly translating to "anime fanboy" is a reclaiming of a derogatory Japanese term to one of pride. "This form of self-identification among (largely American) fans of Japanese animation tells us something about what it means to consume anime outside Japan: in order to affiliate themselves with anime fan culture, American fans are calling themselves by a name the Japanese use as an insult."(Newitz 1995, 1) The cultural panic surrounding otaku fandom in the U.S. noted by Newitz, Tobin (2004), Kinsella (1998), revolves around fear of the isolated, withdrawn, young male being sexually excited by sexualized female forms within anime comics. Matt Hills (2002) complicates the generalizations of anime otaku fandom. Hills elaborates on why terms like "appropriation" and "globalization" are insufficient to describe transcultural anime fandom:

> The case of anime suggests that we need to refuse these terms, or at the very least supplement them by recognising that subcultural homologies (the way subcultures use certain texts to articulate their group identity) can become transcultural homologies (subcultures can use representations of other national subcultures to articulate a shared identity or devaluation). The common cultural marginalisation of fandom in Japan and America can therefore allow for the transcultural circulation of texts and representations that are used to mark out the 'differences' of fan cultures rather than, or as well as, national differences. (Hills 2002, 13)

Digital fan communities within online spaces have been working to bring awareness to the specific issues of whitewashing Asian character roles in live action remakes of anime films. Fans who wanted to voice their disagreement with the casting recreated images, filmed skits mirroring the original film, and published on science fiction forums in order to draw attention and ask for a boycott of the film. The twitter campaign #notmymajor gathered fans of the original to post their distaste for the Johansson casting, and many shared their stories of disappointment and allegiance to the original. Fan videos such as "Ghost in the Shell PSA" show through reenactment the lived affects of children not seeing themselves represented in the media they admire.[10]

Lori Kido Lopez (2011) examines issues regarding digital fan communities, whitewashing, and opinions regarding the remake of properties within already existing fan cultures. Lopez conducted ethnographic research with the operators of racebending.com, through which she is able to speak to the make up and motivation

of fans who disagree with casting choices that they feel do not reflect the intent of the original. Lopez frames the group she studies as consumer-citizens who aim to impact the film industry through the collective power of their boycott, and also utilizes Jenkins' "participatory cultures" (2006) to expand their imagined space of impact, "It is clear that participatory cultures like those around fan communities offer a potential space and set of tools for shifting conversations from fictional texts to the realities that they impact and rely upon"(2011, 443). Because conversations surrounding whitewashing move the analysis of argument from media content to the production side of content its lived experiential impact on fans, looking to fan activists can offer a material subject for Jenkins' "spreadability".

The population that Lopez defines as "fan activists", such as those who brought attention to the *Ghost in the Shell* casting with hashtags like #notmymajor, function to impact media and how it is both disseminated and received. Media spreadability concerns the way media is mobilized. As Jenkins states, "What we are calling spreadability starts from an assumption that circulation constitutes one of the key forces shaping the media environment. It comes also from a belief that, if we can better understand the social and institutional factors that shape the nature of circulation, we may become more effective at putting alternative messages into circulation…"(Jenkins et al, 2013, 194). By this definition, Jenkins asserts that media is shaped by its audiences, it circulates rather than being handed down from one party to another. Jenkins' approach theorizes that media is reciprocally influenced by consumer-citizenship that propels the conversation about fan cultures and whitewashing to move from a top-down consumption model to a model that allows

multiple influences on what sort of content will be created. In other words, the idea that Hollywood will cast according to their own model of what will be a lucrative property, and the concept that audiences are just consumers of that material without any reciprocal impact, is no longer taken for granted.

Lopez in her study of the whitewashing controversy surrounding the live action remake of *The Last Airbender* notes that fans' preoccupation with the original oftentimes disables thoughtful conversation surrounding race: "We see that a fannish preoccupation with authenticity can be limiting if it becomes affixed to a relationship between racialized or otherwise marked bodies and the stories they can tell" (2011, 443). As Lopez shows, claiming that the original is the authority on how to compose a remake becomes complicated when racial identity is left unexamined, and affixing race to fictional character often limits productive dialogue on racial inequalities within media.

Feminist Cyborgs and Posthuman Possibilities

As a researcher with academic interest in feminist science fiction, my initial interest in the controversy surrounding the remake of *Ghost in the Shell* was whether there were any redeeming aspects of the film that were being ignored as a sort of "soft boycott" of the film took place. The following section maps how the 2017 remake may be compared alongside feminist readings and criticisms of the cyborg.

The figure of the cyborg—central to *Ghost in the Shell*—has been a site for theorizing conceptions of humans and machines. Cyborgs have been a particularly productive site for feminist theorizing because of the work of Donna Haraway,

which provides a point of entry for examining the remake's framing of cyborgs. In "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" (1985) and "A Cyborg Manifesto"(1991), Haraway deconstructs the nature/culture divide in order to argue for moving toward a nature-culture continuum. Haraway questions the divide between animal-human and machine as well as the ambiguity of "the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and eternally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines" (1985, 52). By deconstructing what she argues to be artificial binaries, and taking up the figure of the cyborg to wed human and machine, feminists are, according to Haraway, "embracing the possibilities inherent in the breakdown of clean distinctions between organism and machine and similar distinctions structuring the Western self" (1991, 174). Haraway emphasizes that the cyborg figure is outside of history and has no origin story. She does not put a value on the concept of the cyborg itself, as the cyborg is conceived as a tool for theorization.

The 2017 remake of *Ghost in the Shell* draws on science fiction representation of the figure of a female cyborg in ways that resonate with Haraway's conception. The cyborg of the remake calls into question the many theoretical contradictions that a science fiction cyborg might present: she is both superhuman and at the mercy of her creators, she is both posthuman and rethinking what constitutes "human", she exists outside of biological sex but still presents a gendered embodiment, and she is both artificially created and born to human parentage. The 2017 remake works to pose questions about hybridity, superhumanism, dehumanization, and the militarization of the cyborg that are also

considered in the work of Haraway and contemporary scholars regarding the potential of the concept of the cyborg for critical race and feminist theories.

Mira's construction as a weapon in service of her manufacturers reflects cyborg scholarship that engages with how human workers approximate mechanical functions under capitalism. Jennifer González (1995) notes in her work on cyborgs and racialization that with the rise of industrial capitalism some populations were expected to become mechanized/mechanical, "the distinction between the machine and the human became a question of gender and class" (60). While some arguments such as Haraway's extol the cyborg as a figure of revolutionary potential, Gonzalez argues the cyborg will not necessarily exist free of social constraints, "constraints which apply to humans and machines already" (61). The distinction between the mechanical and "those who are mechanized" (Devereux & Kosman 2016) becomes blurred within constructs of productivity, racialization, and exploitation.

When the distinction is made between cyborgs and humans, often cyborg science fictions employs a symbolic narrative of racialization. As Isiah Lavendar III argues: "Envisioning exactly how the cyborg occupies a new race position becomes possible when thinking about future projections of human racial history. In the same way, posthumanism changes how we think about our physical being by raising new questions of what is innately or naturally human" (Lavender 2011, 26). Relating the cyborg as "new race" to conceptual posthumanism opens up the possibilities of applying a racial analysis to theories of "what comes next" for humankind within contemporary science fiction. In that sense Mira occupies a space of a new "type" of being, one that as a cyborg is distinct from humans in status and

that may be exempt from racial identification by nature of this same artificial parentage.

Haraway's cyborg represents a radical theoretical intervention into the construct of "the human," particularly as the cyborg opens possibilities of "the non-reproductive." Haraway's cyborg allows theorizing what becomes possible when beings enter the world outside of reproduction. Cyborgs are not "born" but artificially "created," and are in theory unable to reproduce. That cyborgs, especially in science fiction narratives like *Ghost in the Shell,* may be able to "live on" or create new generations by passing on data while remaining in essence "genderless" detaches concepts of conventional reproduction from female bodies. The viewers' relationship with Mira's visual objectification as a conventionally and exaggeratedly attractive feminine body on screen may trouble the Harawayian cyborg's revolutionary, post-gender figure of possibility. While it is uncharacteristic of a female protagonist to navigate a film's narrative without a romantic plotline, Johansson does not escape sexualization within the film, which I argue goes hand in hand with the magnitude of Johansson's celebrity.

Transracial Transgression and the Inescapable Whiteness of Johansson

The plot of the 2017 remake which detours from the original anime film operates to justify the casting of Johansson by exposition that informs the audience that the robot "shell" (played by Johansson) contains the memories and identity ("ghost") of the Japanese woman Motoko. Janice Loreck argues that when the character Mira discovers the mother of her human brain, who is Japanese, the opportunity is opened for "the film's exploration of race in a posthuman future"

(2018, 38). Loreck conceives of the 2017 film as a "transracial thought experiment" that suggests that "a person's self-perceived race may not 'match' her or his body" (2018, 38). Mira is informed by the discovery of her lineage that her "ghost" is Japanese. In the film, it is both the transracial logic and the cyborg logic that work to argue the Major's white cyborg body is constructed technologically, not through biological reproduction, and therefore detached from lineage or race.

Loreck briefly cites the Rachel Dolezal controversy as the "key example"(2018, 38 n. 3) of transracialism outside of the world of fiction. Dolezal, an American civil rights activist became a source of controversy in 2015 surrounding her presentation as a black woman. When it was "revealed" that the Spokane Washington NAACP chapter head was born to white parents, various news outlets took up the story to question the concept of "transracialism." Rogers Brubaker explains that during the 2016 news cycle, a comparison between the transgender celebrity Caitlyn Jenner and the controversy surrounding Dolezal conflated these individuals as propagating fraudulent identities. Brubaker notes the comparison of the stories heightened anxieties surrounding "unnatural, opportunistic, exploitative, or fraudulent identity claims"(Brubaker 2016, 415). Popular culture discourse comparing the flexibility of gender identity in regard to Jenner, in comparison to the "true" racial identity of Dolezal, shifted discourse from acceptance of chosen identities and subjectivity, to questions of "givenness, essence, objectivity and nature" of identity (415).

Discourse surrounding the Dolezal controversy and the discourse of whether "transracialism" is comparative to other "identity formations" was largely

conducted within the realm of news cycle scandal and controversy. As Marquis Bey and Theodora Sakellarides note on the phenomenon of popularizing racial scandal: "America is obsessed with scandal, particularly when it pertains to matters of race and gender; in fact, identity issues undeniably garner greater attention when they are associated with the scandalous or outrageous"(Bey and Sakellarides 2016, 35). Bey and Sakellarides go on to contend that the proclivity to scandalize race is not in itself generative. Scandals such as the Dolezal controversy operate as an "easy lob to swing at" the "racist fastballs" that have marked themselves as easily recognizable targets. Racial scandal in public discourse offers satisfaction in identifying and villanizing the transgressors and wrongdoers.[11] I would relate this notion of easily identifying the "villain" in a narrative of racial transgression to the targeted disapproval of Johansson herself that ensued following her casting in the 2017 *Ghost in the Shell*.

While the ending of the 2017 film suggests that the cyborg protagonist may occupy a complicated racial categorization, Loreck contends that this thought-experiment is a failure due to the magnitude of Johannson's fame to begin with and her notability as a white American actress. Claiming that Johansson as an actress cannot be distanced from her critical reception and previous roles that connect her to all the white characters she has portrayed on screen**,** Loreck argues casting Johansson in the role "Not only tethers the cyborg character to Johansson's lived existence as a white woman, it also connects her intertextually to the constellation of white characters that she has previously portrayed" (2018, 39).

Central to the "constellation of white characters" portrayed by Johansson are various non-human or posthuman characters who may complicate certain embodiment of "humanness." Cast as the subject of a science fictional experiment testing the potential of "cerebral capacity" in *Lucy* (2014), as the disembodied yet eerily present voice of Joaquin Phoenix's artificially intelligent operating system/girlfriend in *Her* (2013), or as an alien seductress who preys on men in *Under the Skin* (2013), Johansson's roles as "a posthuman 'pin-up girl'"(Matthews 2018, 5) have come to define her celebrity to some audiences. Johansson being type-cast as robotic, other-than-human, and placed in multiple science fiction films may signal a trend that would lead her to be cast in *Ghost in the Shell*. Zara Dinnen and Sam McBean make an argument as to Johansson's face on screen as a technology of gendering and racializiation. They argue that within popular culture, the norms and privileges of whiteness and femininity are figured through the face on screen as technological formation (2018, 136). In reference to *Her*, which they argue is a film that imagines an elite, white, future Los Angeles, even though Johansson's character is not seen, the distinct nature of her voice constructs a white and female character. The casting of Johansson is once again key to maintaining the construction of whiteness. Dinnen and McBean argue, "because her voice is recognisable the audience understands the 'neutral' software as white and female"(2018, 135).

The nature of Johansson's voice as recognizable and attached to her racialized embodiment is almost inescapable: "Just as Johansson's onscreen body operates as an index of her whiteness, her voice on the soundtrack serves as an index of her body. Johansson's voice is a central and much commented-upon aspect

of her celebrity persona…Like her body, Johansson's voice tethers the Major to her raced identity insofar as it anchors the Major to Johansson's physical form" (Loreck 40). In Chelsea Phillips-Carr's review of *Under the Skin*, she highlights both the whiteness of Johansson in the role, and the inescapability of Johansson as sex symbol for the viewer. Mirroring Loreck's thesis on the difficulty of a viewer to detach the character on screen from the celebrity, she notes: "it is difficult to distance oneself completely from the fact that the woman we watch in the nude is Scarlett Johansson, sex symbol and Hollywood star. " (Phillips-Carr 2016, 311)

Johansson's position as sex symbol was further complicated when nude photos of the actress were leaked in 2012.[12] William Brown & David Fleming (2020) note the relationship between Johansson as typecast into science fictional roles as celebrity, and her likenesses appearance in "deep-fake" pornography. "For while the [pornographic deep fake of Scarlett Johansson] might bear a resemblance to Scarlett Johansson, it is in fact other to its human appearance, carrying instead a history of those figured historically as outside of humanity – in particular, as excluded genders, races, sexualities and abilities intersect."(364) Brown and Fleming's conception of the distance from humanness enacted through the deep-faking of Johansson's image may offer another external dimension through which to think about media racialization.

A celebrity as ubiquitous as Johansson has an astounding amount of images of her likeness available through which to produce these sort of deep-fake digital media. Facial recognition data and making the face into identifiable data-points has become a central component of both media and surveillance technologies (Blas,

2013). “Focusing on Johansson’s films enables us to think together the interface-object of celebrity in the contemporary, the technological face of digital cinema, and importantly, the face as primarily a gendered and raced technology in the making.” (Dinnen & McBean, 124) The authors argue that Johansson’s face and status as celebrity work to epitomize her image and digitalization as inseparable from the face of her whiteness and her femaleness. There is a connection between the actress’s “flattened style” (128), her tendency to be cast as “technological ‘other’” (128) and her described “cyberpunk feel.” Sam Yoshiba, director of the international business division of the manga’s publisher told the press, “‘Looking at her career so far, I think Scarlett Johansson is well cast. She has the cyberpunk feel. And we never imagined it would be a Japanese actress in the first place.’ He added, ‘This is a chance for a Japanese property to be seen around the world.’”[13] Johansson’s “cyberpunk feel” could be said to be particular to her ability to embody robotic, emotionless female characters.

It is both the lived race of Johansson the actress, and the white characters that she has previously portrayed, that tether her portrayal of Mira in the 2017 remake of *Ghost in the Shell* to whiteness. According to Loreck, the magnitude of Johannson’s celebrity “undermines” the thought experiment: “Such recognisability ensures that Johansson’s real-life raced identity becomes a salient textual feature, penetrating into the fictional world of the text” (2018, 40). The whiteness of Johansson “penetrates” the film, “undermining” the potential of the cyborg narrative to explore transracial identity experimentally.

If by Loreck's definition of transracialism, the cyborg logic allows for the assuming of an external racial identity, then "transracialism" is central to the whitewashing controversy surrounding the casting of the 2017 film. Isiah Lavendar III (2011) has argued that the tendency within American science fiction to depict a "colorblind" future functions to privilege whiteness and actively re-invest in whiteness as the norm. Whether "transracial", "postracial", or "color-blind", 2017's *Ghost in the Shell* occupies a well-populated category of contemporary science fiction media that absolves itself of tackling racial inequalities in its futuristic narrative. Mira as a cyborg in the film allows for the narrative to both disavow, and to complicate racial positioning. As argued by John Hutnyk (2005), "The cyborg… is more often than not blind to the socio-political components of race in its enthusiasm to eliminate difference by magical intervention" (Hutnyk, 88). The "magical intervention" of the science fiction cyborg of *Ghost in the Shell* may function within the narrative to eliminate and transcend the problematic of racial difference. However, the reality of the film's casting and the controversy surrounding it did not benefit from this same "magical intervention" of eliminated racial difference.

Continued meme-ability

For a major celebrity such as Johansson, who does not self-promote films through her own social media accounts, to maintain a digital presence (whether in a manner of positive reception or mocking derision), memes that remix Johansson's image often do so in relation to an understanding of her filmography and her brushes with controversy. In promoting the 2017 film, fans were invited to use the online meme-generator promotional website www.IamMajor.me with disastarous

results. “It sought to co-opt memetic processes— with their links to identity construction and performance—as a marketing ploy. It invited users to identify with Johansson and her character, but without considering the consequences of the already voiced concerns that many fans had about the identity politics surrounding Johansson’s casting. Unsurprisingly, then, the marketing backfired and the IAmMajor promotion turned into a classic and rapid ‘PR Fail.’” (Palmer and Warren 2019, 139) The failure of this promotional campaign reiterated that fans and prospective audiences were not finding the character relatable to themselves.

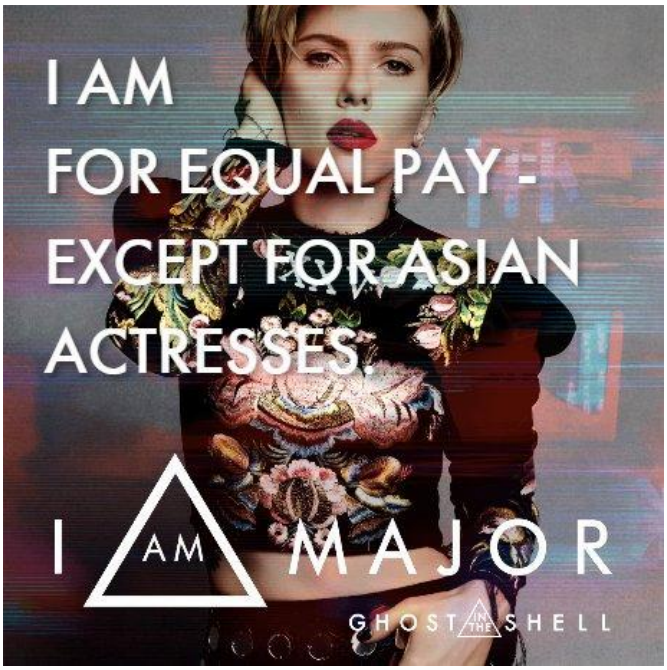

Fig 1.7
IamMajor.me meme, “I am for equal pay—except for Asian actresses” Source: https://www.polygon.com/2017/3/13/14910082/ghost-in-the-shell-meme-generator-i-am-major

Images such as Fig 1.7 proliferated, utilizing the meme-generator software to comment on the inappropriate casting of Johansson. Other examples from this “I am Major” meme campaign hypothesized various Japanese actresses who could have been cast in the role, substituted other anime to live action characters that had been

cast with white actors, and mocked Johansson's outspoken position as a feminist by denouncing her as the pejorative "white feminist." Commentary like "I am for equal pay-except for Asian Actresses" in Fig 1.7 illustrates two central tenants of the whitewashing/white feminist argument: that Johansson's feminism is limited to the equal pay/liberal white feminist rhetoric that is not intersectional and that benefits from exclusionary practices, and that Johansson by virtue of accepting this role has taken the role from an Asian actress.

Fig 1.8

"Scarlett Johansson in her new role" tweet. Source: https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1512814-scarlett-johansson-cast-as

Johansson's perceived "racial transgression" continues to position her as a "meme-able" celebrity persona. Fig 1.8 depicts a self-described transracial character from the FX dramedy series *Atlanta* who as the joke sets up chooses to identify as a white man speaks to fans of show as well as those who associate Johannson with

whitewashed casting choices. Cultural understanding within digital communities of the significance of the practice of donning blackface or yellowface allows meme exchange to turn the joke around on the white performer– serving as an articulation of the idiom: "the internet doesn't forget" (Garcia et al, 2017), a practice of recalling misdeeds or transgressions.

These issues of who a white cis-female should be able to play as an actress extended when Johansson received criticism for her consideration of the protagonist role in the film biography titled *Rub & Tug,* a profile of Pittsburgh transgender male gangster Dante "Tex" Gill. Johansson turned down the role, and the film, which would have been directed by 2017's *Ghost in the Shell* director Rupert Sanders, halted production. As this controversy arose, a sharp increase in Johansson-based memes proliferated online that conflated the *Ghost in the Shell* whitewashing controversy with the disapproval of her considering taking the role of portraying a trans male character. Speaking to memes of Johansson taken from *Under the Skin* as well as the "I am Major" digital marketing campaign, Palmer and Warren conclude: "Memes are exemplary tools that reveal how, in contemporary sharing economies, audiences can directly influence and help construct celebrity personas, both through fandom and through cultural critique" (141). In 2019 there were an abundance of memes which photo-shopped Johannson's face onto trees, after her comment to *As If* magazine stating: "You know, as an actor I should be allowed to play any person, or any tree, or any animal because that is my job and the requirements of my job." [14]

Fig 1.9
"Scarlett Johansson really is the most versatile tree performer in Hollywood" tweet. Source: https://metro.co.uk/2019/07/16/scarlett-johansson-tree-memes-are-getting-out-of-control-and-theyre-low-key-hilarious-10366919/

The connection and continuation of a meme-able Johansson illuminates a particular instance of collective memory within online cultures to remember transgressions, and to hold celebrities accountable through humorous or satirical reminders.

Signaling out Johansson's missteps as part of a larger problem within Hollywood allows meme creators and those who share in the exchange of memes mocking Johansson to target a symbolic issue through an individual example. While certainly Johansson is not the only white actor to be 'called out' for playing characters of other identity categories, her usefulness as a figurehead to speak to a larger problem within Hollywood is also a consequence of her continuing to double-down on her position that as an actor, she has the right to do so. I do not argue that

mockery of Johansson functions to solve or hold accountable the logic of big budget film production that continues to hire big name actors in order to draw crowds. Rather, the memetic case study of mockery and 'calling out' demonstrates the desire by fan activists, as well as digital counter-publics created (however momentarily) through the exchange of these memes, to see change in Hollywood casting politics, and to no longer let grievances over racial transgression go unanswered.

Chapter Two

Tiffany Pollard and Enduring Potentials of Reality Performance for Examining Digital Affect

"I was frustrated. I was pissed off. I was angry. I'm just sitting there. And now for that moment to play out like that is a huge meme. I'm like, only if they knew what I was going through. I was not happy with these girls."

–Tiffany Pollard for Paper Magazine, 2020

Two screenshots from December 14th 2020

Scrolling my personal Twitter account in December of 2020, months into my research on GIFs and memes of Tiffany Pollard, I came across two examples of usage of her likeness that inspired me to screenshot the images and save for reference.

Fig 2.1

"evermore vinyl to be shipped in 20-22 weeks....."tweet.
Source: https://twitter.com/nthonyCarmen/status/1338479794586079233

The image displays Pollard in sunglasses, sitting on a hammock, smoking a cigarette. From my own contextual understanding, I know this to be an image from Pollard's VH1 reality television years beginning with *Flavor of Love*, and while I'm unsure which show or series this still is extracted from, it is immediately recognizable to me. The tweet is from a user I do not follow, but based on the context of who I share mutual friends with, I'm familiar with the association between Taylor Swift fandom and white gay male twitter users. The combination of the image, and the text above, in reference to the shipping delay for a vinyl copy of Taylor Swift's latest album "evermore", suggests dissatisfaction, irritation, and the feeling of being resigned to wait.[15] It is due to the combination of references that I am able to immediately understand this combination of image and text as an overlap of queer appreciation, reality tv memes, and a self-aware iconography of black female performance through a queer affective register.

Fig 2.1 is one example of an at least weekly occurrence of my scrolling through my personal twitter account and seeing Tiffany Pollard show up in GIF or meme form. I see "likes" of people I follow, as was the case when I first came upon above tweet. Occasionally I "like" those tweets, which improves twitter's algorithm to continue showing me similar content. I am unsure whether my research interest in Pollard and subsequent searches on sites such as Google scholar, let alone the mentions in my emails and text messages, has an impact on the amount of images and GIFs of Pollard that come across my Twitter feed. The use of the image of Pollard in the above tweet does not mention her by name or have her tagged. I have no way of knowing if it showed up in my Twitter feed because it had been liked by a

mutual friend, because the content of the image itself comes across often in my personal user information, or because I had recently liked or commented on a tweet relating to Swift's newest album.

The same day on my same account's Twitter feed, I came across another Pollard reference from an account I do not follow. Algorithmically for this to show up on my feed, either a mutual friend must have liked this tweet, or perhaps my data profile curates content that mentions Pollard specific content. Flo Milli, a 21 year old rapper from Alabama is depicted in the video acting out an iconic scene from *Flavor of Love* season 1, playing both the parts of Pollard and "Hottie", another contestant.[16] The scene depicts "Hottie" relating that she often is compared to Beyoncé, to which Pollard reacts skeptically repeating "Beyonce? Beyonce?" to mock the other contestant's comparison of herself to the pop star. I both remember this scene from its original context on the show, and from seeing the scene circulated in meme, gif, and short video form within my digital networks on Twitter and Instagram.

Fig 2.2

"not flo milli reenacting tiffany pollard's 'beyoncé? beyoncé? Beyoncé sweetie" tweet. Source: https://twitter.com/chuuzus/status/1338410369547710465

From this video I infer appreciation, nostalgia, and a closed circuit of in group humor and knowledge. Flo Milli performs the gestural styling of both Pollard and the other cast member and employs a voiceover from the original scene to recreate the encounter by playing both performers. In her reenactment, the comedic timing of this reality TV exchange is further exacerbated and drawn out. I do not second-guess that a number of Flo Milli's fans, many of which presumably were not watching *Flavor of Love* when it aired on cable, would be able to understand the recreations context. The recreation video, in showcasing Flo Milli's performance abilities outside of musical talent, creates a new context for understanding both the extracted scene she recreates, as well as the significance of the original as continuing to be meme-worthy.

This chapter will delve into the distinction and similarities between the two types of Pollard memes shown above, as well as varying other memes of Pollard that circulate in social media networks. Tiffany Pollard first appeared on VH1's reality dating show *Flavor of Love* (2006), and subsequently starred in multiple VH1 spin offs including *I Love New York* (2007-2008), *New York Goes to Hollywood* (2008), and *New York Goes to Work* (2009). Pollard has since appeared on numerous other reality programs and maintained a small celebrity status and fandom. I consider what the meme version of Pollard's likeness, as taken specifically from her appearances on reality television over ten years ago, signifies in this contemporary cultural moment.

Meme uses of Tiffany Pollard circulate within online spaces a number of her varied gestures, reactions, and statements. The tension between appreciation of Pollard's humor and the knowledge that some (if not many) users circulate her image as representative of the "sassiness" (Fuller 2001; Wayne 2009) or "ratchetness" (Warner 2015; Thompson-Jones 2019; Brock 2020; Hernandez 2020) that is attributed to ample images of Black women troubles notions of visibility versus stereotypical mimicry within digital spaces. Examining the complicated relationship between invisibility and hypervisibility (Fleetwood 2011, Noble 2013), which become further complicated within digital networks that have increased the speed and exchange of images. I argue that using a digital disidentificatory method and theorizing a black feminist digital affect complicates and helps to clarify issues surrounding misuse and appropriation of images of black performers by non-black users in online spaces, otherwise known as "digital blackface."

As I argue throughout this dissertation, a meme's significance is defined from its content, form, circulation, and distinctive affect. As with the analysis of Johansson as meme-able subject, the various meme forms that include Pollard are referential to her performances on screen, in this case on reality television. The web of contextual cues that make up the usage and exchange of gifs and memes of black women's performances from reality television demonstrate the intricacies of racialized affect to be examined through this one example of the continued usage of Pollard's image in digital spaces.

Reality TV and "bad" representation

While out of context when viewed in GIFs and memes on social media, my argument regarding queer ironic consumption calls for a contextualization of black women's performances on reality television before and surrounding the time period that *Flavor of Love* first premiered. VH1's *Flavor of Love (FoL*) followed in the steps of dating reality shows such as *the Bachelor*, but with a distinctive element showcased not only in Flavor Flav's signature brand of wardrobe and antics, but a purposefully tongue in cheek portrayal of groupie-fans set up in ridiculous circumstances and challenges. Coming four years after the premiere of ABC's *the Bachelor* in 2002 and subsequent series *The Bachelorette*, VH1's cable programming showcased different stakes, challenges, and outrageous behavior from contestants. Following Flav's performances on season three of *The Surreal Life* (2004) and its spin off *Strange Love* (2005), which explored the romance between Flav and his *Surreal Life* cast mate Brigitte Nielson, VH1's spin off model of reality television occupied a substantial programming block during the early 2000's. Though a multi-

racial collection of potential love interests, a distinct impression of reality TV "trashiness" pervades the set up and competition through the two seasons of the show. Flav's performance as the self-proclaimed "Black-chelor" is contextually situated over a decade after his popularity as hype man for influential group Public Enemy.[17] Even though fantastical, and clearly casting, scripting and editing play heavily into creating this reality television fantasy, the sets and storylines on a show such as *FoL* create a self-referential reality TV universe style, particular to this style of dating competition shows.

Fighting, and particularly women fighting, is central to reality television. From physical brawling (e.g. *Jerry Springer)* to catfighting (e.g. *Bad Girls Club*) to climactic blowouts with throwing drinks in faces and clawing at wigs (e.g. *Real Housewives*), emotional outbursts constitute the reality television "money shot." Instances of violence and fighting are exceedingly meme-able and function in reality TV as "branded affect": "dramatic outbursts of emotional expressivity are 'branded' only as they are taken up, circulated, replayed, and recycled as indexes of a celebrity persona." (Grinstaff & Murray 2015, 111) While only a selection of circulated memes and GIFs of Pollard are situated within contexts of physical confrontation and violence (see for example Pollard/ Pumpkin fight)[18] there are many other "money shot" moments of raw, real emotion from Pollard's reality TV performances that circulate as memes.

Various scholars of reality television from the time of *FoL*'s airing reference the "bad representation" matrix of black female stereotypes said to be exhibited on reality TV. (Pozner 2010) Within these critiques, there are multiple examples of

chastising and decrying the new outlets for stereotypical portrayals of Black women that mimic Patricia Hill Collins' "controlling images" (1990) such as the Jezebel, the Mammy, the Sapphire, and the Welfare Queen. Of these critiques, many decry how the women are over sexualized (Palmer-Mehta et al. 2009, Dagbovie-Mullins & Sika 2013) and baited to argue and get into physical altercations that reinforce "angry black woman" stereotypes. Jennifer Pozner (2010) for example critiques the use of "guilty pleasure" as oversimplified to signal straightforward schadenfreude, when in fact the reflection of ingrained stereotypes justify larger implications of sexist and racist presumptions in the "real world."

Pozner's critique centers the producers of these series of reality shows for VH1, Mark Cronin and Cris Abrego, who she argues orchestrate this "lucrative franchise on racist mockery of Pollard and fellow Flavorettes." (188) This argument position, that production and editing are the puppeteers of "bad" reality television is difficult to contradict, as casting for reality centers on finding a certain type of person who will perform "branded affect" in front of cameras. Pozner claims: "In Pollard, Cronin and Abrego found not only the ultimate Jezebel, but someone they could position as embodying every trope discussed in chapter 3. ('Bitches, Morons and Skanks)" (187) In the article "I Love New York: Does New York Love Me?" (2008) Shannon Campbell and her co-authors argue that the portrayal by Pollard and her mother "Sister Patterson" are re-articulations of the Jezebel and Sapphire stereotypes. Campbell et al. argue Pollard's "lustful appearance, promiscuous demeanor and manipulative behavior make her the perfect Jezebel for the 21st century," as everything about her was "a profound exaggeration, from her lengthly

highlighted hair weave and thick protracted false eyelashes to the four inch stiletto shoes she dons." (23) Policing of "exaggerated" femininity, particular to racialized components of aesthetic excess such as hair weaves, foreclose the potential for WOC to find expression and power within high-femme identities that are linked to cultural signifiers (Hernandez 2020).

Pozner cites Campbell et al. and agrees with their perspective on Pollard's affected performance of femininity-as-imagined-by-men: "We heard her moan breathily one minute and rant in irate, Sapphire-esque tirades the next, always in getups that revealed as much of her breast implants as allowed on basic cable"(Pozner 187). Arguing in essence that there is nothing "real" about Pollard or her performance, these critiques which claim to be leveled from the position of wanting to empower women on screen manage to do the opposite in stripping Pollard of any agency or power within the confines of a highly-produced and over the top reality show image. "Does New York Love Me?" goes even further in the article's claim that *I Love New York* represents internalized patriarchy:

> *I Love New York* is problematic for black women for various reasons. The show not only impacts the way others view and interact with black women, but also impacts the way black women view themselves. We believe *I Love New York* is patriarchal at its core. But much worse is its mediated introduction of internalized patriarchy by black women to black women. We believe the violence of patriarchy and misogyny is only exceeded by the devastation of internalizing patriarchy in African American women. Furthermore, we view black

> women's acceptance, acquiescence and ultimate reinforcement of the patriarchal archetype as black female patriarchy. (Campbell, et al. 2008, 26)

In this allegation, it is the show as a whole that is implicated in patriarchal depictions of romantic interest and idealized femininity. Because Pollard as a Black woman plays this role, she is accused of internalized misogyny and reinforcement of "bad" representations for Black women on screen. This critique leveled against Pollard echoes the baseline notions of Higginbotham's (1993) "respectability politics" and cultural policing. As response to the imperative that black women performers must model 'good' behavior, it must be noted that white women performers are not asked to be 'representatives of the race' in any similar manner. Because the format of *I Love New York* adheres to Vh1's reality dating show model, where the bachelor/bachelorette is the sexual focal point and the 'challenges' that contestants must participate in to win her attention often involve sexual innuendo and brazen attempts to demonstrate both romantic and sexual deservingness, playfulness as a tone and awareness of the camp aspects of this Bachelorette-style off shoot actually produce less of an aura of sincerity that accompanies long running network dating shows. Labeling the tone of *I Love New York* as a sort of reverse misogyny misconstrues the components of humor and ironic sensibility that construct the character of the show. I would argue these critiques presume a certain viewership and standpoint that does not provide space for humor and irony, particularly from the viewership of other black women. Watching reality TV from a disidentificatory viewpoint allows negotiations between performer, style, format,

and view position. Enjoying "bad" reality TV through a practice of disidentifications does not necessitate mockery or contempt for the performer, but rather enacts a node and feeling of 'alikeness' and enjoyment from this form of entertainment. Rethinking the uses of "bad" TV and "negative" representations offers a background for understanding the exchange of contemporary memes from these reality TV exchanges.

Productive uses of "negative" representation

From the critical perspective exemplified by Pozner and Campbell et. al, the performance of Pollard and the other "Flavorettes" are incapable of originality and are being puppeteered by the producers in all aspects. While certainly shows such as *FoL* are not edited and produced with the intention of highlighting "respectable" women's behaviors, shutting down the authenticity of the performances and independent choices within the confines of the reality TV strips agency and power away from the show's cast mates. Presumption of "mockery" dismisses different positions of viewership and especially finding pleasure in ironic reading that is not wrapped up in derision or contempt. Underestimation of the cultural literacy and capacity for enjoyment without cruel affective nodes of mockery disavows the potential for enjoying silly and outrageous reality television without malevolent relationship to the participants.

It could be argued that the majority of viewership for these franchised spin off reality dating shows is positioned within a matrix of ironic/camp/guilty pleasure consumption. The distance between viewer and performer creates a distancing in cases of ironic consumption. As Charles McCoy and Roscoe Scarborough argue:

"These consumers of 'bad' television accept a symbolic boundary between acceptable and unacceptable television, but also transgress that boundary by consuming television that they themselves label in negative terms." (2014, 42) The transgression of symbolic boundaries by knowingly consuming television recognized as "bad" allows viewers to gain pleasure from consumption while maintaining a distance from the characters depicted on the show. This argument and my own, that ironic consumption of "bad" TV does not necessitate a process of identification between viewer and cast member, challenges the critiques of Pozner and others that bad representation leads to internalized misogyny for both cast mates and viewers who absorb these stereotypical images. Labeling the content viewers enjoy within "negative terms" does not disqualify the potential for joy and humor in the experience of consumption. This reading of ironic distancing is related to how I frame digital disidentifications in the memes using Pollard's image and other contextual images form 'bad' reality TV. The act of disidentifying with that which is not similar to you in relationship to a cast member on reality television facilitates a relationship of connecting to and seeing oneself in that which is not within the matrix of self-representative.

Reading performances such as *FoL* both through the lens of ironic distancing *and* disidentifying with the performances, locating critical observations extracted from "bad" media requires pushing past dismissal and disapproval. To both view through ironic distance as well as identify moments of negative affect, such as being in agreement with a performer's emotional reaction, or laughing alongside a character making fun of another character, allows a disidentifying mode of

viewership. Racquel Gates (2018) argues that it is precisely because of the location of reality television programming "in the gutter" that it is allowed to delve into topics and negative emotional terrains that were not being addressed in "respectable" TV counterparts like sitcoms and hour-long dramas. "For while reality television's instances of sexism and racism warrant scrutiny, we should not limit our discussion to just these, as if these are the genre's *only* salient features. While realism can function to pass off certain ideological structures as natural, it can also serve to take apart those same constructions" (147). The "realism" of what is understood to be behind the scenes and what appears in the final edits of a reality television episode often purposefully plays with and deconstructs vérité realism, especially in the self-referential reality TV spaces such as the various *FoL*/*I Love New York* spinoffs. The "realness" of these sorts of reality shows is understood not to be documentarian, but rather edited and commented on to construct narrative. Speaking specifically to the problem of "bad representation" of black characters on reality TV, Gates pushes for a critical approach to viewing negative elements of these kinds of programming with the ability to read these texts alongside the potential for performances that escape the bounds of respectability politics. As I argue with the use of digital disidentifications, exchange of negative portrayals and expressions of bad emotions within meme form allows online discourse to exchange digital stand-ins for longer forms of expressing various affective responses which also exceed the bounds of respectability or "positive" representation.

Understanding negative stereotypical representations does not always foreclose the possibility to enjoy performances that exist outside of "respectable"

arenas. Robin Boylorn's (2008) autoethnographic piece allows her as a black female viewer to traverse the tension between understanding the negative stereotypical images portrayed by the women on *FoL*, as well as relating and identifying with the women's performances.

> I am in conflict. I relate to Black women on reality television in more ways than one. In more ways than I would readily admit. Though I resist some of the ways that they choose to express themselves and ''represent the race,'' I understand the desperation to have your voice/experience heard after being silenced for far too long. I understand the impulse to be loved/wanted/desired/chosen by a Black man when statistics suggest a crisis in Black male-female relationships (Franklin, 2000; Morgan, 1999). I oftentimes find myself ''performing'' and ''being'' whatever it is people expect from me in given situations. (Boylorn 420)

This confessional traverses many of the criticisms waged against the show, the dynamics between performance of affection and desire, and the need to "represent the race" in a way that showcases respectability and does not conform to harmful stereotypes. Boylorn feels in conflict because she relates to the cast mates on the show, while also not wanting to be identified within the limitations of stereotypical reality television behavior and performance. "I feel conflicted because I find myself embracing some images and rejecting others while finding a piece of myself (the good and not-so-good parts of me) in them at the same time. The representations, both stereotypical and atypical, are so familiar to me. I know people who could fit both extremes and I am stuck somewhere in between." (419) Here Boylorn exposes

how identification with reality TV performances do not necessarily mean internalization of racialized sexism as it exists on the program, but a negotiation between acknowledging familiarity through disidentificatory practice. As opposed to a reading of ironic consumption that only facilitates a distancing between viewer and cast member, Boylorn's confessional exposes the gray area between seeing similarity and disidentifying with "problematic" performances of Black femininity within the confines of reality television.

Describing a show as a whole or a specific type of behavior depicted on the show as either "trashy" or "ratchet" depends wholly on the spectrum of racialized affect.[19] Often positioned and associated racially alongside "white trash", trashiness denotes a deviation from the presumed neutral position of white middle class "respectable behavior": "That whiteness is taken to be synonymous with privilege and social power is evidenced by the very existence of white trash as a social category." (Brown 2005, 76)[20] While trashiness is racialized as ratchet most commonly with expressions of black female anger, scholarship working to reclaim and provide new contexts and definitions of ratchet as racialized affect have spoken to the expansive potentials for black women and girls to embrace and transform the negative associations attached to the term. Looking to how performances of "excessive" or "extra" behavior is able to break the limited constraints of what is deemed "respectable" black femininity (Stalling 2013, Pickens 2015, Hernandez 2020), ratchet offers a space of potentiality, rather than associational-matrixes of behaviors that should be criticized or policed.

In citing the racialized affect prevalent in shows such as *FoL*, Kristen Warner (2011) argues for the productive readings and potentials for Black women's performances to exceed the confines of whiteness and respectability. "Put simply, the ways that black women engage within these texts does cross the boundaries of acceptability and it certainly does position itself in-between the paradox of too much and not enough but it also presents an image of black femininity that is not often allowed televisually, enabling women of color to endure and to enjoy who they are without the bounds of whiteness." (Warner 2011) To allow space for celebration of Black femininity instead of derision of "ratchet" behavior that putatively reinforces negative stereotypes, Warner contends that the performances on *FoL* exceed 'the bounds of whiteness' that mitigate being 'too much or not enough.'

While acknowledging the limited choices available within the confines of reality TV, Gates argues that there is significance in "how they use the very behaviors labeled as 'ratchet' to achieve a degree of autonomy regarding the representational and economic aspects of their lives." (144) Achieving said degree of autonomy, outside the limitations the spectrum of "acceptable" behavior as defined by white femininity, and with an embrace of "excessive" performance style cast members showcase otherwise unseen or untelevised affective performances.

> The fear of bad representation is often deemed more important than viewer negotiations and the affective responses they produce. Thus, the burden for black women who appear on these series is dual: although they are already performing the most entertaining versions of themselves, they also have to cautiously navigate the murky and

> often unintentional pitfalls of stereotypes. Moreover, these black female reality TV casts are often tasked with the labor of having to disarm and acknowledge their performances as not representative of their people or racial group. (Warner 2015, 135)

Having the responsibility as performers to both exhibit the most entertaining version of themselves, as well as to be wary of approximating a damaging stereotype and thus becoming a "bad" representation of a larger group of women is a daunting task for these cast members. Warner's emphasis on the value of the affective responses produced enables analysis such as my own to investigate what affective resonances are produced on the end of the viewers, rather than a hyper-focused criticism of a limiting and oftentimes troublesome formatting for televisual performance exhibited in shows such as *FoL*.

Warner and Gates' reading of these "negative texts" allow a movement away from the incessant dismissal of problematic stereotypes and confines of the genre in order to view and investigate the other side of ironic consumption. Gates argues, "negative texts offer a respite from the all-too-real responsibilities of racial uplift and image management" (27). Because of the space that is made within "bad" entertainment to not have to be "good," the responsibilities inherent in black female screen performances are reduced, and the potential for expression of emotions that are typically defined as "negative" are encouraged. Pleasure in viewing reality tv need not be synonymous with schadenfreude, "I argue that these shows provide viewers with pleasure stemming not from schadenfreude (as many in the academic and popular spheres might quickly offer), but, instead, from the collective

experience of being systematically denied access to the aspects to the American Dream and/or neoliberal notion of success that most mainstream media offer." (Gates 166) Rather than a simplistic understanding of enjoyment of "bad" media as a reinforcement of the distance between viewer and subject, Gates and Warner hypothesize how the space created by these sorts of programs allow performances that exceed narrow confines of mainstream normalcy, push notions of success, and allow racialized affects to produce new sites of analysis.

Critics of excessive femininity and promiscuity depicted on reality TV detach the actor from the performance which validates the claim that these performances are nothing but production/ fabrication/ coercion. Scholars pushing back against the matrix of good vs. bad representation are able to locate how performers like Pollard are refusing to conduct themselves within the limitations of respectability politics, as is proven through her continued relevance from small screen (TV) to smaller screen (laptop/smartphone) a decade after the show went off air.

Debating Digital Blackface

Given the above examination into the uses of racialized affect within reality TV performances, what distance is taken and what transformation occurs when these images are transposed into stagnant meme images or into animated GIFs? This section will address the relationship between racialized affect and digital racialization in the context of out-of-context uses of memes and GIFs taken from Black women's performances on reality TV. The recent condemnation of usage of what has been labeled "digital blackface" is often misinterpreted or used as blanket disapproval without insight into reasons for the popularity of these GIFs, and which

online communities are exchanging these images with regularity.[21] For white and non-BIPOC users to be employing GIFs of Pollard to express their reaction in digital spaces demands an analysis of appropriation of gendered and racialized affect.

As Eric Lott (1993) contends in the context of minstrelsy: the "slipperiness" (30) of the minstrel mask acts both as a celebration of inferred cultural 'authenticity,' as well as racist mockery. The movement and exchange between mimicry, imitation, and appreciation has long offered sites for cross-racial transgressions, as are explored in histories of racial performance on stage and screen (Gubar 2000, Lane 2008, Sammond 2015). "As for the counterfeit, it is clear enough from the evidence that consciousness of the copy did not foreclose on a variety of responses to its "blackness." (Lott, 101) As Lott explains, the audience's understanding that minstrel performers were imitators/ counterfeits did not foreclose on their feeling that a portrayal of some sort of black 'authenticity' was still being performed. I see this directly related to usage of black people's images as stand in for affective or reactionary responses. When a user comes across an image of black affectation online, paired with the accompanying 'negative feelings' (such as exasperation, dismissal, irritation, loss of patience) what portion of those nodes of feeling are constructed racially by the expression of the image, and what other contextual matrixes of understanding are in play by the time the image has circulated enough to merit its own accompanying keywords and phrases? The image of Pollard rolling her eyes (fig 2.3) could mean any number of expressions of exasperation, but to not consider her gender and race when exchanged in this format denies the continued usage by white users who seek to express something

they could not achieve in words, or with memes that feature white performers.[22]

Fig 2.3

Pollard rolling her eyes GIF. Source: https://giphy.com/gifs/reaction-miley-cyrus-new-york-1nLCRW0Cf1xm0

The conflict between visibility/ representation and racist uses of images when a figure or a gesture is made to stand in for the whole of an identity category becomes even more complicated in online spaces. I argue that digitized racialization complicates a matrix between appropriation—appreciation—acknowledgment and that not all uses of images of Black women exchanged in online discursive spaces should be subsumed under the category of "digital blackface." Consideration of how to navigate digital blackface vs. appropriation vs. imitation brings my argument back to thinking about digital racialization online.

Application of representational and inter-textual readings of race to specific sites on the internet presents similar pitfalls of racial essentialism and determination based on the privileging of visual regimes of racial representation. Lisa Nakamura (2008) argues for an updated framework for analyzing gender and racial representation within digital spaces. Nakamura's theory of digital racial

formation interrogates how visual capital is "created, consumed, and circulated on the Internet" (15). As a primarily visual medium, digital forms engage users in "reading" identities online as they would in analog spaces. "The graphical Internet demands a type of interpretive modality that goes beyond the textual, one that replaces the notion of "reading" or even "viewing" with a transcoded model of parsing. The mode and type of iteration, the order and positioning of symbols, and the codes by which it is read determine the way that a new media object interacts with its user" (35). Nakamura's notion of "parsing" through codes, symbols and iterations of identity formation online aligns with the difficulty of representational regimes to fully depict identity categories and the material realities of livelihoods. Race when parsed through visual matrixes of organization and understanding undergo another layer of separation and identification when read through digital mediums.

> Visual representations of race and racism work paradoxically: they are both irresistible spectacles and social problems. Racial difference and racialized bodies are mediagenic in ways that appeal to all viewers. And since the nature of digital media is to be transcodable, instantly transmittable, and infinitely reproducible, racial imagery flows in torrents up and down the networks that many people use every day. (Nakamura 2008, 194)

The specific "racial imagery" of Tiffany Pollard circulating online is entangled within layers of association between reality TV performance, and what black femininity does within virtual spaces. When racialized bodies become commodities to be

shared and exchanged, there are ever-expanding potential harmful uses, which carry with them uncalculated impacts to how this proliferation of images impacts material conditions for racialized populations.

The issue of context vs. decontextualization, as I outline here, can result in new negative contexts, new positive contexts, or ambivalent affective realms. Instead of arguing usage of Pollard's image is "good" or "bad," it is worthwhile to examine the relationship between the content of a meme, the viewership/ reception, and the multiple forms and adaptations that evolve in order to situate meaning on a case by case basis. As evident in the pop-journalistic framing of "be wary of digital blackface," I am arguing that not every instance of the use of Pollard's image engages in appropriative visual process that replicates the use of Blackface in film, and that more research into how communities of color circulate images based in nostalgic attachment (Ahad-Legardy 2021) is necessary to facilitate analysis of meme trends utilizing images of black performers.

GIFs and Affect

Viewing a GIF such as Pollard sitting on the bed, my own context encompasses the original performance on the TV show, and my own association and understanding of a generalized ironic viewership of these types of reality shows both at the time of their airing and through a nostalgic lens. The memetic weight of Pollard as a symbol used within memes in the last five years or so, as well as my extensive research on Pollard as a subject that transcends these many visual forms and knowledges, informs how I interpret her image as meme. Moving outward from my perspective, if I had never seen the show but had knowledge of Pollard's image

within meme networks, I could glean context. If I had never seen the show and did not have context of how Pollard operates within digital discourse visually, she would be an unknown Black female figure who looks annoyed. To theorize her anonymity in the mind of someone unfamiliar with her television career returns to the question of what a decontextualized Black woman means within the GIF and meme format. Central to the tension here and teetering between appropriation and appreciation is this central concern regarding context, and lack thereof.

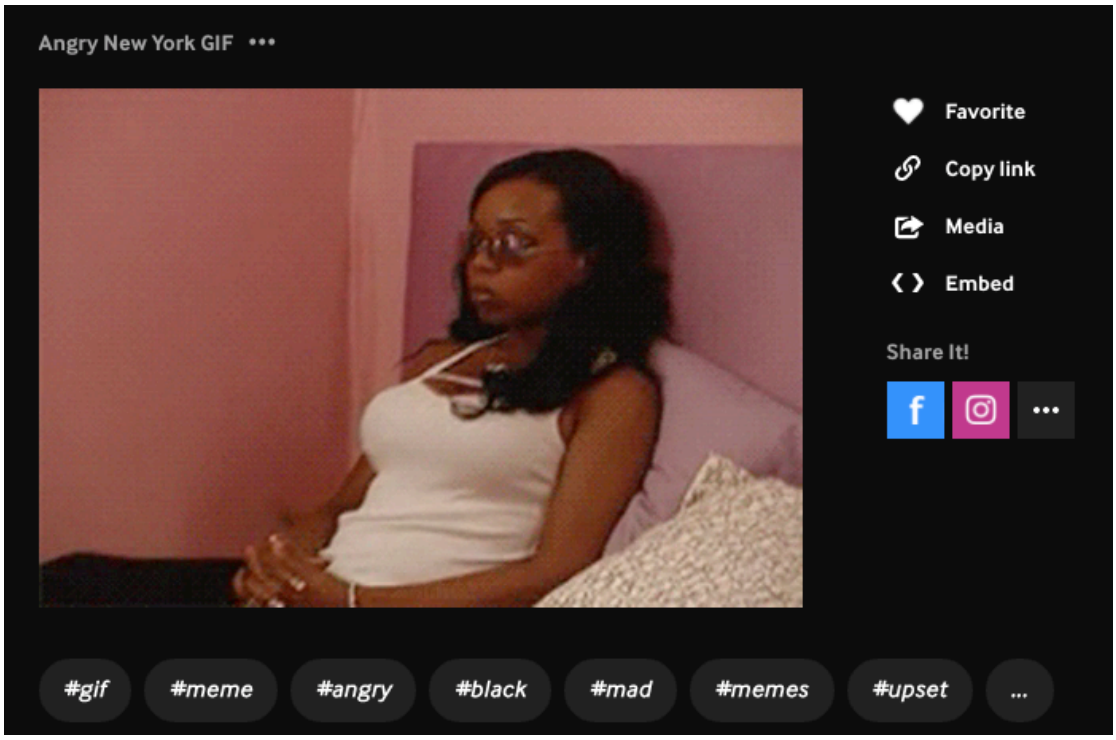

Fig 2.4
"Angry New York GIF." Source: https://giphy.com/gifs/gaga-s-J6ctgPvnDpDi0

GIFs are short looped video files without audio, often embedded within texts, tweets, and other forms of digital discourse. GIFs also perform a distinct function within digital discourse: "They illustrate points, provide information, and act as an exclamation and reference in one, allowing them to be useful means for performing identity, humor, expertise, and community in online environments" (Miltner &

Highfield 4) According to Mashable.com, the most popular GIF of 2018 was a clip of Cardi B expressing her catch phrase "Okurrrr" (who importantly appeared on reality TV as well). Frequently seen GIFs of black women from reality TV and talk shows include *Wendy Williams*, those of the cast of *Real Housewives of Atlanta*, cast members from *Love and Hip Hop*, and *Little Women of Atlanta.*[23] The main goal for an app like giphy, the same as for Instagram/ Facebook, and Twitter, is to get the user to stay on the site for as long as possible in order to generate advertising revenue. Hyper-personalization of the sort of content that appears on your feed occurs in order to keep the user engaged on the platform.[24] The logic follows that as digital surveillance capitalism expands alongside the affective excess/surplus (Cardeñas 2017) that hyper-specification and echo-chamber networks of content exchange will only produce more examples of case studies such as Pollard to speak to larger ongoing questions of racial representation online and what role racialized affect will play in the future of memes. As black female affectation carries proximity to blackness as a commodifiable "coolness" (Roth-Gordon et al. 2020) the relationship between the digital/social classifications of popularity, in-group humor, belonging and membership within elite digital/social communities speaks to the move toward an increased usage of black images online to signal a wide variety of affectations and reactions.

Returning to my two examples at the beginning of this chapter, contextualization of GIF use is dependent on multiple elements, with possibly the most difficult to decipher being the users meaning and relationship to their own choice to use any one GIF. Users might retweet something because they relate to one

aspect of it but don't know the source of the image, thereby circulating this image to their followers who may or may not know the context of the image. This matrix of meaning and lack of context is actually constitutive of the contemporary experience of "being online." "The combination of transcending context, and reinforcing and extending meanings through repetition and remix positions the GIF as a key part of the lingua franca of the social web." (Miltner & Highfield year, 6) The movement between a GIFs context, to separation from context, to creation of new context creates exponential uses, understandings and interpretations from a single image, which could have gone long forgotten such as a scene from an obscure reality show a decade ago. Eventually, if you are a participant in a digital counterpublic that uses a certain set of GIFs/memes regularly, even seeing a still image or a capture of that GIF or short video implies the situation and context, adding an additional distance from the source and an additional mastery of "being in on the joke" within distinctive digital networks.

GIFs while stripped from their original context have the ability to create specific affective impacts through their animation. They can function as substitution for human bodily expressions. The relationship between viewing a GIF of a person's gestures or facial expression and reading a substitution of a human body demands a racial analysis. The function of GIF files is wrapped up in affect and animation through historical situating of racialized "animatedness" and violent images dating back to blackface performances that exhibit Black emotionality and over-animation. (Sammond 2015)

Arguing for the GIFs usage as proxy for affect that can function "as substitution of the individual human body" (Kuo 2019, 181) inclusive of not only exaggerated movement but subtleties including gestures, facial expressions, clicks of the tongue, eye rolling, and more. "The decontextualization of the reaction GIF has the effect of creating a new, partial narrative within the GIF that is only completed when the loop is employed; as Eppink (2014) explains, "the role of these GIFs is not primarily aesthetic; they are gestures, performed actions that are not fully realized until they meet their catalysts (p. 303)." (Miltner & Highfield, 5) In a piece for *Teen Vogue*, Lauren Michele Jackson asks:

> If there's one thing the Internet thrives on, it's hyperbole and the overrepresentation of black people in GIFing everyone's daily crises plays up enduring perceptions and stereotypes about black expression. And when nonblack users flock to these images, they are playacting within those stereotypes in a manner reminiscent of an unsavory American tradition. Reaction GIFs are mostly frivolous and fun. But when black people are the go-to choice for nonblack users to act out their most hyperbolic emotions, do reaction GIFs become 'digital blackface'? (Jackson 2017)

Memetic "hyper-signification" (Shifman 2014, 352) and the concept of the hyperbolic nature of Black expression collides in the question regarding digital blackface that Jackson posits. The connection between hyper-animation and racialized affect must be central in analysis regarding meme-ification of Black women, as I specifically address in the use of Pollard's likeness in GIF form.

As a looping affective gesture or affective stance, GIFs that employ the likeness of Black women necessitate a reading alongside a theorization of racialized "animatedness." Sianne Ngai's (2005) work on the uses of "ugly feelings" is useful to my argument here, specifically in regards to theorizing racialized affect alongside the concept of animatedness. Ngai situates the historical aesthetic of racist cartoons in American screen culture alongside "the ideologically complex questions of animatedness as an affective quality, the agency of mechanized or technologized bodies, and the comic representation of the racially marked subjects." (112) Animatedness has the capacity to invoke puppetry and ventriloquism, the animation of inanimate objects, as well as the possession of excessive emotions or expressivism by an individual or group, the quality of being animated or speaking animatedly.

GIF animation's looping provides a relatively new format for analysis of racialized animatedness and animation. Extraction from media to GIF consistently provides a meme worthy digital file that encompasses one or multiple affective responses, such as irritation, disbelief, or frustration. These negative affects, or what Ngai labels as "ugly feelings," "can be described as conducive to producing ironic distance in a way that the grander and more prestigious passions…do not." (10) These new sites of analysis for the deployment of stereotypes surrounding racial animatedness must be conceptualized not just from the location of the presumed white neutral viewer, but by those within the "in-group" context providing a very different set of associations and "chains of reinterpretation" (Kuo).

Violence fragmented and "re-animated"

The distance traveled from the context of the images and clips coupled with the prevalence of exchange between non-black users opens up questions of how Black womanhood is being disseminated and used within online platforms, and to what extent hyper-visibility and hyper-signification impact material implications for women of color, as well as the meaning and motivation behind the choice of using one meme over another. As Ngai has argued, "(as an affective spectacle) animation calls for new ways of understanding the technologization of the racialized body as well as the uneasy differential between types and stereotypes…"(125) Especially when signifying an emotion, depending on viewer location that emotion could read as individual, grouped, or stereotypically expressive of one certain group of people (in this case, Black women). The slipperiness between association of type and the solidification of stereotypes complicates a generalized reading of GIFs that showcase Black women.

Monica Torres (2016) speaks to the violent capacities of GIFs of Black death, using the example of the police dashboard camera video of the murder of Laquan McDonald, which was turned into a GIF and circulated. Torres argues that the looping, through the repetition of violence is one example of extreme lack-of-context that brings to the forefront only the affective and affecting violence.

> On an infinite loop in gifs, this hyperanimation re-enacts the spectacle for our consumption, puppets made to rise and fall, victims without sanctuary. They mimic Allen's lynching postcards, but without the critical context his curation and commentary provides. In looping, the larger context is cropped out and we are left with only the most

> inflammatory, most affecting moment. This distillation, by definition, exploits and subtracts the context to extract an event's viral essence. (Torres 2016)

This subtraction of context and extraction of "viral essence" is fundamental to the ways GIFs, and memes more broadly, have the ability to create vectors of "affective contagion" (Cardeñas 2017). Within these examples, GIFs can convey a spectrum of feeling and emotion, in which the moving images outside of their original context create, through circulation and digital community, new contexts themselves. Micha Cardeñas speaks to the "necropolitical affect" that digital media affords, specifically in relation to how Black trans death is publicized within the digital realm. "I see my friends who are black and trans ask, 'When will I become a hashtag?' speculating on a transcendence into the digital only occasioned by death."(Cardeñas 2017, 173) Transcendence for many Black populations outside of entertainment into the digital and the memetic can often only be occur once popularized online after untimely death.

Racist embodiments that find new forms in digital arenas must be considered within my argument as to the varying lenses through which to examine Pollard's image as meme and GIF. Aria Halliday offers a critical insight into the uses of black women's bodies in meme form in her discussion of Nicki Minaj's "Anaconda" video imagery and how it was reformulated, cropped, and disembodied online. By critiquing the way Minaj's image, which in the song and music video celebrates her bodily figure and ownership over her sexuality, became a commodity online that was meme-ified and removed from its initial context, Halliday argues that

circumstances of meme-ification such as this can commandeer the creative intent of the subject and re-formulate their image for exploitation and larger cultural consumption (2018, 75). Fragmentation and mutilation in Halliday's context is representative of the dehumanization of Black women, over-sexualized and pieced apart, commoditized for pleasure and entertainment.

Halliday constructs her argument in terms of the memetic power of images that are removed from their contexts, and through what she defines as "viral reification": "the process of commodification through the recycling of demonizing ideas and concepts in digital spaces; and objectification through the denial of humanity in regurgitated racist and misogynist images" (2018, 69). This "regurgitation" comes in the forms in which Minaj was "be-headed" (by having her head replaced with another's on her body), (Fig2.5) and as such fragmented and dis-embodied in ways that are reminiscent of historical violences enacted upon black women's bodies.

Fig 2.5

Source: Top 20 Nicki Minaj "Anaconda" Memes | VIBE MAGAZINE https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SOK_Y4q8Zls

Halliday's argument about Minaj's fragmentation through meme variations

speaks to transmutability and what possibilities arise once an artist's form is deprived of the context of her creation. Framing "her technological decapitation" (76) within the meme formats that cropped and replaced Minaj's head, Halliday connects stolen context and severing of bodily wholeness as a dehumanizing function. To relate this to the use of Pollard in reaction GIFs, perhaps the terminology of "ventriloquism" articulates the particular problem with non-black users puppetering Pollard's image as stand-in for relating a sentiment. This issue speaks as well to the stereotypical depiction of black bodies, faces, and language as hyper-animated, which harkens back to minstrel logics.

Theorizing the harms done in the process of fragmentation that happens in memetic uses of Black women's bodies and faces, the question returns to viewership, context, and the murky definitions of who constitutes members of this digital viewership. While Halliday and others speak to the many perpetuated harms of digitalization and reanimation of Black embodiment in online networks, turning to discussions of Black Twitter as a distinct digital community formation allows my argument to pivot to networks establishing and circulating moments of Black joy and humor. Black twitter discourse demonstrates potentials of a digital counter-public for community building and embracing the flawed and humorous aspects of whole persons, rather than outwardly identified and therefore incomplete versions of the self. This embrace of the flawed and whole self on Black twitter importantly exceeds and operates outside of the "good representation" matrix.

Coalescing around a hashtag, meme, or viral video, Black Twitter has been defined as a digital counter-public "that enabled critical pedagogy, political

organizing, and both symbolic and material forms of resistance to anti-Black state violence within the United States." (Hill 2018, 287) Continually evolving and resisting the confines of definition or easy identification, examinations of what constitutes a Black twitter discussion or a Black twitter network is dependent on the specifics of the encounter. To attempt to identify the racial or ethnic identity of a Twitter user or users may be more accurate through identifying membership within a conversation. "That is, while internet users bring offline ideologies to bear upon their digital discourses, the digital is the mediator, the enactment, and the performance of the relationship between Blackness and whiteness." (Brock 2020, 22) While a number of scholars and journalists have worked to define and delineate what is exactly Black twitter *is* (Sharma 2013, Clark 2016, Hill 2018), I build on work that asks what Black twitter *does.*

As another site to analyze digital racialization, race and digital networks are both transformed by "mutual encounter" (Sharma 2013, 47) that occurs within Black twitter discourse. Meredith Clark's (2015) analysis model demonstrates how distinctive communities are built through digital encounter: "Black Twitter as a hashtag public is formed through the uniting of individuals who share some of the interest and characteristics reflective of each participant's physical and virtual identities. As cultural artifacts, the hashtags move through Black Twitter's three levels of connection through a six-stage process of self-selection, identification, performance, affirmation, reaffirmation, and vindication" (207). Clark's analysis of specific hashtag 'artifacts' such as the mockery of Paula Deen with the hashtag #PaulasBestDishes following her racism scandal, and the criticism over white

feminist erasure of women of color shown in the circulation of #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, demonstrate specific instances of cultural impact that moves multi-directionally from media, to Black twitter, and back again. The criticism of white feminist marginalization and vilification of women of color with #Solidarity demonstrated one of the potentials for activism hashtags as awareness campaigns and sites for sharing personal experiences and traumas. The Paula Deen example more closely aligns with what André Brock calls "ratchet digital practice" (130).

Building off Cathy Cohen's "politics of deviance" (2004), Brock uses examples of Black humor and resistance in digital spaces as empowered intentional misuse and 'inappropriate' behavior. Utilizing Twitter in new and inventive ways to rapidly confer about real-time events and shared cultural criticism or celebration, Black Twitter ''highlights the structure, engagement, invention, and performance of these Twitter users employing cultural touch points of humor, spectacle, or crisis to construct discursive racial identity" (110). Highlighting examples that demonstrate joy and humor, Brock identifies moments of digital catharsis that arise from community creation and joining together around a subject, meme, or hashtag. He says, "I see ratchetry and ratchet digital practice as expressions of joy—as celebration of self in defiance of norms that can be imposed by both external and internal forces." (131) Relating ratchet digital practice to pleasure, the Black art of "signifyin'" and "playing the dozens," Brock argues "an inappropriate digital practice can contribute to leisure and quality of life."(143) Engaging with the occurrence of humor and mockery, specifically in resistance to American anti-Blackness and as a

celebration of Black identity online, Brock's work opens the door for examining how shared in-group humor can operate discursively in digital realms.

Brock's uses of "ratchet embodiments of Black femininity" (130) directly relates to the digital travels of Pollard's likeness in online networks. Her continued popularity is entangled with her over the top performance style both amongst nostalgic resuscitators of her image, as well as new admiration from those who were introduced to her reality performances through the gifs and memes.

Continuing cultural impact

Pollard's continued recognition and status as a meme-able subject translate into both a cultural counterpublic of queer ironic consumers and an appreciative contingent of Black female fans who see in Pollard's memetic performances opportunities for expression of negative affects, as well as a comedic common-language. In order to argue for the latter usage, this last section will highlight interviews that position and praise Pollard as both a charismatic reality star with staying power beyond the scope of her televisual performances, as well as a meme icon.

In a June 2018 interview with Pollard, *New York Magazine*'s Allison P. Davis writes: "Pollard's favorite meme shows her sitting on an unmade bed in sunglasses and shoes, perfectly, disturbingly still, during *Flavor of Love* season 1. 'I was so done with everyone, I just needed a moment — and now it's this super huge GIF,' Pollard says. 'People come up to me all the time like, "girl, I don't even speak anymore. I just use you. You're my way of communicating." I don't know how these youngsters even discovered the old-school shows, but it's made me fresh and relevant again. I'm so

grateful for that.'" Pollard's own acknowledgment that these moments from past television shows have enhanced her current relevance through the GIF format is important to consider and take into account. Davis's interview with Pollard takes place at an art show highlighting moments Pollard's famous moments from reality television, a testament in itself to the material benefits that she does in fact receive from her digital popularity. It is not always the case that the meme'd subject has the opportunity to speak to the lasting impacts of the moment that was isolated and made into a traveling digital file.[25] That Pollard herself in this and later interviews is pleased with the proliferation of memes in her image should inform discussion as to whether they are damaging in their circulation.

Doreen St. Felix articulates how sharing of Pollard GIFs among her community in a 2018 has opened up a new way to discuss disheartening politics in an article for the New Yorker:

> Late at night, when I'm texting friends, our conversations sometimes devolve into rapid, wordless exchanges of Pollard images. I especially admire meme use that undercuts, even if briefly, the gassy political speech that has strangled the public arena. On Twitter, the activist Bree Newsome last month wrote a blistering thread critical of the Democratic establishment's reaction to black voters following the special Senate election in Alabama. But it was a textless tweet—of Pollard squinting, disapprovingly—that said the most. This year, too, will bring its outrages, and we will continue to depend on the emotional candor of this looping language: Pollard—annoyed,

> massaging her temples, the crowd-sourced portrait of our resentment.[26]

St. Felix articulates the use potentials for sharing and echoing resentment and discouragement toward the contemporary state of US politics through the signification of affect afforded within the GIFs of Pollard she cites. Engagement in social justice through the language of GIFs, memes, and hashtags can both echo resentments, frustration, exhaustion, and offer a community outlet, a common language, and a laugh. That Pollard in GIF form affords St. Felix's group of friends a digital-visual shorthand to express discontentment without the exhausting work of "respectable" language and coherent critique within her own community of similarly minded and equally politically exhausted friends speaks volumes to the potential uses of Pollard's meme likenesses.

Patia Borja, creator and co-admin of the successful meme account "Patia's Fantasy World" interviewed Pollard for November 2020 issue of Paper magazine.[27] Seconding St. Felix's reference to a knowledge of Pollard within a network of friends, Borja tells Pollard "I think all my friends' sense of humor comes from you. We're always using your photos as reactions, since before social media was even a thing". She then goes on to implicate Pollard's performance as reality star as a representation of anti-respectability politics that impacted her growing up: "Me and my friends really look up to you. I think it inspired me to see that on TV. I was like, 'Wait, I can act however the fuck I want to act.' I'm not gonna be disrespected. When I grew up I was kind of taught: don't be too loud, blah, blah, blah. But to see that on TV, I was like, 'Oh, imma act like her.' Like a person I want to be." Borja expresses to

Pollard the impact of her performance as reality TV star: a representation of honesty and humor that refused "to be disrespected."

Borja and St. Felix's appreciation for Pollard as a real person as well as continued usage and adaptation of her various meme'd moments from the past demonstrate her continued relevance and cultural impact for Black women's communities. Both Black women are able to laugh along wish Pollard, and understand both the context for her contemporary digital relevance, and the potential uses of her likeness when circulated as digital files. As with Raquel Gates' perspective on appreciation of the performances on shows such as *Flavor of Love* beyond the stance of ironic distancing or mockery, there is a larger capacity for analysis and location of meaning beyond "mockery," and beyond shutting down the opportunity for analysis because of the hesitation of executing "digital blackface."

In the last few years as I've focused on Pollard as a site for research of digital networks and communication, the two populations I've most frequently seen using GIFs of Pollard are those I would identify within "Black twitter" and those who I group under a digital counter-public based in queer identity who are largely white and based in New York or Los Angeles, that I would define as "gay twitter." Between Black Twitter and what I'm classifying as "gay twitter," Pollard GIFs are exchanged and Pollard memes are remixed to indicate a number of negative affects and "ugly feelings." Erasure of black queer and feminine affectation, and increasingly the conflation of AAVE with "internet speak" is one process through which black women are villainized, while others are celebrated for employing these vocabularies and gestures (Eberhardt and Freeman 2015). More research into the conflation of

"internet speak" with the rise of popularity of *Ru Paul's Drag Race* and the digital-linguistic flood that stems from queer of color ballroom and drag cultures would certainly demonstrate the various nuances of appropriation versus appreciation that unfold within Gay Twitter.

There is a distinction between the appropriative and extractive usage of the likeness of Black people within memes and GIFs which falls under the umbrella of 'digital blackface,' and uses of GIFs and memes like those of Pollard within Black virtual networks which has the potential to offer a short cut and a visual-digital language to express "ugly feelings" and shared affective resonances of displeasure. I am also arguing that while there are certainly a multitude of examples of appropriative and extractive deployments of digital blackface within networks such as "gay twitter" that a queer ironic consumption model is not one based in mockery or derision, but rather in humor and disidentifictation. As Moya Bailey (2021) argues of the digital content creators she studies, "the digital resistance strategies deployed… utilize a queer framework that eschews respectability or a quest for 'positive' counternarratives"(29). The relationship between queer resistance to respectability, and the historic push of black women against respectability politics may have something to do with the frequency that these digital networks share meme subjects. Because of the long interwoven histories of appropriation of black culture as a commodity, white queer users who may have good intentions based in a matrix of appreciation may unwittingly, or ignorantly, engage in the practice of digital blackface when it comes to Pollard's image.

The limits of representational politics include the demand for "good" or "positive" images of black women, which forecloses opportunities opened up through the exchange of negative feelings and communities created through the expression of dread, irritation, anger, and exhaustion. As a GIF of Pollard sitting annoyed on a bed or rolling her eyes acts as a vehicle capable of expressing the minute and smaller disappointments within personal digital networks, employing this looping language facilitates new possibilities for communication and community building. As Monica Torres puts it: "Potentially more patient and more open than media products with end points, looping gifs, given the right non-sensationalized context, can teach us to dwell and pay attention to the emotional reality within moving bodies that inhabit the frames" (2016). While Pollard is not the only Black female reality star that has a parallel livelihood within the circulation of GIFs and memes, highlighting as a case study her memetic resonance and continued deployment within GIF format demonstrates a number of new sites for defining and troubling black digital signifiers and online networks of community building.

Chapter Three

Memes for the End of the World: Considering Climate Change and Anti-Capitalist Memetics

What can a meme about climate change *do*?

Given my interest in leftist and socially progressive digital modes of information sharing, this chapter looks at moments of overlap between a critical perspective on capitalism and the drive to educate and/or commiserate on the futility of combatting climate change within our current trajectory toward destruction. Pessimism can exist alongside revolutionary impulses. I am aiming to examine a postironic critique of greenwashing tactics alongside a generalized underlying affective turn against optimism and faith in democratic capitalism's ability to properly mitigate damage from the increasingly unfixable problems climate change will present.

There has been much academic debate over the usefulness and purposes of "the Anthropocene" as both a terminology and guiding framework for understanding the current state and the future trajectory of our climate. Black and indigenous feminist scholarship in particular has furthered arguments against an anthropocene narrative framing of climate fatalism. (See Yusoff 2018, Tallbear 2017, Whyte 2017)

This chapter argues that within ironic meme exchange inflected with anti-capitalist sentiment a resonance of anthropocene criticality is finding new avenues and outlets for information sharing. If a logic of blaming racial capitalism and extractivist histories for the contemporary state of climate crisis is located within online modes of discourse, is there a possibility for a democratization or more vast

avenues of knowledge sharing surrounding the Capitalocene (the idea that capitalism is the origin point from which to measure human impact on the environment) (Moore 2014, Haraway 2015) that encourage preventative action? I contemplate this question from the perspective of a feminist media studies analyst, arguing that black feminist deconstruction of dominant temporal logics and historical 'truths' demands a reassessment of current climate discourse in order to attend both to questions of 'origins' as well as organizational and methodological approaches to action. Questions of how online discourse frames climate crisis in terms of perpetrators, historical origins, systemic oppressions and racialized differences are paramount to examining internet memes about climate change.

What follows unfolds within an ongoing cultural phenomenon within real-time. Record setting heat waves in the summer of 2021, following decreased individual emissions during the covid-19 pandemic, have been one factor in the proliferation of memes referencing our current climate crisis.[28] Figure 3.1 depicts a scene from *The Simpsons* in which Bart tells Homer "This is the worst day of my life" and Homer responds "This is the worst day of your life *so far.*" Remixing the joke to reference climate change, the meme creator replaces text original text with "This is the hottest summer of my life" with Homer's reaction stating "this is the coldest summer of the rest of your life." (Fig 3.2)

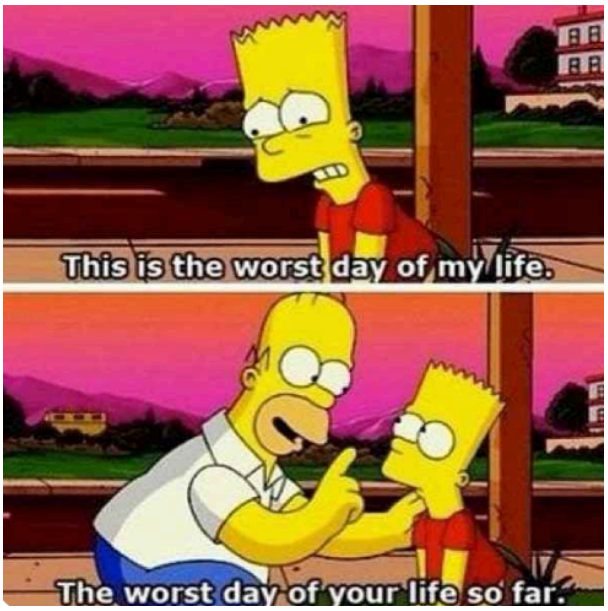

Fig 3.1

Original Simpsons scene. Source: https://www.pinterest.com/pin/131659989082306317/

Fig 3.2

Simpsons meme, "This is the coldest summer of the rest of your life" meme. Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CQd6a-2DN-z/ watermark @queersatanic signals original meme creator

This image was posted by @god.save.the.bean.queen, an account with 7,361 followers (as of 7/13/21) who often posts memes referencing climate change to

mock the absurdities of neoliberal capitalism. This meme is emblematic of an affective register seen often in contemporary memes that either reference the state of crisis, or point toward solutions.[29] Figure 3.2, showing in the top portion the draught map of the west coast in the summer of 2021, reworks the original Simpsons joke regarding how growing up has many "worst days of my life" to specifically speak to increasing temperatures and erratic weather within the U.S.

Considering large-scale global events within a futural timeline is difficult for us as humans to both understand and take action against. This is a question of affect and impact in the wake of undeniable climate catastrophe. The reality of our impending crisis is that some people are going to die before others as a result of climate change. This crisis is a reality that will be seen on a temporal scale, a scale that takes into consideration both the reality of who will not have resources to relocate alongside recent historical examples such as the impact of Hurricane Maria on Puerto Rico and Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans. Differences matter and demand a different urgency than long-term epochal level changes. The importance of race, place, location, and resources matters to the question of origins and the discourse surrounding the anthropocene. Isabelle Stengers (2015) warns of a "planetary New Orleans." The "barbarism" of Hurricane Katrina was not solely a violent act of nature itself, but a consequence of infrastructural racism that abandoned the poor while the rich found shelter.[30]

Figuring a connection between climate pessimism and a move toward techno-pessimism compares the understanding of climate change not as a matter of liberal individualistic blame but on larger scale of capitalist critique. There will be

continuing technological and scientific solutions to sustainability and curbing C02 emissions, but public consensus and collective understanding of our relationship to the changing warming of the planet as itself a "crisis" should be examined from many levels including the sphere of ironically distanced digital meme-scapes.

To do so, I highlight a few distinct examples of viral climate change content in order to speak to the state of consensus and discourse among the left in particular. These examples are chosen in order to question which ways do these conversations move us either forward or backward. How does understanding and push toward greater appreciation of histories of environmental injustice, coinciding with critique of racial capitalism as a whole, impact how climate change memes are created and circulated, and what can this offer future scholars and researchers of the anthropocene?

Framing a crisis online

A "crisis" cannot be taken as a given or a phenomenon for which individuals experience similarly, but rather is constructed through language, framing, and temporality as something that must be paid attention to, and cannot last (van der Meer 2014, Cheng, Juhasz, Shahani 2020). Crises in the arenas of public health, political crises, racial crises, all become subsumed in the framing of environmental issues that encompass political, racial, cultural and public health issues. As Laurent Berlant argues "part of an unfolding historic moment exemplifies the affective experience not of a break or a traumatic present, but of crisis lived within ordinariness." (2008) Digital life lived in the attention economy of "constant media" (Han 2017) reflects and reinforces the "ordinariness" of crisis that demands

immediate attention and solutions. Crisis as perceived and recognized in online discourse requires constant framing and reframing for digital audiences with infinite amounts of information requiring their attention and demanding this particular issue is out of the "ordinary."

Loosely defined as the current epoch dating from the commencement of humanity's impact on Earth's geology and ecosystems, the use of the anthropocene is largely deployed to prove that human impact on the environment has brought us to a new ecological era. While academic attention to the anthropocence has become increasingly prevalent, the theory of anthropocene feminism is not new and has a history beyond what is deemed "ecofeminism" (Vandana 1993, Gaard 2010). Finding the histories and linkages between colonialism, racism, capitalism, and sexism to processes of ecological extraction and extinction has been a feminist project for decades. The anthropocene has also been described as, and used interchangeably with the Capitalocence, which similarly places capitalism as the catalyst and continuous perpetrator of damaging environmental extraction (Moore 2014, Altvater 2016). Additionally, scholars who have argued for the terminology of the Plantationocene (Jegathesan 2021) have done so in order to imply linguistic attribution of contemporary environmental crisis to exploitative and violent relationship with land as well as subordinated or enslaved farmers of manicured cropland.[31] While anthropocene scholarship has become increasingly visible within the last decade, we can place anthropocene feminism within a tradition of ecofeminism, queer ecologies, indigenous scholarship, feminist posthumanism, and feminist science studies. The anthropocene tends not to offer generative solutions

within the social sciences, but rather extols the damage done by capitalist interest over natural resources and reserves.

Is the anthropocene a tool of apocalyptic storytelling, and if so, is this warning so big it suffocates any call to action? How damaging is it to be enamored of the apocalypse? While we should be wary of texts we use "to measure just how far we have fallen from an ecological state of grace" (Philips 2015, 74), we should also do our best to highlight and bring attention to ecological crisis. Placing environmentalism within the historical trajectories of other social justice movements, aligning climate change with patriarchal racial capitalism will resituate climate justice as a social political issue that is not built on elitism or individualizing ethos of personal responsibility and limiting ones carbon footprint. Rather, environmental justice has the potential to make a much larger change than neoliberal environmentalism.

In 2016's *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway proposes that we stay in the earth-bound realm and resist the "self-indulgent and self-fulfilling myths of apocalypse"(35) that come out of discourses around the Anthropocene/ Capitalocene. Rather than give in to the scare tactics of 'point of no return' theories of ecological devastation, Haraway proposes that we highlight stories that challenge neoliberal capitalism and its insistence on growth at all costs. Haraway points to relationships of companion species and art practices that highlight stories and practices of "becoming-with" in order to exemplify the stake that all species of earth have in each other. Haraway's emphasis on the stories we tell relates to Dana Luciano and Mel Chen's (2015) call for "anthro-decentric generativity" and the

generation of new stories as imperative. By examining narratives not solely based in human (anthro) environmental impact and solutions, theoretical works that focus on the here-and-now, as well as a future that is not just for some, but for all, are necessary to "stay with the trouble". The balance between fatalism and irony versus optimistic or even solutions-oriented meme frameworks is one arena in which to consider how the climate crisis is operating discursively.

As explained by Andrew Ross and Damian Rivers (2019), receiving information online, and as they focus on in the form of internet memes, is one avenue for participants to frame their ideas of climate change. Their article emphasizes that interpretation is largely influenced not only by content, but also by the standpoint of the consumer in question:

> When the consumer reads or views news as presented by the media, it is not left totally open to subjective interpretation – it is presented in a way that has the potential to influence the manner in which it is understood. Moreover, it is commonly recognized that certain frames are not always – or in fact, are rarely – in agreement, as they are driven by differing agendas, resulting in a form of ideological or discursive combat over how particular news information will be presented, and thus potentially received (1, Ross and Rivers 2019).

Interpretation and reception of information online may or may not be influenced by the content, the politics or beliefs of the viewer, and the framing with which the information is presented. The authors examine a range of meme formats used in either the frame of "convinced" or "skeptical" of climate change. The article

identifies the logics of five orientations toward climate change in the memes they examine: the risk is present ("real" frame), the scientific claim of the risk is true ("hoax" frame), the risk is caused by human activities ("cause" frame), the potential consequences of the risk ("impact" frame), how to handle the risk ("action" frame)(5). Importantly, online discourse analysis such as this highlights the importance of anonymity of posting, the rampant spread of misinformation within these online meme formats, and the lack of communicative engagement between content-creators and the audiences that the memes reach.

Memes have been a critical tool in the climate change movement to generate support for progressive initiatives and to call out and attack polluters and climate change generators. For example, Davis, Glantz, and Novak show how Greenpeace utilized a user meme-generator to target Shell's arctic drilling and challenge their corporate legitimacy. "Social media, memes, online cultural play, and the ease of sharing have all made quick responses to corporate actions and policy easier with a higher potential for potency and resonance" (2016, 80). Their work on combatting corporate action with meme production in order to direct attention to corporate pollution speaks to politicians using memes. Koyeyko, Kaspal, and Nerlich look to online reader comments on tabloid news articles on the subject of climate change, "such discussions are arguably one of the best sources to study such dimensions of the climate-change issue as ethics, morality and uncertainty, as online debates show how different actors attempt to redefine existing constructions of various problems and solutions" (2013, 74). By looking at the UK Daily Mail, the authors provide a sample methodology for analyzing how opinions regarding climate change are both

positioned and expressed in comments sections of sensationalized online news articles.

Fig 3.3

"Excuse me sir… Can we please talk about Climate Change?" tweet. Source: https://twitter.com/Greenpeace/status/1093978031755014144

Memes such as Fig 3.3 posted to Twitter by GreenPeace demonstrate non-profit branding impulse to communicate via humorous memetic formats while also signaling grave and real threat. Memes that speak to climate change using images of animals may increase empathetic feeling and garner increased online civic

engagement (Zhang and Pinto 2021). As animal studies scholars, posthumanists, and some new materialists argue, removing the false barrier between human and nonhuman and embracing metaphysical relationality between beings and objects opens new dialogues that disrupt anthrocentrism and re-prioritize relationships with nonhuman others. (See: Alaimo 2010, Armiero & de Angelis 2017, Bennet 2009, Davis & Todd 2017, Gómez-Barris 2017, Tallbear 2017, Jackson 2020.)

Indigenous climate scholarship also posits that the end of the world has already happened for many people. Indigenous scholarship that links environmental catastrophe with settler colonialism is central to environmental justice discourse. Heather Davis and Zoe Todd state that the anthropocene exists as "the extension and enactment of colonial logic [that] systematically erases difference" (2017, 769). Contemporary work in indigenous scholarship including work by Kyle Whyte and Kim Tallbear exposes current anthropocentic discourse as "deliberate extension of colonial logic" (Davis, Todd 2017, 771). Eduardo Kohn (2013) considers what an anthropology beyond the human would necessitate, and how animist indigenous knowledges can open up thinking beyond the human/non-human binary.

Complicating the relationship between human and nonhuman life, Kathryn Yusoff (2018) demands consideration of the organization of life/nonlife as a racial project. Building off Saidiya Hartman's (1997) definitions of "fungibility," Yusoff centers the rhetorical division of life from nonlife within historical justifications of slavery: "the division of matter into nonlife and life pertains not only to matter but to the racial organization of life as foundational to New World geographies. The biopolitical category of nonbeing is established through slaves being exchanged for

and as gold" (5). The gesture of dehumanization through the biopolitical category of 'nonlife' or 'nonbeing' is enmeshed in the formulation of geology. The relationship between biology and geology sets the stage for "questions of origins, processes of racialization through speciation and notions of progress, as well as being praxis for inscripting racial logics *within* the material politics of extraction that constitutes lived forms of racism (from eugenics to environmental racism)"(5). Posthuman or environmental politics must factor racialization as central project for continued dehumanization and the material politics and consequences of extractivism, as I begin to point to in the memes I bring in later in this chapter.

Extractive capitalism is built alongside racialized dehumanizations, and as Yusoff contends, indigenous genocide and removal were the prerequisites for colonial possession through dispossession (33). Dispossession allowed geology as a racializing project to convert land into territory, and humans into property. Speaking to the impact of this continued extractivism on neocolonialism in the global South today, Macarena Gómez-Barris summarizes:

> The material and affective production of extractive capitalism crushes vernacular life and its embodiment, enclosing it within the leveling technologies of globalization. In relation to schemes of mega-development, large-scale extractivism assaults peripheral spaces, inflicting uneven pain upon regions where Indigenous majority communities continue to organize life and proliferate it, even in sites of extreme pressure and violence (xvii).

As "leveled" to this degree, the unimaginable scale of global extractivism becomes affectively flattened; the technology of globalization becomes a taken for granted

aspect of contemporary climate crisis. It is this focus on "uneven pain," however, that relates directly with Yusoff's thesis on origins and geology. A particular area of criticism for climate change discourse is the universalizing nature of both "we" who caused these problems, and the "we" who will be harmed by global warming. Similarly, one critique of the anthropocene is the term denotes a clear anthropocentrism, the anthropocene as "age of Man" universalizes "Man" by default. Clare Colebrook (2017) resituates this built-in conflict between the language of "anthro" and the scope of meaning for the term "Anthropocene" by bringing attention to the way the anthropocence constructs a human "we". Colebrook posits that "humanity"—if thought of as such, is now defined by the threat against it—humans are thought of as a "we" that must grapple with our relation to the geological scale of impact: "whatever the injustices and differences of history and colonization, 'we' are now united in being threatened with nonexistence" (Colebrook 8). Rather than erase human difference, the anthropocene makes difference legible on the scale of impact. "We" are united by threat, but communities will be under different threats in scope and scale. Even if "humanity" can now be umbrellaed under a definition of those who will be affected by climate change eventually, this speaks to a long timeline rather than acknowledging how poorer and marginalized populations will be impacted first and most drastically.

Such a perspective allows "us" to move beyond the liberal Humanist subject "Man", who is coded as white, Western, located in the Global North, and male, in order to speak to the various dehumanizing historical gestures that an anthropocentric historicity has violently enacted. Creating "Man" as the subject of

liberal humanism necessitated creating racializations and gendering constructs to exclude marginalized populations from full citizenship and humanity. These spectrums of dehumanization, that range from human-nonhuman-subhuman-animal, function in various historical moments to relegate gendered and racialized populations to subjugation. Building off black feminist scholar Sylvia Wynter, Yusoff explains, that assigning inhumanness to subjugated populations is an "unrecognized dynamic of geologic life that rewrites a radically different text for the anthropocene" (72). Yusoff implicates a dehumanizing apparatus within geologic life, and thus argues that a different text of the anthropocene must trouble the supposed "we" encompassed under category of "man." Anthropocene discourse universalizes humankind; it subsumes histories of who has causal impact and does not differentiate how impact will be distributed. As she states: "the supposed 'we' further legitimates and justifies the racialized inequalities that are bound up in social geographies" (12).

Anthropocene's "we" erases differences of both cause and impact, implicating all humans within human-made epoch, and deterring approaches that would closer approximate environmental justice. Yusoff frames the anthropocene as a set of material practices that have already been experienced by those who have been fighting against the colonial apparatus. She acknowledges that "the end of this world has already happened for some subjects"(12). Rather than framing posthuman scholarship as avoiding racial difference, the posthuman exists within a history of dehumanization and populations that were, in Audre Lorde's (1977) words: "never meant to survive." Black feminist posthumanism argues that there is no way to

conceive of the inhuman or the nonhuman without talking about dehumanization as a tool for those in power throughout history (Weheylie 2014, Jackson 2020).

It is with this in mind that I now turn to the question of how these concepts are framed in digital spaces, and how specifically do the ones doing the framing, especially in the case of a young Latina politician like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, impact discussions of climate change? How do ideas that are being discussed and debated amongst academics, such as the anthropocene, inform meme formats and circulation? How can contemporary digital media conceive of a future-oriented framework that places climate change within historical trajectories of colonialism and racial capitalism? Ocasio-Cortez's digital presence poses a relevant example to examine how viral online exchange configures a macro-lens of contemporary politics, as well as a close look at the shifting liberalism within a younger generation closely aligned to democratic socialism.

AOC and the Green New Deal framed online

Online discourse analysis considers the impact of insular online networks, multimodal expression, and the mobility of transmutable information. This example in this section employ a black feminist posthumanism and discourse on the anthropocene to produce opinions on the contemporary climate crisis through internet discourse.

On April 17, 2019 New York congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez posted a video link across her various social media platforms titled "A Message from the Future with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez." The video speaks from the perspective of a future after the Green New Deal (GND) has successfully transformed American

industry. Having decreased reliance on fossil fuels, created green jobs, and restructured public services such as health care and education, the tactic used in speaking from the successful position of the future emphasizes that the changes were not easy, but ultimately the Deal created a sustainable future. Ocasio-Cortez regularly uses social media as a platform to broadcast her positions, support of measures, and critiques of policies and GOP leadership. As the youngest woman in history to be elected to Congress, Ocasio-Cortez has captivated media attention from both progressive and right wing news outlets. That Ocasio-Cortez used online platforms to publicize her campaign for Congress, and that she continues to use social media platforms to communicate and spread her messages is central to how both her advocates and her adversaries position her as a politician.

Ocasio-Cortez actively uses internet memes to speak to her social media followers, and has become meme-able herself. Figure 3.4 demonstrates Ocasio-Cortez's use of a *Spongebob* meme format to convey a message about climate change denial.[32] This format of using images from the absurdist *Nickelodeon* animated series as a memetic measurement of common understanding, establishes Ocasio-Cortez's fluency in meme language.

Fig 3.4

@AOC "#GreenNewDeal haters' plan to address Climate Change:" tweet. Source: https://401kspecialistmag.com/j-p-morgan-slams-green-new-deal-aoc-fires-back/

Ocasio-Cortez is both fluent in the language of memes to relate to her constituents and fans on an online platform, and functions as the figurehead for the GND in a manner that makes her into a meme-able subject.[33] Looking closely at the comments and discourse critiquing Ocasio-Cortez's endorsement of the GND, many critiques and disparagements closely align with mainstream attacks on climate reform and environmental justice. Central to this analysis is the online platform on which "A Message From The Future" debuted, which is dependent on users' to "share" and "like" the content to facilitate the video's distribution. That Ocasio-Cortez is using the legible and marketable format of the viral internet video provides a unique moment to locate the intersection of feminist futures, meme technologies, and climate change critiques of racial capitalism. As the congresswoman becomes the symbol of shifting politics in the name of climate sustainability and ensuring futurity, looking at both her resilience to right-wing

attack, and the content of the attacks against her, demonstrates how her position comes to stand in for an array of contemporary debates. This online video employs discourse of race and gender into the narrative of climate solutions while offering an alternative to climate pessimism and panic.

An analysis of the content of the video itself demonstrates that Ocasio-Cortez's representation of the GND comes with racialized and gendered imaginaries of how progress will be made to combat climate change in the near future. Presented by online journalism site *the Intercept* and the popular climate and capitalism critic Naomi Klein, the seven-minute video features Ocasio-Cortez narrating an illustration that describes from the future what the "Green New Deal decade" was like to live through. In the accompanying article, Klein describes the short as "science fiction" and describes the importance of imagining different futures:

> Set a couple of decades from now, it's a flat-out rejection of the idea that a dystopian future is a forgone conclusion. Instead, it offers a thought experiment: What if we decided not to drive off the climate cliff? What if we chose to radically change course and save both our habitat and ourselves? [34]

Fig 3.5

"A Message From the Future" Screenshot by author. Source: https://theintercept.com/2019/04/17/green-new-deal-short-film-alexandria-ocasio-cortez/

Ocasio-Cortez narrates artist Molly Crabapple's hand illustrating viewers through various scenes, as the video addresses the issues of present day as having been solved by the changes implemented by the GND. The message of the video, along with the much of the rhetoric surrounding the GND itself, outlines that as the New Deal addressed the Great Depression, the American government has the capacity to build and incite programs to alleviate joblessness while building and investing in a better future for Americans. Faced with the challenge of a twelve-year timeline to cut emissions in half (fig. 3.5), the video demonstrates how green jobs will be created in the process of migrating from oil and coal to green energy. Use of the future tense in the video shows how "we overcame impossible odds" to portray the message of a successful economic and social transition.

There are several aspects of the video that correlate with a message of black feminist futurity, aside from simply imagining a future with prevalent women of color in positions of power. The video could be thought to correspond with

Afrofuturist and an environmental justice ideals as well in its envisioning of a future built and occupied by women of color, who have worked to transform climate change in both urban and rural parts of the United States. The video shows how legislative changes in government that eliminate college loan debt and universalize healthcare are necessary to bridge inequality gaps relevant to climate change. The narrative follows an imaginary woman from her girlhood cast as Ocasio-Cortez's neighbor. This girl grows up to work for AmeriCorps Climate and learns from Indigenous knowledge of how to replenish land. She eventually runs for the same seat in the house. The message of the video is distinctly focused on imagination as the necessary first step (Fig 3.6)

Fig 3.6
"A Message From the Future" Screenshot by author. Source: https://theintercept.com/2019/04/17/green-new-deal-short-film-alexandria-ocasio-cortez/

Imagination and black feminist world making has been the topic of much recent scholarship in black feminist theory. Black feminist speculative theorizing harnesses the power of futurist thinking, the use of the speculative and the fictional, and the theoretical necessity of imagination. Acts of radical imagination as

conceived through black feminist theories are both fundamental to survival strategies, as well as central in building community and identifying solutions to systemic oppressions. (Treva Lindsey 2015, Omise'eke Tinsley 2018, LaMonda Hortense-Stallings 2015, Tina Campt 2017, Saidiya Hartman 2019, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs 2018.) The way the video illustrates figures and ideas is relevant to conversations about memes as defined as the transmission of information via text and image on online platforms. The illustrated and water colored form, rather than employing actors and scouting locations for a short film, facilitates the core message behind the piece itself: That imagination and thinking outside of our current reality is as important a first step as any in combatting climate change.

While there are many aspects of the video and its message that exemplify a feminist project of futural speculative imagination, within the larger context of its creation and distribution, the proposal for the GND is a campaign that is dependent on state reform and citizen cooperation with new legislation. The gap in reactions as seen within the responses to the video online articulate positions largely based in US electoral partisan politics. Although the scope of how the video has been received may be limited to the realm of legislative action, the message of the video contains a number of promising concepts that speak to ways that scholars are expanding the frame of understanding climate change.

Looking at this particular example of a proposal of practical state solutions to climate change provides us with an opportunity to examine the relationship between acceptance and rejection of online advocacy within the framework of internet memes. Ocasio-Cortez is a highly meme-able politician. A number of memes

made to discredit and mock Ocasio-Cortez and her support of the GND reveal blatant sexist and racist frameworks that paint the Congresswoman as idiotic, relegate her to positions of sexual naivety or vulnerability, and misunderstand her message, likening it to a doomsday countdown.

Fig 3.7

"Cortez Countdown Clock" meme. Source: https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2019/01/21/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-the-world-is-going-to-end-in-12-years-if-we-dont-address-climate-change/

Fig 3.8

AOC "The world is going to end in 12 years…unless you give me 70% of your money" meme. Source: https://imgflip.com/m/politics/tag/alexandria+ocasio-cortez?sort=latest&after=2rtaom

While I purposefully avoid spending unnecessary time and energy in troll-inhabited or toxic online spaces, the work being done on right-wing memes is important to my

continued argument about the uses and missuses of meme formats and circulations (See Phillips 2012, Milner 2016). I choose not to include various memes depicting Ocasio-Cortez in sexist and sexualized imagery denigrating her as an unintelligent sex object. I do however point to the narratives of dehumanizing and sexualizing Ocasio-Cortez as central to disparagement of her agenda with the GND and other legislation.[35] I also purposefully am only touching upon climate change denialism that appears within comments surrounding the video. Denialism and its organization, circulation, and misinformation speaks to some of my own arguments about the scope of understanding, problem with origins and finger-pointing, and paralyzing panic/paralysis. This denial is intertwined with indifference, ignorance, apathy and fear (Norgaard 2011).

I closely examine the comments sections on Ocasio-Cortez's social media accounts following the posting of the video to identify and monitor cultural understandings of specific issues that can help locate patterns of thinking that carry a number of assumptions. The various positions found in responses to Ocasio-Cortez's "A Message From the Future" video include: outright denial, fatalism, labeling of both the Deal and Ocasio-Cortez as "irrational," and transferal of blame for the current state of problems onto other nations. Some of these reactions may stem from the same assumptions; rather than pursing a quantitative analysis of the huge amount of comments on these posts across social media platforms (27,000 comments on Twitter, 3,400 comments on Facebook, and 3,836 comments on Instagram as of 6/16/2019), it may be more revealing to study what is at stake in

discourses of denial, irrationality, or transferal of blame and examines how framing of climate change matters to how information is interpreted.

Claiming "climate hysterics"[36] which has a clear connection to the sexist use of "hysteric," or that the video is "trying to scare people"[37] is one trend that is worth examining in the context of what the video itself is composed of. Statements such as: "This is one of the most delusional, terrifying things I have ever seen in my life"[38] may be speaking to a number of fears in reaction to the content of the short video. That the video cites the 2018 UN report that there are twelve years to cut emissions in half in order to avoid climate disaster is one aspect that may come across as frightening to a viewer. The question of fear necessitates the reader to decry the message as "delusional". Rather than admit the need to acknowledge the problem and the inevitability that sacrifices will be made, dismissal of the material all together is a preferable alternative for some.

There is no doubt that looking at online comments across social media platforms quickly shows evidence of divisive partisan-ism from both right and left wing commenters. What is implicated in many of the comments however exceeds the discourse of partisan politics. One commenter states: "I admire the ambition. But it's talking down to half of the country. Nothing says unity like division."[39] While the video does not make mention of partisan tension except to explicitly advocate for cooperation under the threat that "we" as a country are all under, the commenter perhaps interprets this message of unity as condescension. Presumably, being told that climate change will necessitate changes in economic policy is understood as being "talked down" to.[40] In response, a seemingly pro-GND commenter adds: "if we

don't do this the whole country is going down. The part of the country that's against this is a millstone around everyone's neck."[41] Counter to Ocasio-Cortez's message of urgency that makes clear the time for partisan in-fighting must be behind us if the country is to tackle the challenges ahead, this commenter is still operating from a two party-based politics, making themselves into the "winner" by being of the correct opinion, and the other the "loser" for not understanding the consequences. Online comments sections perhaps will always be a location of frustrated and quickly flung insults. These comments serve as an anonymous arena to spar with those of different opinions, with ostensibly very low stakes involved for users posting one off comments or posting anonymously. It is for that reason however that identifying patterns and similarities within such insults or low-stakes commentary can provide a broader understanding of the assumptions embedded in popular arguments.

One trend within the comments was the assertion that other countries are equally to blame for climate change. The tendency to divert focus to other countries policies may be in one part a refusal to face the need to change by invoking xenophobic or racist claims of other countries inherent "dirtiness" or polluting tendencies. Comments such as: "Then what if China, India, and Russia don't make the same changes, and climate change continues to escalate out of control,"[42] demonstrate xenophobic and reductive thinking. This grouping of three of the world's largest populous nations in comparison to our own defers the need for the U.S. to implement change until other countries do as well. The comment also does not mention that the U.S. is one of the only countries to not agree to the Paris

Climate Agreement in 2016, and that under the Trump administration EPA regulations were rolled back. This stance of deferring blame regarding pollution onto other countries, without taking into account the population per capita difference in country emissions, constitutes a refusal to take responsibility for the fact the U.S. and Europe have been the major industrial polluters globally while countries such as China were in industrial infancy. This sort of denial of Western accountability and transferal of blame to other large countries that have more recently industrialized operates under the logic of climate skepticism, with the added layer of xenophobic blame. Another comment by a user on the Twitter post along the same lines states: "So I'm assuming based on you're 'we're all one planet' theory, the green deal includes strong restrictions on countries that pollute way more than the US. If not, until it does, don't tread on me."[43] The logic that other countries "pollute way more" and therefore it is not up to the U.S. to implement restrictive policies until others do based on their skepticism that we are in fact "all one planet."

As Ocasio-Cortez is a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, a fair percentage of her disapproving comments online make sure to deride socialism, (or as more commonly accused, "communism"). One comment on Facebook states: "this sounds like something I would show to my 2nd graders…..socialist paradise."[44] Unclear is whether the video is fit for seven year olds because it is animated, or because it imagines a future in which climate disaster has been averted through the means of cooperation and the work to end racial and gendered inequalities in access. More often, claims such as: "she's such a SENSATIONALIST"[45] abound in the

comments under the video. Comments that claim the plan or Ocasio-Cortez herself as irrational, stupid, or naïve communicate the commenters' disbelief that climate change is indeed happening, or at least not in the manner that she describes in the video.

Attaching the notion of "irrationality" to the body of Ocasio-Cortez, a Puerto-Rican woman, is a replication of the stereotyping of Latina women as "hot-headed," or "spicy" within U.S. cultural constructions. Right-wing news has notably shown extreme distain for the Congresswoman, and she remains a central figurehead of what conservatives have labeled as a "Radical Socialist." Interestingly enough in these same rants against her, she is often described as "the new leader of the Democratic party." [46] The more airtime given to bemoaning Ocasio-Cortez, the more recognition she gains. It may be fair to say in regard to the GND that right-wing obsession with heralding her as the mouthpiece for this legislation in fact increases the circulation of her image and the ideas associated with her position in Congress. Whether that is "negative attention" or not, it has succeeded in making her a household name.

The criticism she has come under for being "naïve" and politically inexperienced has gone hand-in-hand with the criticism attached to her social media following. Even Nancy Pelosi echoed the right wing's attack on Ocasio-Cortez, bemoaning her for "having Twitter followers" instead of ideas.[47] Imagining "A Message From the Future" as a video meant to be shared and viewed on a digital platform, association with Ocasio-Cortez as meme-able subject also speaks to how information travels online in our contemporary moment. Coming under criticism for

her social media popularity is particularly relevant as the Congresswoman predicated her campaign on not accepting corporate donation money, fundamentally challenging the democratic nominee system and calling attention to its inherent financial motivations. Ocasio-Cortez and the GND are conceived of as "irrational" or "naïve" because fundamentally they are challenging a system of racial capitalism and patriarchy. She is young. She is a woman of color. And she is asking an increasingly large and diverse audience of voters to reconsider the foundations of U.S. prosperity, and to confront the need to change. In the video, she addresses this fear directly, noting from the future the "impossible odds" that needed to be overcome and the results leading to increased equality and confrontation of said fear (Figs. 3.9, 3.10).

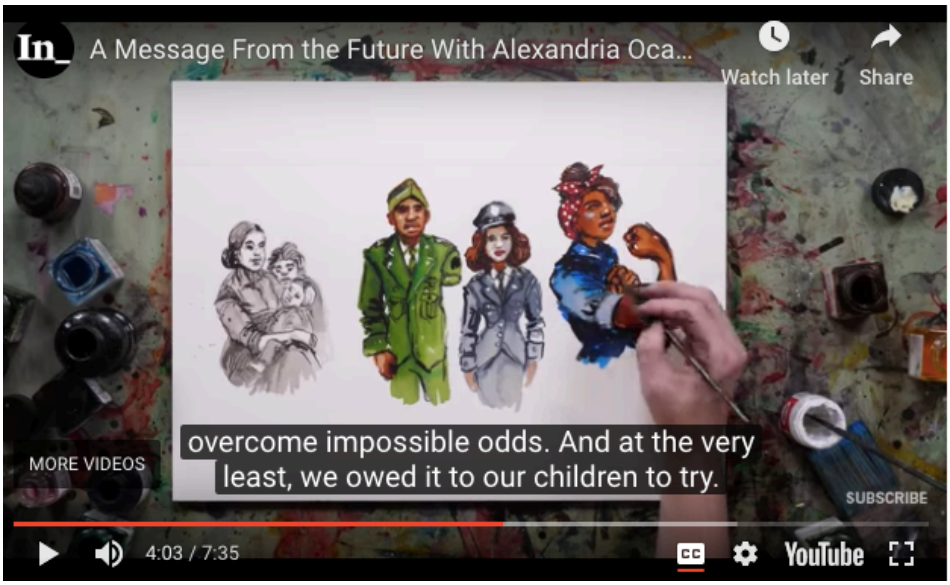

Fig 3.9
"A Message From the Future" Screenshot by author. Source: https://theintercept.com/2019/04/17/green-new-deal-short-film-alexandria-ocasio-cortez/

Fig 3.10

"A Message From the Future" Screenshot by author. Source: https://theintercept.com/2019/04/17/green-new-deal-short-film-alexandria-ocasio-cortez/

As an object of digital visual culture, "A Message From the Future" provides a substantive example of a solutions-oriented approach to climate change that does not minimize origins or responsibility. I highlight this video at such length because of its unique position as digital object addressing climate change that both criticizes the harms of capitalist extractivism and sets forward a plan of action for making changes to and living in our new climate.

Today's digital Left is less willing to engage in Democratic politics, both in terms of faith in the power of voting on the state and national level to impact real change, as well as unwilling to emotionally invest time and attention in the twenty-four hour news cycle of bi-partisan politics. This presents an ongoing tension between the belief in change from within systems, and the understanding that the changes necessary may not be possible without revolutionary action outside of incremental progressivism. While AOC has become a spokesperson in many ways for democratic socialism and the millennial political Left within mainstream media,

it could be argued that her importance to the contemporary online Left is largely figurative. In other words, many democratic socialists do not care for her politics, as much as attention she continues to draw from right-wing political commentators continue to situate her as a leftist hero. Rather, AOC as politician, regardless of her progressive ideals and campaigns exists to many as yet another figurehead for the disappointments of the Democratic Party. Rhetorically as well, faith in the GND is dependent partially on faith in American progressive history and the power of the original New Deal to transform a country and provide jobs.

Democratic engagement within digital publics often replicates our digital behaviors of ironic pessimism and critical standpoints. As Byung-Chul Han theorizes, contemporary neoliberalism has produced a "spectator democracy" (Han 2017, 10). As consumption of politics functions alongside capitalist consumption, engaged citizenship is transformed into passive on-looking. Voters act as consumers instead of active agents in democracy as public sentiment steadily assures citizens that our two party system allows constituents the choice in candidate representation. Rather than active engagement in politics, "Participation now amounts to grievance and complaint" (Han 10). Within digital discourse, political action becomes equated with voicing dissatisfaction or opinion, whether that be through quote-tweeting a news article, @ing your local official, or posting a mocking meme.[48] "More and more, voting and buying, the state and the market, citizens and consumers are coming to resemble each other. Micro-targeting is becoming the standard practice of psychopolitics" (Han 63). As political messages are targeted toward users much like advertisements, echo chambers are created and reverberate

cyclically within distinct digital networks. Flows of information and echo chamber networks stall action and position political ideology as another node of self-branding. Bogna M. Konior describes the stalling of action that results from digital flows of information:

> Flow of information postpones action indefinitely, memes drown us in their self-replicating digital flood, rabbit holes down subreddits tear you away from practice and insert you into an information-producing machine, until you are nothing but an ever-sharpening set of refined 'views on issues.' You have become an epistemological halo, trapped in the apparatus of the Internet, which produce knowledge but stalls action. (Konior 60)

I wonder to what extent this stalling of action and post-ironic consumption has inhibited a collective ability on the left to engage with the sincerity and earnestness that AOC has come to represent in many circles. As a digital version of yourself exists as an assemblage of 'views on issues', generalized aesthetics, and hyper-personalized content, the collective digital network becomes individualized algorithmically and affectively.[49] If a movement toward climate action lacks icons, if Greta Thunberg is too young and Al Gore is too old and AOC is too millennial (read: annoying, "corny"), where do we turn toward action without "mascots" or figureheads? The youth activist Amariyanna Copeny, also known as "Little Miss Flint," who started raising awareness for the Flint, MI water in 2016 at age eight become a symbolic icon for the environmental justice movement. This movement away from trust in governmental action has increased the pressure put on individuals to spread information and knowledge, as well as fundraise for specific

climate disaster causes. Social media campaigns and celebrity endorsements have symbolically replaced governmental action to reduce the effects of climate change.

In 2022, after a failure to reintroduce the GND (Biden actively disassociated himself from the bill while running his presidential campaign), large-scale infrastructural legislation aimed toward sustainability have taken a backseat to other governmental spending priorities. In looking back on a proposal that offered solutions and condoned accountability, the failure of such a message to capture enthusiasm or votes demonstrates a pattern of continuing disappointments in leveraging online media toward democratic engagement. Continued viral content speaking to environmental disaster traverses digital counterpubilcs through new meme-scapes dedicated to extoling our current trajectory toward destruction.

Disaster memes in the attention economy

Informative and humorous disaster memes are indicative of a move toward an increase in pessimistic memes and engagement with digital content that is traded in the affective arena of the negative. Climate disaster memes demonstrate this trajectory even before Covid-19 popularized the concept of the "doomscroll." The stories of the anthropocene, of the harm we have done to get here, highlight the ironic position of humans at the present moment. The "tragic irony" (Phillips 68) of our apparent inability to curb climate change and stories of how humans have been complicit in the destruction that risks our future reinforce the stand-still that follows the majority of anthropocentic disaster stories. In order to circumvent the continuing "crisis ordinariness," (Berlant) some memetic exchanges have pointed specifically to ecocritical and historically knowledgeable strategies to draw

engagement within the digital "attention economy" (Brynjolfsson, JooHee 2012, Zulli 2020).

Images that encapsulate dire circumstances and undeniable environmental catastrophes offer the source material for disaster memes. In the days following the circulation of the image of an oil pipeline explosion in the Gulf of Mexico on July 2, 2021, a multitude of memes, often accompanied with the phrase "the ocean is on fire" circulated on social media. Although offshore oilrig explosions have previously been in the news, this image came to symbolize a very particular moment of climate change panic, confusion, and ambivalence.[50] An often-referenced meme form, "this is fine," speaks to the instance of panic that paralyzes. Created in 2013 by KC Green, the "This is fine" meme has become internet speak for when "a situation becomes so terrible our brains refuse to grapple with its severity" (Plante 2016).

[51]

Fig 3.11
Original "This is Fine" meme format.
Source: https://www.theverge.com/2016/5/5/11592622/this-is-fine-meme-comic

Fig 3.12

"This is Fine" "The ocean is on fire" meme. Source: https://www.albawaba.com/node/creativity-sparking-out-flames-gas-leak%E2%80%99s-top-memes-1436967

This meme as photoshopped onto the Gulf of Mexico pipeline explosion extrapolates a long standing ironic sensibility: to declare "this is fine" while there is fire engulfing the room around you (Fig 3.12). Neoliberal environmentalism creates what Isabelle Stengers (2015) designates as "a *cold panic*, a panic that is signaled by the fact that openly contradictory messages are accepted…" (Stengers, 32) Conflicting messages from living under capitalism such as being encouraged to keep consuming but also to 'think about your carbon footprint' creates immobility. Being aware of the pervasive nature of our collective "cold panic" at this moment would seem to necessitate stories that lead the way forward, rather than the general agreement that global scale problems on a decades long timeline are "the kind of threat humans are awful at dealing with" (Popvich, Schwartz, Schlossberg 2017).

Memetic response to climate change as acknowledgment of this "cold panic," through declaration of "this is fine" in response to what is clearly in no way manageable, but a seemingly unstoppable direct threat surrounding you, offers an insight into collective resignation and the exchange of commiseration. Bogna M.

Konior (2019) argues that whether or not understanding of the origins or arguments about the anthropocene impact apocalyptic memes, that they are regardless an example of the collective state of climate crisis and uncertainty over next steps forward. Apocalyptic memes function through ironic humor to reference the insufficiency of politics to attend to the current crisis. They also provide an outlet to joke about doom and destruction becoming the status quo (Konior 53). The ideas of decline and doom, the expression of lack of agency, irony, humor, doom and commiseration are values that are continually traded in memetic economies.

Fig 3.13
"did I do this right" oil pipeline explosion tweet. Source: https://twitter.com/checarina/status/1411188112085053442

This memetic example in Fig 3.13 offers one response to frustration and anger over the faultiness of neoliberal rhetoric that constructs climate change issues as a matter of personal responsibility. Showing the relative uselessness of individual responses such as “recycling” and “no plastic straws” as the failing attempt to put out the fire of “climate disaster as a result of unfettered capitalism,” this meme highlights the futile individualistic efforts to make substantial impact toward correcting our current climate course through capitalist ‘choices’. The debate and relevance of mocking the plastic straw ban in certain counties is exceptionally relevant to my argument surrounding climate crisis frames and narratives. This particular example of functional legislation that curbed a very minimal, though widely experienced on a day-to-day basis, single-use plastic item is an example of the ways that environmental regulations can actually be implemented, while simultaneously an example of “drop in the bucket” type change.

[52]

Fig 3.14

"Billionaires playing Star Wars" meme, Source: Instagram @seize_the_memes, screenshot by author 7/28/2021

As illustrated in Fig 3.14, ineffectual consumer choices manage to highlight the more substantial impacts made in C02 emissions on a daily basis through space and air travel. Lamentation over single-use plastic and the merits of recycling can serve once again as a falsified neoliberal narrative of "choice" in the matter of solving the climate crisis on the level of the individual. Wealth disparity and the spectacle events of billionaire CEOs like Jeffrey Bezos taking tourism trips into outer space, alongside knowledge that the military is this country's highest polluter, only feeds the fodder of anti-capitalist meme accounts such as the one's from which I've selected. [53] Reflective of an anthropocene sensibility that contextualizes historical as

well as current sources of our climate crisis and state of disrepair, memes such as figures 3.11 and 3.12 do more than reflect the 'cold panic' of debilitating dread in ironically declaring "this is fine." The movement toward identification of current historical actors that are active contributors of climate threatening C02 emissions constructs a narrative of accountability, rather than a consensus that humans each carry responsibility in how we ended up on the timeline toward an unlivable planet. As those who carry responsibility include militaries, corporations, and individual billionaire's pet projects, the memes that trade in ironic mockery of the false narrative of neoliberal personal responsibility increasingly identify the interlocking systems of capitalism and extractivism that make themselves obscured and elusive when it comes to climate blame.

Amid co-existing and contemporaneous catastrophic realities, online discourse within the realm of ironic and post-ironic humor serves parallel purposes. Concurrently, 'disaster memes' construct an affective collective despair and commiseration, while also utilizing humor to exchange and communicate information and emotion within the digital counterpublics that are created through these exchanges and re-posts. As I argued in Chapters One and Two, the exchange of specific meme types and genres signal one process through which digital counter-publics are created and maintained. Expanding the scope of topics that memetic exchange covers, this chapter queried how monumental global, long-term disaster consequences can be parsed through within the limited scope and capacity seen through memetic exchange and communication. In my final chapter, I turn toward the ways that social media's demand of branded self-imaging has adapted alongside

corporate branding strategies of relatability through meme formats, and how these techno-pessimistic readings can be understood through the logic of the doomscroll.

Chapter Four

Branded Affect and Corporate 'Woke-Washing'

Following the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in 2020, many companies and brands chose to address systemic racism and their support of the Black Lives Matter movement through issuing statements on social media. Personification of brands mirrors social media's demands for individualized self-branding, further embroiling an affective relationship to biopolitical self-promotion. While in moments of political outrage and turmoil individual users may feel inclined to post information in meme formats, the question of self-promotion and self-image in digital spaces asks, "who are you posting this for?" Particular skepticism of the rationale behind posting a meme or info-graphic detailing racist violence to one's personal social media feed criticizes the sharing of information within echo-chamber like user networks of those who presumably already share your outrage (Choi 2020, Cinelli et all 2021). The erosion of difference between the urge to commiserate and share outrage online with the notion of the branded self has led to complicated landscapes of meaning when posting political or activist content in online spaces.

This chapter complicates the usefulness of meme exchange models for creation of counterpublic discourse when for-profit institutions employ these formats. I also identify digital disidentificatory responses to online activist "empty gestures" that reframe and restructure relationships between self-presentation and the impulse to share information. The previous three chapters of this dissertation have highlighted various parallels enacted through online discourse and the

exchange of internet memes having to do with race, gender, and power inequalities. I now go onto continue to examine aspects of memetic exchange in parallel arenas of techno-pessimism and acts of digital resistance. Looking at branded activism in online spaces demonstrates what encompasses a techno-pessimistic outlook, as well as the ways that counterpublic creators are continuing to reimagine how to use these platforms toward their own ends of communication and entertainment.

Examining how both individuals and brands associated themselves with political activism has been figured as "woke-washing," which Francesca Sobande defines as "marketing content related to the concept of being 'woke' (invested in addressing social injustices)" (Sobande 2019). Similar to how brands participate in "greenwashing" (Ramus & Montiel 2005, Bowen 2014) to demonstrate commitment to environmental sustainability, or how "rainbow capitalism" (Falco & Gandhi 2020) works to draw customers from the LGBTQ community, "wokewashing" is one way for a brand to appeal to customers and to remain relevant in their marketing strategies. Branded commodification of the aesthetics of protest and the gesture toward social justice has a long history, including marketing toward counter-cultural movements from civil rights to punk rock. When brands and companies use the formats of creative meme generators/content creators in order to position themselves as in allyship with social justice causes, the counterpublical relevance and usefulness is eradicated. If memes often function cyclically, when a brand uses a meme format it is no longer about the community acknowledgement of the insider joke; rather this move signals the end of the meme cycle as the format is commodified. As individual users must curate their social media presence in a

multitude of ways (and for equally as many number of reasons), the association with social justice causes or political sentiment increasingly becomes a question of image and self-branding.

#BlackoutTuesday

In June 2020, Instagram users were encouraged to post a black square to their page and to abstain from engaging in social media for the day in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter protests against the murder of George Floyd by law enforcement. The result of multiple users using the hashtag #blacklivesmatter in tagged posts of a black square had the adverse effect of a social media boycott or symbolic gesture toward a non content creation day. The speed with which black squares multiplied on an Instagram feed suggested an additional layer to the cultural contagion necessary in memetic exchange. Not wanting to be left out or risk non-association with this trend composes an additional layer of meaning similar to a snowball or bandwagon effect. The case of blackouttuesday highlights one well-known specific instance of bandwagoning of hashtag activism, which is now remembered for ineffectiveness and conflation with "performative" activism.

Online activism in this contemporary moment presents a double-edged sword. Surveillance by law enforcement and federal agencies on public platforms such as Twitter and Facebook has made protesters wary to share information such as location tagging on social media. During the protests at Standing Rock against the Dakota access pipeline on native land, this question of solidarity versus virtue signaling similarly played out in digital space. In response to suspicions that protestors were being surveilled on social media, the call to geotag (pinpoint your

geographical identification online) oneself on Facebook or "check in" to the physical location via the application was meant to have as many users as possible flood this virtual "space," and therefore obscure attempts to identify individual protestors. Geotagging the protest location along with the hashtags #NoDAPL and #WeStandwithStandingRock, 1.4 million people checked in to the protest location on Facebook in the fall of 2016. (Baik 2020, 2058) This action of both demonstrating endorsement for the cause and obfuscating surveillance efforts to aid the protestors in the physical space was also met with various suspicions of "performative" activism, or using one's social media platform to proclaim a political standpoint, while not going beyond the act of the post toward any monetary ends or continuing contributions.

The heightened moment of isolation and disconnection during the summer of 2020, a combination of pre-vaccine covid protocols, general and widespread fear and anxiety, and political exhaustion and frustration, resulted in an increase in time spent on social media by many. One aspect through which to view the Blackout Tuesday phenomenon is through desire for collectiveness and community in agreement during this time. The social impulse to make oneself known as politically aligned with a collective and historically propelled movement against police brutality takes on a new weight when social media replaced other forms of socializing during covid lockdowns. Examining this digital event as a heightened and rapid response that tore through the limited capacity attention of online movement to speed across a monumental number of Instagram posts speaks to the nature of digital cultural contagion. This moment of "performative allyship" (Wellman 2022),

where users of all identities, but particularly white Instagram users, posted a black square to their Instagram feed in support of Black Lives Matter quickly overwhelmed the platform. In addition to flooding the feeds of Instagram users with a series of black squares, many were using the hashtag #blacklivesmatter along with the post. The consequence of affiliating the black squares with the hashtag resulted in the tagged page for #blacklivesmatter flooding with black squares, obscuring any previous posts or information that had been used for organizing or awareness. The unintended result of the viral phenomenon brought attention to related posts critiquing the popularity of posting the black squares. It followed that a large number of users who had felt the need or desire to post the black square image to their personal Instagram feed in the first place then deleted and removed their posts following criticism.

This response to Blackout Tuesday represents a redirection of the massive attention and response that came from this event toward targeted ends. As one example of the memeification of social justice sentiment, Mariah Wellman (2022) argues that instagram influencers circulated black squares as "credibility maintenance" (Wellman, 3). The combining factors of what Instagram influencers believe creates their "brand": credibility, performance and popularity—the scale of popularity dependent on likes, followers, and reposts, parallels how a company or organization brands themselves in digital spaces.[54]

"Performative" activism

From a feminist theoretical perspective, the terminology and understanding of what has been labeled "performative" activism in digital spaces is separate from

Judith Butler's definition and usage of gender performativity. Looking to ways that terms that originated in feminist theories, for example the misuse or redefinition of "emotional labor" in online discourse, is important to my argument about the ways that complicated theories become watered down and misinterpreted in online spaces where individuals feel compelled to "brand" themselves as "woke" online. Particular to the claim of "performative activism," Kelsey Blair (2021) examines the difference between the colloquial usage, which references a gap between speech and effect, and Butler's definition that demonstrates a relationship between declarative language and embodiment. In the colloquial (particularly the social media colloquial) usage of "performative" aligning with the "empty gesture," Blair refers to "performative utterances wherein the content of a speech act or the circumstances of its enactment are such that it is unlikely the utterance will manifest the full scope of the effect(s) that it names." (55) Accusations of "performative activism" in digital spaces are likened to "virtue signaling" or the symbolic association with and gesture toward social justice causes for the purpose of user popularity and/or clout. To accuse a social media user of "performative activism" implies a lack of sincerity as well as criticizes the minimal effort involved in declaring political sentiment in digital spaces, with something as simple as a post or a re-tweet.

To consider the "empty gesture" in the context of posting a meme such as the memes that were exchanged regarding the murder of Breonna Taylor, these memes were often instructive as well as gestural. Many of these memes functioned to refer to a specific violence as demonstrative of larger systemic oppressions and racism, as

well as asking for direct consequence: “arrest the cops who killed Breonna Taylor.” The issue of the symbolic or ‘empty’ gesture toward this tragedy in relationship to individualized self-branding in online spaces extends the idea of “performative activism.” When a user is consciously or subconsciously posting for the purposes of greater engagement, ‘likes,’ and followers, the performance of outrage takes on a new purpose. The pushback against what is denigrated as “clicktivism” “performative activism” and “empty gesture” of posting content in relation to political event or alignment has a good deal to do with the simplicity of posting/retweeting as well as the absence of physical involvement. If the context for understanding what comprises “real” activism is based on participation in in-person protests, demonstrations, actions, or organizing sessions, then any number of online activities which purport political action would fall into the category of “performative” or “empty.” These contentions and debates over what defines or qualifies as “real” activism becomes even more complicated during events such as covid-19 shelter in place, questions of transnational organizing, and the transition to all sorts of events and conferences from in-person to virtual.

Fig 4.1

"oh wow would you look at that" tweet. Source: https://thetempest.co/2020/07/25/entertainment/breonna-taylor-meme-for-you-to-care/

Looking to the speed and efficacy in which the information that Breonna Taylor's killers had not yet been arrested through news media articles and text-based infographics shared on social media, to the meme-ification of this information provides one pivot point in the relationship between self-branding and online activism. The format of these memes when shared by individuals have the effect of minimizing the event into these easily share-able digital files, and perhaps even to engage in "virtue signaling" while not participating in on the ground activism or anti-racist action. Similar to Blackout Tuesday, the movement from outrage and the sharing of headlines and information regarding what had happened to Breonna Taylor and the ongoing injustice of the perpetrators not being brought to court was separate from the proliferation of memes that used "arrest the cops who killed

Breonna Taylor" as the source content to be remixed and replicated through meme exchange.

Kimberle Crenshaw's (2015) call for "Say Her Name" and the associated hashtag #SayHerName, aims to bring attention to black women victims of police violence often overshadowed in the news and public attention by the names of black men killed by law enforcement. The movement to meme-ification in the case of Breonna Taylor demonstrates a parallel and troubling narrative of how attention is brought to violence in online spaces. Crenshaw's approach to bringing attention to the women who are often not highlighted or remembered in the aftermath of police violence asks for the names of victims to be remembered and proclaimed. While certainly the refrain "arrest the cops who killed Breonna Taylor" includes her name, the impact of having this phrase repeated in various meme contexts is separate from Crenshaw's call for solemn naming and acknowledgement. By memeifying the call for accountability by law enforcement instead of highlighting and remembering Taylor herself, a distance is established from this violent and tragic murder. As I discussed in Chapter Two, the memeification of black women, particular to memes and gifs that demonstrate black female affectation to invoke registers of "anger" "sassiness" and other attributes applied to stereotypical black female media representation, is one vector through which scholars must examine new articulations of racist sentiment in digital forms. While Taylor's image was widely spread in mentions of her wrongful death, it is her name that functions in these memes as the object of circulation.

Fig 4.2

"Y'all turned that woman's death into some sorta quirky meme" tweet. Source: https://twitter.com/MANlTHEDON/status/1275496232958472194?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw

The use of "quirky" in the text of Fig. 4.2 demonstrates how whether or not the participation came from a place of wanting to draw attention to this issue, the mode of transfer of this meme through contextual humor is meant to elicit a nod of cleverness in repurposing a viral phrase or ingenuity when it comes to skills in photo-shopping and content creation. Good intentions and gestures of solidarity with the victim, her family, and the black community becomes obscured through a memetic format that is humor-based or fundamentally meant to be ironic and clever.

The criticism that results from virtue signaling or what some call performative activism is predicated on users posting from their individual and personal accounts, for which the purpose of communicating with friends can easily be overcome by the desire for attention and validation through followers and likes. The desire or need to self-brand on social media may itself be subconscious or accidental. Positive reinforcement emotions and neurochemical responses such as dopamine increases elicited by likes on social media all factor into the desire to self-

brand (Burhan & Moraszadeh 2020). When online popularity is linked in a web of wanting to appear socially-conscious, anti-racist, and most importantly "Cool" (Crockett 2008) once again association with blackness becomes itself a commodity. As scholars such as Francesca Sobande (2019), Marc Lamont Hill (2018), and Lauren Michelle Jackson (2019) have theorized 'coolness,' 'blackness,' and social progressivism have long functioned as attributes that carry strategic weight for individuals, as well as for brands. Much as brands now must integrate digital media into their advertising and are quick to hop on the latest meme trend in order to sell products, brands and corporations become personified and aim to portray a sense of "identity." One need only listen to a corporate strategy session to understand the overlap between the branded self (individual user/person) and the "personality" of the brand (corporate account/ company).

Fig 4.3

Netflix Black lives matter tweet. Source: https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/adeonibada/generic-brands-george-floyd-protest-statement

Wokewashing, as defined by Sobande (2019), is a move for corporations to associate themselves with "woke" politics, i.e. progressive anti-racism. As Felice Blake explains in *Anti-Racism Inc.* : "the very contradictions that emerge through the mainstream recognition of Black popular culture presents critical opportunities to question the very cultural and political terms of order that structure cultural institutions and dominant discourses about race, creativity, and representation in the complicated space of incorporation" (2019, 207). The contradictions inherent in conflating branded marketing with a movement that criticizes exploitation through racial capitalism become extremely apparent in the flood of branded responses that occurred in the summer of 2020. While brands issued statements with variations on verbiage and whether or not "black lives matter" was actually included in the copy of the text, there were a large number of statements on a black background with white text. In order to ascertain the success of these statement formats, further research into how large the brand logo appears in relation to the text, the use of "we" to mean the brand, the number of likes/shares in comparison to other posts from the brand, the timing in between their support statement and any other form of advertising, whether this statement was paired with any sort of financial commitment or promise toward inclusion on the backend, a breakdown of who was responsible for these kinds of posts (PR, social media marketing, social media interns), CEO or board-level involvement, would all illuminate the question of commitment to change. The idea that there is accountability for a company's 'commitment', whether as declarative, promised on the DEI section of the company website, or mentioned in one post seems to be gestured toward but up to the

consumer to follow up on. While some journalists and studies have worked to identify the successful or lacking follow-through on such commitments, looking at the similarity of statement aesthetics, structure, and timing demonstrates a wave of corporate wokewashing particular to a historical timeline.[55]

Fig 4.4

Amazon "The inequitable and brutal treatment of Black people in our country must stop" tweet. Source: https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/adeonibada/generic-brands-george-floyd-protest-statement

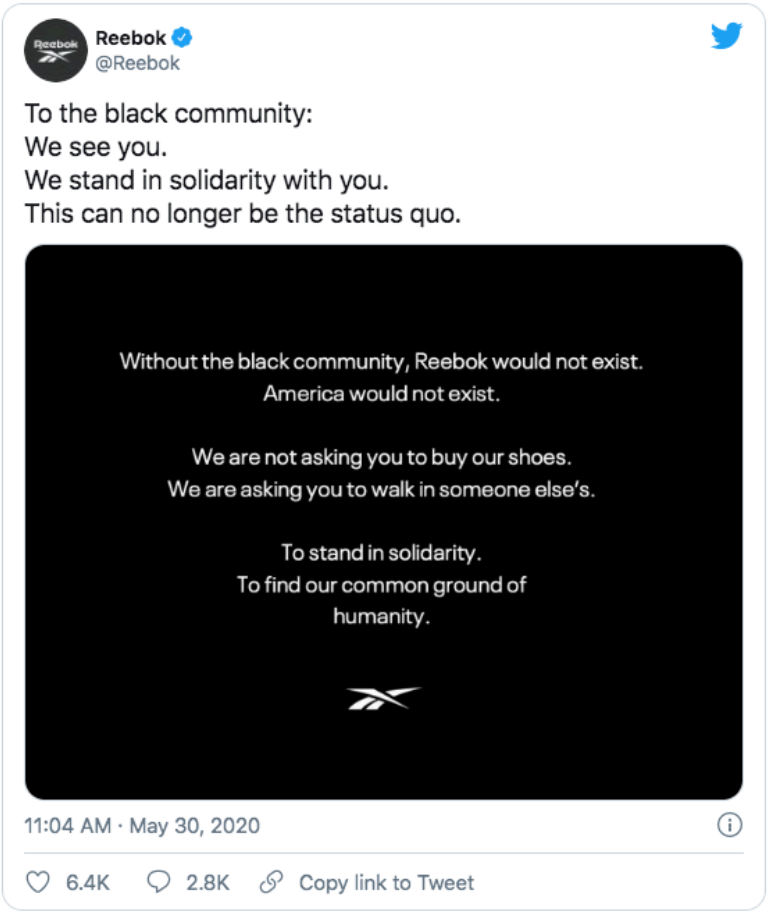

Fig 4.5

Reebok "Without the black community, Reebok would not exist" tweet. Source: https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/adeonibada/generic-brands-george-floyd-protest-statement

What makes these sorts of very similarly formatted statements significant is rather than brands associating themselves with blackness as "hip" "stylish" or most importantly "cool" these statements circulated the commerce of sincerity in order to brand as empathetic. As Roth-Gorton et al. (2020) discuss, brands strategize the creation of white comfort through advertising copy as 'corporate cool', which appropriates and uses AAVE and memetic language originating with black digital language in online advertising.[56] The increased usage of corporate branding opportunities to associate themselves with anti-racism for the purpose of remaining viable and therefore profitable, the further removed from BLM as an anti-

authoritarian intersectional movement for black lives. It is strategic for a company to come to the marketing decision that association with, or acknowledgement of this moment of protest against racial injustice should be in the form of publicized statement. Even when a company's advertising attempts to make them "relatable" or "personable" the company is not a person with a political stance and opinion. A corporation is designed to generate profit, and to declare alignment with racial justice in this particular moment is one particular way companies made sure to not lose profit through a missed digital marketing opportunity.

The increasing presence of companies and brands on social media, either as paid advertising on the platform or through engagement is unavoidable on social media as a necessary sphere of marketing. Sponsored content (sponcon), similar to paid editorial sections in magazines, replicates the format and language of the magazine but are paid for by advertisers and companies. Sponsored meme content functions similarly on social media. Brands and their social media marketing officers are eager to engage with the latest internet meme trend in order to cash in on the free engagement and marketing. The urge to mock bad brand tweets or instagram posts often works as free publicity, even if the point is to denigrate the brand for a misstep or highlight an error in judgment as to how the social media post would be received. When quote-tweeting or sharing an advertisement in order to point out a glaring example of bad taste, this act still functionally serves to amplify engagement for that advertisement, as well as further the reach of marketing content.

Reminiscing on how brands and companies participated in these statements in recognition (or gesture toward) black lives matter in the summer of 2020 there

are similar examples of empty sentiment. Some individuals may have felt that to not post a black square or a statement of support would single you out as a non-supporter or someone who was shying away from making their political stance known out of fear (or worse, racism). On the corporate marketing side, to be left out of the wave of statements being posted online would amount to a missed advertising opportunity.

Fig 4.6
LEGO tweet "We stand with the black community against racism and inequality"
Source: https://twitter.com/LEGO_Group/status/1268216876498399237

Beyond critiquing the wave of similarly formatted statements in support of black lives, a further analysis of what sort of commitments companies made during this wave of support and what those commitments entailed comprises a question of longer term commitment. In figure 4.6, the Lego corporation announced a donation amount, and in Figure 4.7 Glossier pointed out specifically which organizations they would be donating to. More in depth commitment to anti-racism, including work being done in hiring, income equality, diversity and inclusion benchmarks, annual charitable donation commitments, partnerships with community networks and

other substantive ways companies could show their commitment to fighting discrimination, may be more difficult to "market." The surge of DEI workshops and mandatory discrimination trainings at companies, particularly looking at who bears the burden of these duties and how milestones and achievements made toward equality are quantified, are longer term impacts following summer 2020's flood of brand statements.

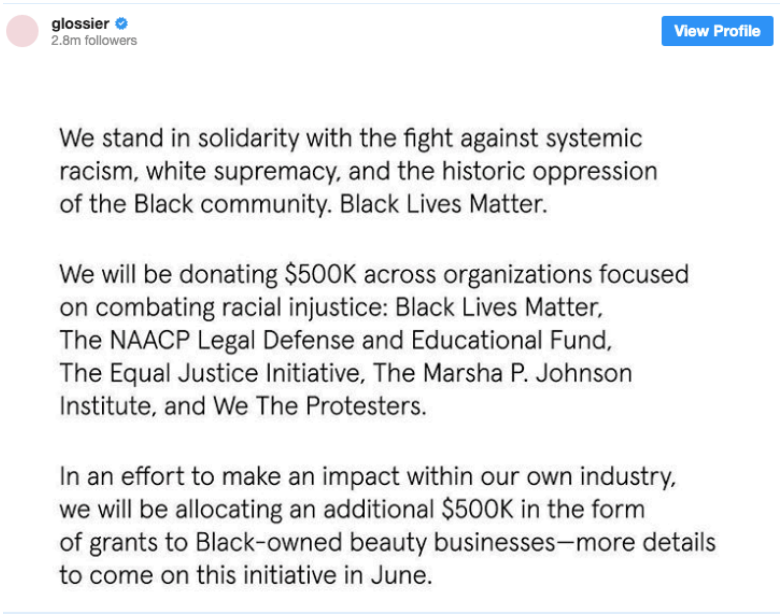

Fig 4.7

Glossier Instagram post. "We stand in solidarity with the fight against systemic racism, white supremacy, and the historic oppression of the Black community." Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CA1K4rLpQq9/?hl=en

In response to this, looking to purposeful ways to undermine and hijack algorithms in virtual spaces in order to flood online discourse of the alt right with mocking images or infographics is another avenue toward breaking open self-contained echo chamber networks within virtual spaces. These examples point to the constant evolution of online activism and tactics that repurpose meme exchange as a method of political disruption. Black feminist digital activism continues to find

avenues to resist oppressive hierarchies and to find solutions and create new relationships to these pre-existing and problematic platforms in digital spaces.

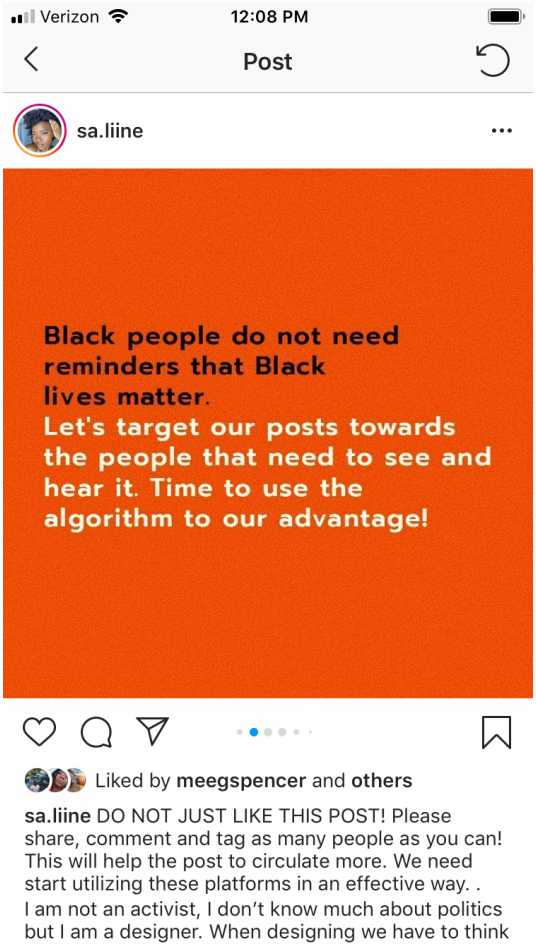

Fig 4.8

@sa.liine Instagram post, screenshot by author June 2, 2020

Fig 4.9

@khalif Instagram post, screenshot by author June 2, 2020

The example in figure 4.9 presents an image of Portia Williams from *Real Housewives of Atlanta* sipping a beverage tagged with a number of alt-right and pro-law enforcement hashtags. This act of subversive hashtag usage provides one example of what I classified in Chapter Two as the potentiality of images from reality television for queer ironic consumption and exchange of affective resonances.[57] Instances like Fig 4.9 apply the lessons learned about the way, at least for a day or a moment, any particular feed associated with a hashtag can be intentionally flooded or "hijacked" with intention by users on a digital platform. This form of digital activism which aims to disrupt alt-right digital organizing points to

innovative ways that black feminist activists are overcoming the latent biases of the algorithms and platforms, and using the features available toward their own ends.

One such example of "using the algorithm" toward the advance of black feminist politics is the company Cltre created by Black tech entrepreneur Angela Benton to encourage black users to get paid for their data.[58] Advertised by media content creator and investor in Issa Rae, the company pays users for their data thereby streamlining what is obscured in the fine print of every standard user agreement. The promotional video, shared by Rae on her instagram, shows black content creators engaging with digital platforms. The copy on the video reads, "We used their platforms. We played by their rules. We gave them our data. Imagine what we could do with a platform that let's us get paid for our data… You don't just move the culture. You are the culture."[59] Cltre advises users on how to download their data profiles from a number of applications and websites including Amazon, Hulu, Netflix, and Spotify, and then allows users to upload their data for monetary compensation.

Data as commodity and algorithmic intelligence that caters to content based on users' data profiles is one aspect of digital life that is taken for granted as part of what you offer. The idiom "if the product is free, you are the product" demonstrates how data collection and advertising create billion dollar tech industries based off getting users to spend as much time as possible on their platforms. The eroding distinction between work and play in online spaces monetizes users pleasure activities and content production. As Andrew Ross asserts:

> In the world of new media, where unions have no foothold whatsoever, the blurring of the lines between work and leisure and the widespread exploitation of amateur or user input has been normative from the outset. It would be more accurate to conclude, then, that while digital technology did not give birth to the model of free labor, it has proven to be a highly efficient enabler of nonstandard work arrangements (Ross 2012, 33).[60]

Through data extraction and platforms designed to keep users engaged on the site, the unpaid emotional labor and affective investment in social networking becomes a place of exploited labor within pleasure economies.

What is hidden behind algorithmic data gathering is the volume and worth of ones data as harvesting in pleasurable activities, including enjoying streaming television and interacting with friends on social media. Companies like Cltre offer one avenue toward both fundamentally understanding data as a commodity. They also put into users' hands a tangible compensation for what is often given away with the signing of a user agreement. While this company, as any other, is driven by profit, the turn toward putting money back in the hands of content creators, particularly with awareness that black culture in digital spaces creates significant value, offers a trend forecast of what is possibly to come in the future. Continued feminist analysis must take into account the exploitative nature of these platforms as well as look toward ways that previously disadvantaged populations can take control of their online content. Underserved and underrepresented people continue to create opportunities, profit, and communities while navigating the turmoil of the online sharing economy.[61]

Working with and under the conditions that have been established online, identifying ways to re-configure and profit from already existent and problematic platforms provides an alternative viewpoint from which to consider techno-pessimism and the inclination toward the doomscroll. The challenge posted in Figure 4.8 to "use the algorithm to our advantage!" does not aim to dismantle the prejudices embodied in the platform, nor does this challenge encourage a move away from usage of Instagram. Rather, it takes note of how the algorithm functions and leverages the use of tagging and hashtags in order to create a new narrative. As memes mocking Hollywood whitewashing are distributed on Facebook that profits from political misinformation, as gifs of racialized affect provide solace to WOC on algorithmically biased Twitter, as climate change memes are re-posted on censoring and exclusionary Instagram, digital counterpublics continually find ways to work within these platforms toward their own ends.

Ironic Distancing and the Doomscroll

The doomscroll is twofold: the content you swipe past endlessly consists of material and information pointing to societal and cultural collapse and violence. At the same time, the act of scrolling and its addictive nature makes you feel doomed to continue looking at your phone. You look to your phone for comic relief from the slew of horrifying information that happens to come to you as news and updates on your phone. As a social media feed offers a seemingly endless supply of content, one aspect of the doomscroll is continuing to swipe until you feel like you can be 'done.' In personal experience, receiving vast amounts of information that creates a negative or anxious emotion through the same device or platform that has previously delivered entertaining or lighthearted emotions (particularly those that make you feel seen/less alone/in community) causes me to continue to scroll until I either get exhausted, frustrated with myself, or distracted by something external to the light of the screen.

While the particulars of the early pandemic doomscroll era may have faded, I argue that resonances of this same form of habit and attachment to digital media remain for many in their relationship with their various feeds. This feeling, that even if for the most part I do not get joy out of scrolling Twitter for example, that there will be a momentary pay off, or an event that elicits the feverishly rapid and witty responses that best suit the platform keeps me coming back. The desire to feel in the know, in real time, is a condition of leading a digital life in relationship to information.

Amid the continuing doomscroll economies on digital platforms, techno-pessimism seems the logical stance. In April of 2022 Elon Musk proposed to buy Twitter for $44 Billion, prompting a flurry of concerns over what will happen to the platform once it is taken private, especially given its struggles with harassment and racism under current regulations and methods of content moderation.[62] The threat of the overturn of Roe v. Wade generated a plethora of infographic warning of data mining on fertility and menstrual tracking apps.[63] In Buffalo this weekend, a white man was radicalized online and live streamed his attack as he shot 10 black victims in a grocery store.[64] Meanwhile, users on Twitter express a preemptive groan to the announcement of a new season of Netflix's *Black Mirror* because we're already living in it.[65]

Meme formats and networks of exchange impact opinion and the sharing of information for large-scale issues that are intrinsic to questions of structural power inequalities within racial capitalism and gendered discrimination. Political pessimism and existential dread related to our planet's future oscillate between ironic cynicism and collectivized expressions of panic within meme networks. Covid-19 illuminated a number of things about how global catastrophe will be mismanaged by governments and health organizations. Not only the increasing differences in access to healthcare, but the fact that with so many flights downed and cars not commuting, there was no substantial reduction in emissions. These disparities go hand in hand, increasing wealth inequality, unequal access to resources necessary to cope with extreme weather crises, and neoliberal individualistic environmentalism and its lack of real material change to substantial

emissions numbers. Likening memes about climate change to memes about the Covid-19 pandemic within the context of the "everyday absurd"(Macdonald 2021) or critical generational perspectives within the "ok boomer" meme phase (Anderson and Keehn 2020), a continuum of ironic consumption of contemporary digital content appears. In order to understand the temporality of what "decline" actually means through memes, it must be demonstrated that a series of smaller disasters constitutes a steady decline, rather than one grand end-of-the-world apocalyptic event. Considerations of "doom" and the concept of "the doom scroll" as expressions of the affective relationship between the individual and the consumption of digital media in scenarios of consecutive crises is indicative of the contentious relationship between techno-pessimism and collective understandings of what the future has in store.

Trying to identify the possibly correct amount of seriousness and earnestness that is achievable in online spaces is difficult, particularly as sincerity in online spaces is increasingly identified as "cringe." Cringe in digital spaces can denote un-ironic posts, passé memes, or viral content associated with social justice that others 'cringe' to see, or are second-hand embarrassed or irritated by. An example of this such as "vote blue no matter who" and the movement away from traditional liberalism even following the post-Trump election season points to an ironic relationship with digital media content as well as a collective sense of political disillusionment. Digital affect of exhaustion and state of being overwhelmed due to the vast amount of content and information to be absorbed daily can be configured

similarly as "compassion fatigue" (Moeller 2002) or "rhetorical exhaustion" (Bradshaw 2020) at the amplification of myriad voices and opinions.

Digital amplification, the idea that the loudest voices or the stories that will garner the most amount of online engagement will receive, through the algorithm, the most circulation, is a central node in the collective turn toward digital exhaustion. Whitney Phillips (2018) discusses how the amplification of false information and harmful content, in particular voices of the alt-right in digital spaces, function as central to the brand strategies of digital media. Metrics for evaluation of success in news or advertisement hinge on clicks and likes, stacking the news cycle as well as social media feeds with content most likely to generate the most engagement, thus: "Things traveling too far, too fast, with too much emotional urgency, is exactly the point. In such an environment, the spread of sensationalistic, antagonistic, or otherwise manipulative information isn't a surprise." (10) This joint business strategy of social networking sites like Twitter as well contemporary journalism that depends on online engagement for revenue means that stories that generate clicks and likes are prioritized across platforms. What generates engagement has proven often to be false, alarmist, sensationalist, or scandalous in ways that perpetuate harmful divisions and inequalities. (Phillips & Milner 2018, Valenzuela et al. 2019)

Identifying what does and also what does not draw attention in the online attention economy must be a feminist research question. While Phillips' focus is on the spread of misinformation and politically motivated trolling that gets undue attention, this dissertation considers the question of "too much emotional urgency"

for the purpose of looking at sites of racial controversy and gendered scandal in digital spaces. Amplifying controversial content has proven to include not only political arguments, but also cultural and social gossip that draws public attention. For example, a celebrity dating announcement may circulate likes, but a celebrity trial will circulate more; a Kardashian in a revealing outfit may stir an amount of attention, but a Kardashian making a misstep or saying something like "It seems like nobody wants to work these days"[66] will draw more retweets and public attention in the name of backlash and correction. There is material benefit and investment in keeping online users scrolling on the app for longer and engaging more. High-yield topics of online engagement that garner user activity to a platform create profit for the tech company through advertising. Likening what does and what does not garner viralness online is interrelated to legacies of what succeeds in creating scandal and distraction (Noble 2013, Ronson 2015, Benjamin 2019, Seymour 2020).

The rise of commiseration over collective "Doomscrolling" during the Covid-19 shelter in place lockdowns identifies an encompassing relationship with digital media as well as the dependence that many individuals have with their phones and computers (Baraback 2020). Isolation, for some physical (as encouraged to only be in close contact with those in ones household), for some also emotional (lack of access to indoor gathering, friends, dating, restaurants, and other spaces) increased the distance between online 'togetherness' and online engagement as further isolating. The desire for information within the sphere of the digital as a space of commiseration and an oftentimes fleeting sense of community became exacerbated for many, particularly as more time at home led to more time online. For many

whose previous relationship with social media had been toward the purpose of entertainment and perhaps aspects of FOMO (fear of missing out), the turn toward doomscrolling has as much to do with increased dependence on online stimulation to replace human connection, as with the type of information likely to be on the timeline during the early days of the pandemic. The call from news sources to limit the amount of time reading the news and to consciously monitor how many hours spent online seemed to mark a crisis-level of information gathering and anxiety spiraling among the general public. Much like research that has been conducted on the emotional impacts of a twenty-four hour cable news cycle during Covid-19 (Fitzpatrick 2022), the baiting and retention of viewership through sensationalist language and promises of more important news to come drives up viewership even when breaking news is not necessarily breaking.

Navigating the contemporary moment online requires the ability to understand the negative and emotionally draining aspects of spending time and energy in our virtual spaces. Our time online is a combination of entertainment, information, data, consumption, labor, and production. Memes and gifs offer one avenue through which to identify how conversations particular to issues of race, gender, sexuality, and class circulate. They also offer a medium to begin to understand why and how existentially threatening questions of racial capitalism and climate crisis will continue to be meme'd events. Politically and culturally exhausted populations of online users will go on to find new formats and platforms to circulate memes and viral content. The usefulness of a visual-textual shorthand to clue in membership and joint-perspective on any particular issue, as complicated or

contextual as that may be, has potentials for both resistance strategies as well as easy corruption and cooptation.

Feminist scholarship in the space of digital media benefits from incorporation of intersectional analysis as well as the possibilities of black feminist speculative world-making. By identifying resistance strategies and possible new ways to exploit and navigate existing tech platforms, modes of digital disidentification offer new narratives to continue the work of community building and engagement. In a digital world of creation and evolution, looking toward the next meme trend or next viral phenomenon, I hope lessons from the front lines of memetic controversies and scandals contribute to new and productive methods of online discourse analysis.

[1] This is work I avoid, not because I'm unfamiliar with its importance, but because I am not willing to psychically spend the energy in that particular muck and violence for the necessary length to produce adequate research.
[2] The film was internationally co-produced by Japanese and British media production companies *Production I.G* (Japan), *Bandai Visual* (Japan), and *Manga Entertainment* (UK).
[3] The 2017 film was produced by *DreamWorks Pictures*, and distributed by *Paramount*. Its budget was reported as $110 million, and to date had a box office of $169,846,945 (IMDB.com, accessed April 2021).
[4] For more on this see: Melissa Phruksachart "The Many Lives of Mr. Yunioshi: Yellowface and the Queer Buzz of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*" Camera Obscura (2017) 32 (3 (96)): 93-119.
[5] Other regimes of racial identification including the one-drop rule and ancestral tracing, the historical uses of census data, and contemporary DNA analysis each carry flawed and significant histories that inform how visually identifying a person's race is understood and presumed along with identifying relative age, gender, etc.
[6] In relation to the cyberpunk genre, Park argues "…cyberpunk stories tend to center thematically on what makes human beings 'human,' interrogating how we differ from advanced forms of artificial intelligence; how we distinguish 'real' objects, place, and experiences from their copies; and how traditional ontological categories break down in a society ruled by technology and corporate interests" (9).
[7] Park contends that in regards to *Blade Runner* (1982), critics and scholars have tended to focus on the Asiatic signifiers in relation to the film's allusions to slavery, while only a few have "considered how the ornamental Orientalism of the film *implicitly structures* its central thematic question, that is, what makes some entities human and other not quite human or 'more human than human?'" (53).
[8] Specifically Wong Kin Yuen (2000) and Giorgio Hadi Curti (2006) note that New Port City is based on modern day Hong Kong. Yuen uses Foucault's heterotopia to speak to the hybridity of postcolonial cityscapes and their importance for the "cultural pluralism"(2) embraced by cyberpunk fiction like *Ghost in the Shell* and *Blade Runner*.
[9] Jaqueline Berndt explains that what is often noted as "manga style" is a result of decades of transnational cultural interchange, "Manga, in particular, has consistently appropriated such diverse pictorial sources as Chinese ink-painting, European tableau with its central perspective, European caricature, and American superhero comics. After World War II all this was mediated by photography and film. What is globally known today as 'manga style' is, in fact, the result of intercultural exchange." (Berndt 2008, 299)
[10] Chewy May, Jes Tom. "Ghost in the Shell PSA: "Movies aren't real, but they affect real people". published on Youtube Feb 28th 2017.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Ll7gt0meuU&t=2s
[11] See also Kai M. Green's reflection on this subject
https://www.thefeministwire.com/2015/06/race-and-gender-are-not-the-same-is-

not-a-good-response-to-the-transracial-transgender-question-or-we-can-and-must-do-better/

[12] Adrienne Massanari (2017) examines how the celebrity nude photos that leaked onto Reddit.com on the thread "r/thefappening" occurred within "toxic technocultures" supported through algorithmic frameworks on the platform.

[13] https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/ghost-shell-how-a-complex-concept-whitewashing-critics-kept-crowds-away-990661

[14] https://www.asifmag.com/story/scarlett-johansson-david-salle-collaboration-with-as-if-magazine

[15] This account, which I have 6 mutual followers with, but am not personally "friends" with, has 9,932 followers as of 1/10/2021. Our "mutual friends," all of which I either know personally to be, or are coded on twitter are cis white gay men. On twitter, the language of "mutuals" (mutual friends) or "oomf" (one of my followers) also situates a queer digital counter-public of Twitter connections.

[16] This style of dubbed video is very popular on Tiktok, and the format, clearly shot on Milli's phone camera also offers a contextual state of dubbing audio.

[17] This formula was replicated on Vh1 for *Rock of Love*, also featuring a "has-been" artist from the 80s and 90s, for whom the contestants were supposed to be fans of his former music career as lead singer of Poison. As for Flav, the image of the groupie for a hip hop group varies from the image of the rock groupie, and the aesthetics on the show (for examples giving a clock vs. giving back stage passes) aimed to highlight what I would consider a very particular divide between "Black music" fans, and "white music" fans.

[18] https://giphy.com/gifs/realitytvgifs-vh1-throwback-thursday-70XCjIwttVXUs

[19] For more on reality TV and "ratchet" behavior, see: Pickens, Therí A. "Shoving aside the politics of respectability: Black women, reality TV, and the ratchet performance." *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 25.1 (2015): 41-58.

[20] Considering feminized performances of white trashiness, Jeffrey Brown (2005) in theorizing the cultural position of Anna Nicole Smith explains how Smith's image as 'rags-to-riches' Southern girl dramatically changed to obscene and grotesque display of excess centering on her weight gain and marriage to an 89 year old millionaire.

[21] See condemnation from popular outlets of Digital Blackface such as https://www.wired.com/story/tiktok-evolution-digital-blackface/, https://www.womenshealthmag.com/life/a33278412/digital-blackface/ https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2021/03/10357290/oprah-meghan-markle-reaction-digital-blackface

[22] The difficulty of answering such a question depends on more questions: How do I know it is a white user, how can I quantify what they "mean" just by the context of their usage, can I go back and see how often they use GIFs or memes featuring images of black celebrities, do others in their social media network also employ a large number of similar GIFs, etc.

[23] Apps such as GIPHY and Tenor offer users GIF files to choose from based on user search terms. The danger of this movement toward targeted advertising lies in the

hands of (neo-trolls) is the ability to target and harass based on search terms. Search results appear through a combination of popularity, company algorithm, as well as increasingly through the usage of user personal data identification. Offering services including GIF keyboards linked to SMS service, GIFs encourage usage as reaction to a post online, or text from a friend. Popularity and current events will often populate the top search results. For example a search for "fly" may have only turned up certain images before the 2020 Vice presidential debate, and after the instantly meme-able moment of a fly on top of Mike Pence's head during the live debate, the search for fly would pull GIFs from the broadcast based on what was trending across platforms. The blueprint of how content surfaces for users differs across platforms, but increasingly companies are using the same logics of "keep the user on the platform for as long as possible by highlighting hyper-personalized content." With GIPHY's recent purchase by Instagram (which is owned by Facebook), the inevitability that GIF searches will pull user data across platforms in order to show results that are popular in their social network, linked to other media or topics they've searched or sites they've purchased from in the past.

[24] For example if an alt-right GIF content creator wants to boost his agenda, it is easier to propagate harmful images through manipulation of the popularity algorithm and keyword searches. A search for "trans" may turn up images of an all-gender restroom sign being torn down. This sort of content would not go against company protocols of "hateful or violent content" but a user with the malicious intent would have a much easier time getting this search result to show up to larger and larger numbers of users.

[25] For analysis of extractive and dubious meme-ificaion of Black women, See: Dobson, K., & Knezevic, I. (2018). " Ain't nobody got time for that!": Framing and stereotyping in legacy and social media. *Canadian journal of communication*, *43*(3), 381-397.

[26] Source: https://www.newyorker.com/culture/rabbit-holes/say-it-with-a-tiffany-pollard-gif Retrieved 1/16/2021

[27] Paper magazine as Papermag.com continues to be a popular outlet by combining a printed and virtual publication.

[28] https://www.npr.org/2021/05/26/1000465487/earth-is-barreling-toward-1-5-degrees-celsius-of-warming-scientists-warn

[29] An analysis of "micro-influencer" number of followers could inform my argument about the small but distinct network of leftist ironic digital content and its circulation within echo-chamber networks.

[30] Stengers' warning of the potential for all of the planet to experience a storm of this magnitude shifts the focus of environmental racism from toxicity, redlining, and infrastructural racism to the issues of reactive time, increased vulnerability, unequal protection, and abandonment by the state.

[31] See also: McKittrick, Katherine. "Plantation futures." *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 17.3 (42) (2013): 1-15.

[32] For context, see: https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/01/arts/spongebob-squarepants-stephen-hillenburg.html

[33] In a March 29th, 2019 interview on MSNBC, Chris Hayes refers to Ocasio-Cortez as "kind of the mascot" for the Green New Deal. To deem Ocasio-Cortez a "mascot" dehumanizes her and patronizes her position as politician. This is one strategy by right wing media to dismiss both Ocasio-Cortez as serious politician, and the GND as viable legislation. https://www.msnbc.com/all-in/watch/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-explains-why-the-green-new-deal-is-about-more-than-climate-1468164675990
[34] https://theintercept.com/2019/04/17/green-new-deal-short-film-alexandria-ocasio-cortez/
[35]https://www.reddit.com/r/TheRightCantMeme/comments/apa25u/aoc_memes_from_an_individual_facebook_comment/
[36] Username @MoralArmor, April 18th 2019, Source:
https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1118520320653238272
[37] Username: @Liz_Wheeler, April 18th 2019, Source:
https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1118520320653238272
[38] Username: @LisaMartoneD, April 17th 2019, Source:
https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1118520320653238272
[39] Username: Philip Mathieu, Accessed May 21st, 2019
https://www.facebook.com/OcasioCortez/videos/2444759028902386/
[40] Ocasio-Cortez and Environmental Justice advocates alike understand this response of condemning the tone of the message because it is felt to have come from a position of elitism. The Congresswoman responded to the claim that climate change was an "elitist issue" in a March 26th, 2019 hearing. "You want to tell people that their concern and their desire for clean air and clean water is elitist? Tell that to the kids of the South Bronx, which are suffering from the highest rates of child asthma in the country," she said. "This is about our lives, and this should not be partisan," she added. "Science should not be partisan." Source:
https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/mar/26/green-new-deal-senate-democrats-protest-republicans
[41] Username: John Seipp, Accessed May 21st, 2019
https://www.facebook.com/OcasioCortez/videos/2444759028902386/
[42] Username: Andrew Griswold, Accessed May 21st, 2019
https://www.facebook.com/OcasioCortez/videos/2444759028902386/
[43] Username: @PackerfanWeird, April 17th, 2019 Source:
https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1118520320653238272
[44] Username: Kristie Son, Accessed May 21st, 2019
https://www.facebook.com/OcasioCortez/videos/2444759028902386/
[45] Username: Denise Anderson, Accessed May 21st, 2019
https://www.facebook.com/OcasioCortez/videos/2444759028902386/
[46] https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/mar/31/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-aoc-republicans-trump
[47] https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/08/politics/nancy-pelosi-alexandria-ocasio-cortez-twitter/index.html
[48] This could be directly related to the viral trend following the 2020 election of mockingly answering "what would you do in this disaster scenario" with the answer : "vote <3" / same joke as "if you're in line at the polls stay there!"

[49] Communicating and existing online through these sets of refining 'views on issues' parallels to abundance of "takes" online, i.e. "my take is..."
[50] https://www.theverge.com/2020/4/20/21228577/offshore-drilling-deepwater-horizon-10-year-anniversary
[51] https://www.theverge.com/2016/5/5/11592622/this-is-fine-meme-comic
[52] Source: Instagram @seize_the_memes, screenshot by author 7/28/2021
[53] https://apnews.com/article/jeff-bezos-space-e0afeaa813ff0bdf23c37fe16fd34265
[54] One other example of this is on dating websites such as Tinder, users are encouraged to add their "passions" on their profile from a predetermined list that shows up as keywords on their profiles. Alongside "skiing" or "music", many users 2020 onward now have "BLM" as one of these "interests" identifying themselves on dating apps. That Tinder would list BLM as a "passion" is worth analysis on its own. While this question of gesturing toward some sort of activism or inauthentic association with political movements is relevant to the question of digital activism and racialized affects in digital spaces, the question posed by this user centers again: "who is this for?" If non-Black persons are identifying each other on social media and dating websites by their associations with BLM, does this void the usefulness of digital shorthand for purposes of information sharing and organization, or is it just an undesired outcome?
[55] https://www.vox.com/the-goods/22463723/blackout-tuesday-blm-sephora-starbucks-nike-glossier
[56] Accounts such as @brandssayingbae point to the multiple ways that brands use meme lingo and aim to participate in trend-specific language and phrases in order to facilitate engagement online. By re-tweeting brands from Salesforce tweeting "Salesforce + Chill" to multiple brands promoting products using Megan thee Stallion's phrase: "hot girl summer" this account and others point out to absurdity of branded online marketing. See: Roth-Gordon, Harris, Zamora 2020.
[57] While the Pollard images generally reflected emotions such as irritation, anger, and frustration, this image, which also does not necessarily convey positive or joyful emotions, summons "staying in my lane" "sipping" "unbothered": eyebrow raised knowing and confidence.
[58] https://afrotech.com/black-consumers-get-paid-for-your-data-with-clture
[59] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EUqub14xb0&t=22s
https://www.clture.io/faq
[60] The nonstandard work arrangement that users, largely unwittingly agree to when hitting "accept" on the prompted "terms and conditions" or "terms of service" agreement allows not only company ownership of user generated content but the ownership of personal data which becomes mined and sold as metadata. Unpaid "click work," such as flagging inappropriate posts, sharing content, and "liking" posts, all produce value. Marking a post as inappropriate may not be a pleasure activity, but it can function by "intensifying exchanges and prompting viral circulation, memes, and buzz" (Casilli 2017, 3937). Click work, and pay-per-click work, shows the value of user administration and moderation. As with flagging

posts for removal, "liking" posts can also be described as constituting emotional labor that produces value for social networking companies (Arcy 2016).
[61] I'm thinking particularly of OnlyFans, the move from influencer Instagram to branded content tiktok, Patreon donations and pay walled content, subscription based blogs and online magazines.
[62] https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2022-04-28/elon-musk-twitter-accountability-racism-monopoly-regulation
[63] https://techcrunch.com/2022/05/05/roe-wade-privacy-period-tracking/
[64] https://www.inquirer.com/opinion/commentary/buffalo-shooting-violence-prevention-20220516.html
[65] https://twitter.com/carolaverygrant/status/1526268903306932224 Username @carolavergrant "we're not prepared for how cringe a pandemic Black Mirror is gonna be" Retrieved May 16, 2022
[66] https://www.buzzfeed.com/natashajokic1/kim-kardashian-work-advice-backlash

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