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And If the World Should End Tonight…: Racial Capitalism, Sexual Mythmaking, and Tumblr's Queer-of-Color Worlds of Resistance

DISSERTATION

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by

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DEDICATION

To

my beloved kith and kin.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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On December 17th, 2018, Tumblr—a site once known as an oasis for queer and trans people on a notoriously hostile internet—implemented an all-encompassing adult content ban. With this change in policy, the site saw massive waves of flight. Less than a year later, in August 2019, Tumblr sold for less than $3 million, a substantial loss from its $1.1 billion valuation in 2013 (Siegel 2019). In the years since the "Tumblr Apocalypse," the site has retained a core userbase, but it no longer maintains its ubiquity as a space for queer organizing online.

What the Tumblr case study illustrates is not only the shape and texture of digital spaces where queer and trans youth people congregate, but also the modes of social ordering that structure *all* our lives. Rather than revealing the necessity of disciplining those rendered "abject" or "sexually excess," Tumblr offers an example of the *possibility* that these spaces of "excess" sexuality offer. In other words, Tumblr is a case study of the *people* who make a space "excess," and the modes of refusal that they embody, even as—*and because*—they are marginalized by both state and non-state agents of racial capitalist regimes.

In this project, I utilize Tumblr as an opening to develop my concept of *sexual mythmaking* as a technology of racial capitalism. Sexual mythmaking shapes the conditions of possibility for *all* populations by distributing power and precarity along two antagonistic binaries: the "sexual excess" and the "sexually innocent/sexually acceptable." This theoretical framework reveals how understandings of sexuality have *always* been a key component of the difference-making projects central to the development of capitalist modernity, and remains a central ordering technology, even as *some* marginalized sexual subjects become incorporated into the political mainstream. As such, modes of resistance against sexual mythmaking as a technology of racial capitalism—and thus racial capitalism writ large—refuse both assimilation into "sexually acceptable" and the ordering schemas that implicitly produce the "antagonistic differences" that sexual mythmaking relies on, and thus offer us alternative imaginaries of possibility in the long arc of "unprecedented times."

INTRODUCTION: SEX, POLITICS, AND SOCIAL MEDIA

"You fucked the world up, now
We'll fuck it all back down…"
—Janelle Monáe, "Screwed," *Dirty Computer* (2018)

"…queer futurity…is not an end but an opening or horizon. Queer utopia is a modality of critique that speaks to quotidian gestures as laden with potentiality. The queerness of queer futurity, like the blackness of a black radical tradition, is a relational and collective modality of endurance and support….It is a being in, toward, and for futurity."
—José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* ([2009] 2019, 87)

On December 17th, 2018, with the implementation of Tumblr's "adult content" ban, a queer world came to its end.

Almost exactly eight months after the passage of the Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act of 2017, Pub. L. No. 115-164, 132 Stat. 1253—known as FOSTA-SESTA, for the two component House and Senate bills that made up the legislation[1]—Tumblr implemented a total ban on all "adult content," defined as: "…[content] that show real-life human genitals or female-presenting nipples, and any content...that depicts sex acts" (2018). This ban was largely understood to have come in response to the Apple store banning Tumblr, which itself was, ostensibly, the result of an FBI investigation into "original child sexual abuse images" on Tumblr. As a site known for its sexual content, this ban had a massive impact on Tumblr's many communities, many of whom were organized around the sharing and resharing of erotic content. After the "adult content" ban was suddenly announced on November 19th, massive waves of flight wracked the site. To some, Tumblr's adult content ban was just another change in

[1] The Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) was proposed in the House of Representatives by Ann Wagner on April 3, 2017. The Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) was proposed in the Senate by Rob Portman on August 1, 2017.

its notoriously unenforced terms of service. Other Tumblr users, however, understood the new "adult content" ban as a paradigm shift, a fundamental challenge to Tumblr and its status as space on an internet notoriously hostile to queer and queer-of-color communities. By the beginning of 2019, the once-thriving social media platform was a shadow of what it once was, and by August 2019, Verizon/Yahoo sold Tumblr for less than $3 million—a substantial loss from the $1.1 billion that Yahoo purchased Tumblr for in 2013 (Siegel 2019). In the years since, Tumblr—though still a functional website with an active userbase—has become much less of a core space for community-building online.

Tumblr's crash after the implementation of its "adult content" ban illustrates the deep interlinkages between capital, the state, and sexuality and eroticism. Though Tumblr was not explicitly targeted in the text of the FOSTA/SESTA bill, the things that occurred on Tumblr and that shaped its unique culture—including a free and open culture of sexuality, of which included the creation and distribution of various forms of pornography and erotica, the active presence of sex workers both selling their services and advocating for their rights, and alternative/deviant forms of pornography—became legal and, as a result, economic liabilities for the corporate powers whose interests ultimately shaped the texture of the site. FOSTA-SESTA, though justified as a piece of legislation meant to curb forced sex trafficking, was very explicitly written with wide enough latitude, so that it opened site owners, moderators, and potentially the Apple app store and even internet service companies like Comcast and Spectrum, to criminal and civil liabilities under the law. Though Tumblr was not *targeted,* the sexual conduct and communities that existed on the site fell under the purview of FOSTA-SESTA, explicitly framed as one of the "causes" for the legislation or not.

Despite the cataclysmic nature of the 2018 adult content ban—one nickname for both the implementation of the adult content ban, and the massive loss of active users, during the period in which those events unfolded, was the "Tumblrpocalypse"—that Tumblr would ban adult content after FOSTA-SESTA was, in retrospect, somewhat unsurprising. Other sites that hosted explicit sexual content were seized, shut down, or chose to limit their services before Tumblr's 2018 adult content ban. What more, when thinking about Tumblr as digital architecture, digital community, and digital *geography,* the fact that Tumblr's CEO framed its 2018 adult content ban as the making of a better, more inclusive, more positive, *safer* Tumblr makes this decision to implement technologies of policing sexual deviance one that is not without precedent. After all, there is nothing new about sexual spaces being upended and destroyed for the interlinked aims of political consolidation and capitalist expansion. The starkest, most-illustrative images of gentrification, after all, are those of spaces formerly dominated by spaces of open sexuality, often open *queer* sexuality, transforming into arenas for corporate retail ventures. Times Square, for example, once known for its adult theaters and sex shops, is now known as a family-friendly tourist attraction, complete with a Disney store. As Samuel Delany writes in his autoethnographic *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue:*

> …a notion of safety has arisen, a notion that runs from safe sex (once it becomes anything more than making sure your partner uses a condom when you are anally penetrated by males of unknown HIV status, whether you are male or female) to safe neighborhoods, safe cities, and…[safe] relationships….danger is rarely specified in any way other than to suggest its failure to conform to the ideal bourgeois marriage. Such critiques [of safety] are imperative, however, if we are ever to establish new institutions that will promote similar ends" (1999, 122).

Or, as José Esteban Muñoz writes, this "late Disneyfication" of Times Square—and other spaces of alternative, deviant, and open sexuality beyond just sexual *identification*—push minoritarian subjects into the private sphere. The result of this, Muñoz writes, is in the interest of power:

> The state understands the need to keep us from knowing ourselves, knowing our masses….the power of our masses…can be realized only by surpassing the solitary pervert model and accessing group identity. Doing so entails resisting the privatization of queer culture for which the gay pragmatists such as Andrew Sullivan, Gabriel Rotello, and Bruce Bawer clamor ([2009] 2019, 64).

In this way, then, the making of a Tumblr—of an internet—that is "safer," though well-intentioned, simply adds a digital case study to the well-documented phenomena of sex policing and gentrification of geographies of sexual contact and community.

But unlike Times Square and the Christopher Street Piers in New York, the Tenderloin in San Francisco, and countless other physical neighborhoods where queer people and sex workers and queer sex workers made communities, Tumblr as digital neighborhood would not find itself made anew after the "adult content ban." Though Tumblr functioned as what André Cavalcante describes as a "queer cultural archipelago," Tumblr as a digital geography would reveal the limits of applying logics of geographic policing and restrictions onto online spaces. Tumblr-as-corporation could not replace the queer-of-color perverts, callout queens, and freaks of Tumblr-as-community with white, middle-class, "respectable" clientele. After the "adult content" ban, despite the best efforts of corporate marketing teams to maintain Tumblr's "brand" as a then-valuable internet commodity, the "mainstreaming" of Tumblr did not happen. On Tumblr, even after the "adult content" ban, there was no rush of influencers, no #sponcon, no social media celebrities earning million-dollar paychecks from the site.

In its implementation of the "adult content" ban following the passage of FOSTA/SESTA, and in the extreme loss of its vulgar economic value after the ban, Tumblr offers an example of the *possibility* that these spaces of "excess" sexuality offer. Or, to word it another way, Tumblr offers a case study of the *people* who make a space "excess," and the modes of refusal that they embody, even as—*and because*—they are marginalized by both state and non-state agents of racial capitalist regimes. After all, Tumblr as a corporate entity, even as a

digital space, was nothing without the people who populated it, as proven by its loss of valuation after the so-called "Tumblr Apocalypse."

Despite corporate maneuvering by Verizon/Yahoo, it was Tumblr's *communities*—communities that were produced, in no small part, through the sharing and distribution of different forms of erotica—that made it "the Tumblr community." This sense of community was embodied by a "unique sensibility" (Cho 2018, 3185). And it was the refusal of those very people and communities embodying Tumblr's "unique sensibility" to be imbricated into an order of "sexually acceptable" racial capitalist exploitation and extraction—an order originating with the passage of FOSTA/SESTA, and facilitated by the "adult content" ban, an order echoed by Rudy Giuliani's promises to "clean up Times Square" in the 1990s—that made Tumblr's "adult content" ban so counterintuitive to the site's "value."

In defining Tumblr's "unique sensibility," Alexander Cho describes the site in contrast to the "default publicness" privileging white heteronormativity that are the default of websites such as Facebook:

> Tumblr, in contrast…is a digital space where queer youth of color do not feel the pressure of constant homophobic and racist surveillance from pre-existing (or future) life networks. It evades indexing; it privileges affective and evocative exchange of imagery and the cultivation of a sensibility rather than giving primacy to literal interaction (though it allows for that too); it did not for most of its history allow for one-to-one direct messaging between users; it does not assume or require connections to extant offline networks and does not insist on a singular, permanent, "authentic" user identity; it is seemingly OK with porn and flouts copyright, among other interrelated design and policy choices (2018, 3185).

As such, Tumblr's ethos was one well-known in social media spaces as a queer, intersectional, social justice ethos. The platform served as a hub for DIY feminist organizing and queer exploration and experimentation, one that that became a central (web)site through which images, information, and resources were circulated during times of political uprising. This queer intersectional ethos pushed the conditions of possibility for social movements in the post-Web

2.0 era, but most importantly, this "explicitly political" work was done alongside fandom/pop culture content, surrealist humor posts, and, in equal measure, a famously non-regulated culture of porn. Porn was, on Tumblr, just as much a part of building and precluding different communities as was content about popular media franchises or political events. Despite its relative academic obscurity compared to platforms like Twitter and Facebook, the echoes of Tumblr's impact on the conditions of political discourse lingers on, an uncited, unspoken force that shaped a whole generation of queer and queer-of-color youth. This structural forgetting, much like its minimization and ridicule during its heyday, can, I believe, be linked to Tumblr's many queer communities and their "problematic" embrace of the explicitly sexual, or the sexually "excess."

Theoretical Context

Tumblr's "end" after the passage of FOSTA/SESTA and the implementation of its "adult content" ban is not brand-new per se, of course. But the dynamic at play that Tumblr makes visible—the making of subjectivities marked sexually "excess," the erasure, policing, and extraction that results from such marking, and the possibilities of resistance that come in response to *and* as a result of such marking—is what I wish to explore. Those queer-of-color people who produced Tumblr's "unique ethos," I argue, make visible the fundamental centrality of sexuality and eroticism in racial capitalism as an ordering structure, both in their resistance, and in their being policed by, processes of what I am calling *sexual mythmaking*.

Sexual mythmaking, as an analytical framework, seeks to attend to the ways that sexuality, eroticism, and reproduction are disciplined, promoted, or coerced in the ongoing projects of maintaining racial capitalism and regimes of racial difference. Attending to the modes

in which sexuality is disciplined—or not disciplined—as a means of reproducing projects of difference central to racial capitalism. Returning to what Cathy Cohen wrote in her landmark 1997 piece, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," the failure of a single-axis queer politics was in its challenge to heterosexuality *only.* The white queer political orientation against an imagined monolithic heterosexuality *without* an understanding of the forces that have historically produced "non-queer" Black and Indigenous peoples as "heterosexuals outside of heteronormativity" (1997, 452) reproduces the ontology of "antagonistic differences" so central to racial capitalism by positing a single-axis "…'hetero/queer' divide" (1997, 447). The "hetero/queer" binary obfuscates the malleability of the border between the "sexually excess" and the "sexually acceptable" for nonblack queer subjects. As Cohen points out:

> It is the 'nonnormative' children of many of these [women answering to the criminal justice system and receiving state assistance] that Newt Gingrich would place in orphanages. This is the same Newt Gingrich who, despite his clear disdain for gay and lesbian 'lifestyles,' has invited lesbians and gay men into the Republican party" (1997, 457).

Here, Cohen's critique of white queer politics' failure to account for the "heterosexuals on the (out)side of heteronormativity" pulls into full relief how sexual mythmaking's malleability allows for the promise of assimilation and acceptance for those "sexually excess" populations who can be rehabilitated into the project of "proper" reproductivity—the project of reproducing capitalism as an order, and white hegemony in service of that order. As Matilda Bernstein Sycamore writes, "Willful participation in U.S. imperialism is crucial to the larger goal of assimilation, as the holy trinity of marriage, military service and adoption has become the central preoccupation of a gay movement centered more on obtaining straight privilege than challenging power" ([2004] 2008, 1). Writing during the development of "affordable" HIV/AIDS treatments for those populations with access to such medical treatment, the development of the "gay consumer" (Puar [2007] 2017, 4), and the "normalization" of white gay and lesbian people in

mass media via pop culture phenomena like *The Real World* and Ellen DeGeneres's "coming out," Cohen and Sycamore reveal the very real political and material consequences of queer political claims to "acceptability" in the same time period that regimes of sexual mythmaking began to adapt to allow some queer subjects purchase into "sexual acceptability."

Similarly, other scholars working within queer and transnational feminist studies have examined the ways in which the formerly-abject subject position of "the [white] queer" has not only been imbricated into the project of the racial capitalist order, but in fact, has become weaponized in service of the Western imperial state. Jasbir Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages* introduces the concept of "homonationalism" to describe how American sexual exceptionalism is used to justify modes of racism and military imperialism in a, "…commitment to the global dominant ascendancy of whiteness that is implicated in the propagation of the United States as empire" ([2007] 2017, 2). Invoking Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Jin Haritaworn writes on the policing of Muslim immigrant communities in Germany: "…the border [demarcating Others] is redrawn around 'core values' of women-and-gay friendliness….This process nevertheless continues to follow the logics of racism….the exceptional qualities in the above list are held up as core values that must be protected from [racial] Others" (2015, 9). For these authors, it is not simply that queer politics have changed after the peak of the biopolitical crisis that was the HIV/AIDS epidemic, but that certain gay and lesbian political formations are *key* to maintaining the racial projects of the state. The failure to account for "heterosexuals outside of heteronormativity" in the face of queer assimilationism has defined and shaped mainstream LGBT+ politics and various subjectivities such a politics claims to represent.

Robinson's fundamental argument about the adaptability of mythmaking processes applies to sexual mythmaking: that, while incorporating "remnants of [their] predecessors"

(2007, xiv) these processes allow for changes for the sake of consolidation *through* difference-making (2007, 132) in the interests of the state and capital. Projects of resistance that rejected sexual mythmaking's labelling of positionalities as "excess," like projects that sought to reclaim the humanity of people—including white queer people—with HIV/AIDS, were met in response with a subsuming of *certain* queer subjects into "acceptability" in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Similar to the consolidation of Irish laborers under the banner of "whiteness" through blackface, particular gay and lesbian subjectivities could be consolidated under the banner of "respectable" modes of sexual being by incorporating a, "…model of white-picket-fence, 'we're just like you' normalcy" (Sycamore [2004] 2008, 3). Queer assimilation into respectable modes of sexual being then, has allowed for a shift to allow for the maintenance of racial capitalism in the early twenty-first century, a century marked by a simultaneous hyper-consolidation of capital under what Paul Amar describes as "culture of neoliberalism" (Amar 2013, 241-243) *and* an incredible possibility for global solidarities.

Further aiding in sexual mythmaking's incorporation of certain queer positionalities into "acceptability" are, once more, medico-scientific discourses. As the very ordering schemas so central to making the meaning of "gender" in a racial capitalist order, medico-scientific discourses remain relevant in the making and unmaking of "sexually acceptable" queer subjectivities. An August 2019 article detailed a genome study of almost 500,000 participants from the United States, United Kingdom, and Sweden in search for genetic bases to sexuality, finding that—no, there is no "gay gene," there are *multiple* "gay genes." This study, of course, is a twenty-first century follow-up of sexologists' attempts to find medical "justifications" for sexual attraction dating back to finding "proof" of lesbianism in enlarged clitorises. Even outside of genetic research, appeals to the *inbornness* of queer and trans identities been all-too-common

tactics in campaigns for "equality." That Lady Gaga's 2011 "Born This Way" single became an anthem of "equality" in response to California's Proposition 8 speaks to the white queer need to reinforce the medico-scientific discourses of same-sex attraction's genetic legitimacy—and thus, gay and lesbian *acceptability*—rather than upend and problematize them. More contemporaneously, transmedicalism—the perspective that the only "legitimate" form of transgender identity is the medically-recognized and sanctioned transition into the "opposite gender"—and the wholesale rejection of nonbinary or genderfuck positionalities rely on appeals to the authority and legitimacy of the ordering schemas of European bourgeois gendering.

With this context in mind, I argue that Tumblr's queer-of-color communities make visible the processes of mythmaking that orbit sexuality and eroticism, and how these processes of mythmaking are deeply interlinked with not only the state and contemporary modes of capital, but, as I argue in chapter one, the development of racial capitalism as an organizing structure in and of itself. As such, sexuality and eroticism—usually examined as elements of racial capitalism's processes of mythmaking, though not as elements unto themselves—must be given a particularistic focus.

In other words, Tumblr's particular case is important for several reasons. First, Tumblr as website, corporate entity, and digital community is an illustrative case study of sexual mythmaking and its fundamental elements, the ways that sexual mythmaking functions as an ordering schema, and the ways that sexual mythmaking—though binaristic—is responsive to crisis and the development of new markets. Second, Tumblr as community offers an important counterhistory to the development of the gay mainstream as a powerful political force in the late 2000s and the early 2010s—especially as the gay mainstream's focus on mostly white, mostly middle-class gay and lesbian couples left out, and were in political opposition to—communities

of color. Third, Tumblr as community offers valuable insight into political alternatives to not only the gay political mainstream, but to the modes of ordering that racial capitalism makes tantamount to "the real," and in doing so, offer lines of flight from racial capitalism's ordering ontology—and offer imaginaries and examples of politically important life-worlds outside of, and in excess of, the "real" world.

Chapter Outline

This project is divided into five chapters, each interlinked in a semi-linear fashion. In my first chapter, I outline what I term *sexual mythmaking*. Using Cedric Robinson's work as both historiographical point of departure *and* as theoretical roots to sexual mythmaking, I flesh out the role of sexuality and reproduction in the development of racial capitalism. It is here that I outline the historical uses of sexuality as mythmaking schema, one that is particularly interested in projects of reproductive control. In doing so, I lay the groundwork for an understanding of sexual mythmaking as a schema that is necessarily invested in maintaining antagonistic differences, hierarchies, and binaries—and thus, is necessarily interlinked with the project of gender-making. Moreover, this chapter examines how racial mythmaking and sexual mythmaking interact in producing hierarchies of value and order.

From the theoretical origins of sexual mythmaking, I move onto my second chapter, where I examine the discourses used by members of the gay political mainstream during the marriage equality era. This analysis functions both as case study for sexual mythmaking's flexibility and as table-setting for my primary case study. Before examining the marriage equality era, I offer a brief history of the mainstream gay rights/LGBTQ+ politics movement as it has developed in the United States. I briefly outline the history of gay and lesbian political

movements, up through the Mattachine Society, the HIV/AIDS crisis, and the "Gay Nineties," all to offer political context for how and why the gay political mainstream looked the way it looked during the marriage equality era. Then, I examine two digital campaigns utilized as part of the marriage equality era, the NOH8 photo campaign, and American Apparel's "Legalize Gay" social media campaign. Through examining these campaigns, I offer context for the state of the gay political mainstream's use of online platforms to advocate for marriage equality, but I also examine how these discourses work to recenter gay politics as almost-exclusively an avenue for white bourgeois gay and lesbian people. In doing so, this chapter and chapter three work in tandem to capture a particular moment of political inflection, and the communities that were left of the project of mainstreaming that was the turn towards marriage equality.

Chapter three is the beating heart of this work, an analysis of Tumblr and the queer and trans-of-color politics that developed on the site. In this chapter, I attempt to outline Tumblr as a space that produced communities that offered counternarratives to the gay mainstream during the height of the "same love" centered marriage equality era. As Alexander Cho describes, Tumblr has a unique ethos. This ethos was infamous, often portrayed in bad faith by more conservative factions online as that of "social justice warriors." Tumblr's ethos, I argue, that developed as a combination of the unique digital architecture of Tumblr-as-website, and the communities and people who populated the site. As a website whose digital infrastructure allows for fluidity, flexibility, anonymity, and—as a result—is near-impossible to index, Tumblr and its communities contain within them a fundamental ephemerality that is difficult to materially capture. As such, this chapter attempts to triangulate Tumblr through three archives: first, through mainstream media portrayals of Tumblr; second, through the Tumblr posts of two important figures on the site—Mark Aguhar, a transfeminine Filipina American artist, and Blake

Brockington, a young Black transmasculine student and activist—to articulate the kinds of politics and modes of being in community made on Tumblr; and third, through a turn to autoethnography and the realm of feelings and memory. These archives—and this chapter as a whole—is unusual for political science. However, Tumblr and the role that Tumblr played in offering alternative modes of being cannot be accounted for utilizing the conventional terms of disciplinary political science. As such, this chapter is rich with interventions, including the mere insistence that Tumblr and the erotic communities that were on it *were, indeed, political.*

Chapter four returns to Tumblr's 2018 adult content ban, FOSTA-SESTA, and the broader legal and sociocultural genealogy that FOSTA-SESTA stems from. Here, I offer a brief summary of Tumblr's policy change, an analysis of FOSTA-SESTA and the immediate legal genealogy that it draws from, and the broader historical genealogy at its root. I argue that, though noble on its surface, the primary discourses that motivated FOSTA-SESTA—the need to "stop sex trafficking" and "protect children" from perverts on the internet—taps into a long history of "sex trafficking" and "protecting children" being utilized as ways to mobilize the state to protect those subjects always "sexually innocent," which is to say, white women and children. By examining FOSTA-SESTA's broader legal genealogy, I draw a direct link from fears surrounding the sexual purity of white women and children in the post-Emancipation era, to the implementation of Tumblr's 2018 adult content ban, thus offering a much-needed racial analysis of conventional legal discourses about "protecting children" and "stopping sex trafficking." Moreover, putting FOSTA-SESTA—and thus Tumblr's 2018 adult content ban—also works to center those children who are never mythologized as "sexually innocent," and thus who are made *less safe* because of cultural and legal policies that encourage disclosure, surveillance, and policing in the name of "protecting the children."

In the fifth and final chapter, by means of conclusion, I end by glancing towards queer futurity. To do this, I return, once more, to Tumblr's 2018 adult content ban—specifically, the community reaction during the "grace period" between Tumblr staff announcing the ban and the ban's ultimate implementation. During this brief grace period, Janelle Monáe's music video for "Crazy, Classic, Life" was circulated and recirculated on the site, functioning as a fitting memorial for a queer world at its end, *as it was ending.* Here, I connect "Crazy, Classic, Life" and its queer Afrofuturistic vision to Tumblr's queer ethos. In glancing towards the queer horizon, Monáe and Tumblr's queer archipelago offer a different mode of imagining political community, one that prioritizes survival. This queer archipelagic mode of understanding community, the political, and organizing provides space for political "failures," accounting for how failure, fluidity, and flight are important parts of queer political strategies—especially as queer and trans-of-color worlds are always at the precipice of their end. Especially as politics in the post-Trump era is one of norms being broken and worlds at their end, this queer archipelagic form of politics might offer insights into survival at, within, and after "unprecedented times."

Interventions

As a project that, in part, works to emphasize the fluidity of particular digital communities, this project is fundamentally an interdisciplinary project. Drawing from disciplinary political science, performance studies, ethnic studies, law scholarship, gender and sexuality studies, digital humanities, anthropology, and visual studies, this project is informed by an eclectic set of disciplines, literatures, and fields of study. As such, this project offers substantial contributions to these fields.

Given my disciplinary training in the field of political science, and given the ways in which this project engages and challenges conventional understandings of "the political," some of my primary contributions in this project are in expanding political science's scope of what counts as a "political" object of study. Eroticism, though often viewed as *part* of larger political projects, is not conventionally understood as, itself, political. Even in scholarship about the political and legal impact of "the public" and "the private," and even in feminist scholarship built on the second-wave feminist mantra of "the personal is political," erotic production—even and especially porn—is often seen as a cultural product that is related to the political, rather than an avenue by which to understand key concepts of politics: the making of order, the production and reproduction of power, and imagining modes of resistance. In focusing on sexuality expansively, especially in thinking about its relationship to eroticism, my theory of *sexual mythmaking* brings to the fore communities, projects, ideologies, and politics that have conventionally been left out of political science research—and this extends into my focus on Tumblr as a (web)site of political education and political community-building. The field of "Tumblr studies" is very small, in part, because of how Tumblr evades conventional modes of studying social media. The site cannot be scraped and mined for data in the same ways that Twitter and Facebook can be, as a result of Tumblr's digital infrastructure, and attempts to mass-archive the site in the wake of the 2018 adult content ban were met with active hostility from Tumblr staff. Tumblr is fluid and ephemeral by design, and this fluidity and evasiveness is embodied by how users carry themselves on the site. As a result, Tumblr is a space that cannot be quantified in the same ways that Facebook and Twitter can be quantified—and as such, it suffers from a lack of study, especially within political science. In this way, simply by studying Tumblr, this project expands

political science to look beyond the more "public-facing" social media sites and towards smaller, more evasive digital spaces *as* sites of political education and organizing.

In terms of my contribution to the study of race and power, this project draws upon key works in queer-of-color critique, critical race theory, Black studies, Asian American studies, and Indigenous studies to examine how sexuality and sexual mythmaking have always been *racial* projects, and as such, it has extensive contributions to offer in terms of thinking the always-already-intersectional nature of race, gender, and sexuality. My work expands Cedric Robinson's analysis of *mythmaking* as a project of racial capitalism to understand how race and eroticism are interlinked in complex ways, but this project also expands the broader discourse around the myths that have linked racial groups to inherent sexual deviance. In other words, what sexual mythmaking offers is an analysis of how the naturalized status of "excess" that various racial groups are mythologized as embodying is problematic *not* because of the sexual behaviors that are being portrayed themselves, but because of the *meaning* that such sexual behaviors take on *as* a project of producing "antagonistic binaries" to maintain naturalized hierarchies. This, thus, works to challenge conventional analyses that—though key in critiquing how Black and Indigenous peoples especially have had violence justified against them as a result of mythologies of inherent sexual deviance—take the ontological and often moral marker of "sexual deviance" for granted, thus leaving unaccounted-for the radical forms of sexual politics that queer and trans-of-color people have historically and contemporaneously advanced.

In terms of theory, sexual mythmaking advances a more expansive critique of hegemonic modes of racial and sexual order, while also challenging the roots of such an order. This is one of my key contributions to critical race theory, queer-of-color critique, and other fields of study that analyze race and power, though it is far from my only contribution. I offer key contributions in

terms of rethinking the place of the Philippine-American diaspora within the larger umbrella of "Asian American" by advancing C. Heike Schotten's argument about the relationship between settler colonialism and imperialism, and applying this framework to the making of Philippine-American diasporic identity. I also draw upon nascent work by Nick Estes and Rebecca Nagle, and well-cited works by Dorothy Roberts and Ted Kerr to examine how Black and Indigenous children during the boarding school era were left out of discourses about "protecting the children." Finally, by centering queer- and trans-of-color subjects, this work draws much from the analytical project that is queer-of-color critique.

Relatedly, this project offers important interventions into gender and sexuality studies. Specifically, this project intervenes in current debates in gender and sexuality studies scholarship, and expands trans politics literature, by means of pushing against trans politics scholarship's sub-disciplinary assumptions and boundaries. As a project within disciplinary political science *and* gender and sexuality studies, trans politics is a burgeoning sub-subfield within the subfield of LGBTQ+ studies. Especially in political science, trans politics scholarship as a subdiscipline of a subdiscipline takes certain assumptions into mind. One key assumption that trans politics makes is that all transgender people are a politically cohesive group with similar political interests. As my critiques of transmedicalism in chapter three show, transgender people are neither politically cohesive nor necessarily politically united, with some dangerous collaborations opening up among some trans activists in the name of trans political legibility. It is this legibility that drives another assumption present in much trans politics scholarship, which is the sharp cleaving of gender from sexuality. The ontological cleaving of gender from sexuality has moved from academia and into mainstream conversations about gender and sexuality, in part, as a project of legibility. Sexual mythmaking relinks the two, and—without reifying the

forms of biological determinism that anti-trans activists have used to deny gender-affirming healthcare—understands gender and gender-making projects as projects fundamentally interested in reproduction and reproductivity. These theoretical interventions, I believe, open up space for trans politics to expand beyond questions of legislation and legibility and into questions that fundamentally challenge gender *as* an ordering project writ large.

Conclusion

While this project offers rich interventions into many bodies of literature, arguably, though the most important intervention that this work offers is not an intervention into academic discourses but rather, in its work as memorial. Key to this project is memory and memorialization, and in turn, this project memorializes the Tumblr I grew up on, and the people who made its "unique ethos" so important to myself and queers of color growing up in the era of queerness *as* whiteness. This project is important not only because of its intellectual interventions, but because it is a project that is memorializing a community and figures that have been long-rendered as unimportant, apolitical, and excess—figures and spaces seen as disposable and ill-memorialized, in many ways, even after death. Throughout many of the disciplines with which I interface, a common thematic reappears: the importance of memory. As archive, as method, and as object, memory serves as an important avenue by communities who are made disposable even in the project of collective histories making may be accounted for, even in absence of physical archives, statistical data, or other positivist measures of "truth." Or, to quote another digital space, the AIDS Memorial: "What is remembered lives."

The places and spaces that once housed queer-of-color worlds are quickly disappearing. As fugitives from the ordering schemas of the colonial gender binary, of sexual acceptability, of

racial capitalism's ordering ontology, the subjects of these spaces have always found themselves nomadic; no space is a safe space under violent regimes of order, after all. And as such, queer and trans-of-color life remains marked as marginal, lives that remain open and exposed to extraction and death under the ordering schemas of racial capitalism and the regimes that develop from it. The epidemic of trans-of-color death by murder and suicide, and other modes of ordering that produce trans death by other means—like conditions that produce detransition as a necessary survival stratagem, or the epistemological injustices that make it so that gender transition is rendered unable to be thought—are not the product of simple intolerances, but are necessary parts to racial capitalism's ordering ontology. To memorialize, to remember, to engage in counterhistory, then, is not only to engage in work informed by such queer- and trans-of-color resistance; it is to allow those no longer with us to come alive once more, to glimpse at immortality. It is approaching what C. Riley Snorton describes at the end of *Black on Both Sides* as "still life"—still, there being life. And it is this orientation towards life—and queer and trans-of-color modes of sustaining life, even in times of eternal crisis—that offers insight into politics beyond, outside, and in excess of what has been rendered as "the political."

As such, it is with the making of "excess" that we begin.

CHAPTER ONE: SEXUAL MYTHMAKING AND RACIAL CAPITALISM'S REPRODUCTIVE IMPERATIVE

"*Just as the Enclosures expropriated the peasantry from the communal land, so the witch-hunt expropriated women from their bodies, which were thus 'liberated' from any impediment preventing them to function as machines for the production of labor…*[italicized in original]*"*
—Sylvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (2004, 184)

"When white supremacy reconstructs slavery as emancipation, it will also reconstruct (that is, reconsolidate) manhood and womanhood as racist social categories….The nineteenth-century cult of true womanhood was just one instance of a greater cult of gender under white Western hegemony in and beyond North America."
—Greg Thomas, *The Sexual Demon of Colonial Power* (2007, 11).

Introduction

The 2018 "Tumblr Apocalypse" was the product of its time, a casualty of both legislative attempts to limit sex on the internet, and corporate consolidation of public life online. But Tumblr's collapse in the wake of its 2018 adult content ban was *also* the result of an accumulation of logics, discourses, and political projects that have structured the ways that sexuality, race, . Before delving into the political moment that was the late 2000s and early-to-mid 2010s, we must discuss the system under which our understandings of race, capitalism, sexuality, gender, power, value, and excess came to be. Through engaging in scholarship exploring the development of capitalist modernity, I formulate a framework that I am calling *sexual mythmaking.* This framework offers another way of understanding the role of sexuality, gender, and reproduction—and the related control of sexuality, gender, and reproduction—within capitalist modernity. Moreover, as a technology of capitalist ordering, sexual mythmaking, following Cedric Robinson's theoretical framework of *racial capitalism,* is always fundamentally about difference-making, and thus, it is always fundamentally about race. Or, to

quote Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Racial capitalism is all capitalism" (Gilmore and Lambert 2019). And as such, sexual mythmaking as a technology of racial capitalism, is a technology of *all* capitalism, orienting and producing the hierarchies that order our world—and shaping the capacities of responses to it.

In what follows, I examine various critical histories of the development of capitalist modernity to theorize the role of sexuality in racial capitalism's past and present. In attending to these histories, I deeply engage with the works of Cedric Robinson, Sylvia Wynter, and Sylvia Federici to articulate the making of capitalist modernity. Though these texts do not perfectly overlap in scope and focus, what all these authors offer is a counterhistory—one that links the making of race, "naturalized" gender systems, capitalism, and the "political" writ large—to the *particularistic* histories, cultures, and structures of Western Europe. This focus on understanding the always already *racial* nature of capitalism to be part and parcel with the development of capitalism, the modern state, and the forms of order produced by capitalist modernity allows for an understanding of the continuities of history, the role of modes of difference—gendered, racialized, sexual, and class—in maintaining structures of domination and rule, and, ultimately, the scope that structures, as response, projects of struggle and resistance.

Primary among the works that I attend to in producing my theoretical framework of *sexual mythmaking* are the intellectual projects of Cedric Robinson—particularly, his understanding of *racial capitalism* as all capitalism and the modes of discipline that such a structure requires. Though Robinson is not the first—nor the last—scholar to write about the relationship between race, capitalism, and the making of political and economic modernity, I draw heavily from his works for a few reasons. First, Robinson's framework of racial capitalism as *all* capitalism offers an understanding of, as mentioned above, the continuities between

Western European past and capitalism's present. These continuities, importantly, center the non-universality of race-making—and of systemic, naturalized hierarchical categorization of subjects writ large—and offer important insights into other forms of naturalized hierarchies, like the production of a gender binary or modes of imagining the erotic. Second, Robinson's understanding of racial capitalism takes seriously the role that projects of media and mythmaking have in maintaining racial capitalism as a structure, and regimes of racial ordering within that structure. Though Robinson is not the first scholar to point to the role of media narratives and mythmaking in maintaining racial hierarchies[2], Robinson's formulation of *racial mythmaking,* and his attention to the projects that work to produce and reproduce racial hierarchies *as* a project of capitalist modernity is an important refiguration of the role of mythmaking in maintaining global, racial relations of power. Finally, Robinson's attention to fugitive resistance is much-aligned and much-cited within the project of queer-of-color critique, from which I also heavily draw and of which, this work is well within the intellectual genealogy. As José Esteban Muñoz writes:

> Robinson's temporal mapping of black resistance and endurance to capitalism predates Karl Marx….If the condition of possibility for blackness is a certain radicalness in relation to capitalism's neutralizing temporal logic, the black radical tradition is engaged in a maneuver that helps elucidate queer futurity ([2009] 2019, 86).

It is from this important attention to *conditions of possibility,* for maneuvering towards refusal—towards what Muñoz renders as queer futurity, or "[being] attentive to the past for the purposes of critiquing a present….depend[ing] on critical practices that stave off the failures of imagination…[understood] as antirelationality and antiutopianism in queer critique" ([2009] 2019, 18). The politics of queer futurity as a mode of critique, queer-of-color critique as a mode

[2] Among Robinson's contemporaries, Edward Saïd and Patricia Hill Collins, for example, are scholars whose work on orientalism (1978) and "controlling images" (1990) respectively, have made their works canonical in critiques of media and the role of media in racial domination.

of analysis, and the Black Radical Tradition as a family of thought from which Robinson writes are political attentiveness to quotidian modes of flight, resistance, refusal, survival, and possibility, on one hand, and a careful engagement with the conditions that produced and reproduced the current conditions of the present by means of critique, on the other. Or, as Muñoz so artfully puts it on the first page of *Cruising Utopia*: "Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" ([2009] 2019, 1).

It is such attentiveness to resistance, brought to the fore by Muñoz's engagement with Robinson, that I choose to primarily theorize from Robinson's own intellectual production.

"Antagonistic Differences" as Foundational to Racial Capitalism's Modes of Order

As theorized by Cedric Robinson, *racial capitalism* describes not a variety of capitalism, but the structure of capitalism and its ontological origins itself. The economic systems of Europe that would develop into a capitalist order were *always* racial*,* as a result of the particularistic ordering of European society through "antagonistic differences" (Robinson [1983] 2000, 10). The centrality of difference-making in European society, Robinson writes, has always been a means to justify hierarchies, themselves a way to justify relations of slave labor. This tendency of difference-making produced race, allowed for the "…rationalization for the domination, exploitation, and/or extermination of non 'Europeans'…" (Robinson [1983] 2000, 27), and was the quotidian basis for the rupture that was the transatlantic slave trade. Or, in Robinson' words:

> The tendency of European civilization through capitalism was thus not to homogenize but to differentiate—to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into 'racial' ones….the Slavs became the *natural slaves* [emphasis mine], the racially inferior stock for domination and exploitation during the early Middle Ages…at the systemic interlocking of capitalism in the sixteenth century, the peoples of the Third World began

> to fill this expanding category of a civilization reproduced by capitalism" (Robinson [1983] 2000, 26).

Difference-making, then, as a *particularistic* organizing element of European sociality, is a constitutive element of racial capitalism—even before it produced race *per se.* As the particularistic origins of the Western order, the production of "antagonistic differences" through difference-making processes, processes that would later crystalize into "racial differences." The social tendency of European society to produce "antagonistic differences" upon which sociality, labor hierarchies, and the state would be founded, is racial capitalism's primary foundation. This difference-making tendency, in its particularistic nature to Europe, has tremendous implications not only for the development of capitalism, but for the production of the state and its mechanisms of rule, on one hand, and *who* is seen as a subject of the state or an object of discipline, on the other. To this end, Sylvia Wynter gestures towards the making of modernity's subject in her pathbreaking 2003 essay, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom." Wynter offers further context to the intellectual origins of the making of European ordering—the very same order that, once more, leads to the economic and political ordering that manifests itself as *racial capitalism.* Like Robinson, Wynter argues that the making of race and difference is the product of the particularities of European thought and its development. From that, Wynter argues that this race- and difference-making predates the production of the modern state, and is instead an inheritance of Ancient Greek and religious modes of making meaning and order (2003, 281). The Enlightenment-era processes of making the political subject "Man," or the making of "the Human," Wynter argues, was not the making of a truly expansive, "new" kind of subject of rule, as most genealogies of the development of Western thought often frames it. The shifts that rendered "Man" and "the Human" into the Enlightenment-era, rights-bearing subject from the Medieval era's subject of rule were not, to

Wynter, quite as extreme changes as most liberal political theorists might render it to be. Instead, what the shift to secular subjectivity with the coming of the Enlightenment era represented was the adaptation and continuation of previous logics of difference-making and domination.

This process of continuity (rather than rupture) arrived in the form of the making of political subjectivity, and as such, the mechanisms of discipline and rule. As Wynter writes, this was to be the "…syncretized synthesis of the anthropology of the classics drawn into a secularizing Judeo-Christian framework…what Latour would call the West's 'constitution with a capital C'" (2003, 286). From this inheritance, the making of capitalist modernity—and its central subject—cannot be untethered from forms of difference-making. In other words, the making of modernity cannot be disentangled from its co-constitutive projects producing and justifying difference, empire, conquest, and race. From Wynter:

> With this redescription, the medieval world's idea of order as based upon degrees of spiritual perfection/imperfection…was now to be replaced by a new one based upon degrees of rational perfection/imperfection. And this was to be the new "idea of order" on whose basis the coloniality of being, enacted by the dynamics of the relation between Man—over represented as the generic, ostensibly Supra cultural human—and its subjugated Human Others (i.e., Indians and Negroes), together with, as Quintana notes, the continuum of new categories of humans (i.e., mestizo and mulattos to which their human/subhuman value difference gave rise), *was to be brought into existence as the foundational basis of modernity*….In this transmuted reformulation, while the "significant ill" of mankind's enslavement was no longer projected as being to the legacy of Adamic Original Sin, the concept of enslavement was carried over and redescribed as being….This redescription had, in turn, enabled the new behavior-motivating "plan of salvation" to be secularism in the political terms of this-worldly goals of the state (2003, 287-288).

Wynter does not describe, at least explicitly, the ways in which the development of capitalism interlink with this project of subject-making, however, when taken alongside Cedric Robinson and Eric Williams, Sylvia Wynter offers a sketch of race-making's particularistic, rather than "natural" development—which is to say, that "race" as a primary social organizing principle could not have come to being outside of the social, cultural, economic, political, and *religious*

context of what came to be known as Western Europe. This racial throughline that Wynter draws between the Medieval subject and the rights-bearing Enlightenment subject has important implications for the making of chattel slavery and its entanglement in the making of the post-Feudalism economic order. As Eric Williams writes, "One of the most important consequences of the Glorious Revolution of 1688…was the impetus it gave to the principle of free trade. In 1698 the Royal African Company lost its monopoly and the right of a free trade in slaves was recognized as a *fundamental and natural right* of Englishmen" ([1944] 2021, 23). This, along with Wynter and Robinson, offer an image of the making of capitalist modernity and its inextricable entanglement with race-making and the distribution and meaning of rights. In other words, Wynter, Williams, and Robinson show that, indeed, *racial capitalism is all capitalism*, and its still-unfolding consequences stem from the *particular* histories, logics, and orders from Western Europe.

Despite the particularistic origins of racial capitalism in the European context, even difference-making, central to the process of maintaining racial capitalism, had to be enforced and reinforced through processes of revision, rearticulation, and struggle. This struggle for control of history took place through constructs, narratives, stories, and myths. In *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning,* Robinson expands on the role that popular media plays in reinforcing racial capitalism's racial regimes through producing images of "antagonistic differences."

Key to Robinson's project in *Forgeries* is an analysis of racial mythmaking processes, and how myths—referred to as forgeries by Robinson—about raced *and* gendered bodies function as larger modalities of difference-making and domination. Of the forgeries that are made in processes of racial-gendered mythmaking, sexuality and eroticism are key components. Beginning in the earliest era that Robinson examines in *Forgeries*, the mythmaking process of

racial capitalism have held sex and sexuality as central. In *Othello,* for example, Iago invokes both the specter of Desdemona's rape and provocative images of miscegenation in his machinations against Othello in a way that Robinson describes as a, "mix of the pornographic and the real" (Robinson 2007, 27). This early popular portrayal of a Moor character is indicative of a key shift in how Europe viewed African people, and it is central in a process that Robinson points to as the *invention of the Negro*. This process of invention was itself necessary to the development of the slave economy. Quoting Robin Blackburn, Robinson describes this invention as, "…almost entirely…[eclipsing] the notion that the slave was a human being" (Robinson 2007, 33). The invention of the Negro reflects the centrality of processes of mythmaking in racial capitalism; through the production of racial myths like Othello, the Moor became *paradigmatically* slave and couplings between Moor and non-Moor people became "unnatural" and "monstrous" (2007, 29). Through the production of racial myths, the invention of the Negro *and* the white race became co-produced, resulting in the production of differences along which material conditions—conditions of exploitation, of violence, of life, of death—could flow. Forms of mythmaking, then, are not merely a part of racial capitalism, but central to it.

Throughout the histories of popular media portrayals that Robinson analyzes, two forgeries of mythmaking make and remake themselves over the course of the American racial capitalist regime. These myths very explicitly invoke sex and sexuality as modes to maintain difference. The first is the myth of the inherent violence and vice of Black men's sexuality. Robinson points to key figures in the genre of blackface minstrelsy, like Gus from D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation,* as functioning to "[install] Black inferiority" (2007, 126) as an ordering regime that *displaces the real* (2007, 123). Through marking the eroticism of Black men as an impossibility, and through casting Black men's sexuality as "depravity," this forgery of

racial mythmaking transformed the material conditions of the world. Out of this forgery develops the second key forgery of the American racial capitalist regime: miscegenation as an "unnatural" or "monstrous" act, with children of interracial couplings living a repulsive "mongrel [mullato] existence" (2007, 101). Robinson argues the Black brute myth—and the related myth of interracial-sexuality-as-impossibility—worked to establish difference-making processes to impose beliefs of, "…whiteness and race theodicity, patriarchy and filiopiety, historical destiny and Christian civilization on the mass consciousness" (2007, 104). This illustrates the scope and importance of mythmaking projects in maintaining difference under racial capitalism. It is not *just* that the figure of the Black brute maintains white supremacy; it is that the figure of the erotically-depraved Black brute produces and reinforces gendered, racialized, and eroticized difference, producing meaning and *value* for whiteness—in particular, white masculinity—in racial capitalism. Because of these forgeries, tremendous acts of terror could be justified under the guise of protecting white womanhood. All the while, these two forgeries of Black men's inherent sexual violence and interracial sexuality's legibility *only* through sexual violence work to obfuscate a material reality: the sexual violence enacted upon Black women, both during the period of chattel slavery and after it, at the hands of white men.

While violence against Black women becomes *invisible* through mythmaking processes dealing with Black men's sexuality, through the mythmaking processes dealing with Black women's sexuality, sexual violence against Black women becomes *impossible* in the white mass conscious. Robinson's historiography of gendered racial mythmaking tracks the multiple and dialectic construction of myths of Black women's sexuality and Black women's real-world sexualities, and the ways these myths are fundamental to maintaining racial capitalism. In producing myths of Black women's sexuality as first nonexistent, then vulgar and aggressive,

sexual violence committed against Black women by white men is further obscured, allowing for a re-inscription of the tremendous violence that white men were allowed to commit. This forgery of racial mythmaking also has the effect of reinforcing the notion of white women as pure objects of sexual desire within the realm of erotic acceptability. This dialectic production of the "degenerate" sexual being and the "pure" sexual being—along with the violence that is justified under this dialectic—is made especially evident in Robinson's invocation of Farrar and Jordan: "The Mammy exorcised [the sexual exploitation of Black women by white men] and effaced the historical record: '[quoting Jordan]…the sexual pursuit of Black women [was defended] as necessary to avoid *infecting White womanhood with erotic degeneracy'* [emphasis mine]" (2007, 253).

The dialectic production of "acceptable" and "unacceptable" sexuality and eroticized subjects is, even in Robinson's own analysis, necessary to the project of racial capitalism. In the racial capitalist state, where projects of difference-making are key to maintaining and defending the structures that allow for capital to be accumulated by a racialized bourgeoise class, the modes of mythmaking surrounding Black and white women's sexualized bodies, access to those bodies, and the *value* of those bodies themselves leads to systemic forms of sexualized violence justified under regimes of maintaining sexual purity. Racial capitalism's use of sex, sexuality, and eroticism makes it so that sex and eroticism are sites of contention and mythmaking themselves. With this in mind, it becomes imperative to acknowledge the gaps in Robinson's analysis of sex and sexuality's role in racial capitalism and the mythmaking projects that racial capitalism create.

Sexual Mythmaking as A Technology of Racial Capitalism

Robinson's analysis of sex and eroticism as fundamental components to the project of racial mythmaking in racial capitalism, though pathbreaking, does not account for the importance of *modes of sexuality as important sites through which forgeries of myth are made themselves*. In his analysis of the sexual nature of mythmaking, Robinson takes the interrelationship between sex and eroticism and positions it as indicative of broader racial mythmaking projects while focusing much less on sexuality as a mode of mythmaking that is *both* a product of racial capitalism *and* not wholly encompassable-under racial mythmaking alone. The difference here, between the sexual as *part* of a larger project of racial mythmaking within racial capitalism, versus sexual mythmaking as working with racial mythmaking within racial capitalism, is key. By positioning sex, sexuality, and eroticism as a key part to racial mythmaking, the power of sexuality—particularly, myths about sexuality—as a difference-making tool *in and of itself within* in racial capitalism drops out of that which is understandable or comprehensible. How can queer-of-color rejections of respectability politics, for example, be understood under a rubric that does not account for the ways that *both* the application of the term "excess" to Black and other racialized positionalities *and* the mythology of what constitutes the "excess" are constructed for the purposes of creating power? Under Robinson's analysis, which does not examine the sexual elements of racial mythmaking *as* processes of mythmaking themselves—the function of erotic abjectness, the transformation into respectable modes of being of some, the maintenance of other positionalities as always abject—and the stakes in *rejecting* assimilation into respectable and dominating modes of being under racial capitalism remain obfuscated. Furthermore, in thinking about the long genealogy of racial capitalism, sexuality functions as a mode through which subject-positions are produced and produced *hierarchically* for the purpose of social and economic ordering. This sexual ordering functions as the making of "antagonistic differences"

that Robinson points to in *Black Marxism* as the particularistic ordering project of difference-making that is foundational to the making of racial capitalism. What would it mean, then, to take sexual modalities of difference-making as *part and parcel* to the particularities to the formation of Europe's political, social, and economic orders—these structures themselves, always already racial? What would it mean to problematize not only the ways that "excess" is applied to racialized subjects in a way to justify formations of power, but the very mechanisms by which "excess" functions itself?

I propose a *reframing* of Robinson's analytical findings to underscore the centrality of sexuality and eroticism in racial capitalism. Through reframing the way that Robinson approaches sex, sexuality, and eroticism in *Forgeries*, I propose that sex and eroticism are not merely part of racial mythmaking, but instead, are part of a process of *sexual mythmaking*, a process by which difference is created and reified, producing abject sexual subjects that can be exploited or surveilled by the state, whose labor is exploited by capital, and against whom violence can be committed. In short, *sexual mythmaking—alongside racial mythmaking—acts as a function of racial capitalism.*

The intellectual origins of sexual mythmaking are embedded in the very same canons of Western thought that produce racial difference-making, and, as tools of racial capitalism, are meant to reproduce and reinforce the stratified economic and labor differences that are so central to its existence. In *An Anthropology of Marxism,* Robinson examines the concealed origins of Western economic thought. As Robinson outlines, the classical Greek thought that acts as the groundwork for the Marxist tradition also acts as the groundwork for racial capitalism. By examining Aristophanes's comic poem *Ecclesiazusae* at length, Robinson points to the linking of communism and the enfranchisement of Athenian women. Through this, Robinson reveals how

the intellectual origins of Western economics and state structure inherently work towards a project of difference-making and subjugation. *Ecclesiazusae,* then, is both a cultural representation of the economic and political projects that produced racial capitalism, and a project that helped to build racial capitalism. Robinson quotes Sue Bundell when tying the "serious issues" that Aristophanes outlines in his comic poem: "…Since democracy created a growing dichotomy between activities which were public and collective, and those which were private and individual, it accelerated the disparity between males and females" (Blundell qtd. in Robinson [2001] 2019, 92). However, beyond pointing out the key interconnectedness between the state, capital, and formations of difference and difference-making that are key foundations to regimes of racial capitalism, Robinson's inclusion of *Ecclesiazusae* offers an example of the early modes of sexual mythmaking that are rooted in and inherent to racial capitalism.

As is visible in Robinson's analysis, *Ecclesiazusae* positions "total sexual liberation" as a conspiracy and undoing of the world. Lorde, in "The Uses of the Erotic," describes such sexual liberation as challenging to systems of power because, "…once we begin to feel deeply in all of the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of" ([1978] 1984, 89-90). This empowerment from within, this challenge to forms of oppression, is both anticipated and portrayed as simultaneously humorous *and* dangerous in *Ecclesiazusae.* In linking *Ecclesiazusae* to conflicts and coups that Athens experienced in the time that Aristophanes was writing, Robinson describes the poem and its role in producing the groundwork for Western economic thought—and racial capitalism as a structure—writ large:

> By transferring the communist impulse of poorer citizens to women [Aristophanes] could expect his audience to revel in the mix of ribald gender character assassination with class conflict. The *demos,* now subsumed under the identity of the *cunning yet sexually-depraved females, possessed no moral or political authority* [emphasis mine]…For

> certain, these women and the unpropertied class were not slaves but any regime, like that of democracy, which extended to them political credit was as absurd as the notion of rule by slaves ([2001] 2019, 93).

Though Robinson himself does not position this critique as one of mythmaking processes at all, reframing his analysis of *Ecclesiazusae* as an analysis of sexual mythmaking makes evident how sexual mythmaking is part and parcel to the early development of racial capitalism. It is not *simply* the status of *Ecclesiazusae*'s Athenian women *as* women that positions them as antagonistic to moral and political authority and belonging. Rather, it is because the *kind* of women they are, the kind of sexual beings they exist as. The women of *Ecclesiazusae's* Athens were positioned as vulgar and dangerous not because of their womanhood, but because of what claiming enfranchisement would mean: "…total sexual liberation with primacy awarded to the old and ugly" (Robinson [2001] 2019, 91). This formation of sexual vulgarity, while positioning the demands of the fictional Athenian women as humorous, simultaneously marked the women of *Ecclesiazusae* as sexually vulgar. The production of a myth of sexual vulgarity, then, linked any political demands for women's inclusion in the real-world Athenian society with such sexual vulgarity, degeneracy, and the specter of chaos. Much like the forms of racial mythmaking that Robinson describes in *Forgeries,* the figure of the sexually-depraved women of *Ecclesiazusae* works to displace the real, creating the myth of a sexual subject who can destroy the social order through sexuality—more specifically, through sexual deviance. By invoking degeneracy and linking it to the sexual agency of a particular subject—the women of Athens—and insisting that the sexual behavior of Athenian women will result in a challenge to private property and the ordering of the Athenian state, *Ecclesiazuse* further works to displace and justify the increasing exclusion of real Athenian women in Athens' social and political worlds. Robinson does not directly connect the sexual aspects of *Ecclesiazuse* with the production of a particular *myth*, but

his analysis suggests a process of gendered sexual mythmaking. This, then, reflects the key role of sexual mythmaking in the very intellectual genealogies and making of racial capitalism itself.

By speaking *with* Robinson's intellectual project, and by engaging with a close reading his own critiques of early articulations of Western thought, *sexual mythmaking* as a discrete technology of difference-making begins to take shape. Robinson's own reading of *Ecclesiazusae* points to, in unnamed ways, processes of naming, mythologizing, and pathologizing *certain* forms of sexuality to then justify political and economic moves against those marked as "excessive" sexual subjects. This form of difference-making is in line with European society's tendency to produce "antagonistic differences," that particularistic ordering schema that Robinson traces as the principle that grounds racial capitalism.

What makes *sexual mythmaking* important, however, *is its key role as a technology to control reproduction.* Reproduction—both the literal biological process of pregnancy and childbirth, and reproduction in terms of capital and culture—are key in maintaining the racial capitalist order. And, much like the particularistic tendency of European society to produce *racial* difference, racial capitalism's pre-capitalist history reflects how the production of "antagonistic differences" has always been utilized to control reproduction.

Heretics, Midwives, and Whores: Sexual Mythmaking and Reproductive Control

In her Marxist feminist analysis of the processes of witch-making and witch-burning in premodern Europe, Sylvia Federici makes note of the centrality of sexuality and control over *particular kinds* of sexuality during this period. While some leftist writers and historians of Early Modern Europe have critiqued particulars of Federici's historiography—for example, Kindo and Darmangeat (2017) took particular issue with Federici's exact statistics of witch-killings, and

argue, as Federici does, that men were persecuted under witch-killings, too—the importance of Federici's history of the European ontologies of gendered control, and the relationship between such ontologies and Europe's move from feudalism to capitalism, still holds. In fact, Federici's analysis offers a glimpse at how the period of transition from feudalism to capitalism proper required the production of myths related to sexuality—in this case, the myths of the female "heretic" and the "witch"—to establish control over biological and social modes of reproduction. In other words, Federici's analysis reflects the continuation of racial capitalism's tendency towards *sexual mythmaking.*

Control over reproduction—biological and economic—were key to establishing power in Europe during the early Middle Ages. According to Federici, sexuality "became" politicized in the early Middle Ages after "demographic disasters" like the Black Death. As she writes, "….womens' [sic] control over reproduction seemed to pose a threat to economic and social stability…after the spread of the plague, the sexual aspects of heresy became more prominent in its persecution….the figure of the heretic increasingly became that of a woman, so that, by the beginning of the 15th century, the main target of the persecution against heretics became the witch" (Federici 2011, 40). While Robinson's account of the women in *Ecclesiazuse* shows us that sexuality has *always* been politicized in the canon of "European thought," Federici's analysis of history points back to the role that myths of sexual deviance, excess, propriety, and innocence play in the historical genealogy of capitalist development.

The Black Death, in decimating Europe's population, led to a labor shortage. The response to this labor shortage by institutions of power—the church and the state—was the further disparaging of non-reproductive sex and birth control, directly leading to processes of mythmaking for the purposes of demonizing a particular sexual subject. Thus, from Federici's

analysis of the "politicization" of sexuality, in addition to Federici's long historical account of how the "domestic sphere" and "public sphere" came to be, something else comes into focus: the production of *forgeries of myth* used to discipline particular sexual subjects into forms of reproduction *for the purpose of maintaining an economic order*. Rather than posing a completely new era of history, then, when taken as evidence of a moment of *sexual mythmaking,* the "politicization of sexuality" that developed out of the Black Death reflects a continuation. The use of this technology of differentiation—mythmaking, the production and reinforcement of the "antagonistic differences" that Robinson points to as necessary and central components of European social and, thus, economic ordering—reflects *both* racial capitalism's stability in the European social and economic order *and* the ways in which it is flexible, mutable, and responsive to crisis. In other words, what framing Federici's historiography through sexual mythmaking shows us is less the onset of a new era of capitalist development, but rather, the adaptation of key ordering principles in response to what could potentially upend or challenge it as a structure.

Comparing these two moments in Europe's pre-Industrial history further reveals the throughline that is difference-making through myth. In the case of Aristophanes' women and the heretics of the Black Death, sexual mythmaking functioned to produce hierarchical difference and dispossessed political, economic, and social subjects. Whereas the sexual myths produced in Antiquity revolved the political dangers of the subjectivities marked as sexually "excess," in the early Middle Ages, the *forgery of myth* that was produced was that of the "heretic," a figure whose sexual excess was linked to theological, moral danger to society. The political and economic dangers that said "heretics" posed to the ordering of society was made implicit, but the avenues of control that these sexual forgeries were used to entrench and maintain fell into the

same tradition of hierarchical difference-making that defines the European ontology of racial capitalism. This is especially visible in the throughline of producing hierarchical gender differences through myths of sexual impropriety echoed between Aristophanes' Greece and the Europe of the Middle Ages.

As Federici points out, as church campaigns against heresy continued, the figure of the heretic became almost paradigmatically a woman *and* a figure linked to that of non-reproductive sexuality. Sexuality outside of marriage—meaning, sexuality outside of reproductivity—was a key element of finding people to be made into "heretic" and the myth of heretic itself. The making of the myth of "heretic," then, functioned as a means to ensure the reproduction of the economic order through controlling biological reproduction *through* the violent sanction of non-reproductive sex, or sex that was not in the service of ensuring the expansion of the dominant economic and social order. It is not sex *itself* that was made "sexually excess," but sex that challenged the hegemonic structure of power and its reproduction that was worthy of sanction. The existence of state-controlled brothels makes this especially visible. As Federici writes, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, tax-financed brothels began proliferating Europe as a means of remedying "the turbulence of proletarian youth" and homosexuality (Federici 2004, 49). The non-reproductive sex happening in these public brothels and through Church-sanctioned modes of prostitution were *not* mythologized as "sexually excess" in the same way as "the orgiastic sexual practices of the heretic sects" (ibid) were. These sexual spaces of non-reproduction would not be marked as heretical in need of discipling. Because this sex happened under the auspices of the state and the Church, because this sex was meant as a way of maintaining structures of power and ensuring the reproduction of power, the sex happening in state-sanctioned brothels was "sexually acceptable."

Far from destabilizing the power of the state and the church, state-sanctioned brothels—sexually acceptable alternatives to the "sexually excess," the heretics, whose existence suggested alternative ways of being—worked to buttress the power of the state. But while the making of "heretics" and their subsequent persecution illustrates the function *and* porousness of sexual mythmaking as a technology of capitalist ordering, it is in Federici's analysis of the production of *the witch* that the role of sexual myth *as* a modality of establishing power and control through difference-making that sexual mythmaking's role in the early establishment of *racial capitalism* becomes most visible.

Either Woman or Witch: Sexual Mythmaking and the Gendering of Early Modern Europe

In writing about the construction of *the witch,* Federici points to how the figure of "the witch" helped to produce the meaning of "womanhood." That is to say, "the witch" was a modality of difference—a myth—against which the gendered position of *woman* as a bourgeois European gender under a newly-developing economic regime could be contrasted. The witch-as-myth was defined through her relationship to sexual transgression: the Sabbat, the mythological nighttime gathering of witches, for example, was orgiastic, "immoral," a space of the breakdown of sexual roles (2004, 177). In reality, that which defined those persecuted as witches were the challenges they posed to the entrenchment of the capitalist order through their relationship to, or power over, (non)reproduction. As Federici writes:

> …the witch-hunt destroyed the methods that women had used to control procreation….But the witch was not only the midwife….She was also the loose, promiscuous woman—the prostitute or adulteress, and generally, the woman who exercised her sexuality outside the bonds of marriage and procreation. Thus, in the witchcraft trials, 'ill repute' was evidence of guilt (2004, 184).

Here, the linkage between control over reproduction and the economic order that was beginning to be established in the Medieval period's campaign against heretics fully consolidated into a

campaign to destroy those who could posit a challenge against the privatization and reproductive control necessary to impose capitalism proper. Though *the witch's* non-reproductiveness extended beyond her role in biological reproduction—after all, poor women and old women, who could no longer reproduce value through labor were also targeted as witches—the figure of *the witch* was, at her core, fundamentally tied to a sexuality that was in contradistinction to, and in excess of, the "proper" sexuality of a bourgeois woman—and the function of "woman" as a bourgeois subject in the growing capitalist order. Federici articulates the function and meaning of "woman" as thus, drawing a direct connection between dispossession of land and dispossession of the body: "Just as the Enclosures expropriated the peasantry from the communal land, so the witch-hunt expropriated women from their bodies, which were thus 'liberated' from any impediment preventing them to function as machines for the production of labor. For the threat of the stake erected more formidable barriers around women's bodies than were ever erected by the fencing off of the commons" (2004, 184).

In this sense, the application of *sexual mythmaking* as a technology of racial capitalism not only produced subjectivities against whom the weight of the state could be applied, but, I would argue, produced a *queered-gendered position.* Though Federici argues that, "…the language of the witch-hunt 'produced' the Woman as a different species" (2004, 192), I argue that the processes of sexual mythmaking produced *the witch* as not a "woman" at all. In the development of the capitalist order, *the witch* functioned as a third gender. This status of third gender was not inborn or fixed, however; to misquote de Beauvoir, one was not "born" a witch, but could very well become one. As a third gender, *the witch* became the marker that *the woman*—a bourgeois construct of the newly-developing economic order—could be both contrasted against. *Woman* defined herself as *not-witch.* She was fundamentally bourgeois, she

did not occupy the "public" sphere, and her sexual life existed only in service of reproducing the social and economic order that capitalism was producing. Despite her status in her role being understood as "natural" in contrast to *the witch's* status as "unnatural," *woman* as gender was unstable; a being gendered woman could *transition* into witch through participating in "excess," non-reproductive forms of being.

In capitalism's formal infancy, sexual mythmaking produced a three-gender system, one where two genders were necessarily unstable by design. *Witch* served as trans(ed) boogeyman for the purpose of making *woman,* and disciplining into *woman.* This three-gender system's disciplinary power came from the fact that a female subject gendered as woman could "fall" into becoming a female subject gendered as witch—resistance, refusal, and even *inability* to conform to the shifting modes of what "woman" meant under the shifting economic order was rendered into abject subjectivity; transition became a marker of non-conformity, holding within it both the disciplinary potential of power *and* the eventual ways through which people have enacted modes of flight. All female subjects functioned as simultaneously *proto-woman* and *proto-witch,* occupying a *transed* position that could only be incorporated into "naturalness," into "true" womanhood, through disciplining into the economic and social hierarchy of the newly-developing capitalism. To *transition* into "womanhood" was to reject the non-reproductiveness of *the witch.* To be a witch was, fundamentally, to be "excess," to be, at least in terms of the concept as a *political* marker[3], "queered." This further reflects itself in sexual mythmaking's application of modalities of "excess" to subject-positions outside of the European feminine figure who served as the proto-woman *or* proto-witch. Gendering was applied asymmetrically,

[3] Here, I am thinking of Cathy Cohen's articulation of queerness as "outside of heterosexuality," which is to say, outside of the "acceptable" modes of reproductivity. Or, as Zein Murib put it in the "New Directions: LGBTIQ Scholarship in Political Science" panel at the 2022 Western Political Science Association, "queerness as a relation to power."

not according to a "natural" binary, producing difference and reinforcing the racial and colonial orders that produced settler colonialism and chattel slavery as institutions. This, Federici acknowledges in her final chapter, describing the application of "witch" to the Indigenous peoples of all sexes on the African continent and throughout the Americas. What Federici does not successfully approach, however, is how this application of "witch" to Indigenous peoples of the Americas was just as much a project of the mutability and unnaturalness of gender difference-making that was, itself, part and parcel to the racializing logics applied to those people whose land and labor were needed to produce "the New World."

Race, Gendering, and Sexual Mythmaking

The Western gender binary and its dominance *as* a mode of social ordering, as mentioned above, was fundamentally important in understanding in how—even as racial capitalism requires control over literal, biological reproduction—the gender binary is and has been a tool of racial capitalism's ordering project to naturalize differences, naturalize antagonistic binaries, and distribute value and extractability from certain populations. The transplantation and use of this Western European gender binary to the context of the Americas and Africa marks whole racialized populations as a form of Third Gender, *collapsing* racialized subjects as all inherently excess through the making of naturalized conditions of "excess." Such difference-making projects are fundamentally interlinked with the destruction of those populations marked "sexually excess," in other words, those who are in *excess of* reproducing whiteness for the purpose of reproducing capitalism. Through this marking of *all* African and Indigenous American subjects as "excess," as third-gender *witch,* the full force of the state can be mobilized against such subjects. This dispossession and dehumanization through the marking of Black and

Indigenous subjects as "witch" justifies the violent processes that allow for the expropriation and extraction of land in the process of settler colonialism, on one hand, and the reduction unto chattel and the theft of labor through the institution of the plantation, on the other. The marking of peoples of the African and American continents as always third-gendered, sexually s"excess" subjects, is fundamental for the expansion of capitalism into a truly global system.

This wholesale application of "witch" to Indigenous subjects in Africa and the Americas under European colonialism both supports and problematizes the claims of gendered ontological imperialism that Greg Thomas makes in his 2011 critique of the presumed "universality of gender" that motivates women's studies as a discipline. While it is true that, as Thomas writes, "…this slavocratic concept of sex [the Western gender binary of "man" and "woman"] reserves womanhood for white female bodies alone….[functioning as] a heterosexuality of white supremacy which academic historians and critics have yet to explode" (2007, 42-43), even in the establishment of capitalism as the West's dominant economic order, "woman" was not reserved to *all* "female subjects." All "female subjects" became "woman" only when *the witch as third gender*—the witch as the very real, non-reproductive, sexually excess class of non-woman feminine people—was eliminated. In other words, *the witch* as sexual forgery disciplining white feminine bodies only shifted from power when there were no more "witches" to burn. As Federici writes, the turn to an "enlightened" worldview of mechanistic philosophy and new science was not what ended the witch-burnings, but the imposition of the ordering and disciplining structures congruent with capitalism (Federici 2004, 202), of which, medico-scientific discourses were—and continue to be—in alignment with.

But while *the witch* as transed white feminine subject represents sexual mythmaking's necessary function—the function of making difference for the distribution of value, a core

component of both racial capitalism's ontological origins and the very development of capitalism proper—it is the application of third-genderedness to whole classes of racialized subjects that returns us to the interlinkage of *racial mythmaking* and *sexual mythmaking.* As Federici notes, witch-hunting, as a deliberate colonial strategy in the making of "the New World," functioned as a mode of enclosure, "…which, depending on the context, could be enclosure of land, bodies, or social relations….witch-hunting was a means of dehumanization and as such the paradigmatic form of repression, serving to justify enslavement and genocide" (ibid). Witch-hunting as enclosure—as a way to extract stolen labor and stolen land to ensure the expansion of the capitalist order—is inextricably tied to the meaning imbued in the position of *the witch;* the justification for witch hunts, after all, had to be rooted in the creation of that very subject to hunt in the first place. As such, the position of witch as third-gender—one whose subjectivity is marked as existing in erotic excess—cannot be separated from the projects of racial mythmaking developing alongside them.

In producing Africans and Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island as all always already witches, the association worked to help reify and reproduce a long-standing myth: Africans and Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island as all always already sexually excess. This fusion of racial and sexual mythmaking helped to justify the tremendous modes of violence—including, but not limited to, the complete *gendercide* of third-gender peoples like the *joyas* in Spanish-colonized California (Miranda 2010)—necessary to produce this "New World," a terra nullis produced through enclosure, extraction, and exploitation, ripe for the expansion of capitalism's economic ordering of the world.

This blanket association of *all* Africans and Indigenous peoples of the Americas with the myth of *the witch*—again, a third-gender figure that was always already in excess of "acceptable"

sexuality—was supplemented with and reified by the burgeoning medico-scientific discourses working to naturalize the European system of gender developed out of the witch-burnings. This European gender system built upon antagonistic differences in the form of a gender binary, and whose purpose served as a means through which to ensure the reproduction of capitalism, smuggled myths of "natural" sexual excess of colonized populations under the guise of scientific rationalism. At the root of the both the earlier cosmological process of gendering *and* the later scientific process of gendering under the pressing power of racial capitalism lay the project of sexual mythmaking. In both the cosmological and scientific processes of gendering, sexuality—or assumed sexuality—was central to processes of gendering. Even beyond witch-burnings, European medico-scientific understandings of the world and European cosmological understandings of the world, then, are not fundamentally incompatible as world-ordering principles. In fact, the shared project of producing "antagonistic differences" and processes of hierarchical ordering intensified with the development of "comparative anatomy" and the attempts to scientificize the hierarchical racial and gendered differences of racial capitalism. In her analysis of nineteenth-century comparative anatomy, Siobhan Sommerville writes: "The racial difference of the African body, implied Flower and Murie, was located in its *literal excess* [emphasis mine], a specifically sexual excess that placed her body outside the boundaries of the 'normal' female" (Sommerville 2000, 26). Here, of course, the "normal" female body, the body that could be "properly" gendered as a "woman's body," was the body of a white bourgeois feminine subject. The medico-scientific discourses that marked Black feminine flesh as inherently, biologically excess *also* linked the meaning of womanhood to a "proper" heterosexual reproductive function. As Sommerville continues, "One of the most constituent medical characterizations of the anatomy of both African American women and lesbians was the

myth of an unusually large clitoris….such characterizations literalized the sexual and racial ideologies of the nineteenth-century 'Cult of True Womanhood'…" (Sommerville 2000, 27-28). This collapsing of Black sexual excess and lesbian sexual excess makes especially visible the ways in which the makings of "womanhood" under racial capitalism has always been marked as a raced project *and* a project of disciplining sexuality for the purposes of ensuring reproduction. The function of "woman" as a gender—the ways in which it was produced to mean a white, (hetero)reproductive feminine figure—was not *solely* meant as a way to make disposable and exploitable those mythologized as beyond, beneath, or outside of "true womanhood." The making of "woman"—and the making of gender as a whole in racial regimes—functioned as a mode of both empowering white feminine subjects through their making as a gendered "referent" *and* disciplining them into acting as proper reproductive subjects. Thus, while sexual mythmaking's project has always been to ensure the eternal expansion of capitalism through the control of reproduction, the reproduction of *whiteness* is an especially privileged site under sexual mythmaking's world-making and world-breaking regimes. Euro-Western gender categories, produced as hierarchical ordering ontologies, have developed in ways to maintain the reproduction of racial capitalism *through* the reproduction of laborers. Key here, though, is the reproduction of *laborers,* in the reproduction of *personhood,* not in the reproduction of the *unhuman*.

As Spillers notes in her 1984 "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," the institution of chattel slavery throws gender, motherhood, sexuality, and desire into "unrelieved crisis" (1984, 76). As a marker of difference, gender, Spillers writes, "…takes place within the confines of the domestic….The human cargo of a slave vessel…offers a *counter*-narrative [emphasis in original] to notions of the domestic" (1984, 72). Here, Spillers' use of *the domestic* as that realm through

which gender is made explicates the ways in which the meaning of "woman" as a signifier remains fundamentally interlocked with the economic world that was being produced through the *particularisms* of European relationality. Returning to the Early Modern period's witch-burnings, the invention of "womanhood" came in turn with the cleaving of the "public" and the "private," making the "place" of someone gendered woman that of the domestic. Spillers throws into full relief the ways in which this European understanding of gender—even removed of the trappings of medico-scientific discourse—functions as a technology of making and unmaking, not only of "properly" gendered subjects, but of "antagonistic differences" so stark that they delineate those *subjects who labor and reproduce*—whether through the process of work or through the biological reproduction—from the enslaved, *those who are reduced to labor and reproduction.* As such, as Spillers writes, the meaning of "family" as a project of European reproductivity is fundamentally affiliated with the ability to transfer property and capital: "…the *vertical* transfer of a bloodline, of a patronymic, of titles and entitlements, of real estate and the prerogatives of 'cold cash'…becomes the mythically revered privilege of a free and freed community" (1984, 74). Such transfer of property and capital, within a system of chattel slavery, surely includes those enslaved—regardless of familial or blood ties of those enslaved. Thus, the "family" structure of European domesticity, as a structure that is fundamentally interlinked with forms of gender *and* sexuality, is also predicated upon the ability to not only to come into ownership of those enslaved, but to break those very kinship ties that then become marked as "excess." As Spillers writes, "…[*misnaming* a matriarchist value to the enslaved] is false because the female could not, in fact, claim her child, and false, once again, because 'motherhood' is not perceived in the prevailing social climate as a legitimate procedure of cultural inheritance" (Spillers 1984, 80). As such, white motherhood and Black motherhood, though sharing in the title of

"motherhood," developed to function very differently as key subjects in the making and maintaining of racial capitalism.

The position of Black motherhood further reveals the centrality of *whiteness* and its reproduction in the project of sexual mythmaking. Though the process of mythmaking that produced *the witch as myth* punished those whose relationship to sexuality was in excess of, detrimental to, or unable to be controlled under the burgeoning capitalist regime, with the development of chattel slavery, sexual mythmaking as a disciplinary regime thus became fundamentally associated with the protection of reproduction of *whiteness*—and thus, racial capitalism as a system—unto eternity. With this in mind, returning to Robinson's own analysis of the myth of Black hypersexuality yields not entirely different, but adjacent conclusions—ones that centralize the importance of reproduction in the making of "excess" and "abject" categories of racialized sexual subjects.

When Robinson writes about the role of *Othello* in creating the proto-myth of Black men's sexuality as "lascivious" and only imaginable through a scene of a "horrifying rape" (2007, 27), he is describing sexuality as *part* of the creation of the Negro, rather than as an intertwined and interdeveloped process of racial *and* sexual mythmaking. The making of this myth cannot be disentangled from the implications of "lascivious" or "excessively" sexual behavior, with such "excess" defined as *in excess of* "acceptable" reproductive sexual behavior to ensure the reproduction of whiteness. *Othello* functions to produce "the Negro," an abjected modality of difference, because of interracial coupling's *failure* to be "acceptably" reproductive—Othello and Desdemona's coupling could, by its nature, never reproduce the racially "pure" subject. It is that inability to reproduce racial purity, and in particular purity *from* racial Blackness, that made the sexuality represented within the Othello/Desdemona coupling

"excessive." The sexual "excess" of interracial coupling is reinforced in the Othello/Desdemona relationship by the very same modes of mythmaking that construct Black masculine subjectivity as abject, unattractive, and animalistic. The specter of sexual violence reinforces the mythmaking of interracial coupling as "taboo" and impossible through mutual desire. Sexual violence, as Robinson writes, *also* works to mark Blackness as abject. Speaking with Robinson in his analysis of *Othello,* we can see sexual mythmaking working *with* racial mythmaking to create the groundwork for the ordering schemas of chattel slavery and the racial regimes that develop out of it.

Sexual mythmaking's function in racial capitalism and its regimes is that of controlling reproduction, with a particular focus on the reproduction of whiteness—and the hierarchy that whiteness represents—as a means of ensuring the reproduction of racial capitalism unto eternity. Interracial sexual coupling without rape worked to unsettle the "naturalness" of the order that whiteness symbolizes, destabilizing the hierarchical difference-making that racial regimes rely on, both economically and ontologically. As such, interracial sexuality *had* to be produced as "abject" or "sexually excess" to preserve this political, social, and economic structure. Though interracial coupling between a Black man and a white woman could, very well, result in reproduction and childbirth, through the ways that it reveals the instability of the "antagonistic differences" of race and gender, though a supposedly heterosexual, reproductive coupling, it does not reproduce *correctly*—it is in excess of "proper" reproductivity.

Conclusion: Unheld, Unassimilable, and Excess

Sexual mythmaking is powerful. Sexual mythmaking, acting as a technology of racial capitalism, produced whole systems of binarisms—antagonistic differences—for the purpose of discipline:

the discipline of genders, of bodies, of populations, of peoples, of ways of being. These forms of discipline were material, with material stakes. Sexual mythmaking justified mass killings: the burning of witches in Early Modern Europe and the extermination of the *joyas* in what is now called California (Miranda 2010) as modes of gendercide in the early history of the production of capitalist modernity—and such physical, material discipline did not end with the transition into the era of failed Reconstruction. Sexual mythmaking and the centrality of disciplining modes of sexual excess took shape in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries as the crisis of lynching sparked by the invocation of supposed threats to white women's ability to "properly" reproduce whiteness[4]. And though those included within the category of "sexual acceptable/innocent" and those rendered "sexually excess" have shifted in the face of crises—allowing for white queer and trans populations, and *some* nonblack populations of color, space within the realm of the "sexually innocent" and "sexually acceptable"—sexual mythmaking as an organizing technology has remained.

Sexual mythmaking's power and persistence, however, does not make it all-encompassing. Processes of mythmaking do not produce forgeries without contestation. Fugitive modes of resisting sexual mythmaking exist and persist, even as sexual mythmaking's power to "displace the real" and invoke disciplinary power continues to structure our current relations of gender, sexuality, race, and power. Like the structure of racial capitalism that it is part of, sexual mythmaking, in producing its abject subjects, produces modes of its own destruction.

Take, for example, the naturalized gender binary, itself a project of sexual mythmaking under racial capitalism. The making of European gender formations as a site through which to

[4] Ida B. Wells' robust reporting on lynching, and her later anti-lynching organizing, is an example contemporary to the crisis of lynching that understands that such sexual panics over miscegenation were actually projects of maintaining hierarchical differences between racialized subjects.

discipline white feminine subjects into "proper" reproductivity in the making of racial capitalist modernity reveals the deeply racial project of both the Western gender binary *and* its related understandings of "proper" sexuality and erotic conduct. If, as in the era of the witch-burnings, gender was being made through the gendercide of third-gender *witches* who served as challenges to capitalism's development, and if, as seen with the biologicization of "true womanhood's" gender embodiment being linked to whiteness and "proper" sexual subjectivity, the stability of Western gender structures—especially its binaristic gender structure—reveals itself to be a project of myth in and of itself. In other words, the flimsiness of such a structure and the conditions for its overthrow are inherent to its own production as a mode of discipline.

Such "legible" gendered modes of being—that is to say, disciplined modes of being within the cisgender, Euro-American gender binary—function as projects of enclosure and capture, ones that can be, are, were, and will continue to be shaken, problematized, and evaded. As Christina Sharpe writes, "The asterisk [in Trans*]…holds the place open for thinking….[speaking] to a range of embodied experiences called gender and to Euro-Western gender's dismantling, its inability to hold in/on Black flesh" (2016, 30). Gender's *inability to hold* was, at least in the genealogy of capitalism and the longer genealogy of the European difference-making ontologies that come from it, by design—but taking seriously Sharpe's provocation, it is those made illegible under Euro-Western gender, those marked as "sexually excess," who reveal the slippages of the ordering schemes of racial capitalism's "antagonistic differences."

Considering the role of sexual mythmaking in the present, even and especially as queer and trans assimilationism allows for some queer and trans subjectivities to ascend from the abject position of the "sexually excess" into the realm of the "sexually acceptable," as queer nuclear

families happily take on the project of reproducing whiteness, and as white transgender people clamor for "equal opportunity" to reproduce racial capitalism as agents of military imperialism around the world, it is those who embody the asterisk in Sharpe's *Trans*,* or who perform the "…destabilization and remaking of our identities" in Cathy Cohen's articulation of the "radical potential of those of us outside of heteronormativity" (1997, 481) who reveal possibilities of other worlds outside of the memory and myth that Cedric Robinson describes as "unstable truth systems" (2007, xii). It is those subjects who lived and continue to live in the space of incomprehensibility that marks the "sexually excess" that draw our eye towards the realm of possibility that José Esteban Muñoz described as the promise of queerness—the queer utopic. It is this incomprehensibility, this refusal, this flight from the "romances of the presence" that offers not only productive ways to imagine political resistance to the structures that order us, that have ordered us, but also offers modes of survival and life, even in the wake of the apocalyptic. It is that focus on survival, life, and persistence beyond what has been marked as the possible that offers us ways outside of the binarism of sexual mythmaking's order and into that place past the horizon, past the pragmatism of the "sexually acceptable."

But before we glance towards queerness's horizon, we must familiarize ourselves with the gay political mainstream, queer pragmatism, and the discourses inherent in political campaigns towards yearning for inclusion in the "sexually acceptable."

CHAPTER TWO: NOH8, LEGALIZE GAY, AND MARRIAGE EQUALITY AS SEXUAL ACCEPTABILITY PROJECT

> "I'm done pretending that the handful of racist gay white men out there…are a bigger problem for African Americans, gay and straight, than the huge numbers of homophobic African Americans are for gay Americans, whatever their color.
>
> This will get my name scratched of the invite list of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, which is famous for its anti-racist-training seminars, but whatever."
> —Dan Savage, "2008 Black Homophobia" (2008).

> "Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name….My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented."
> —Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987, 65).

Introduction

In the mid-2000s and early 2010s, one of the many ways that sexuality appeared in the mainstream public consciousness, both online and offline, was in the form of political debates around federal recognition of same-sex marriages. The political movement for marriage equality took many forms—demonstrations, protests, public service announcements, image campaigns, popular media campaigns, among others. All the while, with internet access becoming more widespread and social media websites growing in scope and influence, it became more and more clear that digital worlds were key spaces that could impact the shape and scope of "real-world" political debates. Many of the campaigns that mainstream gay political groups implemented to organize support for gay marriage were in equal parts online and offline campaigns, whether "intended" to be digital media campaigns or not. By examining two such campaigns, the NOH8 campaign and American Apparel's Legalize Gay campaign—of which, their online nature and virality was central to their success—I hope to reveal the shifting and permeable nature of the "sexually excess" and "sexually acceptable" binaries of sexual mythmaking.

"Gay Marriage" as Stopgap to "Marriage Equality" as Horizon

In its early years, the political demand for same-sex marriage, like gay politics as a whole, was deeply linked with HIV/AIDS. In the 1980s, with the AIDS epidemic poorly-understood and all but ignored by the state because of its status as a "gay disease," same-sex partners of AIDS patients were denied hospital visitation rights and biological families were given precedence over queer partners and communities in burying and memorializing the dead. While this arrangement should have revealed the need to, as Sycamore puts it, "abolish marriage" ([2004] 2008, 3) because of the ways in which it was so clearly utilized as a means of ordering and disciplining in life *and* in death, the gay political mainstream rarely centered the link between same-sex marriage and the disposability of subjects mythologized as "sexually excess" in their demands for marriage equality, especially as the supposed "end" of the HIV/AIDS epidemic receded further and further into collective memory beginning in the new millennium. The obfuscation of same-sex marriage's origins in a time of crisis, as well as the gay mainstream's response to California Proposition 8—the mobilization of capital and influence around the proposition, the discourses surrounding marriage equality, and the underlying racial and sexual myths that said response played into—makes visible the conditional porousness of the constructs, processes of mythmaking, and disciplinary regimes of sexual mythmaking under racial capitalism.

As part of the marriage equality era, Proposition 8 was a flashpoint, mobilizing many gay political activists and heterosexual allies in favor of marriage equality. For many liberals, gay and heterosexual alike, the juxtaposition of Obama's presidential victory and "progressive" California's effective rejection of same-sex marriage served as a jarring call to action. The many campaigns opposing Proposition 8 utilized a constellation of different techniques, including web-

based approaches, taking full advantage of greater internet access and the burgeoning social media infrastructure to help spread their message, gain support, and influence young people. As Rhonda Gibson writes, though social media *alone* did not bring about Proposition 8's repeal, social media played a very important role in changing attitudes about same-sex marriage—namely, by contributing to an environment wherein same-sex marriage became normalized, and quickly (Gibson 2018, 159-160). The role of social media in quickly shifting public opinion towards same-sex marriage makes the specific messaging, appeals, and ideas that marriage equality campaigns and their supporters utilized online of key importance. Moreover, in quickly "normalizing" same-sex marriage, the digital components of the marriage equality era offer context how mainstreaming gay and lesbian subjectivities made appeals to a particular kind of belonging under processes of sexual mythmaking.

"We're Just Like You": NOH8 as Viral Image Campaign

Developed in response to the passage of Proposition 8 in 2008, the NOH8 campaign was a self-described "photographic silent protest" developed by celebrity photographer Adam Bouska and his partner Jeff Parshley. Though the NOH8 organization maintains an active social media presence, the NOH8 campaign was most visible and had the most influence in the immediate seven-year period after the passage of Proposition 8[5]. In its most recognizable form, the NOH8 campaign consisted of photographs of people, often celebrities or other public figures, wearing white t-shirts and duct tape over their mouths, with "NOH8" painted on their cheeks. The "8" of

[5] According to the IRS form 990s compiled as part of ProPublica's Nonprofit Explorer project, the NOH8 Campaign 501(c)3 made its highest total revenue in 2012, taking in $773,208 for a net income of $208,633. From 2013 to 2014, the NOH8 Campaign operated at a loss. In 2015, the same year that Proposition 8 was overturned, the NOH8 organization took in $556,764, with a net income of $155,808. From 2016 on, the NOH8 Campaign 501(c)3 has operated at a loss.

"NOH8" was always highlighted in red. With its clear imagery, celebrity representatives, and its easy reproducibility, the NOH8 campaign was designed for virality. The visual signifiers of the NOH8 campaign were easily recognizable and accessible, and though there were some costs for one to be included in the "official" NOH8 campaign[6], people could—and did—participate in the "photographic silent protest" by posting a picture of themselves on social media. In fact, reproducing the NOH8 imagery on social media was encouraged by the official campaign. As of May 2021, the NOH8 website continues to host a "My NOH8" section of user-submitted photographs, and although the links on this page do not direct to a publicly accessible archive of each user-submitted photograph, according to the catalog count, there have been at least 4,603 images submitted to the official NOH8 website alone. This number does not account for the photos taken as part of the "official" NOH8 campaign, the photographs people took of themselves in support of NOH8 solely for their own social media accounts, or the recirculation and reposting of NOH8 campaign photographs outside of social media. Nor does it account for the alternative ways that people may have created online media in support of the NOH8 campaign, like making text-only posts on social media accounts with the hashtag #NOH8, or creating alternative forms of digital art, like the "hundreds of [Second Life] users" (NOH8 Campaign, 2009) who used digital NOH8 accessories for their avatars. Combined with the inclusion of celebrity figures, the relative accessibility and ease of reproducibility helped to contribute to the virality of the NOH8 campaign's "photographic silent protest."

In addition to its photo campaign, the NOH8 organization produced a series of public service announcement videos, posted to the then-growing video sharing website, YouTube. The

[6] The NOH8 FAQ page states that while anyone can post a picture supporting the message of NOH8, to "officially" participate in the NOH8 campaign photoshoots, participants must attend an "official" NOH8 open shoot or NOH8-sponsored event and pay $40 for a solo photograph, or $25 per person for a couple or group photo (with a minimum of $50 per couple or group). These photoshoots are described as the "primary source of support" for the campaign.

first NOH8 video was posted in May 2009, six months after Proposition 8 was passed. NOH8's public service announcement videos expanded the scope of the campaign, further helping to contribute to NOH8's virality. Titled "I Am," this first video acts as a manifesto for the NOH8 campaign, outlining the campaign's goals, the supposed stakes of the campaign, and the kinds of people this campaign is working in service of. The video starts on a close-up shot of Perez Hilton, a gay media personality whose daily tabloid blog[7] made him into a public figure. "I'm a blogger," Hilton says proudly into the camera. His declaration is followed by another figure saying, "I'm a police officer." This is repeated with other subjects—some notable celebrities of the era, some otherwise-ordinary people—stating who they are, what their profession is, or some other form of identity or status marker: that they are gay, straight, or bisexual; that they are single, or engaged, or married to a same-sex partner; that they are gay parents, or that they are gay parents' children.

After this cataloging of "diversity," the PSA makes a turn towards unity, making claims that *despite* their identities, these figures are still, "Your friend…your neighbor…your coworker…your fellow Americans." This appeal to unity as "fellow Americans" is a near-exact match for what Sycamore describes as the "tyranny of assimilation" in her preface to *That's Revolting!,* even down to adapting the imagery of white-picket-fence suburban neighborliness to argue that there is nothing deviant or out of the ordinary about gay and lesbian people and their families. Indeed, this appeal to unity can easily be described as an appeal to "normalcy," an argument that in *spite* of difference, gay and lesbian couples are not only fellow Americans, but

[7] In a way, Hilton's claim to fame represents the state of the mainstream "gay internet" ecosystem of the mid-to-late 2000s. Personal blogging—whether on personal websites, blog-specific platforms like Livejournal and Wordpress, or on social media sites like MySpace and Tumblr—was a key element of queer space-making online (see: Jordan-Zachery 2012). As Hilton's case indicates, such forms of queer space-making could also prove to be potentially economically lucrative.

they are, in fact, "just like you." This appeal to "'we're-just-like-you' normalcy" (Sycamore [2004] 2008, 3) leads directly into the video's pivot to an appeal to equality. After setting up that they are all "fellow Americans," the speakers and subjects of the NOH8 campaign declare that they are entitled to equality—specifically, equality under the law. Proposition 8 is framed as fundamentally against what it means to be "American" because, "…we're [gay and lesbian couples] not treated equally."

The explicit message here—that to be a fully rights-bearing American is to be "equal" under the law—is framed here as theft, as the "taking away" of a right that "all Americans" are entitled to. Building on this theme on what *all* "all-American, we're-just-like-you" Americans are entitled to by virtue of their status as part of an ingroup, the video crests with a call to action in the form of an appeal to family. Rather than fighting for the liberation of all peoples, rather than fighting against a structure that has made people less valuable and more disposable under both explosive and quotidian regimes of difference-making, the fight for marriage equality is instead a fight for "family." But even as a "fight for family," this fight is not for *all* types of families. It is not a fight for queer modalities of kinship that developed in response to queer rejection, disposability, and precarity. No, the "family" that the NOH8 campaign—as an arm of the marriage equality-industrial-complex—fights for is an "acceptable" form of family: the nuclear family, with its two parents and its bubbly children ready to be transformed into good workers, good citizens, and similarly "acceptably" reproductive subjects. "Fight for our family," say the two white young adult figures who proudly declared that their parents were gay earlier in the advertisement. "Fight for us," a multiracial group of adolescents say, in unison. "Fight for me," a racially ambiguous third-grader says, the camera seemingly angled so that the child is

glancing upwards, as if to place viewers in the role of the role model that said child is literally looking up to.

The first NOH8 PSA video ends with a sentiment that is equal parts an explanation of the NOH8 campaign's methodology and a call to action, with the PSA's stars posing to the voiced-over lines: "Our truth is written on our faces. Together…we can make our silence heard…no hate." Before the advertisement pulls out to list the NOH8 website URL, a white man, one half of a gay couple from earlier in the video, his mouth duct-taped over and "NOH8" painted on his cheek, pointing to his wedding ring. The camera lingers on this shot briefly but meaningfully before quickly cutting to Bouska holding a camera, a visual call to action that places viewers as participants in NOH8's "photographic silent protest" like the subjects of the video. These two shots echo the last audio lines of this call to action: protect this gay white man's ability to marry by joining in on our photo campaign. With its brevity and straightforwardness, the first NOH8 video clearly articulates the meaning behind the NOH8 campaign: first, that Proposition 8 and any form of opposition to marriage equality is rooted in hate from ignorant, homophobic people, and second, that despite their differences, gay and lesbian people are "just like you."

These themes and appeals made in this first NOH8 video carry over into subsequent NOH8 videos of the "marriage equality" era. In the "I'm Coming Out" PSA, posted less than three months after the first NOH8 video, various celebrities declare that they are "coming out" for equal rights, utilizing a fake-out conceit to reiterate that denying someone their "right to family" is "hate." Like with the appeals to family utilized in the first NOH8 video, this emphasis on the "right to family" uses supposedly expansive language to make a very narrow demand: legitimization under the gaze of the state for *certain* queer subjectivities (gay and lesbian couples) and *certain* kinds of families (nuclear families, with two married adults and, implicitly,

children that they are the primary or sole caregivers of). There is no challenge here to the broader structure of what "family" means, no push to think of different ways to care for one another outside of a structure of relationality that is optimized to reproduce in just the right way to produce more and more laborers. Forms of kinship in excess of the nuclear family's reproductive potential are not in the vision of the NOH8 campaign's calls to act in the name of defending families. Instead, the NOH8 campaign's appeal to "family" is an appeal to some perceived unfairness that gays and lesbians are not being recognized and privileged by the state in the same ways that heterosexual nuclear families are. In this call to imbricate gay and lesbian subjects into the project of state-sanctioned coupling, in rendering the "gay families" to be defended as *only* the kinds of families where a wide-eyed third grader has two mommies or a couple of teenagers has two daddies, the NOH8 campaign very explicitly draws gay and lesbians into the realm of sexual acceptability, all the while obliterating the possibility of other forms of queer family-making. This leaning on explicit appeals to reproductive normalcy, this self-definition by means of distancing gays and lesbians from the possibilities of erotic unsettling, only challenges structures of ordering insofar as it allows a group formerly mythologized as sexually excess within the realm of sexual acceptability under processes of sexual mythmaking. It does not challenge the structure of sexual mythmaking's binary oppositions—a structure that itself is the product of the antagonistic binarisms that organize racial capitalism.

With its appeals to sexual acceptability *within* racial orders in mind, it is important to address the *explicit* ways that the NOH8 campaign and its supporters engage with race. Antiracism is effectively absent from the NOH8 campaign. When race *is* addressed, it is only when race is collapsed with sexuality, appealing to liberal notions of "equality" by saying that race is *like* sexuality, rather than a power-oriented analysis that understands race and sexuality as

interlocking, co-constitutive, and historically co-produced. In its most explicit form, this logic is outright stated, like in NOH8's 2010 "I Am Human" video, where Selene Luna, a Mexican American actress, says "Sexuality is *like* race" in Spanish. But this theme of equivalence is hewn throughout the NOH8 campaign's videos and photo posts, in ways that frame these logics of equivalence in more insidious ways, such as in the 2009 "I'm Coming Out" PSA, where Dawn Richard, a Black musician[8], utters the beginning of a phrase, "Denying a minority the same rights you were born with…." only for Tabatha Coffey, a white Australian lesbian, to finish the phrase: "…is hate." In a shining example of neoliberal multiculturalism, Richard and Coffey, Black non-gay person and white lesbian, articulate a common message of the marriage equality years: the campaign for federal recognition of same-sex marriages is a fight against hate.

For the script to place the logical conclusion of Richard's words in the mouth of Coffey, a white lesbian, is to posit that one struggle is the logical equivalent of the other; that the "hate" of Black struggle against dehumanization in the 1960s is akin to the "hate" of being denied marriage in the 2000s and 2010s. In these logics, to be gay is *like* being Black, and to deny gay and lesbian people the same ability to have their relationships affirmed by the state is, effectively, on par with the long campaign of Jim Crow segregation and legal disenfranchisement that defined the near century after Reconstruction. Never mind the fact that as non-person beings, Black heterosexual couples were denied the "right" to marry during the period of chattel slavery. And never mind the fact that anti-miscegenation laws were held as precedent in the United States

[8] At the time that the "I'm Coming Out" PSA was being released, Dawn Richard was dating a cisgender man. Richard hasn't necessarily "come out," but her relationship to queerness is a complex one. In an interview with Black nonbinary artist Michael Love Michael, Richard discusses how her 2019 album *new breed* centers Indigeneity, New Orleans as community, and fluid understandings of gender and sexuality (Michael Love Michael 2019). In other interviews and in her own social media posts, Richard has also expressed that her formation as an artist has been fundamentally tied to Black queer artists and communities in New Orleans. As someone who does not *identify* as gay, Richards not only embodies a problematization of the neoliberal identity politics that is embodied by the NOH8 campaign, but she also gestures towards a similar politics of Black queer and trans refusal as Blake Brockington, who I will be discussing in-depth in the next chapter.

until the *Loving v. Virginia* decision declared such legislation unconstitutional in 1967. Or that, unlike Proposition 8, many anti-miscegenation laws not only *invalidated* interracial couplings, but criminalized and persecuted interracial forms of coupling. These historical wrinkles—precedents that require us to think beyond a single-axis "sexuality only" framework—completely disappear in the logics of equivocation that define the NOH8 campaign's invocation of race. By symbolically linking the marriage equality struggle to the Civil Rights struggle, the subjects with whom the gay marriage advocates seek "equality" with is obfuscated: similarly bourgeois, middle-class heterosexual couples, subjects produced as "sexually acceptable," within hierarchies of value under racial capitalism.

The NOH8 campaign was far from the only marriage equality campaign that utilized memetic images or YouTube to spread its message. But the NOH8 campaign's YouTube videos, even if not "viral" at the same scale of other viral videos of the time[9], was nonetheless an influential part of online campaigns for marriage equality and is indicative of the gay mainstream internet ecosystem of the late 2000s and early 2010s. In its YouTube presence and its memetic "silent protest" photographs, the NOH8 campaign and its supporters show that the political

[9] Most of the NOH8 campaign's videos on YouTube have view counts of less than 400,000 views. While this is far from the millions of views that other viral videos of the era received, we must first contextualize these seemingly low view counts. First, the NOH8 campaign videos were launched in an era where YouTube did not have the same massive influence as it does today. The infrastructure for a serious public service announcement to attain the same amount of views that other, similarly "serious" videos get in 2021 was not yet developed. Second, Proposition 8-related content of the time period did not become viral in the same way that non-Proposition 8 viral videos became viral. In other words, the "virality" of a viral video of a child doing something funny is not the same *texture* of "virality" as a video campaign to encourage a group of people to action. Finally, the impact of the NOH8 campaign videos cannot be quantified in the view counts of NOH8's videos alone. Response and reaction videos, testimony in comments, and the cross-platform proliferation of the NOH8 campaign's imagery are also important ways to gauge the NOH8 campaign's virality and influence. For example, one comment on the "NOH8 Campaign PSA" video, reads: "I'll do my english [sic] presentation about the NOH8 Campaign on Monday and I really hope I can convince some of my schoolmates and teachers of the project to support you! It's a presentation in front of my whole shool! [sic] :') <3" (2012). This comment reflects a few things: first, the relevance of the NOH8 campaign three years after the campaign's launch; second, the youth appeal that the NOH8 campaign held, in no small part because of its simple message and imagery; and third, the offline and unaccounted-for ways that the NOH8 campaign spread, ways that cannot be gleaned from YouTube analytics.

project of advocating for marriage equality relied on producing and reproducing an image of "gay normalcy," or, in other words, in reforming gay and lesbian subjects into sexual acceptability. Like the "homophile" movements active more than fifty years prior, the NOH8 campaign made appeals to the "respectability" of middle-class gay and lesbian people, making bourgeois gay and lesbian interests the *only* possible political interests for queer people, and painting gays and lesbians as deserving of equity with bourgeois heterosexual couples *because* of their status as fellow neighbors, coworkers, nuclear parents, and Americans. And like the "homophile" movements of the 1950s, part of this appeal to acceptability is by obfuscating any indicator that gays and lesbians do, in fact, have sex. All the while, the NOH8 campaign posited sexuality as *like* race, thus obfuscating the important ways that sexuality is co-constituted with race—effectively re-centering white bourgeois gay interests as effectively *all* that gay politics stands for. And though not all viral campaigns for marriage equality were appealing to the "family friendliness" of gay and lesbian subjects as the NOH8 campaign was, similar themes, appeals, and logics lie at the root of even "sexier" marriage equality campaigns. Even with its embrace of the rebellious, hypersexual reputation that its parent company developed for itself, American Apparel's viral Legalize Gay campaign still utilized logics of gay assimilationism under state ordering regimes, showing that at the root of the gay mainstream political project of the 2000s and 2010s was, fundamentally, a project of moving from "excess" to "acceptability" under regimes of racial capitalism.

Legalize Gay and the Corporate Sexy of American Apparel's Marriage Equality Campaigns

Like the NOH8 campaign, American Apparel's Legalize Gay campaign developed as a specific response to the November 2008 passage of California Proposition 8. According to Jesse

Gillan of design group Former Partner, the Legalize Gay campaign began at a Los Angeles rally opposing Proposition 8, and demand for paraphernalia with the "Legalize Gay: Repeal Prop 8" logo on it grew from that rally. Despite this deceptively-grassroots origin story, even Gillan's official retelling of "Legalize Gay's" inception reveals the industrial scale of the campaign. Though small in comparison to retail production numbers, Gillan writes that "a few hundred Legalize Gay T-shirts [were printed]" (Gillan 2021) specifically for the rally. According to American Apparel's Legalize Gay homepage—now only accessible via the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine—these t-shirts were distributed to protestors at that 2008 protest. From its inception, Legalize Gay was intended to grab attention, to be repeated, to be coveted, to go viral.

As such, the iconic Legalize Gay logo appeared in many forms, in many places online. During the height of marriage equality's political salience, Legalize Gay selfies were commonplace on youth-oriented social media sites like MySpace and Instagram, but they were not limited to these sites. Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter were also digital spaces where "Legalize Gay," both as image campaign and as standalone campaign, proliferated. More than a decade after American Apparel's launch of the Legalize Gay campaign, and despite social media's ephemerality, the residue of this campaign's virality persists. A search for Legalize Gay on MySpace, for example, pulls up a curated Legalize Gay playlist by Onch Movement, a jewelry designer who gained cult status during the early 2010s. Quick Twitter searches for Legalize Gay and "shirt" reveal not only photos of people from the era, but people's memories of the ubiquity of the Legalize Gay image campaign—with some people even coveting a "vintage" Legalize Gay t-shirt in 2021.

Perhaps most telling a sign of the American Apparel campaign's virality, though, is the presence of imitators. One Facebook page, billing itself as the "Legalize Gay Campaign," was

established in 2012, more than three years after the launch of American Apparel's Legalize Gay campaign. Though American Apparel's logo is nowhere to be found on the "Legalize Gay Campaign" Facebook page, the influence of the campaign is clear from the aesthetic choices[10] associated with American Apparel's campaign, complete with t-shirts with Legalize Gay in a notably generic font and semi-nude, playful portraiture of thin, conventionally attractive young women. Another t-shirt campaign, Legalize Trans*, engaged more explicitly with the original American Apparel-led campaign. Created by Black transmasculine organizer and former campus chaplain Asher Kolieboi, the "Legalize Trans" campaign was designed to shine a light on the limits of Legalize Gay as a campaign by highlighting and centering those trans people who Legalize Gay necessarily precluded as a gay politics-making project. In an interview for the now-defunct Bilicero Report, Kolieboi describes Legalize Trans* as "...bring[ing] into the spotlight other issues that LGBTQ people face -- transphobia, classism, racism, ableism. As [Legalize Trans*] grows we would like to bring all that into the conversation" (Comer 2010). Though utilizing the same t-shirt campaign format, Kolieboi's Legalize Trans* campaign is rooted in a politics of intentionality that is fully absent in the Legalize Gay campaign. And even if the language of "Legalize" reproduces the same sort of problems of appealing to recognition by the state that Legalize Gay does, Kolieboi's Legalize Trans* campaign, unlike the copycat "Legalize Gay Campaign" Facebook page, actively utilizes aesthetic mimicry as a tool for political critique. As the adage goes, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. But, as imitation

[10] In the mid-to-late 2000s, American Apparel was known for "pushing the boundaries" with its borderline-pornographic advertising. Though the imagery of American Apparel's campaigns might be tame compared to the Kardashian-adjacent aesthetic normalized on Instagram in the late 2010s and early 2020s, during the "marriage equality years," American Apparel's pseudo-candid image campaigns featuring scantily-clad, thin, usually-white models in various forms of undress would earn the chain a reputation of sexual illicitness and infamy—but just enough for the chain to be economically successful. Former Partner, the same design firm that developed the Legalize Gay campaign, was also responsible for much of the "softcore" advertising campaigns that defined American Apparel's mid-2000s "cool kid" identity.

by means of critique shows, copycats, mimics, and parodies can also serve as an effective measure of the influence, prevalence, and impact, especially when examining histories that are fragile and ephemeral through their very online nature.

The memetic nature of Legalize Gay and its imitators played on the same sort of cheeky illicitness and boundary-pushing that American Apparel's other advertising campaigns played on. After the creation of the "gay consumer" but before the federal legalization of gay marriage, to purchase a commodity stating Legalize Gay was to engage in prepackaged defiance, a sort of gay equivalent to American Apparel's infamously sexy image. Like NOH8, American Apparel's Legalize Gay campaign was targeted towards young audiences, but unlike the NOH8 campaign, American Apparel's Legalize Gay image campaign was far from the squeaky-clean, family-forward approach to gay acceptability. This sort of consumer-friendly rebellion was only emphasized when an American Apparel store in Washington, D.C. with a Legalize Gay display was vandalized in July 2009. One local news outlet at the time described the vandalism as a "gay bashing" (Stabley 2009), and Montgomery County police were interviewed on-record investigating whether or not said vandalism was a "hate crime," thus elevating the consumerist project of an American Apparel window advertisement to rights-bearing personhood itself. Responding to the vandalism, American Apparel stated very firmly on their website:

> not only are they not going to prevent us from speaking out on an issue that is important to this company and our employees but we'll continue to run Legalize Gay advertisements in papers across the DC-Metro area. We'll also send Legalize Gay t-shirts to any group in Washington DC that is fighting for gay rights and will help support any protest or rally for the cause….We don't find this kind of thing funny and we definitely don't find it intimidating (Legalize Gay 2009).

Such flippancy in the face of vandalism might be construed as brave, subversive, even, if it were not for the fact that American Apparel's Legalize Gay campaign was far from a charitable project. Unlike the NOH8 campaign, American Apparel's Legalize Gay campaign wasn't even

registered as a 501(c)3, collaboration with the Human Rights Campaign notwithstanding. Legalize Gay was never *only* about opposing California's Proposition 8. From its inception, the campaign was just as much a marketing campaign meant to build the popularity of a multi-million dollar corporation as it was an information campaign meant to advocate for marriage equality. The July 2009 act of vandalism functioned as a boon for American Apparel and the Legalize Gay campaign, casting it as an underdog, a political advocacy group, a corporate David fighting the anti-gay Goliaths. Using this event to their advantage, American Apparel was able to construe theirs as a message of change, of bravery, of being part of a subversive, fashionable ingroup. As a commodity, American Apparel's Legalize Gay t-shirt signaled a political position, yes, but also signaled that its wearer was rebellious, cool, enviable, and, in a way, sexy.

Despite its wink-and-nod to the supposed illegality of "gayness," the performative rebellion of the Legalize Gay advertising campaign was successful for the exact opposite reason: because the form of sexuality being sold was "acceptable" within the logics of racial capitalism's technologies of sexual mythmaking. Unlike its predecessor, "Legalize LA," a similar t-shirt campaign launched earlier in 2008 as a response to workplace raids and proposed legislation to increase policing across the US-Mexico border, the subjects who these t-shirts were meant to bring attention to were *not* being defined as "criminal" or "illegal" under the arms of the state. But in moving from "Legalize L.A." to "Legalize Gay," an implication of policing, state surveillance, and potential state violence is projected onto gay couples as a result of gay marriage's supposed illegality. This false equivalence not only renders gay marriage as equivalent to violence experienced by those racialized undocumented subjects, but it also obfuscates the realities of gay marriage as a specific political goal of a particular class of gay couples. In 2008, ten years after HIV/AIDS was declared "over," the push for marriage equality

was less a struggle over the ability for a queer person to be mourned and retained fully in memory, and more a symbol of social and political assimilation and imbrication in the eyes of state. As a viral image campaign, the Legalize Gay campaign built itself through utilizing the aesthetics and flippancy of rebellion, without engaging in any of the material political demands made by radical queer organizations. The reality of the messaging behind Legalize Gay was not that of liberation, but one of recognition—bourgeois gay couples, already imbricated into cultural scripts of "sexual acceptability," wanted full imbrication into "acceptable" subjectivity through state recognition and protections. Though imbued with the corporate-approved sexiness of American Apparel, the Legalize Gay campaign was, in its very nature and in its very name, doing work that was far from radical—a project made ever more visible in the ways in which the campaign, both in "official" American Apparel-branded materials, and in "unofficial" user-generated content, worked to collapse race and sexuality as *like,* rather than intersecting and co-constitutive.

In a 2009 New York Times article about a series of firings at American Apparel's Los Angeles factory, one fired worker, using the mononym Jesús, describes the ways that Obama-era immigration policy "reforms" reinforced his position of precarity. Jesús is quoted as saying, "Being realistic….I guess I'm going to have to go to one of those sweatshop companies where I'm going to get paid under the table" (Preston 2009). Part of the reason Jesús was forced into under-the-table work was not only because he is undocumented, but because of the intersecting forces of homophobia and labor status. Though he does not disclose the reason that he migrated to the United States in this article, before he lays out the realities of being forced into sweatshop labor, Jesús notes that the reason he will not migrate back to Mexico is because he is gay. In the framework posited by the logics inherent in the Legalize Gay/Legalize L.A. collapse, only

"undocumented" or "gay" are possible subjectivities, and Jesús's experience of precarity as an undocumented gay man becomes invisible. The intersecting and co-constructed forces of colonialism, homophobia, and xenophobia operating under an extractive and hierarchical racial and economic order fall away in this bimodal understanding of politics, furthering the ways in which Jesús and other undocumented queer people like him are marginalized. And though mainstream gay discourse of the time utilized gay undocumented people as beneficiaries of marriage equality, as Eric Stanley writes:

> The way immigration is being used by the gay marriage movement is not only un-thought out but also relies on racist notions of the "white man saving his brown lover"….missing from the picture of immigration that gay marriage advocates are painting is the reality that there are queer couples in the U.S. where neither person is a U.S. citizen. How will gay marriage help them stay in the U.S. if that is what they want to do? Gay marriage will not challenge "citizenship" but simply place some bodies within its grasp while holding others out (2014, 29).

As Stanley explains, despite the collapse of likening gay monogamous partnership to being undocumented, mainstream gay political discourse—American Apparel's Legalize Gay among them—is rooted in logics of expanding the "citizenship" of white, cisgender gay subjects. Even within the logics of marriage-as-stopgap measure, the political mobilization of the gay undocumented migrant is invoked in service of sexual saviorism, echoing Spivak's "white men saving brown women from brown men," except with a same-sex twist to it. Legalize Gay is *not* for the undocumented gay people whose intersecting economic and social conditions lead to exploitation and extraction, but for their imagined white gay lovers, bourgeois white people with the economic and social resources necessary to sponsor a spouse through the lengthy, costly, and highly surveilled marital naturalization process. Though catchy, American Apparel's rhyming campaigns, in holding equivalent the legislation targeted towards migrants who supposedly stand in for "LA" and the monogamous couples who stand in for "gay," perform the simultaneous

work of obfuscation, minimization, and collapse—all for the political goal of gaining political and social equality with heterosexual bourgeois white elites.

More insidious in its logics than the simple Legalize Gay/Legalize L.A. binarism at the heart of American Apparel's Legalize Gay campaign is a 2009 blog post by author Lee Wind. As the only example of personal blog content highlighted on American Apparel's Legalize Gay homepage, Wind's post, titled "Walking While Gay," details his experience walking around Los Angeles while wearing a Legalize Gay t-shirt. The title is a clear play on "Walking while Black," a phrase that would have had greater prominence in June 2009, when Wind originally wrote this post. Earlier that month, Henry Louis Gates Jr. was arrested outside his home by a white police officer. Gates himself wrote about the "Driving While Black" phenomenon in a 1995 article for *The New Yorker,* and though Gates was not driving when detained outside of his own home, his arrest sparked conversation about instances of Black men being surveilled and accosted in their everyday lives. With this context in mind, it is unsurprising—though not unproblematic—that Wind falls back upon the language of "Driving While Black" when comparing his experience of self-marking as a gay man to the surveillance that Black people experience when moving through the world. Wind even acknowledges this, though he does not recognize the *incomparability* of same-sex marriage to the quotidian and systemic criminalization of Black life, writing:

> The experience [of walking around Los Angeles in a Legalize Gay t-shirt] got me thinking about the whole phenomenon of "Driving while Black," and how for some people, there's NEVER a moment when people don't know their minority status, for bad and for good. I have a new-found sense of humility, realizing the relentlessness with which my non-white friends must deal with everyone's instant reactions to their identity. While I've known this intellectually, it was a different thing entirely to EXPERIENCE it (Wind 2009).

There is much to unpack in this extended quotation alone, and it encapsulates the whole blog post well. As a white gay man living in Los Angeles, Wind's newfound experience of "visible"

marginalization brought upon by wearing a hip, mass-produced t-shirt led him to view his inability to be married as *like* that of the policing and surveillance of Black people moving through space. What Wind reveals in this blog post is the idea that lies at the heart of the Legalize Gay campaign and marriage equality project as a whole: that if not for individuals' tragic circumstances of same-sex attraction, the bourgeois, presumably white gay and lesbian people advocating for marriage equality would hold the very same political, economic, and social position as bourgeois, presumably white heterosexual couples. The common refrain of the era—that being gay isn't a choice—belies the belief that underlies it: "because if it was, I wouldn't choose it."

Of course, a more generous reading of Wind's blog post might consider this paragraph an acknowledgment of the privileged position that he occupies *as* a white, cisgender, masculine gay man. But when taken in the entirety of its context, this paragraph speaks to the emptiness of Wind's acknowledgement of race. When the only acknowledgment of positionality or racial solidarity comes in the form of re-centering the supposed "normal life" of a white gay subject, the function of this acknowledgment is not rooted in a radical politics that acknowledges the systems of oppression that historically connected white gay subjectivity and Black heterosexual subjectivity as both sexually "excess." This does not respect the ways how, as Siobhan Sommerville notes, "simultaneous efforts to shore up and bifurcate categories of race and sexuality…[historically] were deeply intertwined" (2000, 3). Rather, the work of this acknowledgment is that of contrast, to bring to the fore just how much white gay and lesbian life is *like* Black life—the fundamental *incomparability* of marriage equality discourses and antiblack police violence aside—not to build collective solidarities, but rather, to point out how even *imagined* proximity to antiblack oppression is an unacceptable condition of oppression. To

this end, “Walking While Gay” embodies the problematic of comparison that Jared Sexton writes of as misunderstanding and obfuscating the specificity of antiblackness. In analyzing the political paucity of coalitional campaigns rooted in *people-of-colorblindness*, Sexton writes, “Without blacks on board, the only viable political option…will involve greater alliance with an antiblack civil society and further capitulation to the magnification of state power” (2010, 48). And indeed, in Wind’s project of comparison, in this well-intentioned erasure, he displaces the reality of what he is invoking, taking on the language of Black struggle to appeal to antiblack structures of policing and rule.

“Walking While Gay,” in this sense, functions as a synecdoche—not simply of the Legalize Gay campaign, but of the marriage equality campaign in whole. Whereas “Walking while Black” is an indictment of the racial order, “Walking while gay” is making a demand of the exact same racial order, an antiblack racial order that makes the appropriation of “Walking while Black” into a cheeky blog post about a white man’s experience wearing a t-shirt possible. By donning a Legalize Gay t-shirt, Lee Wind makes an appeal to the state, legitimizing the very same state and legal apparatuses that produce the conditions of surveillance and violence that “Walking while Black” stems from. To “walk while gay” in a Legalize Gay t-shirt is a call to *mobilize* the state to do the work of shielding and protecting supposedly “acceptable” subjects from conditions of subjection imagined to be “like” conditions of racialized others—an unimaginable injustice, especially if the conditions of oppression that white, bourgeois gay and lesbian couples imagine themselves to be subject to are *like* those of antiblack violence. Though it is not outright invoked in Wind’s blog post, this mobilization of the state and all its disciplinary power because of an imagined oppression that is *equivalent to* antiblack racism echoes the same sort of calls the gay political mainstream was making for expanded hate crimes

legislation. This shared appeal to the state—whether in the form of state recognition or in the form of calling the state to action—makes visible the core appeal that is being made within Wind's blog post and the Legalize Gay campaign as a whole. Wind's blog post, the Legalize Gay campaign, and the marriage equality movement as a whole, sought out federal legal recognition of same-sex coupling a step towards a neoliberal form of "equality," an equality at the height of economic and racial ordering regimes, an "equality" with white heterosexual couples and their capacity for being seen, being defended by, and being allowed to weaponize the violent possibilities of a state built upon the ongoing processes of Indigenous dispossession and chattel slavery's afterlife.

Ultimately, Wind's "Walking While Gay" blog post makes the dangerous racial logics inherent to American Apparel's Legalize Gay campaign—and the broader marriage equality movement—explicit. Combined with this post's highlighted place on the American Apparel website, Wind's "Walking While Gay" blog post was given exceptional status in the gay blogosphere at the time, further crystalizing the meaning behind American Apparel's Legalize Gay campaign, not to mention the political and racial positioning of the gay political mainstream at the time.

Like the NOH8 campaign, American Apparel's usage of the Legalize Gay marketing never quite "ended" so much as it fell out of popularity, especially after "gay" was finally "legalized" in the 2015 suite of Supreme Court decisions declaring heterosexual-only marriage legislation unconstitutional under the Fourteenth Amendment. As a corporate marketing campaign assuming the identity of grassroots political activism, American Apparel's Legalize Gay campaign nonetheless had a very real impact in terms of organizing young people around the political message that the campaign sought to promote, shallow and problematic though that

message was. Digital ephemera of collective engagement with the campaign still exists online, archives of an era so recent yet so radically different from the state of gay politics as it exists just over a decade after Proposition 8's passage. Though there are many imperfect ways to quantify the spread of American Apparel's Legalize Gay campaign, its impact is clear in how Legalize Gay persists in the collective memory of young queer people who came of age during the marriage equality era. One tweet, posted on the official Twitter account for the Canadian LGBT anti-discrimination nonprofit Get REAL, reads:

> I can still remember the first time I saw someone wearing a 'legalize gay' shirt when I was a young, closeted human. I can't put into words how it felt to see that support, visibility, and inclusion. Never underestimate the power of a T-Shirt (2018).

Though this tweet is, too, interested in selling mass-printed t-shirts—the photos accompanying the text are of a model wearing one of Get REAL's "NO HOMOPHOBIA" t-shirts—it reveals an important, sometimes underestimated impact of the marriage equality era-messaging campaigns like Legalize Gay and NOH8: they hailed queer youth, helping them imagine a future beyond the uncertainty of closetedness. But Get REAL's nostalgic sentiment also extends to the implicit and explicit appeals that such a t-shirt makes, and the implicit and explicit ideas that the Legalize Gay messaging campaign helped to promulgate as an element of the gay mainstream's political project of insisting—despite the public and visible gay radicalism of the 1980s and 1990s, despite the fact that Black and Indigenous populations both queer *and* heterosexual are still ravaged by an ongoing HIV/AIDS crisis, despite the ways that a radical gay body politic could unsettle hegemonic notions of ordering and value—that gay and lesbian couples are safe, sexually acceptable, and "just like you."

The Marriage Equality Era and Queer Assimilationism

The NOH8 campaign and American Apparel's Legalize Gay campaign both reflect an important element of sexual mythmaking's project as a technology of racial capitalism: that it is mutable and permeable, allowing some subjectivities and some types of sexuality into the realm of "sexual acceptability." This permeability exists as a way to maintain racial capitalism as an ordering structure by producing varied racial-sexual regimes in response to different crises, expanding and contracting notions of value and disposability, all the while keeping the hierarchical, naturalized, antagonistic means of ordering and reproduction intact. Though gay assimilationism as the reigning modality of mainstream gay politics did not *originate* from these viral online campaigns, NOH8 and Legalize Gay both worked in service of shifting queerness's meaning under ordering regimes of extraction and value. What it means to be LGBTQ+ in the eyes of the state, markets, and mass culture began to shift from subjects fit for policing (in the form of anti-sodomy laws), disposability (in the form of malignant neglect and conservative scapegoating during the height of HIV/AIDS), and extraction (in the form of the creation of a marginalized class of people falling into precarious and often-criminalized labor pools like sex work) to subjects who could call upon the state *to police* (in the form of expanded hate crimes laws), could *perpetuate disposability* (in the form of declaring the HIV/AIDS epidemic "over" when pharmaceutical companies developed treatments for people with access to regular healthcare), and who could declare themselves "*full citizens*." In short, the primary referent for gay subjectivities was no longer those *in excess of* "proper" reproductivity, and instead, came to symbolize those aligned with the reproductive project inherent within racial capitalism. The NOH8 campaign did so by explicitly arguing that same-sex couples were proper reproductive subjects, while American Apparel's Legalize Gay campaign did so by utilizing sexuality in a

way that did not challenge hegemonic ordering structures. Through this delinking of mainstream gay politics from eroticism, these two campaigns, as well as the whole of the gay political mainstream that they were a part of, *also* delinked gay politics from HIV/AIDS. In doing the work of obfuscating a crisis that construed subjects as disposable because of their "sexual excess," the NOH8 and Legalize Gay campaigns made appeals to imbrication in "full citizenship" by absolving the state of its responsibility in the deaths—historic and ongoing—of sexually "excess" queer subjects. In carrying water for the state, the gay mainstream earned a seat at the table of "normalcy," with all the taffeta trimmings of the gay wedding industry and the marriage paperwork of state-sanctioned, "properly reproductive" sex to prove it. All the while, the *racial* elements of the marriage equality debate—and the making of bourgeois cisgender gay and lesbian people as "acceptable" sexual subjects—put into stark relief the function of sexual mythmaking as a *racial* project under racial capitalism.

As some forms of white, bourgeois, cisgender gay and lesbian sexuality quickly became assimilated into the realm of "sexual acceptability" with the galvanization of marriage equality organizing in the late 2000s and early 2010s, other forms of sexuality and relationality—including forms of heterosexual coupling—remained ever-outside of formations of "sexual acceptability," and were even being *reinforced* as "sexually excess" all the while the binarizing frames of sexual mythmaking were becoming permeable to *some* sexual subjects. This, like gay assimilationism, was not new to the organizations opposing California's Proposition 8. Published in 1997, the same year that Ellen Degeneres proved that lesbians are "just like you" in the *Ellen* show's now-historic coming-out episode, Cathy Cohen articulates a critique of queer politics and its myopic focus on heterosexuality in her pathbreaking "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens." Primarily, Cohen is concerned with how such a politics allows white gays and lesbians

to make alliances with conservative politicians, even within more supposedly radical *queer* political spaces. This sexuality-only focus across white interests occurs all the while ignoring the shared interests of those "heterosexuals outside heteronormativity" (1997, 442, 451, 452-457). As Cohen writes:

> [The] move toward the disallowance of some forms of heterosexual expression and reproductive choice can be seen in the practice of prosecuting pregnant women suspected of using drugs…through the forced sterilization of Puerto Rican and Native American women…and through the state-dictated use of Norplant by women answering to the criminal justice system and by women receiving state assistance. Further, it is the "non[hetero]normative" children of many of these non[hetero]normative women that New Gingrich would place in orphanages. This is the same Newt Gingrich who, despite his clear disdain for gay and lesbian "lifestyles," has invited lesbians and gay men into the Republican party. I need not remind you that he made no such offer to the women on welfare discussed above. Who, we might ask, is truly outside of heteronormative power…? (1997, 457).

This question—*who is truly outside of heteronormative power?*—has a foregone conclusion. No one is outside of heteronormative power, not even heterosexual people. But the important ontological intervention that Cohen points to might be reoriented otherwise as *whose sexuality is necessarily marked and mythologized as "excess?"* These questions are just as generative as they are points of critique: for Cohen finds within the promises and possibilities of the postmodernist turn towards "queer" (as opposed to "gay" or "lesbian") a kind of politics that centers not only those punks and bulldaggers[11] construed as sexually "excess" by virtue of their non-heterosexuality, but also, in equal parts, those "heterosexuals outside heteronormativity" represented by the figure of the welfare queen, the Black mother, the reproductive figure who is by nature of her subjectivity in a matrix of antiblack and pronatalist worlding under racial

[11] Though "punk" has since become synonymous with a genre of music, "punk" originated as a slang term for gay man who was the receiving partner in anal sex. There have been efforts to connect the threads of these slang terms along with a racial analysis (Nyong'o 2005, 2008), as well as general conversation around what "punk" means with a specific lens towards the racialized usage of the word (Stephens 2018). While the origins of "punk" as a specific slang term to refer to a specific kind of gay man are somewhat murky, "bulldagger" as a term for butch lesbians has its origins in Black communities of the Harlem Renaissance. With this in mind, the alliance of "punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens" that Cohen imagines as the possibility for queer politics is necessarily a Black-led one.

capitalism, in "excess" of proper reproductivity. As the article's title indicates, *queer politics* holds within its theoretical interventions a form of radical *potential,* one that allows for the making, remaking, and *destabilization* of identity as a mode through which coalitions that center shared experiences of marginalization under formations of power, and thus, shared opposition to structures of domination and power. As Cohen writes, "I envision a politics where one's relation to power, and not some homogenized identity, is privileged in determining one's political comrades. I'm talking about a politics where the *nonnormative* and *marginal* position of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens, for example, is the basis for progressive transformative coalition work" (1997, 438). Such a politics, unfortunately, was not to become the politics of the gay mainstream in the decade between Cohen's article and Proposition 8.

The marriage equality era deepened, entrenched, and emboldened the sexuality-only axis that Cohen critiqued, especially as formations of identity and "identity politics" began to shift under the dual formulations of expanding neoliberalization and projects of gay assimilationism. As noted by Lisa Dugan, the *new homonormativity* was just as much marked by defining itself against the "civil rights agenda" (2003, 50) as it was marked by a shifting relationship to the public/private divide. This making of the *normative* homosexual oriented against the "civil rights agenda" *and* "liberationism" all but crystalizes a sexuality-only approach to mainstream gay politics. The *sexuality-only* approach to advocating for solutions, as utilized by the gay mainstream, was seen as *the* way to approach the question of tackling homophobia—rather than a systemic, power-oriented approach that "liberationists" gestured to. And while bourgeois, mostly white gays and lesbians made appeals to be *legally* codified as "full citizens," discourses of Black sexual excess remained a consistent presence in both popular and elite discourses. Dugan points to the Cato Institute's David Boaz, and his simultaneous support for gay marriage

all the while invoking young women on welfare "hav[ing] children…without a husband" and "inner cities" to show the dovetailing of mainstream gay politics' ideological center with conservative projects of neoliberalization. But this dialectic—the normalization through valorization and moralization of gay nuclear families, combined with the continued denigration of Black families and Black mothers—extended beyond libertarian organizations, beyond conservative gay organizations, and was ever-present in even "progressive" platforms of the political mainstream.

"Acceptable" Gay Families and "Excess" Black Heterosexual Households

During the 2008 presidential campaign, then-candidate Barack Obama included LGBT rights as one plank of his presidential platform. Though he publicly opposed same-sex marriage, Obama's platform supported civil unions that allowed not only property transfer rights and insurance and healthcare benefits—two key privileges bestowed upon state-sanctioned couples—but child adoption rights, as well. To then-candidate Obama, all the privileges of heterosexual nuclear families could be conferred onto same-sex nuclear families, just under a different rubric, utilizing a different name.

All the while showing support towards same-sex nuclear families, candidate Obama was less generous with non-nuclear Black families. For Father's Day of 2008, Obama gave what is now called his "Fatherhood Speech." In it, he lambasts the "absence" of Black fathers as fundamentally "weakening" the bedrock of Black families and linking it to the problems of gun violence and incarceration experienced by poor Black communities in Chicago. Though much has been written about this speech and its failures to address the specific policies of policing and incarceration and the broader antiblack racial order that has, since chattel slavery, destroyed

Black family structures, the ways in which this speech denigrates a certain form of family structure is reflective of how sexual mythmaking, as a technology of racial capitalism's ordering ontologies, is flexible only to a point. Because during the same political zeitgeist that gay couples were gaining purchase as "sexually acceptable," Black mothers were still being cast as fundamentally, almost inherently, "sexually excess."

In her pathbreaking 1987 text, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," Hortense Spillers articulates the subject formation of the Black woman and the Black mother in the structure of racial ordering produced through the rupture of chattel slavery. Like Cohen's indictment of the failures of queer politics, which takes as one of its examples of "heterosexuals outside of heteronormativity" low-income women on welfare, Spillers opens by looking at the Moynihan Report, using Moynihan's analysis of Black families as an entryway into how Black women are figured through articulations of gender, motherhood, inheritance, and property. Moving from the Moynihan Report to the transatlantic slave trade and back again, Spillers notes that though named as mother, the enslaved African mother was produced as a subject outside of "motherhood" as it was understood by Western conceptions of feminine domesticity, writing, "From [bell] Hooks's lead…we might guess that the 'reproduction of mothering' in this historic instance carries few of the benefits of a *patriarchalized* female gender, which, from one point of view, is the *only* female gender there is" (1987, 73). Implicit in this critique is the conception that *Euro-Western* female gender under patriarchy is the only female gender there is. The discourses and constructions that define Black femininity and Black motherhood are rooted in the making of enslaved Africans as outside of the matrix of humanity, what Spillers describes as, "appear[ing] in the same context with beasts of burden" (1987, 79). Out of the making of enslaved Africans into property, the conventional notion of "kinship" *as* a transfer of property relations and

economic inheritance from father to son becomes impossible for enslaved peoples. And as such, Black mothers come to be the "powerful and shadowy evocation of a cultural synthesis long evaporated—the law of the Mother—only and precisely because legal enslavement removed the African-American male not so much from sight as from *mimetic* view as a partner in the prevailing social fiction of the Father's name, the Father's law" (1987, 80). Following Spillers' analysis, in the discourses of family-making, Black mothers become *not* figures entangled in webs of power and disempowerment, possession and dispossession, but the nigh-singular (re)productive source of pathology—first, to their families, and then, to the nation and social structure as a whole.

These discourses of Black motherhood's inherent pathology are understated but visible in Obama's Fatherhood Speech. Though the ostensible target of Obama's speech is the "absent" Black father, the fact that Obama casts Black families as crumbling without patriarchs is to say that the influence that *is* present is not enough to prevent social pathology. Perhaps she is the *cause* of such pathology in the first place. Obama's later superficial lionization of the Black mother does little to dismantle the dangerous logics that he is utilizing[12]; the single Black mother, though described as "heroic," is still the conduit for blame, still implied as a reason for the Black family's failures to reproduce "acceptably." Obama states:

> We know that more than half of all black children live in single-parent households, a number that has doubled—doubled—since we were children. We know the statistics—that children who grow up without a father are five times more likely to live in poverty and commit crime; nine times more likely to drop out of schools and 20 times more likely to end up in prison. They are more likely to have behavioral problems, or run away from

[12] Rhetorically, the "single mother" figure Obama invokes may not even be the nebulous figure of the Black single mother, but instead, his own white mother. Obama spends some time describing his "grandparents from Kansas" who helped his hard-working mother raise him and his sister. This juxtaposition between the nebulous Black single-parent household that results in children "liv[ing] in poverty and commit[ing] crime" and the hard-working family "from Kansas" invokes different kinds of "non-traditional" families—and such "families" cannot be disentangled from the racial imaginaries that Obama is trafficking in.

> home or become teenage parents themselves. And the foundations of our community are weaker because of it (2008).

Though she is unnamed and supposedly absent from this paragraph, the specter of the Black mother haunts this portion of the Fatherhood Speech. Herein, as the result of the Black father's absence, Black children are cast along a path to a life of dispossession. The cause of this dispossession and degeneracy is not the result of an ordering structure that was built to produce a class of people whose subjectivities rendered them disposable; instead, at least in the logics of the Fatherhood Speech, the fault lies with the rupture of the nuclear family structure itself. In the image of single-parent families that Obama articulates, it is not enough that Black mothers are working hard, for their influence in the absence of Black fathers is that which leads Black children towards dispossession. The single-parent household—a family rendered unfamily not *only* through its racialized distance from the nuclear norm, but through the single Black mother heading it—is framed as the cause for incarceration, for "behavioral problems," for "weaker" communities. Without utilizing Moynihan's language of "pathology," Obama invokes it, rendering its spread as infectious and cyclical. Utilizing this "shadowy evocation" (Spillers 1987, 80), Obama displaces the weight and infrastructure of racial capitalism's ordering of the world through antagonistic difference-making and antiblackness onto the corrupting influence of the Black mother, rendering her reproductively excess by nature. Obama's Fatherhood Speech does not represent a rupture in understandings of families, but rather, a necessary continuation of it.

While Obama's Fatherhood Speech was delivered five months before California's Proposition 8 was passed, it was nonetheless part of the cultural landscape that informed California voters in the lead-up to the 2008 election. Taken as part of a larger constellation of discourses about forms of family and coupling, Obama's Fatherhood Speech makes visible the fact that, even in spite of Proposition 8's passage, the already-shifting tide towards "acceptance"

of "non-traditional" families that marriage equality advocates emphasized was limited to *nonblack* non-traditional families, and even more specific among those, bourgeois white nuclear families. Combined with a convenient narrative of blame that posits Black and Latino voters as "responsible" for Proposition 8 (see: Farrow [2004] 2014; Savage 2008; and Dickerson 2009), discourses of gay and lesbian assimilation and acceptance allowed for the promulgation of a liberal logic of reproductive futurity, symbolized by the gay nuclear family, posited against the supposed inherent "backwardness" of Black voters—further entrenching the "acceptable" reproductive nature of bourgeois gay and lesbian subjects. Narratives espousing the possibility of linear "progress" are only possible through an *obfuscation* of relations of power, and are moreso only possible through assimilationism's invocation of myths that reinforce and reify relations that produce certain racial subjects as disposable and dispossessed.

Marriage equality as a project of gay assimilationism would not be possible without the crisis that revealed the ways that coupling under the watchful eye of the law became a matter of life and death, of wholeness in memory and the capacity for memory's persisting. But gay assimilationism was equally made possible through bourgeois gays and lesbians reifying the racial order through the politics of sexual mythmaking's binaristic differences. As Lisa Dugan writes, "In order to facilitate the flow of money up the economic hierarchy, neoliberal politicians have constructed complex and shifting alliances….These alliances are not simply opportunistic" (2003, xvi). Similarly, the alliance between neoliberal politicians and the gay political mainstream was *not* politicians exploiting and manipulating a "racially innocent" gay populace. Instead, as Dan Savage, the NOH8 campaign, and American Apparel's Legalize Gay campaign make apparent, there was much to be gained politically, economically, and socially in the gay political mainstream positioning gay and lesbian people as "just like you," and sexually

acceptable, both implicitly and explicitly positioning themselves against the reproductively and sexually "excess" Black families in their own appeals to state sanctioning of their own reproductivity.

Conclusion

As part of the "marriage equality debates" of the late 2000s and the early 2010s, the NOH8 and Legalize Gay campaigns represented two viral image campaigns among many. Through the ideas and messaging of both campaigns, the making of a mainstream gay political populace in a "post-HIV/AIDS era" comes into view. Both campaigns made appeals to sexual and reproductive acceptability, but each campaign did so in very different ways. The NOH8 campaign made appeals to the "normalcy" of gay and lesbian people as citizens, laborers, and most importantly, as members of acceptably reproductive nuclear families. American Apparel's Legalize Gay campaign, on the other hand, courted youth attention by cultivating an image of rebellion, cool, and sex appeal, all the while making explicit appeals to the state and limiting that sexy cool to the sexiness defined by marketing sensibilities. Moreover, both campaigns—and the larger gay political mainstream of the period—consistently linked sexuality to race in an ahistorical, non-intersectional way. In making shallow appeals to diversity, mainstream gay campaigns, organizations, and leaders utilized dangerous logics of equivalence, marking the denial of bourgeois gay interests as *like* legacies of antiblack violence—thus further marginalizing those very queer and trans subjects and populations to whom assimilationism into structures of state and capital would not and could not represent the end of their political marginalization. All the while, as marriage equality worked to formally incorporate white, bourgeois gay and lesbian peoples into respectable subjects through rendering them "sexually

acceptable," familiar scripts of reproductive excess continued to render Black families and Black mothers *particularly* as aberrant, sexually excess, and, ultimately, disposable.

This dynamic makes visible the ways that mythmaking, as a technology of organization and value under racial regimes, is simultaneously semi-permeable *and* oriented around a stable "outside." Sexual mythmaking is organized by racial capitalism, the histories it draws into reality, and the ontological bases of racial capitalism as a means by which to order and extract from the world; in other words, sexual mythmaking is organized *by* racial capitalism just as much as it organizes *for* racial capitalism. Returning to Dionne Brand's ever-prescient reminder that chattel slavery created a rupture in the world, sexual mythmaking was not exempt from this worldmaking process; common scripts of Black feminine sexual and reproductive pathology—of inherent conditions of sexual excess—remain stable in the broader political mainstream even as "nontraditional" families and forms of coupling were becoming assimilated into "full citizenship." This stability allows for a myth of progress to obfuscate racial capitalism's ordering principles; it is fully necessary to maintain a structure of ordering wherein control over reproduction of culture and laborers alike allows for hierarchical racial differences to flourish, allowing capitalism and its necessary racial orders to render its future unto eternity. Or, to quote Spillers, "My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented" (1987, 65).

Such contemporary, historical, and structural grounds was the context for the development of Tumblr as it began to develop its "unique sensibility," as Alexander Cho (2018, 3185) describes it. Though some Legalize Gay selfies and arguments in support of gay marriage were hosted on the site, Tumblr also helped to facilitate the development of a queer politics—a queer-of-*color* politics—that was very unlike the "we're-just-like-you" normativity of gay marriage advocacy. Though Tumblr-as-infrastructure had design elements that could very well

be used by people of *all* political positions, Tumblr as *site* functioned as an outside, a community, a testing ground, a fugitive, anarchic space of possibility.

CHAPTER THREE: ANARCHIC ARCHIPELAGOES AND QUEER OASES: TUMBLR, TRANS-OF-COLOR RESISTANCE, AND GLANCING TOWARDS QUEERNESS'S HORIZON

> "You know, contrary to popular belief, the lion is not the king of beasts. There are many crowns. But no king. Only anarchy."
> —Myr [Miriam], "Sunset Park" (Ron Wimberly, *LAAB #4: This Was Your Life!*, 2020)

> "Under conditions like these, survival isn't merely a drive; it's an imperative. It is a command to stay close to each other and take care of each other because we need each other in order to stay alive with each other. What we've got, when there's nothing else, not even the feeling of freedom, is our flesh, life, and each other. We can't afford any more losses. We need More Life."
> —Joshua Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer-of-Color Life* (2018, 77).

> "I may be crazy but that don't make me wrong. Nobody promised you tomorrow."
> —Marsha P. Johnson, quoted as part of the Brooklyn Museum's 2019 exhibit, *Nobody Promised You Tomorrow: Art 50 Years After Stonewall*.

Introduction: *Extremely Online*

Social media's meteoric rise in the mid-2000s coincided with the development of the gay political mainstream, and as noted in the last chapter, the gay political mainstream utilized social media as part of the "marriage equality" debates. However, even as the digital media campaigns of the gay mainstream's political campaigns utilized significant social, political, and economic capital to shift public opinion with regards to the political cause of marriage equality, it did not go uncontested. Alternative modes of living, loving, lusting, loathing, and longing for one another were being theorized in digital spaces, sometimes alongside the very normativizing, sexless and sexually acceptable discourses utilized by the gay political mainstream. These alternative imaginings were being theorized—though not exclusively—by those subjects who were often left out of the gay political mainstream's focus: queer and trans people of color, trans and nonbinary people of all races, and people whose relationships with sex and sexuality could

not be reclaimed into "proper" reproductivity. This loose and sometimes-overlapping, sometimes-conflicting coalition of people can be described as those *outside of homonormativity,* to riff off Cathy Cohen. And though there was never a concerted, organized political bloc that identified these subjects, one place where those unruly queer and trans subjects rendered outside of homonormativity converged was the microblogging website, Tumblr.

In this chapter, I explore the role that Tumblr played in contesting the mainstream narratives established by the mainstream gay rights movement in the late 2000s and early-to-mid 2010s, up until the implementation of its adult content ban in December 2018. Tumblr, as it came to be understood by its users, was less descriptive of the website itself and more descriptive of the eclectic and ever-shifting communities that developed on the site and called it their digital home. It is this understanding of Tumblr-as-community (or perhaps, more aptly, Tumblr-as-*communities*) that developed in response to the mainstream gay rights agenda, both as intentional political project *and* through virtue of the lives lived by the artists, activists, and everyday Tumblr citizens who made Tumblr their digital home. Ultimately, through a combination of the website's infrastructure, the digital communities who populated the site, and the ways that relations of intimacy, care, and conflict developed on the site, Tumblr served as the grounds wherein modes of resistance against the projects of ordering that sexual mythmaking under racial capitalism utilizes to mark populations disposable, deplorable, and excess.

Throughout this chapter and chapter five, I will be utilizing autoethnography as part of my process in articulating Tumblr-as-community and its political possibilities. Though autoethnography is not a commonly used method within disciplinary political science, it is an essential methodology for scholarship on affect, collective and individuated traumas, queer and trans worlds, and other objects of study for which there are substantial gaps within institutional

archives. Given Tumblr's unruly digital infrastructure, an algorithmic indexing of the site, like one might do with Twitter or Facebook posts, is near-impossible; much of the texture of what the *experience* of being on Tumblr eludes such methodologies. As I describe in greater depth, the very infrastructural qualities of Tumblr make it so that accounting for the experience of being on the site is near-impossible without some form of self-reflexivity. In addition, autoethnography and memory-as-archive is an important part of accounting for gaps in institutional archives because of how one's experience becomes a rich vein from which to develop theory. Hartman's 2008 *Lose Your Mother* shows that the process of recalling one's experiences is a rich process of archive-making and theorization in and of itself. In recalling her time spent in Ghana, Hartman's own experience of encountering the archival gaps that chattel slavery left open, of making community with other Black American expatriates whose dreams of the possibility of return did not meet the reality, of navigating the contested histories of chattel slavery—all this history is just as key to her production of a theory of the link between African peoples and those in the African diaspora as *"we who become together"* (Hartman, 2008, 234). Autoethnography is both a robust method by which to theorize from life, and a means by which to produce a counter-archive. It materializes the immaterial, the ephemeral, and the ghostly, offering a means by which to glance against histories that—especially if directly lived—may otherwise be lost. Or, as Ann Cvetkovich writes with regards to gay and lesbian cultures:

> Forged around sexuality and intimacy, and hence forms of privacy and invisibility that are both chosen and enforced, gay and lesbian cultures often leave ephemeral and unusual traces. In the absence of institutionalized documentation or in opposition to official histories, memory becomes a valuable historical resource, and ephemeral and personal collections of objects stand alongside the documents of the dominant culture in order to offer alternative modes of knowledge (2003, 8).

The invisibility and privacy of choice that Cvetkovich describes is made especially visible with queer and trans spaces no-longer-as-they-were; it is also made especially visible in the case of

social media, wherein the project of curation is an important element of—rather than in opposition to—the production of an "authentic" self. As such, and given the limitations and restrictions on studying Tumblr in the aftermath of its 2018 adult content ban, in addition to analyzing the projects of *collective* memory and myth that were produced, pushed against, and problematized on Tumblr, I will occasionally be delving into my own memory as a project of archive-making. It is through this turn to memory, affect, and the ephemeral *in addition to* the material archives and objects that I analyze that I attempt to approach the impact that Tumblr had on a generation of queer- and trans-of-color people. It is through a mix of material analysis and autoethnography that I, in other words, attempt to articulate what Mark Aguhar described as "growing up gay on the internet."

It's Got Everything: Tumblr's Digital Architecture

Before I begin describing Tumblr and the role it played in allowing for alternative worlds and possibilities during the height of gay liberalism in the Proposition 8 era, there are a few distinctions that need to be clarified. Tumblr-as-website, Tumblr-as-corporate entity, and Tumblr-as-community are not the same thing, and often—as the next chapter on FOSTA-SESTA will explore in greater depth—held and continue to hold oppositional goals. And while there is overlap, such as the fact that neither Tumblr-as-community nor Tumblr-as-corporate entity could exist without Tumblr-as-website, this overlap did not often bear out in the shape of policy changes that were rallied for by Tumblr's communities. I begin this section by describing Tumblr-as-website, the infrastructure that would become the gathering place for the people who would make up Tumblr's communities. Ultimately, though, because it was the *people* who populated the site, produced its value, and made it into the digital neighborhood with its own

particularities, reputation, and meaning, I will quickly transition from "Tumblr" more-often referring to Tumblr-as-umbrella community, rather than infrastructure or corporate entity.

Founded in 2007 as a photo-sharing website intended only for college students, Tumblr quickly became a common space of possibility for queer and queer-of-color people of the millennial generation. Tumblr developed during an interesting time for queer and trans people, especially queer and trans-of-color people. This was coming out of the confluence of a post-HIV/AIDS world, a post-Christopher Street Piers world, a post-queer assimilation world, and the digitalization of relations of community. As a digital platform, Tumblr held two things central, design elements that helped to define itself as a unique digital space.

First, every Tumblr user had a space to be customized as one's own; these homepages, called "Tumblogs," could be designed and structured in an almost-infinite number of ways, offering an opportunity for self-exploration and self-definition that resisted the homogenizing, social indexing of platforms like Facebook. Where Facebook required and still requires some connection to one's legal identity through its "real name" policy, Tumblr forced no such thing. The only indexable feature on Tumblr was one's blog URL, which could be changed at any time. A person's blog URL could be calloutqueen.tumblr.com one day, and bloggingforbrowngurls.tumblr.com the next. All other modes of identification were self-disclosed, if ever disclosed at all. The self-chosen, unfixed nature of Tumblr's public-facing identifiers allowed for an incredible amount of fluidity, anonymity, and vulnerability, all at once.

Second, Tumblr's infrastructure included many things that helped it develop a unique ethos of community. These digital elements include the relatively-wide variety of post types that Tumblr supported, its relative lack of character limits for its text posts, its centralized dashboard that—until recently—was devoid of advertising and recommended posts, its robust reblog and

search functions, and its general lack of centralization and emphasis on curation. This architectural focus on open-endedness and decentralization allowed for curiosity, play, and exploration, all the while producing a community ethos that dominated the site. And while a form of community ethos exists on other social media platforms, such as Reddit or 4chan, the kinds of communities that flourished on Tumblr before December 2018 were fundamentally different, and notably so. Cho summarizes this confluence of design and community as producing Tumblr's unique *sensibility*, writing:

> …a different set of design decisions, intertwined with historically lenient administrative policies [made Tumblr] a digital space where queer youth of color do not feel the pressure of constant homophobic and racist surveillance from pre-existing (or future) life networks. It evades indexing; it privileges affective and evocative exchange of imagery and the cultivation of a sensibility (2018, 3185).

Central to the community ethos and sensibility of Tumblr were critiques of racial capitalism, discussions of non-heteronormative modes of being, and the development of what came to be known as "Tumblr activism" or "Tumblr feminism" (Kee 2017, 87). Within this particular sensibility, sex, sexuality, and eroticism were not only non-taboo, but existed as quotidian elements of Tumblr sensibility, elements that, instead of producing difference, could produce solidarities and communities. While the digital media campaigns as part of the marriage equality movement did the work of distancing gay and lesbian subjects from sexuality and eroticism, or at the very least rendered such sexuality as within the physical and affective bounds of acceptability, the modes of being articulated in Tumblr users' everyday practice resisted this cleaving, refusing the production of a binary antagonism between the "political" and the "sexual," thus pushing against sexual mythmaking's ontological ordering schema.

Sex, sexuality, and eroticism were all key to the development of the Tumblr sensibility. In Cho's collection of ethnographies from queer-of-color youth on the platform, he shares his own experience with finding Tumblr, writing, "I first became aware of Tumblr through a

combination of things in 2008: discovery of a seemingly unending supply of gay porn on the platform, as well as online friends who began sharing links of funny queer Internet image-based ephemera" (2018, 3186). Cho's experience equally-centers the erotic and the non-erotic as both contributing to his entrance into Tumblr as community. This experience is far from irregular; as McCracken writes, "On Tumblr, young people can create erotic material and engage in discussions of sex and sexuality that have become formative for many. As a result, Tumblr has become a center for a variety of pornographic material (visual, aural, written, alternative), as well as for the kinds of nonnormative sexual or queer expression" (2017, 156). It was through this centering of the erotic that communities formed on Tumblr. Cavalcante (2018) describes the pre-adult content ban Tumblr as a "queer cultural archipelago…giving users a glimpse of the queer utopic, the promise of something better" (2018, 18). This diffused, archipelagic series of communities were linked by elements of a shared ethos that worked to refuse the ontological distinctions between the "erotic" and the "political" that became so salient during the marriage equality era, thus refusing acceptability and processes of sexual mythmaking. Neither the sole aspect of individual communities, nor an element that had to be hidden away, Tumblr's many communities obliviated the ontological difference between sexual community and non-sexual community. For example, queer communities flourished on Tumblr, in part, because of the role of sex, sexuality, and eroticism and the sharing of user-generated sexual content like fanworks with sexual content or erotic selfies. Contemporary queer communities outside of Tumblr existed and continue to exist within a liminal space in the public imagination: contingently and partially accepted as part of "respectable" sexual beings if white, supporters of the nation, capitalist subjects, and fully assimilated (Sycamore [2004] 2008, 3-6; Puar [2007] 2017, 40-42).

In the vein of resisting assimilation, critiques of the state, capitalism, and modes of violence were common on the Tumblr community of the pre-adult content ban era. What is notable about these critiques, though, is that, before Tumblr's 2018 ban on "adult content," these critiques existed as equal in weight to expressions of sex, sexuality, and eroticism. One person's blog could have erotic fiction, critiques of racial capitalism, and surreal humor posts all on the same page. Once more, Cho's autoethnography provides a perfect example. A sample of his feed from 2014 included a joke critiquing "Gay conservative/republicans," a post written "that is an entreaty to sign up for Amazon Student because it can save you money," and an animated GIF of one male porn star fellating the other (Cho 2018, 3186). Combined with the fact that, as a 2015 Pew Research Center report indicates, "Tumblr users are equal numbers of male and female, and are demographically poorer, proportionally less white, and more urban than users of other major platforms" (McCracken 2017, 154), Tumblr's queer archipelago both represented and offered a very different mode of queer lifeways than that portrayed in mainstream gay and lesbian organizing during the time period, and as such, offered not only different modes of thinking community, but different modes of thinking what queer worlds might look like.

Further illustrating the shared ethos that flourished on Tumblr pre-ban is a 2013 *Colbert Report* interview with David Karp, founder and former CEO of Tumblr. Four minutes into the interview, Colbert asks Karp, "Let's talk about the elephant in the room with Tumblr, okay? Let me paint a picture of the elephant: it's on its back, and its legs are spread. [Tumblr is] porn central. There's a ton of porn on it." In this framing of Tumblr's "prostrate elephant in the room," Colbert is framing the erotic content of Tumblr as a problem for the website. It is a problem, it is excess. Colbert is reifying the frame of sexual excess that positions Tumblr's eroticism—often, queer-of-color eroticism—as "outside" of both acceptable sexuality *and*

acceptable social behavior, and strengthens the difference-making project of sexual mythmaking. Though he often performed an over-the-top, right-wing character-version of himself on *The Colbert Report,* in this interview, Colbert's disgust and concern is not tinged with sarcasm; it belies a genuine belief of a community's excess, both in the sense of said community *exceeding* the bounds of the "acceptably" sexual, and in the sense of functioning as a call for policing, regulation, and the re-establishment of order. In response to the claim that Tumblr had erotic content on it, Karp replies, "It's got *everything*…we've taken a hard line on freedom of speech, creation of our users, and it's not something we want to police." Compared to Cho's account of his Tumblr 2014 Tumblr feed, this response from Karp tracks. Even to Karp—someone who had a vested interested in maintaining Tumblr's profitability—the erotic, user-generated content on Tumblr was held with the same weight as any other type of content, thus positioning the erotic as something under "freedom of speech," something as *legitimately political* as the other content produced by Tumblr users. And though the political possibility and resistance to sexual mythmaking's ordering project exceeds and troubles the limitations of liberal rights-based frameworks like Karp invokes with his "freedom of speech" line, it is important that Karp understood and defended excess eroticism and situated it *as* political: even, especially, as the gay mainstream distanced itself from explicit eroticism as a way to maintain political legitimacy.

In the broader, "real world" context that it was a part of and responding to, Tumblr functioned as refuge. It was a queer space, one wherein queer- and trans-of-color voices, and critiques of interlocking systems of power, were central. It was a place where sexual mythmaking's binary opposition: the production of the "sexually acceptable" and the "sexually excess," the "sexual" and the "political," held little power. Most importantly, this rejection of sexual mythmaking on Tumblr was not through claims to "acceptability" in the hopes of

assimilation. Instead, the rejection of sexual mythmaking came through an ontological position: by collapsing the differences between the sexual, the political, and the social altogether, and by producing community *through* the erotic *and* the political *and* the social, another mode of being—one outside of the binary oppositions that structure racial capitalism—was shown to be possible.

To be sure, not all of the communities that existed on Tumblr were active in resisting sexual mythmaking, a form of difference-making on lines of sexuality and eroticism, one that works, along with Robinson's racial mythmaking, to maintain and defend the structures that allow for capital to be accumulated by a racialized bourgeoise class on one hand, and justify structures of violence against an "excess" class on the other. But Tumblr's infrastructure allowed for such communities of resistance against sexual mythmaking to flourish, thus unsettling the hegemonic image of the assimilatory queer, the middle-class queer, the white-picket-fence queer, the homonationalist queer. And it is through the assertion of another world, through a remaking of the conditions of possibility possibility, that Tumblr, as a broad, loosely interconnected community offered an insight into what Cedric Robinson describes as "fugitive, unaccounted-for" (Robinson 2007, xiii) modes of resistance against what I am describing as sexual mythmaking in racial capitalism. This falls under what Erica Edwards describes as the kaleidoscopic—a politics and aesthetics of infinite multiplicity, possibility, and beauty, one that resists the production of hierarchical leadership (Edwards 2013, 233). Perhaps not every Tumblr user was doing the work to actively refuse sexual mythmaking, and in fact, early Tumblr served as a battleground for queer identity wars, for claims of "oppression Olympics," for the development of discourses and rhetorics that continue to be explosively contested. But these discourses developed specifically *because* Tumblr attempted to glance towards utopia—not in

spite of it. Rather than framing the development of so-called "oppression Olympics" on Tumblr as a sign of its failures, we must recognize the fact that such discourses developed as a result of a shared culture that recognized and attempted to account for structures of power. As such—even in its failures—represented a space of political possibility, one eroticism *and* the lived realities of queer-of-color life, two things missing from mainstream gay politics organizing at the time, were not seen as extraneous to the conditions of worldbuilding, but at its very beating core, shaping the conditions of possibility in very different ways and orienting us towards very, very different worlds, even in failure.

Tumblr's intra- and intercommunity failures would be nothing compared to the ways in which Tumblr-as-corporate-entity failed its communities, a failure that was made especially visible with the implementation of the 2018 adult content ban. But while Tumblr-as-corporate entity exploited the very users that populated and popularized it until their sexual "excess" was challenged by arms of the state, Tumblr-as-community, as kaleidoscope, as queer archipelago, functioned to, in line with the Robinsonian rendering of the black radical tradition, produce a queer infinity of possibility, a space to develop what Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore describes as, "…new ways of loving, lusting for, and caring for one another" ([2004] 2008, 3). This politics of radical queer possibility that was made possible on Tumblr is made visible in the products of its users. Two users in particular, Mark Aguhar and Blake Brockington, are especially important figures in the development of Tumblr's queer archipelagic ethos. In their everyday practices on the site, Aguhar and Brockington, *calloutqueen* and KING, embodied modes of refusal, flippancy, resistance, and flight—moving us towards something beyond sexual mythmaking's normativizing frames, beyond racial capitalism's binary oppositions of value and hierarchy, beyond gay pragmatism and the pessimism of respectability. As two minor celebrities in

Tumblr's queer- and trans-of-color archipelagic chain, Mark Aguhar and Blake Brockington were two subjects who embodied Tumblr's queer imaginary—an imaginary that, as Tumblr subjects, they, themselves, had a role in shaping.

Growing Up Gay On The Internet: Mark Aguhar as Call Out Queen of the Queer-of-Color Internet

Mark Aguhar was a Filipinx-American[13], Houston-born, multidisciplinary transfeminine artist, whose work centered and circulated, primarily, on the internet. Though Aguhar was not the first person to become "Tumblr famous," she shaped, was shaped by, and offers one glimpse towards the types of queer and trans-of-color political potentiality that made a space on Tumblr. In her works, Aguhar took on what Roy Pérez—a friend of hers during her lifetime—describes as a "critical flippancy" (Pérez 2012), a kind of embodiment that refused the respectable modes of being that undergirded the heart of mainstream gay politics at the time that she was working. Rather than contort herself into the sexually acceptable, easily-consumable notion of queerness's

[13] A note on language: I use both "Filipinx" and "Filipina" to describe Mark Aguhar's gender identity here, though she does not use it to self-define herself; in fact, she never uses the term "Filipinx" on her blog. Despite this, I use "Filipinx" with regards to Aguhar for a few reasons. First, "Filipinx" is a term used by and for queer subjects of the Philippine diaspora. Some people both living on the Philippine Islands and in the Philippine diaspora have described "Filipinx" as either linguistically unnecessary or evidence of ongoing "colonial mentality," however, I choose to utilize this term when describing Aguhar and other members of the Philippine diaspora to mark the specificity of diaspora subjectivity in relation to the ongoing colonial labor circuit between the Philippines and the United States, and how this ongoing labor circuit troubles the distinctions between settler-colonial project, imperial project, and post-colonial project.

Second, though language will always have a certain paucity to it—especially language in translation, and especially language in translation in the aftermath of centuries of ongoing regimes of Western colonialism—as a marker of gendered subjectivity *in* diaspora, "Filipinx" may be closest to describing Aguhar's gender identity. Similarly, I describe Aguhar as "transfeminine" rather than a "trans woman" because in her corpus of work, she self-defined herself under multiple notions of gender, not just trans womanhood, defining and self-describing her own gender identity as "situational gender…boi boy gurl girl grrl woman female male intersex genderfluid normative masculine effeminate feminine dyke trans man butch fem femme fag queen but we have yet to get to dragon or witch or misandrist which are all my real chosen gender descriptors" (Aguhar 2012a; Aguhar 2012b). This, combined with the fact that her very embodiment of gender—one that resembles, though is not identical to, the *bakla* sexual-gender category on the Philippine islands—operates against white-dominated trans narratives of "passing," eschews categorization into the naturalized and rigid binaries of Western colonial gender.

meaning in the era of "Same Love" and assimilationism, Aguhar refused palatability, embodying a form of ungovernability without compromise, rejecting a world "so fucking weak" (Aguhar qtd. in Pérez, 2012) that it could not contain her. Moreover, though her work circulated in the digital realm—a realm that itself represents a sort of immateriality—Aguhar's corpus of work, as well as its circulation in queer memory, is rooted in her embodiment as a fat, Filipina American transfemme person. It is this rootedness in her own embodiment, whether through her embrace of her *fleshiness,* through her return to sexual and erotic "excess", or the re-centering of her *heavenly brown body* that Aguhar's corpus of work provides a glimpse not only towards queer-of-color-resistance, but towards queer-of-color lifeways, modes of glimpsing towards queerness's horizon, even as we occupy that space at the end of the world.

As she described her work on her "professional" artist Tumblr, Mark Aguhar envisioned her work as a, "…continuous exploration of queer expression and what it means to have grown up gay on the internet" (Aguhar 2009?). Blogging on a secondary, more personal blog with the handle *calloutqueen*, Aguhar's presence on Tumblr both shaped and was shaped by what has been described as Tumblr's "unique sensibility" (Cho 2018, 3185). Aguhar's role in producing and being produced by Tumblr's ethos—that "unique sensibility" that created space for queer-of-color refusal in the face of ongoing projects of queer assimilation—is visible from the title[14] of her blog, "BLOGGING FOR BROWN GURLS." Her project, as I will detail in more depth later, was an intentional practice of speaking to and about queer people of color. In centering the

[14] A Tumblr blog's URL and its blog title are two different things. A Tumblr user's URL amounts to the digital marker of their identity on Tumblr. It accompanies their posts when viewed on the Tumblr dashboard and is linked directly back to their blog. This can be changed at will. A Tumblr blog title, on the other hand, is different—it is usually the first thing that one sees when navigating to a Tumblr user's blog, but is not visible on the Tumblr dashboard. In this way, a blog title can—though does not always—function as a subtitle, or a means of stakes-claiming, or a statement of purpose. In this case, *calloutqueen* is Aguhar's URL, "BLOGGING FOR BROWN GURLS" is her blog title, and Mark is the name that she self-identified and indicated as how she wished to be addressed. On Tumblr, all three of these things—digital identification badge, blog subtitle or statement of purpose, and name/pseudonym—could all be changed at-will.

BROWN *GURLS,* Aguhar is speaking against queer assimilability, playing against the "we're-just-like-you" politics of the well-educated, middle-class, gender-conforming, mostly-white queer families of the marriage equality movement. Hers was a movement for those queers of color whose embodiment moved against the gender binary, against middle-class norms of formality and respectability, against the white bourgeois gaze of the white bourgeois gays. This politics of intentionality was something Aguhar had to develop and work towards; she did not start off with the blog title of "BLOGGING FOR BROWN GURLS," after all. But even in her early works, Aguhar's presence on Tumblr was that of a queer Filipinx unsettling, an unsettling that may not have been accessible and legible to those without the specific cultural context of being a BROWN GURL who "grew up gay on the internet."

Even before indicating the purpose of her Tumblr was to "[BLOG] FOR BROWN GURLS," Aguhar consistently worked through Filipinx/a/o identity on her blog, oftentimes theorizing an ambivalence with identifying as Filipino, Filipino American, Asian, and other ethnic markers often applied to her. In later establishing the project of the *calloutqueen* blog, the title, speaks to a particular production of the queer Filipina subject, one that returns us to histories often-forgotten in the production of *Filipinx* as it means under the umbrella of Asian Americanness. Aguhar herself articulated an ambivalent relationship with being marked as "Filipino American," as noted in a January 2011 post:

> It's hard for me to identify as Filipino American because it comes wrapped up in shit about how I relate with my mother, and also how I always felt like the weird sissy boy around my brother/cousins/family friends. I prefer to just identify as brown. Because I can't feel aligned with the community I grew up in, but I can feel aligned with all the other queer people of color.
>
> Is that kind of fucked up? Probably (Aguhar 2011a).

What Aguhar articulates here is an ambivalence with the identity "Filipino" and "Filipino American," an ambivalence that, at its core, is about the still-ongoing process of Western

colonization for those in the Filipino diaspora. In this post, in earlier works, and especially in her later works, Aguhar's Tumblr presence is continually engaged in a project of *unsettling,* one that touches upon the shared ambivalence that defines the Filipinx diaspora in the ongoing wake of empire. And though she often does not explicitly bring up this history, even in her earlier works, Aguhar glanced upon counterhistories and counteridentifications, making an opening for alternative political possibilities rooted in that ambiguity.

To be *Filipino,* or *Filipina,* or especially *Filipinx,* is to occupy a contested space: decidedly not white, not Black unless one is multiracial or of specific ethnic groups; those in the Philippine diaspora are presumably part of the "racial middle," but not "Latino" by geography and not comfortably at home in the umbrella coalition of "Asian" because of where they stand in the internal hierarchy of *Asian Americanness*. While Filipinos were central in establishing the meaning of a unified "Asian American" identity in the 1960s and 1970s, it was, even then, not without ambivalence. As Violet Rabaya writes in her 1971 contribution to *Roots: An Asian American Reader,* "I was shocked…to find that Filipinos, even though their hatred for the Japanese is still great because of the war and their dislike of the Chinese apparent, believe that they are inferior to whites and other orientals (Japanese and Chinese)….To be an outcast in a white society and an outcast among other orientals leaves the Filipino in that never-never land of social obscurity" (Rabaya 1971, 110-111). Like Aguhar more than four decades after her, Rabaya refers to Filipinos here as "brown," unlike the "yellow" self-identifier that became synonymous with "Asian" in the making of "Asian American" collective identity. This is a self-description shared by other Filipino writers in the anthology: Al Robles describes Filipinos as, "Brown / like fallen coconuts / on a cold winter day / brown / like fish drying / in the hot summer sun" (Robles 1971, 114). While this feeling of unbelonging and ambivalence could potentially

open up spaces of possibility, the fact of an extant hierarchy—one wherein Filipinos are "lesser" members of the group—poses an existential challenge to such possibility. And though these pieces were published more than fifty years ago as of this chapter's writing, the ambivalence that Filipinos feel towards inclusion under the umbrella of "Asian" has not gone away in the decades since Rabaya and Robles' writing. Anthony Ocampo gestures towards such a racial ambivalence, positing Filipinos as *panethnic* in and of themselves, showing affinities and vacillating between "Asian" and "Latino" in terms of collective identity and belonging. This making of the "Latinos of Asia," in other words, poses Ocampo's work, alongside Aguhar's project of "BLOGGING FOR *BROWN* GURLS," reveals an ongoing ambivalence held by Filipino-Americans towards identifying within "Asianness," one that becomes especially fraught given the differing relationships that "motherland" countries have with the United States, racialization, and notions of belonging.

In the making of *Asianness* as an identity marked by and defined in relation to American empire, the many peoples and ethnic groups of the Philippines could not be further from the "civilizations-in-decline" (Kim forthcoming) of China and Japan. In other words, while other Asiatic "motherlands" were defined—and thus racialized—as necessarily foreign, alien, but ultimately "civilized," the Philippines and its peoples were constructed as "savages," as people in need of civilization's disciplining. Political cartoons from the time make this especially visible. In one Puck illustration from 1899, for example, Japan is anthropomorphized as a put-together *debútant*, led into a welcoming community of nations—presumably, a community of equals—by the United States. In the background of this illustration, China looks on, a jealous or perhaps nosy woman uninvited. Contrast this with a Judge illustration meant to illustrate Kipling's "white man's burden." In this Judge illustration, while China is illustrated as an older round-faced man

in a bamboo hat who sits atop John Bull's back in a reserved, almost bemused sort of way, the "Filipino" figure is portrayed with the same aesthetic conventions as the figures for Zulu and Hawai'i: that is to say, using the imagery of blackface minstrelsy. Dark skin, curly hair, and big red lips define these figures. And while Puerto Rico and Cuba are also portrayed as dark-skinned and with cartoonish red lips, it is the Philippines, Zulu, and Hawaii that are portrayed in the minstrel show archetype of the savage. All three figures are adorned in generic "tribal" costume, bare-chested save for necklaces and other adorning jewelry, and what appear to be bones stuck through their ears or noses. Moreover, unlike the bemused calm displayed by the figures representing China or Egypt or India, the figures representing Zulu, the Philippines, and Hawai'i look down in wide-eyed distress, not knowing that their capture by these Western imperial powers is "good" for them. The juncture between Filipinos and Africans and Hawai'ians on one hand, and the other intermediary non-Western "burdens" on the other hand, cannot be made starker than in this illustration. This portrayal—one wherein the Filipino people are portrayed with the same aesthetics that circulated within blackface minstrelsy—is not uncommon for the era. And while the ontological collapse made explicit in this illustration does not represent the important distinction between the making of racial Blackness and the making of non-white "savagery" as a whole, it reveals shared historical and political affiliations that become obfuscated in the making of Filipinos as "Asian American," and that lead to feelings of difference and unbelonging from the Filipino writers mentioned above. This stark construction of Filipinos' inherent savagery, one to be contrasted against the foreign and opaque civilization of others later racialized as "Asian," however, was not limited to illustration alone.

The 1904's World's Fair was home to the largest, most expansive "human zoo" of the human zoo era. As Walter Johnson writes, "The purpose of the fair…was to demonstrate to

visitors that human history had reached its 'apotheosis' in [St. Louis's] Forest Park" (2020, 205). At the "ideological core" of this project, Johnson continues, was the "Philippine Reservation," a segment of the human zoo dedicated to displaying different Philippine ethnic groups as a representation of supposed human march towards progress. As Johnson rightly notes, terming the 1904 human zoo the "Philippine Reservation" was far from coincidence; rather, the "Philippine Reservation" represented the settler colonial impulse being turned abroad. This settler-colonial impulse, C. Heike Schotten writes, comes out of an unfulfilled settler *desire* turned outward:

> …because the native has not been finally eliminated once and for all, because the subjects of the commonwealth remain settlers, they cannot rest. They cannot rest until the last trace of the native has been eliminated, such that settlement can become a truly legitimate commonwealth founded on the basis of a free and equal contract of its 'native' [settler] citizens….This is how and why the settler colonial foundation of biopolitical sovereignty transforms itself into an expansionist, imperial security state that finds new enemies abroad, new obstacles to its endless expansion… (2018, 57).

Building on Schotten's observation, I believe the 1904 "Philippine Reservation" reveals the making of settler colonialism turned outward, exposing the ways that settler-colonial logics not only undergird the imperial world-making projects of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but are differently-distributed according to settler conceptions of "civilization" and "progress." In this way, the making of "Filipino" as a unified political and ethnic identity marks that inflection point, the point wherein settler desire turns outward; a unified Filipino identity, insofar as it exists within the histories of colonialism, immigration, and marginalization in the United States, then, is necessarily just as interstitial, linked through geographic migration patterns to "Asian," but marked otherwise through histories of enclosure and capture, colonialism and settlement, savagery and "civilization." Identification is fraught for members of the Philippine diaspora in the United States not simply because of the internal hierarchy within the category "Asian American," but because in the global geopolitical context of settler-colonialism, imperialism, and nationalism, members of the Philippine diaspora represented—and, because of continued

colonial labor circuits, arguably *continue to represent*—a troubling of the stark distinction between settler-colonialism, on one hand, and imperialism, on the other hand. Aguhar's ambivalence, here, becomes understandable because *Filipinx subjectivity in diaspora is interstitial and ambivalent as a rule.* This interstitiality, this ambivalence, works to reveal both racial capitalism's projects of difference-making, and its limitations. Racial and sexual mythmaking could justify the reduction of Philippine peoples as simultaneously in need of "civilizing" *and* inherently sexually excess, and the 1904 Philippine Reservation revealed the process of processes of mythmaking working to *displace the real* in near-real time—after all, the Philippine Reservation was a project of military propaganda as much as it was a project of "scientific" and cultural learning, offering a justification for continued American occupation of the Philippines. At the same time, though, the ambivalence of identity that those in the Philippine diaspora are left with reveals that such difference-making is *not* rooted in the realities of the dispossessed; instead, the difference-making project that marked those in the Philippine diaspora as adjacent to Indigenous Hawai'ians and other figures subject to settler colonial projects could not perfectly mesh with the making of Asian American in 1970s. This ambivalence, then, reveals difference-making's ultimate flimsiness—and thus capacity to be dismantled—of projects of difference-making, even as its long history leaves it as the "spine" of racial capitalism.

With the fraught histories of "Filipino" identity in mind, Mark Aguhar's later pronouncement of purpose—that she is blogging for (fellow) brown gurls—takes on a new political tenor. Though Aguhar does not exactly approach a rejection of Filipinos' subsumedness into the rubric of "Asian American" with her work—and, in fact, engages with more "conventional" themes of pan-Asian diasporic cultural production, such as those of alienation,

patriotism, desirability, and belonging—she glances against that counterhistory, even before she makes the intentional switch to BLOG FOR BROWN GURLS.

For example, in her April 2010 diptych, *If UR Gay I Want 2 Fuck U* and *Even if UR STR8 I Still Want 2 Fuck U 2* she offers a different kind of human zoo, one that offers not enclosure but erotic interconnectivity, not hierarchical capture but something approaching an eclectic, anarchic, erotic community. In both of these watercolor drawings, Aguhar lines up a series of semi-nude bodies, each figure clad in nothing but white boxers, standing stock-straight and oriented to look one direction. Punctuating these rows is Aguhar herself, lying prone at either the bottom or sitting cross-legged at the top of the page, her figure at least double the size of any other figure. Roy Pérez, writing about these pieces, does not read this as glancing against the context of the Philippine Reservation, instead framing Aguhar's centering of whiteness and white male bodies here as a fraught, though ultimately meditative, mode of "owning, learning, and unlearning desire" (Pérez qtd. in McMaster 2020, 191). From Pérez's work, James McMaster examines Aguhar's own self-critical mediation on her attraction to white gay men in this piece, and in her BDSM-inspired rope work pieces, as a negotiation of her desires—a means of critical self-care—whereby, "these appetites [for white masculinity] do not overwhelm her" (McMaster 2020, 191).

Taking both Pérez and McMaster's analyses of the *Fuck U* diptych together, I add that Aguhar's *Fuck U* series is in equal parts informed by Aguhar's erotic subjectivity *and* her Filipina subjectivity in a racial and sexual order that devalues her, that marks her as always already sexually excess. This re-centering of erotic community is much in line with Aguhar's corpus of works, but when reading this piece as informed by her Filipina subjectivity, one cannot help but draw comparisons to some of the key events in the making of Philippine-American

subjectivity. Though perhaps not exactly intended by Aguhar herself, this piece is haunted by the legacy of Philippine-American subject-making in the Philippine Reservation. As such, Aguhar's project of recentering her own excessively erotic, abject body—and, as McMaster argues, navigating and negotiating her own desires—takes on a somewhat different tenor.

As Johnson writes, the possibility of interracial sexuality, desire, and intimacy marked the Philippine presence at the 1904 World's Fair. The unofficial theme song of the fair, "Meet Me in St. Louis," was tinged with the possibility of white women engaging in interracial desire[15], and among fair organizers, government officials, and media outlets reporting on the fair, there laid a clear tension between upholding the mythology of the necessity of the US's imperial war in the Philippines as a form of "civilizing" mission on one hand, and the moral panic of white women being "exposed" to the dark, semi-nude bodies of Igorot men on the other hand. As Johnson describes it, the bare flesh on display at the Philippine Reservation became a question of, "the properly exotic yet minimally erotic" (2020, 211). During the time at which Aguhar was writing, the gay mainstream had, in many ways, successfully campaigned themselves into the condition of sexual acceptability under racial capitalism, their eroticism all but divorced from their subjectivities, signed away in exchange for recognition by the state and prized seats as privileged demographic markets in the circulation of global capital. In clothing the figures of her

[15] As Johnson writes, the song's chorus includes the line, "We will dance the Hoochie-Koochie / I will be your toosie-wootsie…" which was a reference to, "the national sensation caused by the dancer Fahreda Mazar Spyropoulos, who, under the name Fatima, danced at the Columbian Exposition in 1893 so suggestively that she was banned from the St. Louis World's Fair. The 'hoochie coochie' was a racially tinted sexual promise….The theme song of the 1904 fair was a song about a white woman gone sporting in St. Louis: about the allure of interracial desire and the dark pleasures of the tenderloin that ight draw in a young white woman beguiled by the bright fair lights" (Johnson 2020, 213). It's notable here that Johnson reads "Meet Me in St. Louis" as a story of a white woman "beguiled" and cast down a path of sexual degeneracy by nature of her moving towards an interracial desire. Johnson's reading of the 1904 Fair's "unofficial theme song" casts white women as otherwise "sexually pure" figures in need of protection from the allure of the "sexually excess," sensuous savage. In other words, hewn through this "theme song" is the possibility of "improper" sexual reproduction; of the potential for "sexual excess" under binary regimes of sexual mythmaking.

own “human zoo” in nothing but white briefs, Aguhar utilizes imagery common in white gay erotica, but her work also glances back upon the contentious loincloths of the Igorot men enclosed in 1904’s human zoo. In navigating her own interracial desires, Aguhar—perhaps accidentally—brushes against this Fil-Am history, not so much to reclaim some form of sexually acceptable “dignity” for either her contemporary subjects or the Igorots of more than a century before, but to bring such degenerate eroticism back to the fore, and bridge these two examples of sexual excess and engage them in conversation, thus revealing the racial potentiality that the erotic holds to break and unsettle dominant structures of power. Though Aguhar does not answer the question of, *if we are not Asian, then what are we?* by any means, but she offers space for the question to be asked, and for those who come after her to answer it. Similarly, while Aguhar has organized all the bodies—save her own—into neat, orderly rows, there is no hierarchy presented in this diptych; not even Aguhar herself is framed as apotheosis, not even when she “tops,” so to speak. Even as she found herself navigating a fraught and ambivalent relationship to her own desires, Aguhar did not reproduce racial hierarchy and ordering in this piece, unintentionally or not. There is no implicit “march towards human progress” like was the explicit project of order and ordering at the heart of the 1904 World’s Fair. Nor is there the *intraracial* hierarchy of “inferiority/superiority” as is described in the fraught, ambivalent making of “Asian American” identity, as described by Rabaya. Aguhar’s indexing of erotic bodies, her own fleshy, brown body exaggerated and enlarged at the center of this gathering, offers us a sense of communalism, of *communism*. And it is this *communism beyond communism* that is amplified and echoed in Aguhar’s May 2010 drawing, *GPOYW (Meditations to the Blogosphere).*

Like *If UR Gay I want 2 Fuck U* and *Even if UR STR8 I Still Want 2 Fuck U 2,* Mark Aguhar’s *GPOYW (Mediations to the Blogosphere)* indexes bodies of different sizes and skin

tones, all wearing white briefs, and all oriented towards one central figure: Aguhar herself, once again illustrated to be exaggeratedly large, similarly nude save for the white briefs she and—another difference from the other figures in the piece—wearing a yellow bow in her hair. Unlike the two pieces in the *Fuck U* series, this one is much less orderly. Rather than perfectly-organized lines, the figures of this piece look more like partiers on a dance floor, bodies filling up the page and taking up as much space as possible. There is even less consistency in how bodies are positioned and sized here. Some subjects sit cross-legged, while others stand with their hands to the side, like in the *Fuck U* diptych; some figures are diminutively small, regardless of body type, while others sitting next to them seem the size of giants. And most interestingly, *GPOYW* also invokes a greater sense of community in the sense that figures are now facing each other, glancing across the page as if looking for someone to be with. If the *Fuck U* series was Aguhar's negotiation of her desire for white masculinity, one that inadvertently glanced upon the US-Philippine history of the human zoos and offered a potential unsettling of the project of ordering that the Philippine Reservation symbolized, *GPOYW* dismantles the walls of the human zoo and brings together all the subjects who were subject to its disciplining mythmaking projects together in one great dance hall, gathering together in a community of queer erotic potentiality, with Aguhar at its beating heart. This mode of making community, an erotic, non-hierarchical community, returns us to what Joshua Chambers-Letson describes in the epigraph to this chapter as communism-as-performance, communism-as-survival; in other words, communism beyond the Communist Party's big-C Communism. It is a communism of *being alive,* to help one another survive.

The title of this piece, *GPOYW,* is familiar Tumblr slang standing for "Gratuitous Picture of Yourself Wednesday." More often just appearing as simply GPOY*,* this was a common term

and tag used on the site initially used to index selfies of oneself, but that developed, in some places and to some users, as a phrase used ironically to indicate, "I identify with this picture." While the term could—and did—continue as a literalism, in many ways, GPOY acted as a challenge to the concept of indexing and representation under such visual signs, instead, indicating modes of *representation without visual reflection,* a mode of representation that desettles the simple binary of "descriptive/substantive" representation used to measure representation's efficacy under normative political science's disciplinary conventions. The GPOY tag, used in such a way—that is, to indicate *representative non-representation*—drips with an irony and sarcasm that echoes Aguhar's own critical flippancy, but is rendered with additional meaning when used to title this piece. The sheer amount of bodies, their combined sense of almost-nakedness, produces a sense of overwhelm, gratuitous in both content and amount. Moreover, in rendering herself both physically larger and at the center of the piece, Aguhar emphasizes her own physicality, returning to the original meaning of "GPOY" as a Tumblr-specific term for the ubiquitous selfie while simultaneously subverting the body normativity that selfie culture, in many ways, fostered. While Instagram's influencer culture would not have existed at the time that Aguhar was working on this piece—after all, Instagram itself did not launch until five months later, in October 2010—a social media culture that valued thinness, whiteness, and legibility was already well-established on the internet, especially among youth subcultures. The modern-day body positivity movement was, too, in its infancy in April 2010. For Aguhar to center herself, her embodiedness, her gratuitous flesh, was in its era a radical act of embracing a body rendered excess. But notably, such embrace of excess, gratuitous flesh, is not framed in this piece as an act of reclaiming her body into the confines of "acceptability." Rather, like in her previous illustrations, Aguhar embraces her body without

excusing it, emphasizing its sexual *and* fleshy excess. She makes no apology—but she makes no excuses, or attempts at belonging, either. She simply allows her body to be, embracing her body in a world where *being* embodied in her body, in her fleshiness, made her always already, libidinally and corporeally, excess.

Six minutes after posting her mediations to the blogosphere, Aguhar posted a simple, one-line commentary on the piece, pithy and flippant in the same kind of voice that she carried over to her *calloutqueen* blog: "the problem with a drawing based on tumblr is you're all so pale" (Aughar 2010d). As McMaster writes, later in her practice and performance on Tumblr, Aguhar would reckon with this more substantially, making a move in January 2011 to be more "intentional in who I depict and how" (Aguhar qtd. in McMaster 2020, 194); this shift, McMaster writes, "should be understood…as a counteridentificaory self-making, worldmaking, and caretaking endeavor" (2020, 194). This worldmaking and caretaking endeavor that McMaster points to is one that is particularly important in situating Aguhar's later work, her audience, and how it offered modes of queer- and trans-of-color survival strategies at the end of the world. Because while there is truth to Aguhar's 2010 critique of the Tumblr community that she portrayed *GOPOYW*, there is also an irony to this statement; namely that the community who most identified with Aguhar as a result of her *calloutqueen* blog were not those pale white Tumblr gays who populated much of this piece, but instead, those "PEOPLE OF COLOR, MY BELOVED KITH AND KIN" (Aguhar 2011c) she hailed in her most famous piece, "LITANIES TO MY HEAVENLY BROWN BODY."

Originally posted on Aguhar's *calloutqueen* Tumblr page on January 15th and January 17th, 2011, and later institutionalized in the Brooklyn Museum's June 2019 exhibit, *Nobody Promised You Tomorrow: Art 50 Years After Stonewall,* "LITANIES TO MY HEAVENLY

BROWN BODY" articulates Aguhar's radical politics of refusal, and, in its continued circulation, speaks to a queer-of-color politics of refusal and resistance that proliferated Tumblr before the 2018 adult content ban. Structurally, "LITANIES" is straightforward: a two-stanza poem, with each stanza's lines beginning with a respective repeated word, either "FUCK…" or "BLESSED…," and each stanza followed by the simple statement, "AMEN." This straightforwardness, though, does not mean that this poem nor its impact are "simple." Written in all-caps, "LITANIES" echoes a specific affect associated with the internet and is immediately understood as shorthand for this affect for those of us who grew up on the internet. An internet comment written in all-caps is, for the most part, associated with anger: an all-caps comment at the bottom of an article might signal that someone strongly disagrees with its premise. An all-caps reply to a post might indicate a conversation is getting heated or, in 2019, when "LITANIES" was on display, it might have indicated international aggression from the then-Commander-in-Chief. But even more than simple anger, an internet comment written in all-caps embodies *unruliness*, an *excess* of emotions that spills beyond the respectable grammars of standard English. All-caps may indicate an excess of anger, yes, but it may also indicate an incredible amount of excitement, of joy, of feeling. An all-caps comment responding to a video of baby ducklings may signal an excess of joy, or fondness, the internet equivalent of wanting to squeeze something small and cute in a big, tight hug. An all-caps reply to a video of a musical artist may indicate an excess of excitement. An all-caps comment on a Tumblr post about one's favorite celebrity might signal sexual attraction in excess of the "respectable" modes of expressing attraction. Regardless of the particular emotion that a comment in all-caps symbolizes, these large letters indicate affective excess, messy feelings spilling out of the formal grammars of institutionalized language, evidence of the living, fleshy, embodied person on the

other side of one's screen. It is this affective excess that fills "LITANIES" from the title, to its first line, to the final "AMEN."

Like her choice to write in all-caps on her *calloutqueen* blog, Aguhar's choice to write "LITANIES" in all-caps is one that embraces the unruliness of the internet 2.0 age, of the "callout queen," of the queers-of-color growing up gay on the internet. Whereas regimes of queer assimilation into projects of racial capitalism would appeal to an ethos of respectability, Aguhar once again rejects the respectable and embraces the unruly, both embodying and valorizing a failure to assimilate into respectability, even in her digital affect. Similarly, Aguhar's decision to write "LITANIES" in all-caps—to utilize and embody that excess affect, one whose grammars spill out and physically represent a too muchness on the page—cannot be disentangled from Aguhar's embrace of her own physical, non-internet embodiment. As a fat, queer, brown, trans femme, she embodied *excess* on multiple registers. As a racial-sexual-gendered subject outside of white hegemony and its acceptable processes of reproduction, Aguhar could not find purchase within "sexual acceptability," and, by nature of her position and her embrace of non-reproductive sexuality, very clearly embodies the myth of "sexual excess" as part of sexual mythmaking practices. Furthermore, even in her earlier works, Aguhar embraced her fatness—her "excess" of flesh in the registers of Western hegemonic standards of embodiment. Rather than discipline her *excess of excess*, Aguhar embraced it in the most "excessive" of ways. This embrace of the fat, the queer, the brown, the trans, the femme, of those constructed as "excess" in racial capitalist regimes that seek the unhindered reproduction of white hegemony, functions, itself, as a project of refusal. This refusal through celebration, far be it from existing only in the form of Aguhar's choice to use all-caps, is also embodied directly within the text of "LITANIES."

The text of "LITANIES" embodies Aguhar's queer-of-color politics of refusal, explicitly in her first stanza, and implicitly in her second stanza. Each line in the first stanza of "LITANIES" begins with "FUCK." For example, the first line of "LITANIES" reads, "FUCK YOUR WHITENESS." The confluence of Aguhar's unruly use of capslock, and a rejection of whiteness specifically and at the poem's beginning makes clear that this poem is one whose politics are in opposition to white hegemony and its reproduction. Aguhar's use of repetition in this poem, its structure as a litany for queer-of-color life, further succeeds in embodying a queer-of-color politics of unrelenting refusal—one that Tumblr, both as community and as infrastructure—allowed for. Seeing the use of repetition in Aguhar's poem is reminiscent of the repetition and circularity of social media posts. The process of "reblogging," of sharing a post, allows it to be shared, to be circulated, and to make repeat appearances. Unlike Twitter, which only allows for any one Tweet to be retweeted one time by any single account for it to "count," Tumblr has no limit on the times that any particular post could be reblogged by any particular person. This reblogging and repetition was and still continues to be used as a way to "signal boost" particular posts—someone's GoFundMe, informational posts about current events, even posts that ask to be reblogged just for the sake of being reblogged. Reblogging and repetition also functioned as a way to solidify and cosign concepts or ideas on Tumblr. In this way, Aguhar's use of repetition echoes Tumblr's own infrastructure, and becomes a part of both Aguhar's specific politics of refusal. Reading down each line of "LITANIES" is akin to scrolling down one's Tumblr dashboard, wherein the structure of the "container" is repeated, but the contents contained within said container changes. And though Aguhar's lines do, in fact, end, the, Much like Tumblr's dashboard, the structural repetition in "LITANIES" gives space for

queer-of-color celebration and rage in a world that worked to make such rage a thing of a consolidated past at best, and non-existent or to be disciplined at worst.

If the first stanza of "LITANIES" is an indictment of the structures of racial capitalism that produce people like Mark Aguhar and her kith and kin—queer, trans, brown, fat, and femme—as "excess," the second stanza of "LITANIES" enacts its refusal of sexual mythmaking's power through a radical celebration of those very people made excess. Here, Aguhar shifts, each line now starting with "BLESSED…" instead of "FUCK…," thus rhetorically turning her focus from the white, thin, unashamed subjects comfortably within "sexual acceptability" to the "sexually excess," a group of people who fundamentally resist or refuse racial capitalism's call to reproduce white hegemony. In this stanza, Aguhar centers those who are shamed and policed, all the while never making an appeal to their inherent "acceptability" or recovery into narratives of "respectability." Blessed are not the privileged, but the sex workers, the dis-identifiers, the weirdo-queers, the spectrum of possibility that cannot be subsumed into a binaristic model that privileges the "acceptable" or the "innocent."

In her 1981 speech, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," Audre Lorde articulates a politics of antiracist anger, and distinguishes this from a more structural form of anger that she describes as "hatred." Within this speech, Lorde articulates the political possibility of anger, writing, "…anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our genuine enemies" (Lorde [1981] 1984, 127). In this sense, "LITANIES" and the anger expressed within it is fundamentally a liberating and strengthening act by Lorde's measure, as it explicates, in its last stanza, its vision of a specifically queer-of-color future—a future for

the fat, brown, queer, sissies and boi dykes and gurls and goddesses, but more so, a future beyond the indexing, identarian, disciplining imaginaries of "we're just like you" homonormativity. Aguhar, in her last stanza, articulates a queer-of-color future that is radically incomprehensible—"BLESSED THE BELOVED I…*COULDN'T DESCRIBE* [emphasis mine]"—but all the same, valued and uplifted, not in spite of their incomprehensibility and unruliness, but because of it. If, at the heart of sexual mythmaking are the mechanisms through which white hegemony ensures its own reproduction for the wider purpose of ensuring capital's expansion and reproduction unto eternity, and if these processes of sexual mythmaking have shifted to allow some queer people purchase within the cloistered symbol of "sexual acceptability," for Mark Aguhar to celebrate those who are outside of "queer sexual acceptability" is to make a provocation against sexual mythmaking—and racial capitalism, at its core—in and of itself. More than simply articulating her own radical politics of queer-of-color refusal, this full-chested dedication to "…LEARN TO DESCRIBE AND RESPECT AND LOVE" the incomprehensible and the "sexually excess" itself is action against the structures of queer assimilation that have allowed for some normative, "comprehendible" queers to be subsumed into "sexual acceptability." Through its twinned projects of refusal and celebration, denouncement and dreaming, "LITANIES" embodies what Lorde articulates as an antiracist politics of anger. For Mark Aguhar to celebrate the sex workers, the non-normative, the weirdo queers, the people of color (her beloved kith and kin), without making an appeal to sexual acceptability is to produce a radical politics of queer-of-color refusal. Resistance against—and a politics of refusal of—ongoing projects of sexual mythmaking, then, do not simply reject sexual mythmaking and its power. These projects, as Aguhar's radical politics of refusal show us, also work to embrace, celebrate, and love those populations produced as unruly and "excess."

In the wake of the 2016 Pulse Nightclub shooting, a mass-murder event where 49 people of all genders—mostly Black and Latinx—lost their lives, the second half of Aguhar's "LITANIES…" was shared around Tumblr once more. The "FUCKS," it seemed, were lost in the process of curation for a community in the depths of mourning. Instead, the poem is reduced to the possibility that it holds, and the aspiration and imagining for a world after the end of the world, a place where our people of color, beloved kith and kin, are blessed—blessed enough not to be murdered for the way that the intersection of their Blackness and Latinidad and brownness and queerness and eroticism renders them sexually excess and disposable outside of the Pulse shooting, blessed enough to not be marked for harassment and violence even within such digital oases, blessed enough so that we may live on to dance another day, loving together, even in such indescribable and unindexable ways.

The Pulse nightclub shooting was, for many queer and trans people, a reminder that homophobic and transphobic violence exists. But the violence of racial capitalism broadly and sexual mythmaking's organizing ontologies specifically works to render such spectacular violence as apotheosis, rather than the quotidian violence of said structures that subjects queer- and trans-of-color people to the apocalyptic, every day. Holding this seeming contradiction—the spectacular and the quotidian—as instead, two examples by which the apocalyptic becomes the normalized state of being for those rendered "sexually excess," offers us a way to read Aguhar's "LITANIES" as survival strategy for the apocalyptic everyday. For us to return to Aguhar in our collective time of need speaks not only to her lasting impact, but to the ways that her work maintains that queer archipelagic *elsewhere*, that world in the end of the world, through space and time—and even long after she has since left us. For even in a world without her, a world that sometimes feels like itself is at its end, Mark Aguhar's work continues to challenge, mock, and

refuse the structures of order that have so-thoroughly organized and valued us. It is this flippant refusal to be ordered, this unruly rejection of hierarchies of value, and her unabashed embrace of her corporeality—including and especially as an erotic being—that made, continues to make, Mark Aguhar the *callout queen* of Tumblr's queer-of-color communities.

As mentioned above, "LITANIES" was and continues to be well-circulated on Tumblr, and in its years-long circulation, its function as a political call to arms for the unruly and unassimilable queer-of-color people on Tumblr helped to solidify the politics of refusal that flourished on the site. Beyond its power of uplift and memorialization in the wake of the mass shooting at the Pulse Nightclub in 2016, Aguhar's "LITANIES," and her presence on Tumblr in general, shaped the queer-of-color politics of Tumblr users in more quotidian—though by no means less important—ways as well. As Turner Willman, a trans-Filipinx organizer for 18 Million Rising, writes in their 2019 love letter to Mark Aguhar:

> You created a queer internet oasis for thousands by sharing your personal struggles and celebrating every person living outside normative beauty standards….You experienced verbal harassment, social exclusion, and outright rejection in queer communities that value masculinity, whiteness, and thinness. In contrast, your fat, brown, and femme body was marked by them as ugly and undesirable. But this didn't stop you from taking glamorous photos, declaring yourself "stunning," and investing in feminine clothing and makeup. You knew that embracing your beauty, and ugliness, was a radical and disruptive act. Those of us following you online learned to say FUCK OFF to homonormativity….I can't count the ways you saved me, a trans Filipino floundering in a sea of white masculinity. I continue to honor you by loving myself and living authentically, and fighting for the lives of trans women and femmes of color (2019).

Willman's use of *oasis* feels particularly fitting here, when combined with Cavalcante's language of Tumblr as a queer cultural archipelago. Whereas archipelagoes are independent chains linked by proximity, oases can act as meeting points, places where a traveler's isolation becomes that much less unbearable, even if for a while. But as such, oases are *trans*itory, equipping those travelers with just what they need to survive an inhospitable world or, perhaps even, a world that seems at the edges of survival in the first place. To describe Aguhar's work as

creating a *queer oasis,* then, speaks to the danger beyond of the oasis's tender, nourishing waters, but also the sustenance and life-giving capacity that such work, such collective care, can produce.

Moreover, it's fitting that Willman memorializes Aguhar in the form of a love letter. While on one hand, Willman's "Love Letter to Mark Aguhar" puts her in community with other, more "legitimate" political figures and elevates her work to legible political speech, the fundamentally erotic, flippant, and affective nature of Aguhar's work evades indexing into conventional forms of thinking "the political." And it's that *affective* nature of both Aguhar's own work, and the *affective* ways in which she produces those communities of queer-of-color kith and kin, that offers us an understanding of a politics outside of politics, a mode of being in relation to and surviving for one another that evades our conventional understandings of what makes the "political." As Willman's love letter shows us, Aguhar's work and affect evoked strong emotive responses from people in her life. Anonymous hate messages, a form of easy retaliation on Tumblr, were a common and familiar part of Aguhar's *calloutqueen* blog, in part, because she replied to some of them to make her art. Writing on what he termed as her "revolting self-care," James McMaster describes this scene as, "perform[ing] mastery over internet communication's aesthetics as a way to mark the internet as her territory, her safer space. It is a response that seems to suggest that Aguhar views her online assailant not only as a bad person but as a boring one as well" (McMaster 2020, 186). And, as the internet's ever-churning flow reminds us, there is no greater sin—and no more cutting of an insult—than to be *boring.*

We cannot know how many anonymous messages she deleted, or ignored, or even internalized. All we know is what she chose to post and respond to, what she had the capacity, in any particular moment of time, to turn into art. But we know that she received such messages,

and we know that this means that her work—a form of quotidian performance art, where she embodied a version of herself that, though may not necessarily exist as artifice, is, nonetheless, a form of curation and performance—provoked an affective response from those who came into contact with it. In his own analysis of Pérez's analysis of Aguhar, McMaster describes Aguhar's critical flippancy as a "relay…between 'mocking' one's oppressor and 'empowering' oneself [that] is central to the minoritarian mode of self-care I am theorizing" (McMaster 2020, 187). Aguhar's performance of critical self-care functions to empower herself, and also empowers others. As Willman's post indicates, it is this flippancy that provoked an affective response from those people who found *kin* in Aguhar's work. She was, indeed, blogging not just for herself, not just as an experiment in self-love, but blogging for *all* brown gurls, and boys, and nonbinary people who were marked as disgusting under the rubrics of hegemonic desire and excess under the mythmaking processes of racial capitalism. Embracing and embodying the unruliness and ungovernability—both in terms of refusing to make an ontological appeal to her "sexual acceptability," and in her overt performance of unruly minoritarian self-care, itself a form of unruliness and ungovernability that, once more, embodies the "sexually excess" and finds within it political possibility. The affective kin-making that Aguhar's work invoked is both embodied and problematized in the institutionalization of Aguhar's work after her passing.

In the Brooklyn Museum's accompanying text to her pieces, Mark Aguhar is framed as central, standing in for the role that the internet has played in shaping queer and trans identities and communities. As the Brooklyn Museum's stand-in for the queer internet, she represents a politics a queer-of-color politics of refusal, one that resists the normativizing projects of queer assimilation. In the context of the exhibit, Aguhar took on an exceptional role. Hers was the only artwork that spilled beyond its own exhibit, with the second stanza of "LITANIES" spilling into

an activity/reflection room settled to the side of the main exhibit, repeated dozens of times, like wallpaper, like an echo of the endless circulation of "LITANIES" on Tumblr after the Pulse Nightclub shooting. In this way, Aguhar is made to embody a role less like that of her contemporaries, and instead, embodies a role more in line with the avatar of the exhibit—of the Stonewall 50th Anniversary as a whole—Marsha P. Johnson. When entering the exhibit space, one would pass through a door with a lavender arch. On the arch, in the same red font as the reproduction of "LITANIES," was a repetition of the titular phrase of the exhibit, "NOBODY PROMISED YOU TOMORROW." Moving through the exhibit, lavender bands using the same red font would mark themes around which each set of artworks is organized. All other text in the exhibit, save for the reproduction of "LITANIES," were in the Brooklyn Museum's boilerplate black font, linking Aguhar and Johnson's statements in their centrality to the theme of the exhibit: Stonewall and post-Stonewall queer political art. *Nobody Promised You Tomorrow's* exhibit designer, Paige Hanserd, also designed the merchandise accompanying the exhibit. One piece of merchandise in particular—a white t-shirt with a red halftone image of Marsha P. Johnson on the back—links Johnson and Aguhar together beyond the confines of the exhibit, as the very same font type and color for the reproduction of "LITANIES" is used to reproduce Johnson's full "Nobody promised you tomorrow…" quotation. In this way, then, Aguhar is framed as transcending the other artists in this exhibit, herself becoming, like Johnson, a touchstone, aperture, avatar, goddess, through which post-Stonewall queer art and life can be understood. This equivalence may be coincidental, and it may very well be for reasons of memorial—after all, Aguhar is the only transfeminine artist showcased in the *Nobody Promised You Tomorrow* exhibit who is no longer living. Regardless of intent, Aguhar's spectacular role in the exhibit creates an interesting, and not unproblematic, duology: two trans women of color, one

from the Stonewall generation, one from the "after Stonewall" generation, both standing in as apertures, as goddesses, for their respective generations' articulations of resistance. But this recognition of goddess, for both Aguhar and Johnson, also came with a flattening, exploitation, and extraction. Beyond being made into commodities for which the Brooklyn Museum, long-criticized for its role in gentrifying and policing the borough in which it is housed, made incredible amounts of economic and cultural capital, the transmutation of Aguhar into an institutional darling did not come without a cost. For in the Brooklyn Museum's reproduction of "LITANIES," only the second stanza was reprinted, after all. The anger, refusal, and flippancy embodied full-throatedly in the first stanza were nowhere to be found, at least, not within the Brooklyn Museum's instititonal record of it. This curatorial choice was representative of the New York City's WorldPride 2019 event happening the same summer, a project criticized by many queer people, both in New York City and outside of it, for its corporate ties and failure to live up to Marsha P. Johnson's politics of queer liberation. Being posited as the aperture through which the queer internet could be understood, moreover, also does the role of emphasizing and obscuring through the focus on a singular point. The Brooklyn Museum's centering of solely Aguhar as the queer internet's avatar—and, for that matter, the internet writ large, not Tumblr as a specific space—only gives a partial glimpse at how Tumblr allowed for queer-of-color communities to imagine new queer-of-color worlds and new possibilities for queer and trans-of-color life. With that in mind, I will now shift to discuss another Tumblr user who articulated alternative worlds on Tumblr, Blake Brockington.

BREAK THE BINARY: Blake Brockington, Transmedicalism, and Black Trans Lines of Flight

Born and raised in North Carolina, Blake Brockington was a young Black trans man who came to global prominence in 2014 after winning the title of homecoming king at his local high school. Like Mark Aguhar, was a Tumblr darling, a minor celebrity on the sites for both his mainstream acclaim and his active Tumblr presence. Brockington was a Black trans teenager who, like Aguhar, gained a certain level of visibility within his lifetime, and, like Aguhar, like myself, like millions of other queer-of-color people on Tumblr, utilized his Tumblr blog as a space to theorize queer-of-color being. In Blake's case, his blog was a space wherein he could theorize Black trans lifeways from the "belly of the beast," from the epicenter of anti-trans legislation during a time wherein anti-trans panic was beginning to take hold on the American political consciousness. Though memorialized in a short film, in the preface to Snorton's *Black on Both Sides,* and in countless Tumblr posts, Blake Brockington's memory is not as institutionally remembered as Mark Aguhar is, not acting as the aperture through which a major museum exhibit views the queer internet. Moreover, neither Brockington nor Aguhar are remembered quite to the extent of Leelah Alcorn, a white transgender youth who also made Tumblr a refuge from her own transphobic home, and whose death, like Brandon Teena's, produced legislation and gained recognition from the state. While Brockington's title as "the first transgender prom king" may, upon first glance, embody a sort of trans exceptionalism—an exceptionalism that allows for some trans people to be subsumed into projects of "sexual acceptability" under racial capitalism—the way that Brockington theorized gender on his Tumblr blog reflects an articulation of queer-of-color refusal of "respectable" binary gender categories that, like Aguhar, shows an unruliness and an unassmilability that, under logics of sexual

mythmaking, situates Brockington as incomprehensible and "excess." Because rather than reinforce the Western system of binary genders and their meanings, Brockington worked to destabilize its power in his everyday in his celebration of "BREAK[ing] THE BINARY," to quote from one of his most popular posts. This Black trans politics of refusal that, rather than positioning gender dysphoria as the *only* possibility for Black trans life, embraced what could be—has been—called gender *euphoria.* This euphoric call to action—to BREAK THE BINARY—both performs and embodies ungovernability, a line of flight beyond the "romances of the present" that Muñoz critiques so thoroughly and towards the horizon that is queerness. And moreover, Blake, KING though he is, does not lead us towards that horizon as our one and only true leader, but instead, as someone who, even as KING, continues to perform and embody that very ungovernability that BREAK THE BINARY calls for.

Like Mark Aguhar self-naming herself *calloutqueen*, Blake Brockington took the title of hierarchical ruler and refashioned it for himself, self-naming himself as KING as both his blog title and in textual references to himself. Though his win was deemed "history-making" in national and international media, earning the title of homecoming king was not the hierarchical narrative of ascension that was parlayed by major media outlets. As Blake describes in his own words for the 2015 *BrocKINGton* documentary—its titled stylized as such to emphasize his homecoming king win—though his win offered him some sense of *stability* that he articulated as "for once, I could just be a normal teenage boy," it did not defer onto him the figurative crown of sovereign. He still experienced transphobic violence from those around him. But Blake's reclamation of *KING* as decidedly *not sovereign* is an important act of disidentification, one that exposes the racial and sexual mythologies behind the architecture of rule. José Esteban Muñoz theorizes *disidentification* as "the survival strategies the minority subject practices to negotiate a

phobic majoritarian public sphere that continually elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (Muñoz 1999, 4). Disidentification, at least in Muñoz's articulation of it, is a way of no way, a mode of navigating racism from one end, transphobia from the other end. It is neither assimilatory nor entirely utopian, at least, *in and of itself,* nor is it the "apolitical middle ground" between assimilationism and separatism (1999, 18). Instead, disidentification is a form of appropriation with a critique of power at its nexus; or, as Muñoz writes:

> The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recruits its workings to account for, include, and empower identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered *unthinkable* [emphasis mine] by the dominant culture (Muñoz 1999, 31).

Moving from Muñoz, I argue that Brockington's disidentification with heir to rightful sovereign exposes the unjust machinery of rule that is racial capitalism's sexual and racial mythologies, and, by extension, the ordering ontologies of "antagonistic differences" that racial capitalism as a system requires, itself, to rule. As a project of making rightful citizens, homecoming and prom courts are socialization into "normal life," marking those who will be inheritors to positions of domination within hierarchy. This project is marked by project of ordering and, as in the national and international news coverage surrounding Blake's homecoming win, are used to advance narratives of progress and inclusion. Blake's own description of *who* inherits the position of king—a dress rehearsal for the rightful inheritance of rule—makes this clear. As he says in the *BrocKINGton* documentary, the field in which he stood was not made for him, and was marked not only by cisnormativity, but by race: he makes note that of the homecoming king contestants, he is surrounded by young white men, the unsurprising, perhaps "rightful" heirs to full subjectivity, to rule. In his disidentification with the identity of *KING,* Blake Brockington not

only exposed the constructed—rather than natural—nature of rule, but he also exposed ways of *being king* without hierarchical rule. This is made especially visible in how Blake articulated *being king* in his everyday practice of being while on Tumblr.

Blogging as *brownboiiimagic*, Brockington, like Aguhar, simultaneously Tumblr's queer-of-color ethos while being shaped by that very same "unique sensibility." Not only did Brockington, as a Black trans activist, center Black trans lives in his activism specifically, but he also pushed against the binarisms of racial capitalism, binarisms that have allowed some trans people—Caitlyn Jenner, Buck Angel, Natalie Wynn, and countless other elite white trans people whose lives become the supposed apotheosis of trans life—to similarly become subsumed into "acceptability" under the racial capitalist order. These white trans people, Angel and Wynn especially, have earned their place as "acceptable" within the logics of sexual mythmaking because of their dedication to and participation within the rigid difference-making project of drawing and maintaining gender binarisms, a project that, almost a decade ago now, Brockington was actively working to dismantle in his activism and on his Tumblr blog.

Transmedicalism is an ideology held by some trans people that the experience of gender dysphoria and medical and surgical transition is the most "legitimate" way to be transgender. Transmedicalists situate the "legitimacy" of transgender life within the narrow confines of what has been recognized by medical and state authorities. Given this narrowness, transmedicalism, unsurprisingly, cannot and do not account for experiences beyond these hegemonic, binaristic discourses of gender. It is this alignment with ideologies of gender that are sanctioned by the state through medical "knowledge" that makes visible the role of some privileged transgender people in maintaining white hegemony and ascending to a position of conditional sexual "acceptability." In Black on Both Sides, C. Riley Snorton reads J. Marion Sims' archive to draw

out the connections between science and medicine, antiblackness, gendering, capital, and the state. Gendered medicine, including the idea of "…being made…a normal woman" (Snorton 2017, 25) cannot be separated from the conditions under which they were produced and the conditions that they were produced to maintain. In its development on the medical plantation, the "definition" of womanhood, then, was and always has been a white category because of the fundamental reduction unto flesh of captive Africans upon whose bodies gynecology, the science of "[making]…normal woman[hood]," was built. As Snorton writes:

> …[the transformation of flesh gives rise to how sex and gender have been expressed and arranged according to the logics that sustained racial slavery….As a shared node in the collateral geneaologies of blackness and transness, Sims's archive presents one side of flesh's vestibularizing paradigm, wherein Anarcha, Betsey, Lucy, and the unnamed other captives were rendered as raw materials for making the field of "women's medicine," from which they were excluded as women according to the attenuating frame of plantation medicine's sexual economies (Snorton 2017, 53).

Snorton's argument here—that the linkage between Blackness and transness, between race and gender, in medicine and scientific discourse reveals the centrality of race in constructing sex and gender in chattel slavery's afterlife—can be very-easily extended into transmedicalist discourses of "legitimate" gender.

If, as the transmedicalist argument goes, the only "real" genders are those legible within medical discourses—as Buck Angel implied in a May 6, 2019 Tweet where he stated, "…I distinguish the difference between transsexual (medical [sic] transition) and transgender umbrella (5 [sic] trillion identities most not needing medical)..." (Angel 2019) —then at its core, transmedicalism seeks recognition under regimes where "being made…a normal woman" and, by negation, being made a "normal" man, are "…expressed and arranged according to the logics that sustained racial slavery" (Snorton 2017, 53). Furthermore, the transmedicalist dedication to gender binarisms, beyond very patently functioning as a defense of projects of difference-making within and through state-medico discourses of "legitimacy," functions to re-entrench a structure

of gender that is, itself, a construct and colonizing tool of the West. Greg Thomas, for instance, in his 2007 The Sexual Demon of Colonial Power, writes, "…Oyêwùmí….argues that 'woman' is a culturally specific category of the West which finds no existence in Yorubaland, for example, before the onslaught of empire.…[but in Western queer and feminist studies] Critically, 'woman' is seen as…a universal subject constructed, outside of time and space, to be always and everywhere subordinate to her equally monolithic counterpart, 'man'" (Thomas 2007, 24). More explicitly against the transmedicalist paradigm is the simple presence of Indigenous gender systems around the world and the historic instances of gendercide that followed the colonial imposition of a Western gender binary (Miranda 2010, 258-259). In this way, by dedicating themselves to maintaining a regime of difference-making that is specifically a Western construct that has, through its imposition on Indigenous and colonized populations globally, functioned as a tool of state-making, Buck Angel and others dedicated to the transmedicalist paradigm are quite literally ensuring the reproduction of a colonial white hegemony. Their narrow view of "real" genders as only those binary genders legitimized by medico-state structures supports, in the clearest sense, the disciplining of those outside of the racial capitalist state structure's understanding of gender, allowing for the maintenance and reproduction of white hegemony through the policing of gender categories. All this to say, the transmedicalist paradigm and the transgender people who follow, maintain, or make room for it are allowed a certain degree of "acceptability" under sexual mythmaking's regimes of difference-making exactly because of their support for white hegemony's violent reproduction. All this to say, too, that Blake Brockington's embrace of gender disruption offers a glimpse at his Black trans politics of refusal, that—along with Mark Aguhar's queer-of-color politics of refusal—speak to the

impossibility of their "recovery" into the very same regimes of "acceptability" that posit the both of them as "illegitimate," "not real," or, to quote Buck Angel, "…fuck[ing] shit up."

Brockington, rather than reinforce the Western system of binary genders and their meanings, worked to destabilize its power. Instead, Blake Brockington offered a Black trans politics of refusal that, rather than positioning gender dysphoria as the only possibility for Black trans life, embraced what could be called gender euphoria. In a set of photos posted in 2014—a post that was frequently circulated in Brockington's memory after his death and remains accessible today—Brockington poses joyfully in two tulle petticoats: one, bright pink with light pink ruffles; the other, black with a pink undercoat. In the first photo of the set, Brockington poses in his pink tulle petticoat, standing a modified fourth position, left leg in front of his right, and his right arm grasping a plastic wand topped with a Venus symbol. His hair is dyed a bright red, but between the lighting and the mid-2010s filters, it nearly matches the shade of pink on his skirt. He smiles widely, echoing the "#smile blake" tag (Brockington 2015a) he frequently used to catalogue the things that brought him joy—fanart of *Steven Universe* characters, funny or memetic Vines, photos of himself with children he loved. The accompanying text to the photoset reads:

> When I was little, the only dresses and skirts that I liked were the "spinnerooni" ones because they are so much fun to play in. After trying to come into myself, I decided to try killing every piece of me that was feminine because I was introduced to this "masculinity requirement" to pass as male and to be "trans enough" in general. For the past year and a half, I've been telling a lot of my friends to BREAK THE BINARY [bold in original]…. I shouldn't stop myself from feeling cute as fuck just because other people might not feel comfortable with it. It will probably take time until I can wear this out and about, but I am proud of myself for being able to put this on and take these pictures and make this post and not care too much about it.
>
> I'm still a KING (Brockington 2014).

Brockington's commentary on these photos makes visible a politics of refusal, one that speaks both to Brockington's own radical Black trans politics and to a politics that was reflective of the

re-radicalized queer-of-color politics of Tumblr writ large. If Buck Angel argues that the "five trillion identities" outside of the gender binary are a "shitshow" needing to be "fixed" or disciplined, Brockington's response would be, "BREAK THE BINARY." It is clear from this photoset and its accompanying caption that Blake Brockington's radical Black trans politics involved seeing alternative ways forward beyond the medico-scientific discourses that adjudicated gender's validity as only through the eyes of white hegemony's reproduction. These radical Black trans politics were only in part made possible through Brockington's selfies on Tumblr. In response to one post he reblogged—a photo of a muscular, masculine Black person in a salmon-pink dress—Brockington writes "BLACK BOIZ IN PINK, UNITE" (Brockington 2015b). In the tags of this post—not showing up in the "official" response to the post, but reflecting and responding in a way that is visible on the brownboiiimagic blog, acting as a form of Tumblr marginalia—Brockington both indexes this post and responds to it, writing, "#smile Blake #it me #gimme like 5/6 years."

Reading these tags after Brockington's death is somber. They are a reminder of a young life lost, of the many-intersecting structures of violence that Brockington and other Black trans people confront. This cannot be denied. But these tags also reflect how Brockington's Black trans politics of refusal were oriented towards a Black trans horizon, a future aspiration that envisions a world where, as C. Riley Snorton puts it, "…black trans lives will have mattered to everyone" (Snorton 2017, 198). Brockington, of course, did not develop this utopic vision on his own, even in the context of this post. After all, he was responding to someone else's photo post. He was tagged by a third person—alerting him towards this photo post. Other Tumblr blogs liked and reblogged the photo post, with Brockington's added commentary. In this way, Brockington's Tumblr presence was central to understanding him, but is also central to understanding the world

that Tumblr's queer- and trans-of-color communities sought to make. To appropriate Janelle Monáe, homecomingpr royalty and activist though he may have been, Brockington was not another ruler. *All of his friends were kings*. And his friends, in this case, referred not only to the people whom he knew in his life, but it *also* refers to those people whose relationships with Blake were much more distant, but no less intimate. As one user wrote to Brockington in October 2011: "I feel like I can really relate to you sometimes, so I really appreciate your blog. It's great." Blake's reply was brief, but full of a palpable communality, what Joshua Chambers-Letson might describe as a *communism* of keeping one another alive:

> It is always comforting to know that there is someone out there, somewhere, that feels what you feel.
>
> Thank you (Brockington 2011).

In this brief exchange, Brockington, still, does not posit himself as authority; KING as he may be, he does not deign to have the singular solution to Black trans life at, within, and through the tangle of hierarchy and difference-making projects that render him always already abject, always already excess. Nor does this user posit Brockington as having the sole solution to antiblackness, or transphobia, or, from *misogynoir* and *transmisoginoir,* what we can call *transphobinoir*. Instead, they gather together, creating modes of survival, even if only for the moment, in that *being together,* across space—and, through the preservation of this comment on Brocktington's *brownboiiimagic* blog, in being together across time, too. This intimate exchange between perfect strangers is the making of a Black trans oasis, a form of mutual aid just in the sense of being there for one another, in just, as Brockington puts it, "*knowing that there is someone out there, somewhere*…" It is a mode of being together in isolation,

This said, much like with the "Black bois in pink, unite" post, even in his hopefulness, there is a sense of melancholy that comes with reading this exchange more than five years after

Blake's death; perhaps there is even more melancholy here, for the user in question who asked a question to Blake, is no longer on Tumblr, their account having been deactivated sometime in 2020. But regardless of the bittersweet and ambivalent feelings that this exchange may produce, it *matters.* In the moment, to Blake, it mattered. To the now-deactivated user, it mattered. And even now, it matters. Even if the two figures in conversation are no longer among us—Blake, having crossed the veil, and this deactivated user, having chosen to disappear—this does not mean that this brief exchange was meaningless. Though it only offered survival for a moment, it mattered in that it offered a way of survival, a way of making life, for those denied life under the mythmaking processes that render Black, and trans, and Black trans life as necessarily disposable to maintain the hierarchical ordering schemas under racial capitalism. In this exchange, Brockington and his interlocutor approache that which C. Riley Snorton posits at the end of *Black on Both Sides.* During his life, a life always already occupying a space at the end of the world, Blake Brockington glanced beyond the "romances of the present" (Muñoz [2009] 2019, 1) of racial capitalism's ordering ontologies, the mythologies that produced Black trans life as *never* mattering, to begin creating worlds where Black and trans lives, and Black trans lives, will *matter to everyone* (Snorton 2017, 198). In this exchange, and in his presence on Tumblr writ large, Blake Brockington helped make—if only partially—a fugitive lifeworld in a multitude of ways: first, in his constant process of dismantling such death-producing regimes as the colonial gender binary and the transmedicalist discourses that worked to imbricate *some* trans people into sexual acceptability under racial capitalist modes of ordering and value; and second, in his continual modes of glancing towards that future, and making the *future-present,* in, with, and for the other Black trans teenagers who would serve as his digital kith and kin. Blake Brockington points us to the elsewhere that is *somewhere,* a moving beyond what Muñoz might describe as

the "pragmatism" of transmedicalist modes of being, beyond the acquiescence to a colonialist gender binary and towards trans infinity. The *somewhere* that Brockington articulates as a world beyond the totality of dispossession functions as a line of flight, a path by which Black and trans and Black trans people can find one another, across space and across time, producing intimacies—however distant—that work towards producing that world after the end of the world that Snorton describes as somewhere where Black trans lives will have mattered for *everyone.*

Blake Brockington may not be institutionally remembered to the extent of Mark Aguhar, upheld as the representative for the "queer internet" in elite institutions that he may have dreamed of occupying before his death. And Blake isn't as institutionally remembered to the extent that Leelah Alcorn has been remembered after her own death by suicide. There is no "Blake's Law" equivalent to what would become Leelah's Law, the Cincinnati ban on so-called "conversion therapy" that was directly spurred on by her death. For an equivalent to exist would be to deny the machinery of law itself. Not only was Blake's own political activism position himself against the machinery of rule with his vocal and visible opposition to North Carolina's HB2, but his relationship to the state was fraught. Like countless other Black teens, trans teens, and Black trans teens, Blake was caught in tangles of systems of state surveillance and neglect, systems that were legislatively *designed* to marginalize subjects like Blake, rather than to empower him. Sociolegal structures intended to "protect" children failed him. Structures of the neoliberal academy failed him. And in 2016, on the one-year anniversary of Blake's passing, one of the pieces of legislation he rallied against in life, North Carolina's HB2, also known as the North Carolina "bathroom bill," was passed in a special one-day legislative session (Gordon, Price, and Peralta 2017). There is no equivalent Blake's Law to Leelah's Law, because the legal system was—and is—fundamentally antagonistic to Black, trans, and Black trans subjects like

Blake Brockington. Blake's Law would not simply require a stroke of a pen and a commitment to a new era of tolerance; Blake's Law would require a fundamental restructuring—the making of a new world.

But though he is not remembered—at least institutionally—to the extent of other trans subjects who made their home on Tumblr, Blake Brockington *is* remembered. And his living-in-memory demands of us that very call, that very yearning, to BREAK THE BINARY—not just as individuals, but in community, acting as those *someones, somewhere,* that he glanced towards in his project of building communities of the everyday on and across his Tumblr blog.

All of My Friends Are Kings: Digital Kinships/Kinships-in-Passing

With this focus on community in mind, what would it mean to think Aguhar and Brockington in kinship? What would it mean to think of these two trans-of-color Tumblr iconoclasts as not simply sharing space, not even only both standing in for a particular set of unruly queer-of-color communities, but as kin? What would it mean to resist the racial capitalist ordering principle that understands "kin" only as one's immediate biological family, a relation that, for many queer and trans people of color, is fraught? Thinking Mark Aguhar and Blake Brockington in kinship offers us a possibility to think of Aguhar and Brockington as shaping and shaped by a broader queer-of-color community, all the while taking their dual roles as iconoclasts and simply representative of thousands of other similar members within that community seriously. Thinking Mark Aguhar and Blake Brockington in kinship offers a way to think of Tumblr's queer-of-color communities in a way that does not reproduce the model of leadership and exceptionalism that Aguhar has been cast into.

Mark Aguhar and Blake Brockington were royalty less in the sense of singular leadership and more in the sense of how Janelle Monáe frames royalty and queendom, or rather, Q.U.E.E.N.dom. In an interview with FuseTV, Monáe explains the song and video as for the "ostracized and marginalized," with its acronym standing for "Queer / Untouchables / Emigrants / Excommunicated / Negroid" (Monáe qtd. in Benjamin, 2013). It necessarily orients itself as alongside those produced as "sexually excess," those "ostracized and marginalized" populations marked as disposable under racial capitalism's making of hierarchical modes of valuation. Monáe's comments about who "Q.U.E.E.N." is for, what Q.U.E.E.N.dom might mean, is a necessarily eclectic, coalitionary understanding of community, one that Muñoz might describe as "communities-in-difference." All the while, the Black queer feminine figure stands at the center of Q.U.E.E.N. as acronym, song, and music video, with Monáe drawing from Black radical histories in both lyrics and aesthetics. In her analysis of Janelle Monáe's "Q.U.E.E.N." music video, HLT Quan describes it as an Afrofuturistic mélange that "show the foolishness of those who believe that uprisings are one-time events, or that the powerful elites can contain rebels[16]" (Quan 2017, 189). Monáe's Black feminist Afrofuturism, according to Quan, is one of the "necessary antidotes to messianic billionarism and [fascistic] futurist racial fantasies" (2017, 193). In other words, Monáe's Q.U.E.E.N.dom eschews the forms of singular, hierarchical leadership and the "antagonistic binaries" of racial capitalism's ordering ontology.

[16] With Quan's provocation of the folly of "containment" that the fictional Living Museum attempts to impose upon Monáe's Cyndi and her comrades, what might it mean that Mark Aguhar was contained and eulogized in the Brooklyn Museum, frozen alongside Marsha P. Johnson as "icons" of their respective eras? After all, Johnson's crystallization into mainstream memory has not come without the production of *forgeries* in and of itself. In a symbolic representation of Johnson in mainstream memory, David France's Netflix-exclusive *The Life and Death of Marsha P. Johnson,* beyond allegedly benefiting from the stolen labor of Tourmaline and Sasha Wortzel, all but evacuates Marsha P. Johnson in her whole personhood, instead positing Marsha P. Johnson as cold case. As with the selective editing of Aguhar's "LITANIES TO MY HEAVENLY BROWN BODY," Quan's provocation requires us to—while recognizing how they have been institutionally memorialized—return to *rememory,* recognizing the ways that Johnson and Aguhar both offer fugitive modes of being, ones that *cannot be captured,* even as elite institutions—fictionalized or actualized—attempt to remain the sole arbiters of their living memories.

Q.U.E.E.N.dom, for Monáe, carries the same kind of crown as Aguhar in her taking on the mantle of *callout queen.* Aguhar is queer in both her gender and sexual identities but also *queer* in the sense of her political orientation. Cohen returns us to Aguhar's conception of a queerness outside of a sexuality-only or sexuality-and-gender-only matrix, her coalitions of care about power eventually intentionally excluding white gay men, and intentionally centering people of color, those very people rendered excess not simply or even primarily because of their sexual identities, but because of how sexual excess renders itself a project of whiteness's eternal reproduction. She is *excommunicated* and *untouchable* under regimes of sexual mythmaking, her excess—*sexual* excess, excess flesh, excess emotionality, in excess of the gender binary—all spilling beyond the bounds of a "sexually acceptable," appropriately reproductive subject; *untouchable* in her excess and the embrace of such excess, Aguhar and her work is thus excommunicated from *the political,* relegated to the "private" realm of simple cultural production, even and especially as her work challenges the production of "acceptable" reproductivity under racial capitalism's ontological imperative towards producing, reproducing, and maintaining orders of "antagonistic differences," of binary world orders. As *callout queen,* Aguhar willfully embodies an unruly subject, someone articulated in Q.U.E.E.N.dom's political alliance. And in doing so, she—like Monáe—celebrates those living at the apocalypse's edge, glancing towards the possibility of more life, even in and beyond her passing.

Both Blake Brockington and Mark Aguhar are not *solely* products of Tumblr. Like all the young queer and trans-of-color Tumblr users who mourned them, memorialized them, and were moved by them, Brockington and Aguhar were indelibly shaped by the conditions of their everyday lives: conditions that, digital kith and kin though we might have been, we may not have been privy to. But this does not mean that the digital worlds that they moved in were irrelevant to

the material conditions of their own lives, and especially the material conditions of the lives that they touched. Though they have left us, they have not *left us,* their unruly and ungovernable performances of the queerness's horizon lingering with those whose lives they touched—even long after their passing—like the glittery residue of last night's party lingering on one's skin. Which returns us to Chambers-Letson's provocation: what is left after the party is just as important as the events of the party itself. While this is clear in the case of the collapse, realignment, and restructuring of political parties, this is no less important in the case of spaces of collectivity and gathering. As Joshua Chambers-Letson writes, "…the incompletion experienced in the moment after the party's fall, though often crushing, can be an invitation to throw a new party the next night: the party's fall is not grounds for nihilism, but for action and praxis" (Chambers-Letson 2018, 8).

Key to Chambers-Letson's examination of the *afterlife of the party,* then, is the conception of "being together in difference" (2018, 9), the queer- and trans-of-color refiguration of those who we call our own. Chambers-Letson owes to Muñoz in theorizing "being together in difference," drawing from Muñoz's notion of *identities-in-difference* (1999, 6): "a failed interpellation within the dominant public sphere….predicated on their ability to disidentify with the mass public and instead, through this disidentification, contribute to the function of a counterpublic sphere" (Muñoz 1999, 7). In other words, Muñoz, and Chambers-Letson, by extension, articulate a necessary coalition—perhaps not in the same sense as formal political coalitions, even under the most loose understandings of coalitions under social movement scholarship—but coalitions of the everyday, coalitions that sustain and offer survival for those for whom "proper" interpellation into the body politic is always already impossible. By utilizing "being together in difference," Chambers-Letson returns us to the importance of family and

kinship, but in a very different way from the appeals to the "sexual acceptability" of gay and lesbian nuclear families in NOH8 campaign and other movements in the gay political mainstream. Drawing from E. Patrick Johnson, Chambers-Letson writes: "...the performance of queer and nonbiological kinship can open up 'family' for queers and trans people of color (which is a necessity when one's biological family has failed or disavowed you) [and] it can also remake the notion of kinship such that your biological mothers have a place at the table next to your queer mothers" (Chambers-Letson 2018, 83). This sense of shared kinships—ones that might be fragmentary, or vague, or *in passing*—become especially important for those of us who "grew up gay on the internet."

For those of us who "grew up gay on the internet," kinship relationships are complex, especially to those of us who turned to an anonymous, unregulated internet to create queer and trans worlds away from the "real world" conditions we may have lived within. While moral panics about "strangers on the internet" were and are the fuel for more surveillance at the state and individual level, for those who made Tumblr our digital homes, refuges, and oases, the "real world" proved just as dangerous as the dark corners of the internet. Danger was inescapable for those of us growing up gay on the internet. And so, relationships, tenuous and fragile though they may have been, were important to keeping one another alive. Some of these relationships may have formed asymmetrically, between someone with a well-known Tumblr blog and one of their followers. Take, again, the exchange between Blake and one of his followers that I mention above. Blake was not necessarily close friends with this follower, but there was clearly a relationship of intimacy there, one where Blake's follower looked to him for survival, and, in ways, Blake looked to his own followers for survival, as well. While the concept of "parasocial relationships" has entered the public lexicon as a way to discuss how celebrity fanbases interact

with their objects of worship, this is very different from the asymmetric intimacies held by queer and trans people—particularly queer and trans people of color—as ways to ensure everyday survival. These kinships—what I like to call *kinships in passing*—tended to be, and still tend to be, formulations of care and coalition that, despite their intense intimacy, may be temporary, fleeting, ephemeral, but no less necessary for survival. Kinships in passing are the intimacy of *passing by* someone in a crowd and meeting their gaze. They are the connection that fellow travelers make when *passing through* spaces. They are the moment of *passing as* one's self-chosen, self-crafted gender. They are the ability to hold such kinships after others have *passed on.* Kinships in passing are necessarily ephemeral, deeply linked to affect, but are fundamentally important in offering modes of queer and trans-of-color survival, especially in an increasingly-surveilled and indexed world. Kinships in passing are always already political—they are the origin points for political education. They are an important, understated element of strategies for survival: for creating queer- and trans-of-color digital worlds. It is here, I believe, that a more extensive return to autoethnography is helpful.

From the very beginning of my time on the site, my experience of Tumblr was one of queer oasis. I was a deeply-closeted teenager living in the semi-rural exurbs of Southern Illinois when I created my first blog, following my then-girlfriend to the site sometime in 2010 and becoming fully active starting in early 2011. Though I'd long had reservations about making Facebook, Tumblr felt safer, more akin to the semi-anonymous spaces I'd grown up on. Though it was almost five years since its founding by the time I became active, the site was one held together not by a higher authority, but by loose collectives of people going out of their way to help each other survive. The default layouts were plain and sometimes hard to parse, so people designed HTML templates and distributed them to others for free. There were few tools to make

the dashboard more accessible, so a user created a browser plugin called *Missing e*, which Tumblr staff eventually banned. It was quickly replaced by other plugins, similarly unaffiliated with Tumblr staff. Antipathy towards Tumblr staff was seemingly a constant feature of Tumblr-as-community, even before its adult content ban, which helped to produce its ethos of collective care: the staff would not do anything for us, either through sheer incompetence, malice, or a combination of the two. They could not protect us—and were notoriously slow to act in cases of harassment and abuse—but in equal amounts, they could not govern us. We would keep each other safe, creating resources for one another like blocklists and callout posts, technologies that, though easily-abused, were also important lifelines for collective survival of those most-marginalized. Like other sites of the internet 2.0 era, Tumblr offered near-unbridled freedom, presenting itself as an ungovernable, anonymous space. It was not utopian—far from it—but it offered a glimpse at another way to relate to one another, one that prioritized infinite fluidity, flexibility, exploration, play, and autonomy in collectivity. It was a community shaped by both the site's infrastructure and the benign neglect from those supposedly governing it.

What made Tumblr different from other internet 2.0 spaces, though, was how it bridged the gap between the weird, wild, eclectic spaces of the early internet with the walled garden-style of the internet we see today. As mentioned above, Tumblr-as-website was initially intended as a photo-sharing platform for young adults. It goes to reason, then, that the things those young adults were thinking about made their way onto the site. As such, Tumblr became a place where discourse on social justice became the norm; it was radically democratized. Looking back on it, much of my early political education came from Tumblr. My favorite blog in my late high school and early college years was a blog called *Fuck Yeah Subversive Kawaii*[17]*,* a one-theme blog that

[17] Some context may be necessary here. *Kawaii,* named for the Japanese word for "cute," gained a resurgence in the mid-2010s on Tumblr as an aesthetic subculture of artistic production, and ephemeral image-curation and

mined millennial nostalgia for the pastel pink, feminine icons of magical girl cartoons and reappropriated them to resist dominant structures of power. The blog, moderated by a Tumblr user who identified as a queer woman of color, lays out its manifesto as such:

> this blog is for everyone
> who is kawaii as shit
> and really fucking pissed off
>
> this blog is for the girls
> who will kick your teeth in
> with pale pink mary janes
> and wipe off your blood
> with a lacy handkerchief
>
> this blog is for everyone
> who has decided that
> sexism, racism, and queerphobia
> are not fucking kawaii
> and neither are you,
> you piece of shit

In many ways, *Fuck Yeah Subversive Kawaii's* manifesto, just like Aguhar's "LITANIES," articulates the ethos of refusal normalized on Tumblr, and it is well-representative of my time on the site. Anger, activism, and aesthetics existed in equal measure, and—like in this manifesto—there existed both a sense of aggression and community-building that made Tumblr a space that was simultaneously extremely welcoming and, in some ways, fraught and prone to in-fighting. Emotionality and affect were always in excess on Tumblr, and sometimes, like for those queer-of-color subjects interviewed by Cavalcante, it could feel overwhelming. But as I reflect on my time on Tumblr, especially with more experience navigating other social media platforms *and* institutions that were never meant for subjects like myself, I recognize that the tendency for

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(re)circulation. Subversive kawaii as a subset of the kawaii subculture developed in response to a related part of the zeitgeist, *offensive kawaii.* Offensive kawaii utilized the pastel pink, cutesy, feminine aesthetics to represent sardonic, edgy ideas and phrases without an orientation towards power. To quote the *Fuck Yeah Subversive Kawaii* FAQs: "subversive kawaii is a variation of offensive text/offensive kawaii that focuses on undermining sexist, racist, ableist, homophobic bullshit. taking a quick scroll through the blog will probably be kinda self-explanatory….it's basically a chance for us, the creators of the blog, and you, the viewers and submitters, to vent frustration against society's crap in a way that is completely fucking adorable" (Fuck Yeah Subversive Kawaii 2012?).

Tumblr-as-community to react with emotionality and affect is not a social media outlier—nor is it exactly unique to Tumblr. Emotionality and affect cannot be separated from our social media lives because emotionality and affect are *part of our lives,* online and offline. Tumblr simply offered a different conduit for it, and in particular, privileged the emotionality and affect of those multiply-marginalized. Including—and especially—during times of social uprising or times of collective grieving.

Though I was active on Tumblr when Mark Aguhar died, I was not hit by her loss. She was not in my orbit at the time, and I would not have been within hers; what I do remember is seeing her work come across my dashboard long after she had passed, with the recirculation of her work in the aftermath of the Pulse Nightclub shooting. I remember feeling hailed by her, seen by her, acknowledged and held across time and across space. Saccharine though it may sound, Mark Aguhar's poetry in 2016 changed me; "LITANIES" stayed a part of me—to the point of feeling like a pilgrim returning to a holy site when I unexpectedly saw "LITANIES" reprinted on the Brooklyn Museum's walls in 2019. I did not "know" Mark Aguhar, and she did not "know" me. But though we did not, could not have known each other in life, Tumblr's eclectic communities of queer and trans-of-color people kept her work alive, circulating and re-circulating against the never-ending churn of more posts, more reblogs, more content. It is this praxis of *keeping each other alive beyond death* that, too, is representative of how Tumblr's communities worked to dismantle the binarisms of racial capitalism's organizing ontologies. Returning to Alexander Cho's autoethnographic account of his time on Tumblr, he describes another memorial for another set of queer youth who died by suicide. In doing so, he theorizes a concept he describes as *reverb,* "[a] refrain that has the additional quality of amplification or diminishment (intensity) through echo or refrain….a post lingers until it hits a popular Tumblr,

then takes off, dies down again, and takes off again, almost like a breathing thing" (Cho 2015, 53). Beyond naming how Tumblr's post/reblog structure allows for users to buck the conventional script of linear virality, Cho's naming of Tumblr's *reverb* as a "breathing thing" names the ways in which Tumblr's queer and trans-of-color communities provided a form of life to the no-longer-living through this reverb, through this giving of breath. Through time, through space, through the veil—Mark Aguhar continued living on, not so much *haunting* Tumblr as she was—*is*—residing, her unruly existence a still-living challenge to the "antagonistic differences" of racial capitalism's ordering ontologies.

I did not experience the collective mourning of Mark Aguhar's death, at least, not directly. But I did experience the collective mourning and immense feelings of grief after Blake Brockington's death in 2015. This was less than a year after Ferguson Summer, and less than four months after the grand jury verdict absolved Darren Wilson from his actions. It was less than three months after the very public death, mourning, and community memorialization of Leelah Alcorn. And it was within period of mass trans death by suicide—one wherein, in North Carolina, Blake was only one of three trans teens to die by suicide in three weeks (Romano 2015)—that Tumblr collectively came to mourn Blake. Like with Mark, I did not know Blake directly, and he did not know me directly. But I do remember his presence, his story—and perhaps some of his posts—finding themselves on my dashboard during his life, maybe reblogged from some of the Filipinx and Vietnamese American trans Tumblr bloggers I was in community with. Very viscerally, I remember posts memorializing Blake occupying my timeline, including the GoFundMe campaign initiated to ensure his legal will would be respected. In the fullness of its context—not *just* the collective mourning, but the wave of trans deaths, the continued visibility of the Black Lives Matter movement, a general recognition by

young people on the site that politically and socially, things were *bad*—Blake's death felt like the world at its end. It felt like a form of rupture, like the totalizing power of antiblackness, racism, transphobia, and institutional callousness had, for a moment—for all of us—become far too heavy to bear. Blake Brockington's death and Tumblr's collective mourning for him would stay with me, longer than any petty interpersonal internet drama that I had personally experienced on the site. After all, I don't remember the names or the circumstances of the inevitable conflicts that I ran into on the site. But I do remember mourning Blake.

Seeing Blake's picture in my brand-new copy of *Black on Both Sides* in 2017, then, sparked recognition immediately. I do not remember how I felt when I first read Snorton's introduction, nor what I thought, exactly. But I remember experiencing that bittersweet feeling of recognition—a feeling of brightness at recognizing a familiar face, overlaid against the deep well of sadness knowing that person is no longer walking among us. But again, like with Mark Aguhar, the unique ethos developed on Tumblr allowed Blake something akin to what C. Riley Snorton describes as "still life," and perhaps approaching what Joshua Chambers-Letson theorizes as "More Life." Writing on CeCe McDonald, a Black trans woman "imprisoned for *surviving"* a physical assault (Solomon qtd in Snorton 2017, 196), Snorton theorizes still life as:

> …the interface of survival as that form of life that exceeds life's meanings and posthumous life wherein black and trans life continues to accrue meaning after the event of death, gives expression to black and trans ghosts that persist and linger, as if they are not from the past but from the not-so-distant future (Snorton 2017, 197).

In Snorton's theorization of it, still life moves us, once more, to BREAK THE BINARY, as Blake demanded of us. It acknowledges the condition of "social death" rendered unto Black and trans and Black trans subjects while also acknowledging that even within the condition of social death, there is "a condition of possibility" (2017, 185); or, to pull from Snorton's quotation of McDonald: "going beyond our natural selves" (McDonald qtd in Snorton 2017, 197). This *going*

beyond the natural/naturalized conditions of the world recognizes that even within the condition of social death, there is life. *That Blake's life mattered.* To quote the final line of *Black on Both Sides:* "Even so and as yet, there is still life" (Snorton 2007, 198). Where Joshua Chambers-Letson takes us with More Life is moving beyond still life, of making More from life. In his interview with *Scapi Magazine*, Chambers-Letson describes More Life as performance's transformation of still life into More, stating:

> In performance, still life (still being alive) becomes the grounds on which one improvises More Life into reality. The tradition of the oppressed, though marked by defeat and great sadness, is also the tradition of transforming still life into More Life. I don't know if that's hopeful: it's just a fact. Despite the ravages of colonialism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy and capitalism, the persistence and extraordinary beauty of minoritarian life is a testament to this fact. And while we must demand more than just "still life," hope and performance can be powerful tools in the struggle to realize such demands. (Chambers-Letson in Fields, 2018).

More Life, in other words, is not only a form of memorialization resulting in the production of *life beyond life,* life beyond the veil, but it also orients itself towards futurity in memorialization, making *more* for those kin no-longer-among us, those yet to be born, and those intimately alongside us. It is a means by which to glance towards Muñoz's *queerness-as-utopia* even in mourning. And as such, it allows for those whose lives are marked for extraction and disposability, more—more than what racial capitalism renders the limits of life.

Blake, his life rendered "bare life" at the interstices of Blackness and transness and *Black transness,* was able to utilize Tumblr's digital infrastructure to glance, however ambivalently, towards More Life. If the act of portraying oneself on social media is simultaneously a form of curated performance *and* a means by which unparalleled intimacy and honesty is possible, Blake's final performances beyond his death—taking shape in the form of posts from his queue continuing to post onto his Tumblr almost nine months after his passing—deny the ways in which his life, including the end of his life, get rendered bare. In his final performance posting

from beyond the veil, Blake Brockington literally grasps at More Life, denying the ontological fixedness that death—including social death—renders unto Black and trans and Black trans people especially. But the project of glancing, yearning, and moving towards More Life was not the project of Blake alone. The communities that he took as his digital home also worked to collectively produce More Life for Blake, even long after his passing. Like with Mark Aguhar, he is not only remembered, but his work and memorials to him continue to circulate, kept afloat among the endless churn of new posts. As of November 2021, searching "Blake Brockington" on Tumblr yields memorial posts, many of which make promises to Blake to never forget him; many of these posts reflect a yearning to remember him, much in the same way that Blake asked of us on his blog, "Remember me for me or not at all." And in doing so, we—in our collective performances of remembrance—approach, though perhaps not arrive at, what creating More Life might look like for Black, trans, and Black trans people like Blake. Together, we offer space and community and kinship, acting as the beacons of the *someones, somewhere* for him—for Mark, for all those across the veil and all those not-yet-here—to return to.

Conclusion

During a time period that saw mostly-white middle-class gay and lesbian people fully accommodating sexual mythmaking's binary terms of order to produce and reproduce a class of "sexually acceptable" queer subjects, alternatives to these hegemonizing discourses were being produced online, led by those queer and trans-of-color subjects who could not fit within a project of sexual and reproductive acceptability. Tumblr's digital infrastructure allowed fluidity, flexibility, and anonymity, and combined with the communities who made it their digital home at the beginning of its popularity, produced a community that centered affects and erotics in ways that refused the conventional distinction between "the political," "the social," and "the sexual."

This ethos was not shaped as a result of the website's digital scaffolding alone, and instead, was simultaneously shaped by *and worked to shape* those queer and trans-of-color communities who found oasis and refuge in it during a time of increased surveillance, indexing, and monopolization of digital space with the rise of corporate "public squares" like Facebook and Twitter. Mark Aguhar and Blake Brockington, as just two key figures active on Tumblr in the marriage equality era, developed politics on the site that, even today, almost ten years after their passing, push us beyond the "romances of the present" and demand of us flight towards the horizon that is queerness, towards new worlds.

It is not lost on me that three central queer-of-color figures in this work—Mark Aguhar, Marsha P. Johnson, and Blake Brockington—are no longer alive. It is important to respect this, especially in the case of Mark Aguhar and Blake Brockington, two young trans people who died by suicide. In an Instagram post from August 15, 2020, South Asian nonbinary writer, performer, and activist Alok Vaid-Menon writes about suicide and being trans on the internet, writing:

> "41%" is a comment I often receive. This is in reference to how 41% of trans people have attempted suicide. They do this to say that we die because we have a disorder (not because we are demonized). What had to be severed to produce this self? I mourn for us and them. I refuse that distinction (Vaid-Menon 2020).

Let it be clear: I do not wish to romanticize queer and trans death, especially queer and trans suicide. I do not wish to minimize the deaths of our queer-of-color kith and kin, nor do I wish to make martyrs, or view queer and trans deaths through pink, white, and blue-tinted glasses. But I want to take Vaid-Menon's provocation seriously: to refuse the distinction—the binary opposition—between the "us" of the living, and the "them" of the dead, between the "here" and the "gone," between the "future" and "the ended." And I want to take seriously what Roy Pérez writes about Mark Aguhar's suicide:

> I do not want to aestheticize Aguhar's death—it was not a performance or performative….[but] She did tell us that suicide, for her, exists on a continuum of brown

> and queer material life and that it can be felt and thought about as a rich source of agency, despite the negation to which it seems to surrender (Pérez 2017, 289)

I do not want to minimize or reduce the complexities of these deaths. But at the same time—like the queer-of-color politics of refusal embodied by Aguhar, and Brockington, and the thousands of queer-of-color people on Tumblr who they shaped, were shaped by, and stand in for—I want to reject the binarizing logics of sexual mythmaking. I want to refuse racial capitalism's difference-making epistemology.

Sleep, in accordance with mythologies of Ancient Greece and all its more contemporary iterations, is the twin sibling of Death and the parent of Dreams. This linkage is not limited to the Ancient Greeks: in some Yoruba cosmologies, Sleep is the younger brother of Death (Olomola 1988, 110); more closely-linked still, in some Philippine folk beliefs[18], sleep is understood as the avenue by which the dead may still reach us. All this goes to show, in and beyond the origins of "the world" as understood by the West, there lies a kinship between Death and Dreaming. And so, it is this throughline, this kinship, that informs where we must move from. Recognizing death and dreams as kin, recognizing dreaming as a mode to connect us back to our loved ones among the no-longer-living, dreaming becomes a methodology of the everyday linking us to our dead, moving us beyond mourning and towards queerness's horizon. If, as José Esteban Muñoz reminds us, "Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present….the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on the potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (Muñoz [2009] 2019,, 1), then equally so is a rejection of the "dead and gone." In this way, refusing a distinction between our living and dead kith and kin allows us a way to move beyond the racial capitalist binaries that posit the queer and trans-

[18] My mother, for example, born and raised in the Pampanga region of the Philippines, often describes dreams of our loved ones—particularly those who are no-longer-living—functioning as a means by which they may return to us in dreams. One way that she described this is relevant in theorizing and thinking our queer- and trans-of-color no-longer-living: "[love]…beyond eternity."

of-color dead as "excess" even in death, in their very literal non-reproductiveness. Or, as Muñoz puts it when describing Fred Herko's final dance as a piece of death art, "…Death is often viewed in Western thought as quintessentially antiutopian because it absolutely defines the end of potentiality. But to make 'death art'…is to move beyond death as finitude…" (Muñoz [2009] 2019, 149). In this way, through their radical politics of refusal, Mark Aguhar, Blake Brockington, and Marsha P. Johnson move beyond finitude in the making of queerness-as-horizon. Rather than thinking of them, in their non-livingness, as stagnant as symbols from a bygone era—from worlds long-gone—we can think of Aguhar, Brockington, and Johnson as continuing to resist "…that dominant and overarching temporal and spatial organization of the world….straight time" (Muñoz [2009] 2019,, 154). Instead, we can work through their continued beingness, through their continued circulation and memory, as embodying queerness-as-ideality. While recognizing the material conditions, sorrow, alienation, violence, and agency in queer and trans deaths, we can also think of our now-ancestral queer and trans-of-color kith and kin, in their imaginings of worlds beyond, outside of, and in unruly opposition to sexual mythmaking, as guiding us not only to a political *elsewhere* and to our everyday survival, but to that ever-expansive horizon that Muñoz—himself, among the queer-of-color no-longer-living—describes as queerness's horizon.

In this way, we can think of these queer-of-color figures as leading us, their beloved kith and kin, to the future, to a queer place beyond racial capitalism that we, to quote Mark Aguhar, "…DIDN'T DESCRIBE…COULDN'T DESCRIBE…[but] WILL LEARN TO DESCRIBE AND RESPECT AND LOVE."

Amen.

CHAPTER FOUR: FOR THE SAKE OF (WHITE) CHILDREN: TUMBLR, FOSTA-SESTA, AND THE NINE LIVES OF THE SOCIAL PURITY MOVEMENT

> "…Congress must decide whether Congress wants to shield corporations, profit-makers, exploiters—I would say—murders of young children online, selling them for sex trafficking. So if you vote against [FOSTA], you are shielding them. If you vote for it, you are protecting our children."
> —Congresswoman Carolyn B. Maloney (2018)

> "Individuals within our [sex worker] community of trans experience are now more at risk with less options for services and resources, as well as being at risk of higher policing. In a report from Trans LifeLine, a peer-led suicide hotline, after the closure of Backpage and the passage of FOSTA, there was a 100% increase in calls to the hotline looking for support."
> —Survivors Against SESTA, "Open Letter to the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (J/TIP)" (2019).

Introduction, Or the Queer Archipelago's End: Tumblr's "Adult Content" Ban

As described in the previous chapter, Tumblr-as-community was a fundamentally important space for those multiply-marginalized queer- and trans-of-color youth whose understandings of their racial, sexual, and gender identities reckoned with and moved beyond the conventional, easy consumer identities of the gay political mainstream at the time. Mark Aguhar's art, in particular, shows her deep engagement and entanglement within queer erotic communities on Tumblr. Her work, blog, and Tumblr presence cannot be separated from her engagement with the erotic, from her casual posts about her porn consumption habits, to her illustrations of erotic community. This is, in a way, representative of the larger Tumblr community's relationship with porn and sex workers—one that existed from its very first years.

In March 2017, just one year before Tumblr's adult content ban, the first line on the Tumblr Help Center page on adult content read, quite plainly: "NSFW content is allowed on

Tumblr. You're welcome to post NSFW stuff, and other people are welcome to filter out NSFW stuff. It's a live-and-let-live kind of thing (Tumblr Staff 2017)." This "live-and-let-live" attitude belies the fact that Tumblr staff was not simply tolerant of porn; instead, as Lux Alptraum writes in her 2018 article for *The Verge,* Tumblr staff viewed porn as essential to the website. David Karp's interview with *The Colbert Report* described in the previous chapter glances upon this openness to porn, but this pro-porn view was not limited to Tumblr's millennial founder alone. An open, accepting, and welcoming view of erotic content was widespread enough Tumblr staff to highlight the importance of erotic content[19]. As Alptraum writes:

> By January 2010, the Tumblr smut community was established enough to get official endorsement; that month, the site's staff unveiled an officially sanctioned directory of erotic Tumblrs, which was listed alongside similar directories of Tumblrs devoted to art, fashion, photography, and food (2018).

Tumblr staff's welcoming view of erotic content was, in a way, an extension of David Karp's dedication to an open-endedness and creativity for his site. But we must be careful not to attribute Tumblr's robust erotic and sexual communities to directive of its founder alone—while this lenient perspective and design decisions contributed to Tumblr's ethos, as mentioned in the last chapter, it was *produced* through the users who produced and maintained such an ethos. Tumblr's users were the ones who collapsed the context of the erotic, the political, the social, the fandom, and the personal—and in doing so, they created a vital, alternative understanding of what it means to move through the world. This ethos was not universal, and it would not go unchallenged on the site. In addition to a wellspring of erotic content and communities on the site, critiques of pornography and sexual content were also common. Tumblr's archipelagic nature, however, made it so that these two things—even if in contestation—were not the *sole*

[19] A previous version of Tumblr's content policy, amended sometime in 2014, even had an "Adult Content" section that read, "Is adult-oriented content allowed on Tumblr? Sure. We have no problem with that kind of stuff. Go nuts. Show nuts. Whatever" (Tumblr Staff 2014).

way of understanding erotic products and sexuality in public view. Nor were they entire cleaved from one another. Critiques of *some* sexual content might have even been held alongside other forms of erotica on a single person's account, for example, because of the infrastructural elements of the site. Tumblr was a space where the erotic—contested though it might have been—took on a different role in everyday sociality, in general, and forms of "deviant" sexuality and sexual subjects were able to produce community with one another, in no small part because of the welcoming approach that Tumblr staff took to erotic content, at least in Tumblr's early days.

Though Tumblr would change ownership twice since David Karp publicly declared his public support of Tumblr's bad reputation as a site overrun with porn in his 2013 *Colbert Report* interview, five years later, in late 2018, Tumblr's many eclectic, archipelagic communities would find themselves subject to formal economic sanction. On November 16, 2018, Tumblr was suddenly banned from the Apple app store (also known as the iOS store, the Apple iOS store, or simply the Apple store), the sole market for mobile apps on iPhone devices. Rumors swirled among Tumblr users for the reason for Tumblr's sudden ban, until three days later, on November 19, when Tumblr staff posted an update explaining the Tumblr app's sudden ban from the app store. The announcement read, in part:

> We're committed to helping build a safe online environment for all users, and we have a zero tolerance policy when it comes to media featuring child sexual exploitation and abuse…Every image uploaded to Tumblr is scanned against an industry database of known child sexual abuse material, and images that are detected never reach the platform. A routine audit discovered content on our platform that had not yet been included in the industry database. We immediately removed this content….We're continuously assessing further steps we can take to improve and there is no higher priority for our team (2018).

This vague explanation offers an answer for Tumblr's ban from the Apple app store: original child sexual abuse content originating on Tumblr. Though this child sexual abuse content was immediately removed from the site, according to a Tumblr announcement about the incident, the

Tumblr app did not immediately return to the Apple app store after the offending material was removed. Instead, on Monday, December 3, 2018, Tumblr would first announce a soon-to-be implemented policy change in response to the debacle, one that would result in a total ban on adult content.

In a post titled, "A better, more positive Tumblr," the Jeff D'Onofrio, CEO of Tumblr, outlined changes that would be coming to Tumblr, including a complete ban on "adult content, including explicit sexual content and some nudity" (2018). Though this adult content ban was not *explicitly* linked to Tumblr's removal from the Apple app store, the timing of the post, alongside D'Onoforio's emphasis that "…posting anything that is harmful to minors, including child pornography, is abhorrent and has no place in our community. We've always had and always will have a zero tolerance policy for this type of content" made the implications clear.

The full text of the adult content ban, posted separately from D'Onofrio's post introducing the policy changes, details what "adult content" meant for the site as they attempted to "grow and evolve….to create a place where more people feel comfortable expressing themselves" (D'Onoforio 2018). Under Tumblr's new adult content policy, "[content] that show real-life human genitals or female-presenting nipples, and any content…that depicts sex acts" (2018) would be banned, while images of "female-presenting nipples" would still allowed in only certain, desexualized contexts: "…in connection with breastfeeding, birth of after-birth moments, and health-related situations," as well as, "…nudity related to political or newsworthy speech, and nudity found in art, such as sculptures and illustrations." The latter category of situations, "political or newsworthy speech, and nudity found in art" is notably vague, and it has not been expanded upon in the adult content guidelines. Though, in theory, this would lead to some content that is "not safe for work" but non-pornographic to stay on Tumblr, in practice,

since the implementation of the 2018 adult content ban, many posts that are not pornography have been flagged for takedown by Tumblr's surveillance algorithm[20].

Nine days after Tumblr announced its ban on "adult content," and five days before the ban went into effect, Tumblr would finally return to the Apple app store. The site itself was available once more for download, and for a brief period of time, it would continue to exist as it was during its height. But the damage had already been done. Tumblr's sudden pivot to ban "adult content" was not well-received by its userbase. Massive waves of flight racked the site between December 3 and December 17 in an event described by some users as the "Tumblrpocalypse" (Sands 2018). Some users shared alternate social media handles individually (on their own blogs), or collectively in shared Google documents that came to be known as "lifeboats," others participated in a mass log-off (Radulovic 2018), and others dismissed the change in policy, like one Tumblr user writing:

> u can tell who the ancients of tumblr are bc they're the ones not posting anything abt where to find them if this site collapses…we know this site isnt going anywhere….the apocalypse couldnt stop this garbage…..it has the cybernetic code of a cockroach (thirteenyasmin 2018).

This post was accompanied by a response by another user, writing "those of us who've been on tumblr 5+ years:" and posting an edited series of screenshots from the *Buzzfeed Unsolved* web series that say, "You want me off this website / you're gonna have to kill me" (bluehairedspidey 2018). As of April 2021, this post has over 333,000 notes.

[20] The rollout of Tumblr's enforcement algorithm was remarkably chaotic. Users reported that scientific and refence illustrations of "female-presenting nipples" were flagged and prevented from being posted, but these were not among the only image-based examples of the algorithm's failures. Photos of food, illustrations, and tongue-in-cheek memes were among those posts flagged. One particularly humorous were press photos of actor Sebastian Stan—fully clothed, though not wearing socks. These otherwise-tame photos getting flagged spawned comparisons to pop culture cliches of Victorian-era men swooning at the sight of women's ankles and the cheeky in-joke tag, "male presenting ankles" (whostheblondgirl 2018; see also Hern 2018). This botched ban was not limited to images, either. Even though Tumblr's did not include textual references to sex in its policy change, users reported that posts referencing sexuality were flagged as "inappropriate" (Krishna 2018).

While Tumblr's adult content ban would gain some mainstream media attention, particularly from online publications writing about social media, the texture of this coverage tended to be mixed. While many examples of coverage would take on a somewhat content-neutral tone, some coverage would reify the modes of order under sexual mythmaking that would render Tumblr's culture of open and deviant sexuality as "sexually excess" and not only laughable, but frivolous and a necessary part of maintaining proper order. A 2018 video from the comedy company CollegeHumor, "Tumblr CEO: No More Porn," is a key example of certain outsider reactions to Tumblr's sudden ban on "adult content," and, in a way, to Tumblr's queer archipelagic ideas about pornography and the erotic at large.

In the "Tumblr CEO: No More Porn" parody video, Brennan Lee Mulligan takes on the role of Harry Pancake, a fictional Tumblr CEO, as he makes a PSA-style video about the adult content ban. The fifth installation of a series of videos starring Mulligan as the clueless CEOs of scandal and controversy-embattled companies, "Tumblr CEO: No More Porn" was very popular in the aftermath of Tumblr's adult content ban, amassing over 5.2 million views on YouTube[21] as of April 2022. In terms of its framing of the erotic content on Tumblr, this CollegeHumor sketch offers both comedic and intellectual continuity with David Karp's *Colbert Report* interview just five years prior. The sketch begins with Mulligan's CEO character presumably ignorant of the content on Tumblr, instead assuming that it's a site for "family values." Off-screen, two unnamed characters—presumably assistants or part of the production team of this fictional PSA—inform him of different forms of sexual content on Tumblr, shattering the CEO's "innocence." With each beat of the scene, Mulligan's CEO character learns of more types of

[21] This view count makes "Tumblr CEO: No More Porn" the third-most viewed video of CollegeHumor's *A Message from the CEO* series, behind "Tide CEO: You Gotta Stop Eating Tide Pods" at 8.3 million views, and "JUUL CEO: No More Advertising to Kids" at just over six million views, respectively.

erotic content, each new addition played up for its absurdity or obscenity. For example, when describing the furry community, while the "joke" might partially be on the naïveté of Mulligan's character, what makes the joke truly land is the "horror" of the kind of porn that he is describing. Later, in describing fanfiction, one of the key elements that drew young people to Tumblr, Mulligan's character recites from a *Harry Potter* fanfiction (one that does not exist, written for the purpose of the CollegeHumor video), before his face falls, horrified at the possibility at people taking a pop media franchise and making pornographic stories about it. The humor here doesn't come *just* from the fact that this fictional Tumblr CEO is so naïve—the humor *also* comes from the fact that he's so naïve of the pornography that is framed by the video to be *clearly horrifying.* And while the CollegeHumor video *does* upon the ways in which the "political" and the "sexual" became collapsed on Tumblr, this, too, poses that collapse not as generative, but as humorous and horrifying. In begging for content that is *not* the erotic, Mulligan's character points to "socialist Tumblr" for an example of "not porn" content—only to become horrified upon seeing an image macro of Karl Marx getting a lap dance from a thin white person, accompanied by the text, "Comrades Never Leave / An Ass Uneaten." As a direct reference to some memes and jokes from queer socialist Tumblr users, the humor in this scene once more derives not from celebrating and empowering this mode of adding the "apolitical" back to high politics. Instead, the humor comes from the existence of the erotic's presence in high politics, reifying the sharp binaries between the "political" and the "sexual," the "public" and the "private," the "acceptable" and the "excess."

This framing of Tumblr's erotic content, like Colbert's question to Karp about the "elephant on its back" asked five years earlier, simultaneously renders the erotic content on Tumblr as external to the communities formed within the website while also emphasizing the

horror of open *deviant* sexuality. Rather than call truth to power the forces that led to the adult content ban in the first place, this framing further renders Tumblr's queer cultural archipelago, and the people within those communities, as sexually "excess," and as such, in need of discipline. Rather than embrace the tangle of the "social" and the "sexual" that flourished on Tumblr, the logics of this video—and the forgeries of sexual mythmaking that it promotes—makes open deviant sexuality's community-making properties a ridiculous *impossibility*. In other words, though this CollegeHumor video pokes fun at the CEO's ignorance, the logics at the root are laughing *at* Tumblr's queer archipelago—not with it.

As a comedic project, CollegeHumor's Tumblr video is successful in following the formula of previous successful videos poking fun at the misfortunes of corporate powers. As indicated by its high view count, this video was a success, even more so than other videos in the series. But in its attempts to skewer Tumblr's 2018 adult content ban, this CollegeHumor video skewers the communities at the heart of Tumblr, as well, thus refining sexual mythmaking by reinforcing that alternative and deviant sexualities are not only "sexually excess," but do not deserve to be taken seriously *as* projects of community-building and political organizing. As such, the project of refining sexual excess that this CollegeHumor sketch engages in has material consequences. The very same logic of sex, sexuality, and eroticism as antithetical to the production of community—and, in fact, the idea that the sharing of sex, sexuality, and eroticism is a danger to "safe" or "positive" communities—are the exact logics that justify banning *all* erotic content to produce "a safer, more positive" Tumblr. This kind of logic ignores the ways that Tumblr was an opportunity for multiply-marginalized peoples to produce "safer, more positive" communities during a time where sexuality, race, and all but the most "respectable" elements of the queer community were absent from the gay political mainstream. In moving to

ban the erotic, Tumblr-as-corporate entity, Apple, and the whole legislative apparatus that led to the ban have worked to weaken the robust communities of resistance against sexual mythmaking and racial capitalism that flourished on Tumblr during its height, thus enforcing difference-making processes and reflecting the ever-shifting dialectics of racial capitalism and resistance, processes that become ever-more-precarious in the era of advanced neoliberalism. CollegeHumor—though critical of Tumblr's corporate powers—reflects this weakening, rather than rebukes. But in doing so, CollegeHumor reflects a sentiment that, outside of Tumblr, was mainstream: that the adult content ban might have been bad, but Tumblr's erotic communities were out of control, in need of culling, "excess."

Tumblr's 2018 adult content ban was not produced in a vacuum, or of a sudden realization that Tumblr's "elephant in the room…on its back," to paraphrase Stephen Colbert, was out of control and in need of stopping. Such adult content ban couldn't even be *simply* attributed to the Apple App store's increasingly-draconian policies regarding the content allowed on apps, though that was no small part of the process. Instead, Tumblr's 2018 adult content ban came out of a larger package of legislation, one whose targets may not have *explicitly* included Tumblr nor its queer- and trans-of-color communities of sexual resistance, but nonetheless caught such populations in its dragnet. The legislative changes that came as a result of the contemporaneous passage of the Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act of 2017 (otherwise known as the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act-Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act, hereafter referred to as FOSTA-SESTA), though not directly attributed to Tumblr's 2018 adult content ban, were a tremendous outside force shaping the capacity for Tumblr's erotic communities to exist in the first place. Tumblr was not alone in seeing changes as a result of FOSTA-SETA. Other sites and digital services infamous for their capacity to

facilitate erotic connections, like Craigslist's personals section, were also shut as a result of FOSTA-SESTA's passage, even without being charged with criminal conduct under FOSTA-SESTA violations. With the legislative changes produced by FOSTA-SETA came massive financial stakes to digital platforms' perceived ability to self-police.

Tumblr was only one site impacted by FOSTA-SESTA, and even then, Tumblr's purpose was very different from the other digital spaces that were most-specifically target in the law. What makes Tumblr's adult content ban particular, though, is the difference between Tumblr and other services that were caught in FOSTA-SESTA's dragnet. Unlike Backpage, the Craigslist personals section, and other services that were solely, primarily, or mostly dedicated to facilitating erotic exchanges or sharing erotic content, Tumblr was never a website dedicated *only* to sharing erotic content, though it quickly became a hub for the circulation of various kinds of erotica. In fact, Tumblr has no native payment or monetary exchange system, and did not have one in 2018, when the adult content ban came into effect. Tumblr's shift in policy was special, insofar as it was not targeting a platform whose explicit purpose was to facilitate the sex trade, and instead, represented the broadest impact of FOSTA-SESTA's shadow. The website's change in policy—from "tak[ing] a hard line on freedom of speech, creation of our users, and it's not something we want to police" to a space where images of "female-presenting nipples" were banned outside of "artistic, educational, newsworthy, and political content," vaguely defined as those categories are—thus cannot be understood outside of the lens of FOSTA-SESTA's passage, purpose, implementation, and genealogy. Moreover, in linking state regulation, the Apple app store, Tumblr's development team, and Tumblr's users, the December 2018 adult content ban, in many ways, is representative of a tangle of shared interests and modes of enforcement tying the actions of seemingly antagonistic institutions together in late

neoliberalism. It is the ultimate result of this tangle—the destruction of platforms and communities where non-reproductive, unruly modes of eroticism and order flourish—that reflect sexual mythmaking's power as a tool of order, one that is fundamentally intertwined with the making of racial regimes under racial capitalism.

What follows from here is an analysis of FOSTA-SESTA, its intended and "shadow" purposes, the histories upon which it draws, and the various responses to the legislation, more than four years on. In being attentive to FOSTA-SESTA and its purposes, impacts, and histories, the 2018 "Tumblr apocalypse" begins to make more sense. Moreover, by examining the histories and discourses that FOSTA-SESTA traffics in, Tumblr's 2018 adult content ban becomes understandable in a larger historical and political context—one where mechanisms of power, ordering, and value are inextricably linked to modes of racial and sexual mythmaking, the protection of "sexual innocents," and the disciplining and marginalization of those rendered, like Tumblr's erotic communities, always already "sexually excess."

FOSTA-SESTA

The Fight Online Sex Traffickers Act and Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act of 2017, commonly shortened to FOSTA-SESTA, is a package of legislation intended to strengthen the capacity for prosecutors to pursue websites that promote, facilitate, or act in reckless disregard to "sexual exploitation of children or sex trafficking," and to allow victims of sex trafficking to sue websites in civil court. In other words, FOSTA-SESTA is a package of legislation that, on its face, is intended as an attempt to respond to child sex trafficking through expanding punitive and police powers against websites on one hand, and allowing victims of child sex trafficking to sue website operators for civil damages on the other.

This two-pronged strategy—opening up and enumerating criminal and civil liability to website owners and moderators, and including them as criminal and civil defendants in any future potential cases of child sex trafficking occurring online—was met with widespread support among legislators. Less than a year after it was introduced in April 2017, FOSTA-SESTA passed the House and Senate with a vote of 97-2. Eight days after being presented to the President, FOSTA-SESTA was signed into law by President Donald Trump on April 11, 2018.

As its co-sponsors within Congress and its supporters outside of Congress argued, FOSTA-SESTA was intended to respond to what was believed to be the failures of Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act to allow for "justice" for victims of sex trafficking. Passed in 1996, Section 230 offered protection from civil liability for "Good Samaritan" blocking and screening of "offensive material." In other words, so long as internet service providers made "good faith" attempts to moderate content, websites themselves could not be held liable for the content that their users posted. As the text of Section 230 explicitly states:

> No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be held liable on account of-
> (A) any action voluntarily taken in good faith to restrict access to or availability of material that the provider or user considers to be obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy, excessively violent, harassing, or otherwise objectionable, whether or not such material is constitutionally protected; or
> (B) any action taken to enable or make available to information content providers or others the technical means to restrict access to material described in [subparagraph A].

As FOSTA-SESTA's proponents argued, Section 230's protections prevented police and prosecutorial authorities from holding websites accountable for facilitating acts of sex trafficking and prevented victims of sex trafficking from attaining justice[22]. The "Good Samaritan" clause,

[22] Section 230 made no changes to already-extant sex trafficking law, meaning that people engaged in forced sex trafficking could *still* be prosecuted under established criminal law. What protective changes Section 230 introduced, however, came in the form of civil liability protections for internet service providers (ISPs). Under Section 230, internet service providers are not considered publishers, nor are they considered the "speaker of any information provided by another information content provider," and as a result, "No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be held liable on account of….any action voluntarily taken in good faith to restrict access to or availability of material that the provider or user considers to be obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy, excessively violent, harassing, or otherwise objectionable, whether or not such material is constitutionally

as it was called, was seen as allowing cover for websites to allow for the trafficking of minors, because internet service providers themselves could not be sued. FOSTA-SESTA, then, was intended as a remedy for this failure by enumerating a carve-out in Section 230's liability protections[23] for "promotion of prostitution and reckless disregard for sex trafficking g."

The language used here—taken verbatim from multiple Congressional representatives during FOSTA-SESTA's floor debates—is notable in offering context for FOSTA-SESTA's intent—stated and otherwise. For what is made visible in the language here is the failure to disaggregate the sex trade (described here as "prostitution") from forced sex trafficking in the process of writing FOSTA-SESTA. This linkage between the entirety of the sex trade and the specificity of forced sex trafficking takes from in an ambivalent bit of language in the final text of the legislation:

> (a) IN GENERAL.—Whoever, using a facility or means of interstate or foreign commerce or in or affecting interstate or foreign commerce, owns, manages, or operates an interactive computer service…or conspires or attempts to do so, with the intent to *promote or facilitate the prostitution of another person* [emphasis mine] shall be fined under this title, imprisoned for not more than 10 years, or both.

On first blush, the language used here, "operat[ing] an interactive consumer service…with the intent to promote or facilitate the prostitution of another person," is simply another way of wording forced prostitution of another person. But the murkiness of what "facilitation the prostitution of another person," in the context of internet service providers, can *also* be used to further extend punitive state power over forms of consensual sex work, as well. "Facilitating the prostitution of another person" can mean turning a blind eye to the forced sex trafficking of teenage girls, but in the context of holding liable the owners and moderators of a website where

protected." In other words, those in charge of the digital infrastructures that made up the internet—be they individuals in charge of moderating posts, individual or corporate entities who own individual websites and platforms, or those corporate entities that provide internet service—would not be held liable for civil suits filed against them based on content hosted or removed from the websites which they are in charge of.

[23] To date, FOSTA-SESTA is the only substantive amendment to Section 230.

sex work happens, it can *also* mean creating the conditions wherein sex workers can advertise their services. This murkiness and collapse of forced sex trafficking and consensual participation in the sex trade works to hold all sex work as equivalent to violent, forced sex trafficking. These logics of equivalency extend into other parts of FOSTA-SESTA, as well. For example, the "aggravated violation" provision of FOSTA-SESTA requires that an internet service provider *either* "act[ed] in reckless disregard of the fact that such conduct contributed to sex trafficking" *or* "promote[d] or facilitate[d] the prostitution of 5 or more persons." This *either/or* provision of FOSTA-SESTA's aggravated violation draws lawmakers' collapse of forced sex trafficking and willing participation in the sex trade into even deeper relief. Sex *trafficking*, here, is named—and it is acknowledged as separate from prostitution. Such explicit collapse of forced trafficking and willing participation in the sex trade begs the question of FOSTA-SESTA's true intent. Even if spurred on by cases of online cases of child sexual abuse and sex trafficking, and even if justified as a project meant to stop online sex trafficking, the broad brush by which FOSTA-SESTA's sponsors, authors, and supporters paint the sex trade with reveal the "shadow purpose" of the legislation: an attempt at curtailing the sex trade—rendered criminal through the use of the language of "prostitution"—if not eliminating its online presence entirely.

As a piece of federal legislation, FOSTA-SESTA is marked by the overwhelming and bipartisan support it received from inception. Several members of Congress commented upon its bipartisan nature in a time of intense partisanship[24]. Before being voted on, Senate version of FOSTA-SESTA was cosponsored by 68 of 100 Senators, and the final Act was passed 98-2. This

[24] Notably, during the latter years of the Trump administration and in its aftermath, Section 230 became a symbol of *extreme* partisanship, rather than the bipartisanship we see in the debates around FOSTA-SESTA, as far-right politicians like Marjorie Taylor Greene made disproven claims that social media platforms were engaged in conspiracies to "shadowban" conservative perspectives on their sites. This, notably, does not touch upon the very real ways in which sex workers, erotic artists, and other people who post sexual content online, *do* find themselves the target of surveillance and banning algorithms—in part, out of online policy changes introduced in response to FOSTA-SESTA.

overwhelmingly bipartisan support led some members of Congress to conclude that FOSTA-SESTA's purpose extended beyond partisanship and into broader issues of good and evil and the protection of innocents. As Congresswoman Carolyn B. Maloney's quote in this chapter's epigraph indicates, FOSTA-SESTA was not seen as a mere piece of legislation, but as the last heroic stand against a powerful existential threat to America's children. This positioning of FOSTA-SESTA as a mortal battle for the protection of children was a strong one, and was used to justify its speedy passage through the legislative process. One line echoed during the Senate debates was that Amendments to the bill *must* be rejected. There was no time to wait. *Children were in peril.* Moreover, this powerful framing may have been an important element in facilitating an eclectic coalition of powerful groups to come together to support FOSTA-SESTA and its passage. Organizations representing police, missing children's organizations, concerned parents, and Silicon Valley companies offered their support for the bill. Combined with the bipartisan nature of this bill, the fact that these organizations representing different sectors of public and private life came together to support this bill shows the power of appeals to the protection of children, especially if it includes a response to digital technologies whose landscape and importance may not be well-understood or taken into account.

Not included in the conversations around FOSTA-SESTA, however, were those subjects who simultaneously victimized and perpetrator, those who would be most impacted by the implementation of FOSTA-SESTA. Though its Congressional co-sponsors would proudly declare the wide range of support that FOSTA-SESTA received from law enforcement agencies and big tech companies, the one group of people suspiciously absent from FOSTA-SESTA are sex workers themselves. Despite Congressional debates surrounding FOSTA-SESTA gesturing

towards the need for "harm reduction resources" such as HIV/AIDS prevention information[25], sex workers themselves were not allowed a seat at the table, and such "harm reduction resources" were framed in the sense of *only* "saving" sex workers by facilitating an "escape" from the sex trade. This erasure did not go by unnoticed by sex workers and commentators of the time. Online petitions and campaigns to stop FOSTA-SESTA often centered sex workers. One campaign, Survivors Against SESTA, organized hashtag and call-ins campaigns beginning in March 2018 in an effort to prevent FOSTA-SESTA from passing. On their website, Survivors Against SESTA describe the legislation as *increasing* the risk of violence for everyone involved in the sex trade, rather than prevent it, writing: "Shutting down websites that sex workers use to work indoors and screen clients….only drives sex workers, including those who are trafficked, to find clients on the street where they face higher rates of violence, HIV, Hepatitis C and sexually transmitted infections, and exploitation" (Survivors Against SESTA 2018).

In the time since FOSTA-SESTA's passage, conversations about its impact and efficacy have included those groups both targeted in its expansiveness and those groups inadvertently caught up in its digital dragnet. A June 2021 Government Accountability Office report on the impact of FOSTA-SESTA announced that as of March 2021, only one case, *US v. Martono*, was brought to court under the criminal provision of FOSTA-SESTA. Moreover, the GAO report even enumerates FOSTA-SETSA's legal redundancy, writing, "DOJ officials note that [one] reason why federal prosecutors have not brought more cases under the FOSTA provision is because prosecutors have had success using racketeering and money laundering charges against

[25] As Sen. Richard Blumenthal stated in the March 11, 2018 Senate debates around FOSTA-SESTA: "It would not criminalize the so-called harm reduction communication—information designed to ensure that women and men wrapped up in commercial sex trade can avoid violence, prevent HIV, and access community and support services. H.R. 1865 was not designed to target websites that spread harm reduction information, and the language of the bill makes that clear." That "harm reduction" here is reduced simply to individuals' ability to access information, presumably to leave the sex trade, rather than empowering those already in the sex trade to create safer conditions, is telling of the shadow purpose of FOSTA-SESTA.

those who control such online platforms in the past" (Government Accountability Office 2021, 30; hereafter GAO). FOSTA-SESTA's civil liability clause didn't fare much better, three years after its introduction. Only one individual attempted to use FOSTA-SESTA to seek civil damages as a victim of sex trafficking since FOSTA-SESTA passed. In March 2021, this case was dismissed (GAO 2021, 32-33). In this way, FOSTA-SESTA has not been successful in its authors' explicit goals of protecting trafficked children and women, nor has FOSTA-SESTA offered civil remedy for those survivors of forced sex trafficking online. Though FOSTA-SESTA was written in response to what was seen as a failure of justice in *Doe v. Backpage*, and its proposed aim was to prevent and punish child sex trafficking on sites like Backpage, in practice, FOSTA-SESTA's impact was ambivalent at best. On the criminal end, FOSTA-SESTA has only once been used to prosecute an internet service provider. Even when taking into account its supposed warning effect, rates of sex trafficking have not gone down (GAO 2021, 2). On the civil liability end, FOSTA-SESTA has not been successful even in the one case that it was used to provide civil remedy for a victim of sex trafficking. But what FOSTA-SESTA has been effective in is its "shadow purpose," which is to say, in its chilling effect. Emily Born describes FOSTA-SESTA's success in terms of legal obligations or reduction of sex trafficking numbers as unlikely, or perhaps "too early to tell" (Born 2019, 1652). The real success of FOSTA-SESTA, instead, is how it would force self-regulation, for "…even if FOSTA does not achieve its legal objective and has not reduced sex trafficking, it has forced websites to self-regulate and stop the behavior that the public and politicians found morally objectionable prior to FOSTA" (Born 2019, 1652). Queer, trans, and sex worker communities lost important spaces, both in terms of political and social connectivity, but also in terms of maintaining material safety. In an

article for *The Guardian* reflecting on the closure of the Craigslist personals section, Steven Thrasher writes:

> Craigslist M4M [a subsection of the Craigslist personals section] was fundamental to exploring my budding sexuality, and I hooked up with guys through it in my 20s. I don't have the kind of face or body that generated much interest on Match.com when I was in my 20s, and I still don't have the right looks to generate any interest on Grindr or Tinder.
>
> But sometimes, in the flirting exchange of emails generated by Craigslist ads, I found men to explore with – sometimes sexually, sometimes not. It's a tragedy other people won't have the freedom to explore as I did in this way (Thrasher 2018).

Thrasher's account of his own time on Craigslist personals elides the supposed clarity of difference between digital avenues for sex work, app- and website-based dating cultures, and online spaces for building non-sexual community. Craigslist personals, like Tumblr, was an opportunity for all kinds of communities and connections to bloom—including, but not limited to, communities where those involved in the sex trade were fully part of communities, rather than marked as criminal by nature and delegated to the margins.

Among those who have offered reflections on FOSTA-SESTA since its implementation, sex workers—primary among those impacted by FOSTA-SESTA, both in the letter of the law and in its impact—have been vocal about the ways that this law has impacted their lives. Though Survivors Against SESTA have "formally sunset as an organizing formation," the sex worker-organizers in charge of leading the organization continued to maintain an active Instagram presence (Survivors Against SESTA 2019) up until April 2020. This Instagram presence was not simply an aesthetic one, and instead, was a form of organizing, signal boosting, and theorizing political action in and of itself. Outside of formal organizing formations, individual sex workers also spoke up against FOSTA-SESTA and similar legislation following it. For example, Tamika Spellman, a Black trans sex worker and advocacy specialist at Honoring Individual Power and Strength (HIPS), spoke to her own experience as a sex worker and how FOSTA-SESTA

impacted her day-to-day life at length a 2019 Vox article. In particular, Spellman described the particular harm that Black and Black trans sex workers were being exposed to as a result of FOSTA-SESTA's chilling effect, writing, "Transgender sex workers—primarily black transgender sex workers—were already in the furthest parts of the margins….When there are more sex workers out on the streets [as opposed to online], the violence is going to rise" (Spellman qtd. in North 2019). This focus on the intersectional impact of FOSTA-SESTA is not uncommon in sex worker critiques of the law. Similarly, in her 2020 article, Valentina Mia, a transgender woman-of-color sex worker directly impacted by FOSTA-SESTA, writes:

> …ironically, the very society that effectively forced me into sex work is doing everything it can to ensure I never escape sex work by further oppressing me with legislation aimed at protecting women who were forced into sex work….I am a survivor, but the state wants to trap me in a cycle of poverty and oppression. Legislation like SESTA/FOSTA, which criminalizes the advertisement of sexual services online in an effort to combat human trafficking, is an attempt to further subjugate me by taking away a significant source of income for me (Mia 2020, 238-239).

Like Spellman, Mia takes a structural critique of FOSTA-SESTA, framing her critiques of FOSTA-SESTA not as a "free speech" argument, as representatives for major tech companies may have. Instead, writing two years after the bill's passage, Mia situates FOSTA-SESTA as a fundamentally insufficient response to the very problem that it seeks to supposedly solve: the precarities and potential dangers of the sex trade. If FOSTA-SESTA was meant to reduce the amount of people involved in the sex trade, solutions are not criminalizing the technologies by which those involved in the sex trade attempt to reduce their exposure to the potential dangers and precarities of the industry itself. Valentina Mia's experience as a trans-of-color sex worker shows that the conditions that shape some people's entry into the criminalized enterprise of "prostitution" are *also* the conditions that shape the forced entry of "sexual innocents" into sex trafficking. Like most industries, the sex trade is not easily reducible to a binary of purely agentic, "empowered" workers and those sexually innocent victims forced into the sex trade

through violent capture and circuits of human trafficking. Instead, the sex trade, like all labor markets, is mediated through poverty, trauma, violence, and the many-intersecting ways that, under racial capitalism, certain racialized, gendered, and queered subjects are rendered disposable, extractable, and excess.

Like Valentina Mia, the children who are "lured" into sex trafficking are enmeshed in structural conditions that expose them to greater levels of state violence: like Desiree Robinson, one of the Black children at the heart of FOSTA-SESTA debates, they might be running away from a home they judged as no longer be safe. Pursuing a state or legislative-level solution to reducing the sex trade *and* sex trafficking would not involve an expansion of punitive measures, but would instead involve an expansion of a social safety net, so that figures like Mia might be able to choose to leave the sex trade, if they so choose. This turn towards what Bassichis, Lee, and Spade describe as "transformative approaches" would prevent the conditions by which subjects find themselves "trapped" in the sex trade as a whole. Instead, FOSTA-SESTA, rather than offering a systemic response that empowers all but a few of the "sexually innocent" victims of the sex trade, instead, makes it so that those involved in the sex trade as a whole are less safe. This reveals the simultaneous limitations of FOSTA-SESTA in terms of achieving its stated goal—and the disastrous though unsurprising impact of its "shadow goal," the further marginalization of sex workers—poor, queer, trans, and people-of-color sex workers, particularly—a community of people who utilized digital media technologies to grasp towards a greater degree of safety.

Moreover, as Valentina Mia gestures towards in her critique of FOSTA-SESTA, it is fundamentally important to situate FOSTA-SESTA beyond its narrow context as a response to 1996's Section 230 amendment. Instead, we must examine and situate FOSTA-SESTA as part of

a longer legal and historical genealogy—one that takes into consideration the role that sex and reproduction play in racial capitalism's projects of ordering and disciplining. Analyzing FOSTA-SESTA and its legal, intellectual, and historical precedents opens up an understanding of the law beyond the narrow confines of the "internet age" and allows for an understanding of the ways in which the logics applied to modern technologies are actually quite old, and deeply-rooted in histories—ones that are structured by racial capitalism, sexual myth making, and the binary antagonisms of "sexually acceptable/innocent" and "sexually excess" as a means by which to order society to maintain racial and class hierarchies *through* a control of sex, reproduction, and the capacity for the state to control, discipline, or encourage both.

Situating FOSTA-SESTA

In both the legislative debates surrounding its passage and in the legal analysis of it, FOSTA-SESTA is situated as a modern solution to a specifically modern problem. The "origins" of FOSTA-SESTA, as most legal scholarship usually puts it, are either in 1996—with the passage of Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act—or in 2016, with the First Circuit's decision to deny *certiorari* to the appellants in *Jane Doe v. Backpage*[26]. In both these conventionally-held origin points, FOSTA-SESTA is situated within the context of the internet's

[26] In *Doe v. Backpage,* three anonymous Jane Does sued the website, Backpage—a website often used by people in the sex industry to facilitate meetings with clients—for damages related to their experience being trafficked on the site. That the Jane Does were trafficked is not debated; there is no doubt that they experienced sex trafficking. The First Circuit's decision to deny *certiorari* for the appellants was justified on the grounds that Backpage was protected under the Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act. In their decision, the First Circuit seems to be inviting legislative challenges to Section 230, writing: "Congress did not sound an uncertain trumpet when it enacted the [Communications Decency Act], and it chose to grant broad protections to internet publishers. Showing that a website operates through a meretricious business model is not enough to strip away torse protections. If the evils that the appellants have identified are deemed enough to outweigh the First Amendment values that drive the [Communications Decency Act], *the remedy is through legislation, not through litigation* [emphasis mine] (Jane Doe v. Backpage, US District Court of Appeals: 2016)." Though the facts of the case do indicate that Backpage's moderation was, in fact, in bad faith (editing and obfuscating when sex worker profiles were for underage people), Backpage was seized under other legislation—though the site was seized after FOSTA-SESTA's passage, the Department of Justice did not charged with violations of FOSTA-SESTA.

role in facilitating sex trafficking, typically of children rendered as "sexual innocents." Legal writing about FOSTA-SESTA, in other words, understand it as a specifically modern piece of legislation responding to a *specifically modern* problem of "modern sex trafficking."

Despite this centrality of the internet and digital media technologies, FOSTA-SESTA's historical scope is much wider than the internet and the growth of the online sex trade. Legislatively, FOSTA-SESTA is an amendment of Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act, itself a replacement of the Communications Decency Act of 1934. Though the 1996 version of the Communications Decency Act was specifically intended to monitor and stem the production of "obscene" materials online—with a particular concern towards the possibility of children accessing such materials—its legal precedent and related logics are rooted in previous law, even if not part of FOSTA-SESTA's *official* legal genealogy. FOSTA-SESTA's inheritances among the historical projects of child-saving, the social purity movement, and other legislative and social responses to issues of potential "exposure" of the "sexually excess" to the "sexually innocent" are all necessary to understand the full impact of FOSTA-SESTA, and the populations who are particularly marginalized when such historied logics are invoked.

The development and implementation of laws related to sex and reproduction, sex work, sex trafficking, and the protection of children are deeply intertwined, and deeply racial. This is to say, not only is there a broader legal history to the way that FOSTA-SESTA equivocates consensual sex work and coerced sex trafficking, but the ways that such legislation has been developed and implemented is deeply reflective of projects of racial and sexual mythmaking to maintain hierarchical projects of difference. As early examples and foundations for legislation surrounding sex and reproduction, miscegenation statues have existed in the United States since before its formal founding, with an expansive 1691 Virginia statute being the first to refer to the

status of children with regards to the "abominable mixture" of interracial sex and reproduction (Hening 1823, III, 86-87; see also Wadlington 1966, 1191-1193; Wallenstein 2002, 15-17). This legislation, then, can be said to be one of the roots of laws around sex and reproduction in US legislative histories.

The fact that miscegenation as a logic was produced to maintain a color line of "antagonistic differences" (Robinson [1983] 2000, 10) through which to order society under chattel slavery is clear enough, but it is the post-Emancipation panics around the color line, social purity, and "white slavery" that provide the most fertile link to acts like the Trafficking Victims Protection Act and later, FOSTA-SESTA. As scholars of nineteenth-century feminisms have written, the social purity movement as it took form developed in the post-Emancipation era, ostensibly in response to industrialization and concerns regarding the "urban poor." However, as Siobhan Sommerville points out, in the post-Emancipation era, the question of the color line has always been intrinsically related to the question of the "proper" performance of gender and sexuality:

> …the juxtaposition of the Plessy, Mitchell, and Wilde trials points undeniably to the institutional efforts undertaken during this period to bifurcate identity into "black" or "white," "heterosexual" or "homosexual," and thus to simplify socially constructed boundaries of race and sexual orientation. Importantly, these shifts were embedded in anxieties over the control of language and representation (Sommerville 2000, 8).

Far from offering an account of how the late nineteenth-century trial of Oscar Wilde revealed and emboldened panic over *homosexuality-as-identity* in a way that analytically holds it as equivalent to race, Sommerville instead reveals the *intertwinedness* of "sexual pathology with…racialized images" (Sommerville 2000, 11) in her discussion of sexology. As an early attempt to understand and, in a way, legitimize the nascent identity category of "the homosexual," sexologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries drew from racial science, imbuing sexology with a fundamentally *racial* character. As Sommerville writes:

> …sexual ambiguity delineated the boundaries of race….Sexologists reproduced not only the methodologies of the comparative anatomy of races but also its iconography. One of the most consistent medical characterizations of the anatomy of both African American women and lesbians was the myth of an unusually large clitoris….In constructing these oppositions, such characterizations literalized the sexual and racial ideologies of the nineteenth-century 'Cult of True Womanhood,' which explicitly privileged white women's sexual 'purity' while implicitly suggesting African American women's sexual accessibility (Sommerville 2000, 27-28)

From Sommerville, it becomes clearer as to how notions of "proper" reproductivity and sexuality influenced the development of "white slavery" as a panic, and the ways that anti-prostitution discourses developed in the post-Emancipation era—and continued to influence laws around sex work up into the introduction of internet-focused legislation. The racial threads inherent to the "white slavery" panic are also visible in the development of the earliest example of federal legislation with regards to sex work, the Page Act of 1875. Though most scholarship relates the Page Act most closely to the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the Page Act is an important text in the history of legal regulations of sex, sex work, and sex-related social panics in the post-Emancipation era. The text of the Page Act foreshadows that of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, focusing on bans on both coolie labor and sex work, with the latter referred to in the first section using the language of "lewd and immoral purposes." In the most important section enumerating sexuality, Section Three, the language of the law is slightly more specific, writing: "…the importation into the United States of women for the purposes of prostitution is hereby forbidden." As George Peffer writes, combined with beliefs about the inherent sexual excess of East Asian women, this led to the Page Act being used as a powerful tool to stop the immigration of Chinese women into the United States—thus limiting the ability of Chinese familial *and* cultural reproduction in the United States. The impact, then, was a restriction on the formation of families at the same time that family-saving discourses were coming into the mainstream:

> American prejudices against the Chinese transformed the Page Law into a more general restriction of Chinese female immigration. Since they suspected all but the wives of merchants diplomats of prostitution, the American counsuls erected a system of examination which made the immigration of Chinese wives extremely difficult (Peffer 1986, 42).

The Page Act, which predates the "white slavery" hysteria-driven Mann Act by thirty-five years, speaks to the degree to which race has *always* been imbricated not only into discourses about sex work and trafficking, but it also offers greater insight into the role that race and reproduction play into the drafting and production of legislation surrounding sex work, sex trafficking, and control of sex and reproductivity. At the same time the development of discourses surrounding "white slavery" came the development of separate—though interrelated—discourses about sexual violence and children. These discourses around sexual violence and children, along with these discourses around "white slavery," reproduction, and sex work, would dovetail quite quickly—and all serve to clear much ground necessary for the discourses within and around FOSTA-SESTA to take hold.

In *Redefining Rape,* Elizabeth Freedman notes that the movement for statutory rape and age of consent laws were rooted in the "growing attention to child-saving in a range of social movements" (2013, 126) and that, "[Age of consent laws] pointed toward the construction of rape as a crime committed primarily against youth" (2013, 127). These concerns were developing around in the same post-Emancipation era as the developing "white slavery" panic, and these concerns—maintaining the sexual purity of white women and white children—both were common causes that early first-wave feminists rallied around. The histories of sexual threat legislation show that in the early 1900s, "innocence" was a key theme utilized—and weaponized—as a mode of meaning-making, thus centering children and their proxies as the key figures that the force of the state needed to mobilize to protect.

Among those active in the social purity movements of the late 1800s, the discourses of ensuring proper reproduction is key, as is the discourses of protecting *certain* kinds of children. As a mainstream discourse, the protection of children has always been one deeply tied up with race, difference-making, and the capacity to utilize the mechanisms of the state to ensure the advancement of "proper" reproductivity. This eugenics-based discourse was even adapted by more "radical" white feminist thinkers of the time. As Alexandra Rutherford and Jenna MacKay write, "Infused with the eugenic concern that women who had to submit sexually to their drunken husbands might bear children who would inherit his degenerate propensities, [divorce rights activists] called on women and lawmakers to support the right to divorce" (Rutherford and MacKay 2013, 7). This focus on ensuring the reproduction of the "sexually acceptable" non-degenerates unto eternity to maintain the reproduction of racial hierarchy under racial capitalism is reflected in the discourses surrounding early fears about sexual predation on children. As Estelle Freedman writes, nascent laws about the age of consent developing in the late nineteenth century developed out of fears of seduction, the specter of prostitution, and ultimately, the fears over "protect[ing] girls from sexual ruin" (2013, 133). This fear over the sexual ruin of young girls, Freedman writes, is inseparable from fears regarding the proper maintenance of the color line and the lingering afterlife of chattel slavery:

> The antiprostitution movement in England provided the immediate impetus for American efforts to revise statutory rape laws. In 1861 the British Parliament increased the age of consent from ten to thirteen years, a change welcomed by purity reformers. Over the next decades fears about the "white slave traffic" proliferated. Anti-vice narratives sensationalized the sale of young women into brothels by procurers who had abducted and sometimes drugged their victims, often achieving the "ruin" through seduction or rape before the sale. The reference to racial slavery in the term was telling. It played upon lingering abolitionist sentiments but applied these sympathies largely to the sexual enslavement of white, not black, women. By blaming prostitution on abduction and rape, middle-class reformers rejected earlier presumptions of working-class female depravity. Now they refused to believe that girls of any class would choose to enter the trade (Freedman 2013, 134).

Freedman points to lingering themes throughout the crusade for the protection of children, both from erotic content and from the sex trade as an industry, themes that echo in contemporary arguments for greater levels of surveillance and "parental control" online, but it is the transmogrification of sexual violence as something happening *primarily* to white sexual innocents that is at the root of legislation, policy, and organizations that target "deprave" sexuality and those rendered "sexually excess" in service of protecting *some* children. The fact that, as Freedman points out, the fears of "white slavery" were used to build on lingering abolitionist sentiments from white middle-class feminists shows the ways in which the fears over both prostitution and predation of children were so deeply-ingrained in maintaining racial difference and racial hierarchy. By transmogrifying slavery and abolitionism to be *primarily* about white women and children, the "white slavery" panic and those working in service of it not only displaced the lingering forms of labor trafficking and the *continuation* of chattel slavery in the form of sharecropping, chain gangs, debt peonage, and other forms of what Blackmon describes as "slavery by another name," but such white feminists and social purity organizers *also* displaced the rampant sexual violence that happened during chattel slavery, as well as the sexual violence that happened against Black women by white men. This displacement of "slavery" and "abolitionism" to mean maintaining the sexual purity of white women and girls had a related and reinforcing effect: the (re)production of the image of Black men's sexual degeneracy and excess—one that specifically targeted the white feminine sexual innocents.

Though it was filmed and screened long after the height of the social purity movement, D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* is an important text in understanding the then-newly developing body of jurisprudence surrounding the sexual protection of children. As a filmic text, *Birth of a Nation* visualizes many themes and projects of racial mythmaking that developed in

the post-Emancipation nineteenth century and both transformed and smuggled them into the twentieth century as a form of "moral education." As Robinson writes on *Birth of a Nation*'s introduction:

> Griffith's film is thus marked by the colliding economic and cultural forces of its time: hegemonic Victorian values contended with the meteoric rise of a culturally diverse working class; insurgent and enterprising businessmen in the new film industry…to justify their fragile economic position, became claimants to the status of artists; and movies were proposed as a site of moral instruction" (2007, 93).

Many scholars, including Robinson, have examined the ways in which *Birth of a Nation* has reinforced projects of racial mythmaking, ones that reinforce notions of inferiority and inherent animality of Black people—and Black men specifically (see: Diawara 1993, Shrock 1997, Gaines 2001, Robinson 2007). However, what is less-examined are the ways in which the *Birth of a Nation* as a film—and the "Gus chase" scene specifically—works as moral education and mythmaking project to reinforce related myths of innocence and innocence lost. Though some feminist writers, Freedman included, would argue that the moral crusade at the heart of the social purity movement were quickly falling out of favor in the early twentieth century, what Griffith's film shows us is that though *some* sexual liberation was happening, underlying logics and themes of the post-Emancipation era's modes of racial-sexual ordering continued to order modes of hierarchy and value long after the end of the social purity movement. In particular, *Birth of a Nation* both helps reinforce and reveal sexual mythologies that render the status of white children—white *girls,* in particular—as eternal sexual innocent. This form of sexual mythmaking, the production of the hegemonic sexual innocent, then, has the direct effect of making thinkable *what kind of child* can be victimized, *what kind of child* is the paradigmatic victim of sexual violence, and, as a corollary, *which children can never be considered real victims of sexual violence*.

The Gus chase scene begins with Flora, leaving the Cameron family home alone, off to gather a pail of water. She is pursued, then ambushed, by Gus, who proclaims that he is a Captain, and he is looking for a wife. Though *Birth of a Nation's* Flora is not necessarily textually established as a pre-pubescent child, her youth defines her, further amplifying the threat that Gus's bestial, lascivious Blackness poses. She is the youngest of the Cameron children, embodying a kind of naivete and whimsy established by her actions before being pursued by Gus: she skips along the trail and wanders off to play with a squirrel, her ringlet curls bouncing along as she adventures through the forest. Flora is the image of the sexual innocent in this scene, and her death, similarly, symbolizes and signals what must be done—what is done—when the sexually excess infringes upon the sexually innocent: the entire apparatus of the state must be engaged in neutralizing the sexual threat against white femininity, and white *youthful* femininity in particular. The Klan, representing the power of the state and rule of law, lynches Gus. That the supposedly rightful power of the state and rule of law return to punish the sexual predation of a white feminine sexual innocent is important in showing how though myths of sexual *acceptability* were shifting ever-slightly, the underlying mythologies of sexual *innocents* were being reinforced, especially in their entanglement with the projects of racial mythmaking that produced Black freedom as simultaneously repressive and chaotic, and Black sexuality as always inherently bestial and "excess." As Robinson writes on *Birth of a Nation's* ending, wherein the victorious Klan returns the world to its natural order, "The abrupt juxtaposition of these visual constructions fuses whiteness and a race theodicy, patriarchy and filiopiety, historical destiny and Christian civilization on the mass consciousness" (2007, 104). Whiteness's race theodicy cannot be unlinked from *white patriarchy* here. But white patriarchy, and the force and power of the state that white patriarchy represents within *Birth of a Nation* cannot be separated from that

which it may be rallied and organized to protect, with blood: sexual innocents, who have been—and are—paradigmatically white youths. As the tragic figure whose death mobilizes the full weight of the supposedly rightful rule of law to avenge, Flora is an important figure in understanding the construction of sexual innocence as it relates to white youth. Though not portrayed by or explicitly represented as a white child, as the youngest Cameron child, *Birth of a Nation's* Flora both stands in for and reveals the figure at the heart of the mainstream social purity movement's organizing, at least with regards to children: a white child, most often a white girl, being pursued by shadowy threats seeking to commit sexual violence against her—but, more importantly, seeking to turn the "sexual innocent" into the "sexual excess." The fear that Gus invoked, after all, was not simply the specter of rape, but the specter of *interracial* rape, of the possibility for reproduction *in excess of* the hard antagonistic binaries of segregation, of antiblack racism, of the color line.

The Gus chase scene visualizes the logics behind the making of sex legislation, especially in the post-Reconstruction and post-Suffrage eras, showing that, despite the "loosening" of society in the early twentieth century, the sexual ordering logics that *produced* the social purity movement were still well-entrenched in the mythologies of the time. Though Gus and Flora—and *Birth of a Nation*—are not mentioned by name, the logics of presumably-white, youthful sexual innocents being pursued, hunted, and led into fates worse than death are palpable in the subtext of the discourses surrounding the age of consent, sexual violence, and the purity of white women and girls. In Estelle Feedman's account of statutory rape/age of consent laws, white feminists of the social purity era advocating for both age of consent and women's suffrage framed suffrage as a necessary "balancing" against the capacity for men—of all races—to "ruin" young women and girls' purity. As Freedman writes, framed this in terms of the right to

property, but with consequences far exceeding those that could be levied against one who engages in destruction of property:

> Echoing antiseduction rhetoric, reformers claimed that for the law to be just, it should accord equally harsh punishments for the gender-specific crime of loss of chastity. As a suffrage newspaper put it: "Is property of more value than the virtue of the citizens of Iowa?" A woman's virtue was unlike property, though, for the question rested upon an implicit, and sometimes explicit, assumption that *the loss of a woman's honor was a fate not only equal to theft but also worse than death—and therefore should be elevated from a minor to a serious crime, even, in the view of some writers, a capital offense* [emphasis mine]….the [Women's Christian Temperance Union] frequently argued that the age at which a woman could consent to sexual relations should be the same as the age at which she could own property, which was typically over eighteen….In these arguments, women should have the same right to ownership of their sexuality that men and women had to their property" (2013, 138).

The notion of one's slippage from the "sexual acceptable" into "sexual excess" here is reflective of the logics present in Flora's decision to commit suicide at the specter of interracial marriage and rape, given filmic representation decades later. Given the racial mythmaking project present in this scene, the making of the Black male rapist as the only way in which interracial sexuality is possible, specter of *interracial* sexuality, too, becomes enough to be a "fate worse than death," something that the full force of the state—capital punishment, as mentioned in Freedman's article above—can be mobilized to act against. This context is that which the Gus chase scene in *Birth of a Nation* visualizes, reinforces, and remythologizes, imbuing the paradigmatic victim of sexual violence and later, sex trafficking, with not only a racial, gendered, and classed status—all the while producing those *outside* of the white feminine child as "sexually excess" threats against which the child must be protected from loss of "purity," or, as Freedman notes above, the right to property-ownership—the right to be a properly reproductive consumer under the racial capitalist order.

At the same time that mythologies around white feminine youth as paradigmatic "sexual innocents" were being smuggled from the post-Emancipation morality of the social purity

movement into the twentieth-century, fears around the "corruption" of white boys began to form as well. As Freedman writes, with regards to the expansion of sexual threat discourses to include white boys among the sexually innocent, "Child-saving impulses, along with fears about the possibility of homosexual *contagion* [emphasis mine], helped transform the target of rape concerns….children of both sexes were redefined as the assault victims in need of protection" (Freedman 2013, 189). This notion of contagion that Freedman notes, echoing language of the "corruption" of white women and girls, rendered white boys as victims on the basis of their future reproductive potential being contaminated by "homosexual contagion." As such, the discourse around the sexual corruption of boys was always already a racial project, even if moral panics around homosexuality and corruption would later be a presumably white-on-white project. Freedman writes:

> While concerns about the immorality of immigrants typically identified the risks to young women, they also alluded to same-sex relations….Attributing to immigrants a penchant for sexual perversion drew upon the ideas of early sexologists such as Krafft-Ebing, who devised a theory of "racial degeneracy" that associated perversion with "primitive" races, the lower classes, and poor immigrants (Freedman 2013, 181).

Though the specter of homosexual contagion was most associated with the so-called "effeminate" nonblack groups like Chinese, Sikh, Italian, or Greek immigrants, Black men were not left unaffected by fears of homosexual contagion corrupting white boys. As Roderick Ferguson writes, "After immigration exclusion, anxieties about the polymorphous perversions of industrial capital were relocated onto African American communities" (Ferguson 2004, 39). Twentieth-century vice laws thus rendered Black neighborhoods in the North as amoral, as spaces that "epitomized moral degeneracy and the perverse results of industrialization" (Ferguson 2004, 41). Like the broader threat of miscegenation and "improper" reproductivity made especially visible in the early post-Emancipation era, the discourses around the sexual purity and sexual corruption of white boys, at the heart of the moral panic around these sexual

threats were not primarily the safety of *all* children, but rather, the need to mobilize the state to protect the capacity of whiteness to properly reproduce itself. The necessity to ensure whiteness reproduces itself properly, and unto eternity, at that, is what links the growing moral panic around the "corruption" of white boys, and the fears over the sexual behavior of white women and girls; at the root of these discourses and the material changes they wrought in the form of the sex-focused legislation of the early twentieth century—whether that is 1910's Mann Act, the so-called "white slavery" act focused on the sex work and the sexual corruption of white girls, vice and sodomy laws around the corruption of white boys, or even the strengthening of antimiscegenation legislation—is the necessity to maintain whiteness's reproduction, and as such, to ensure the reproduction of the structure of "antagonistic differences," of structures of antagonistic binaries, to hierarchies of order and power under racial capitalism.

As legislation around both so-called "white slavery" and child sexual violence both began to coalesce into the legislative genealogy from which FOSTA-SESTA would develop a century later, its presumptive subjects continued to be white women and white children. Especially during the postwar era, with the development of "Stranger Danger" as discourses around protection of children became more widespread in the public consciousness, policies that would lead to mass sexual violence against children was underway—a policy not considered as "trafficking" by many of the activists agitating in the "child-saving" or "white slavery" movements. The removal of Native children from their homes, to be placed into off-reservation boarding schools, was in full force at the time that the Mann Act was passed. In a 2021 conversation with Rebecca Nagle, Nick Estes describes the industrial level of sexual violence committed against Indigenous children in Catholic boarding schools revealed by a 2010 investigation of the St. Francis mission school, explaining, "Some of these Catholic priests

considered themselves johns…they would go around and prey specifically on young Native girls, and admitted these things in confession" (Estes and Nagle 2021). In a related article published to *The Guardian,* Estes writes of one of his living relatives' experience at another Catholic boarding school for Native children, where sexual violence was experienced by Native children of all genders (Estes 2021). Though the testimony that Estes report on detail experiences of child sexual abuse from the 1960s and 1970s, the legislation and discourses that made such systemic sexual abuse possible had its origins in the early 1800s. Moreover, the physical and sexual violence committed against Indigenous children in Catholic boarding schools, though similar to the sexual abuse committed by Catholic clergy against mostly white children, is different in the key sense that it was the direct result of state policy, and sanctioned by the state. The Civilization Fund Act of 1819 created the legal foundations for state-sponsored Christian boarding schools, a policy that would last until the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978. Under the Civilization Fund Act, the "industrial" scope of child sexual abuse would not be considered trafficking, even if it was child trafficking in the letter of the law; instead, Indigenous children would be considered—according to the text of the law and the intentions behind it—to be *benefitting* from the US's civilizing mission.

Moreover, the tangle of violence, sexuality, and sexual violence projected onto and enacted against Black children in the United States has been both normalized and utilized as justification for expanded policing and state violence—which has disproportionately targeted Black children. Scripts surrounding sexual excess and the need to protect the "proper" reproduction of the nation was used to justify the forced sterilizations of then Minnie Lee and Mary Alice Relf in 1973. As Dorothy Roberts writes in *Killing the Black Body,* nurses at the federally-funded Montgomery Community Action Agency provided the Relf children with long-

term Depo-Provera shots, and then later sterilization, because of the racial and social positions they occupied: “Apparently believing that their race and poverty made these young girls candidates for birth control” (Roberts [1997] 2016, 93). The Relf sisters, fourteen and twelve when sterilized, were not rendered as sexual innocents, as young, middle-class white girls would be; instead, the medico-scientific apparatus of eugenics, supported by the state, both acted upon *and* reinforced the mythologies of inherent sexual excess of Black girls—especially Black girls living in poverty. Rather than mobilizing to protect the Relf sisters, the state and medico-scientific apparatus reinforced the myth of fundamental sexual excess of the subject-positions they occupied, to the extent of occluding any possibility of their reproduction. The story of the Relf sisters, and the long shadow of eugenic reproductive policies in the United States, can be seen as an extension of the protection of white girls and whiteness writ large, as coerced sterilization and the prevention of Black birth was rendered as a way to, “reduce the undesirable population growth of the poor” (Roberts [1997] 2016, 92), as Dorothy Roberts writes doctors of the 1970s confided. The forced sterilization of the Relf sisters, though not a form of sex trafficking, is still a form of *sexualized* violence, one that remains unaccounted for when the mythologies that produce “sexual innocence” center white youth and *only* white youth.

Being mythologized as fundamentally outside the category of “sexual innocent” also impacted Black boys at the same time that discourses around “protecting the children” became legislated and mainstreamed. Emmett Till is an example of a Black boy rendered not as sexually “innocent,” but rendered in such *excess* of acceptable heterosexuality that his death was near-foretold by the images of state-sponsored vigilante retribution represented in *Birth of a Nation* forty years earlier. Moreover, medico-scientific projects that maintain sexual mythmaking also impact Black boys. For example, Robert Rayford, a fifteen-year-old Black teenager from the Old

North neighborhood of St. Louis, was ultimately determined to be the first known case of HIV/AIDS in the United States. Rayford self-disclosed to doctors that he had experienced symptoms of advanced AIDS since 1966, almost two decades before HIV/AIDS was formally "discovered" in 1984. Despite this, Rayford's life is rarely memorialized as part of HIV/AIDS's history, especially as it related to the twinned cultural threads around HIV/AIDS's "Patient Zero" and HIV/AIDS in children. Instead, the figure of the clueless victim took shape in the form of a white gay adult man, and the infected sexual innocents became embodied in the image of Ryan White and other hemophiliac children infected by "tainted blood" as part of their treatment plans. Despite some speculation that Rayford may have contracted HIV from sexual abuse[27] (Kerr 2016), he is not remembered among the "sexual innocents" whose infection mobilized the state to act against the pandemic it had once long ignored. Rayford's story, like the Relf sisters' story, reveals the disposability that sexual mythmaking produces for *certain* children, and like the scores of Indigenous children who experienced sexual violence during the boarding school era, reveals how sexual violence or the potential for sexual violence is viewed very differently for those children always already sexually excess. But Robert Rayford's story also shows us something else, and that is the ways in which sexual mythmaking subjects figures who *were and remain* rendered "sexually excess" to be unremembered and under-remembered in the collective memories that quickly become "history."

[27] While the source of Rayford's HIV/AIDS infection is unknown, although during his life, there was some speculation as to his involvement in the sex trade. After his death, there was speculation as to the source of his infection being the result of sexual abuse. I do not wish to engage in the project of litigating the "source" of Rayford's infection, but I bring up the speculation of sexual abuse because of its relevance to the mythology of *who* sexual innocents who are the paradigmatic victims of sexual abuse are. In the imaginaries of sexual mythmaking's antagonistic binaries, Rayford, because of Black masculinity and *especially* because of his low-income Black masculinity, would always already be rendered "sexually excess," the antithesis of Ryan White's paradigmatic white sexual innocence.

The 1910 Mann Act's language of "white slavery," transmogrified into the language of "modern slavery" in the 1996 Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), has continued to center white sexual innocents as its subjects. Given the TVPA's role as FOSTA-SESTA's direct lineage, the genealogical construction of "white slavery" into "modern slavery" into the rightful subjects protected by sex trafficking legislation cannot be avoided; the foundations for FOSTA-SESTA, in other words, even as it is narrowly-constructed, cannot escape its racial history. And so, what this sociohistorical genealogy reveals is that the legal roots of FOSTA-SESTA cannot be unlinked from ideas of race, power, and, ultimately, as sexual mythmaking offers us an understanding of, the notion of "proper" reproduction. From its very origins in the social purity movement, laws and discourses surrounding sex work, the protection of children, and the protection of children from sex work and the erotic have always been wrapped up in maintaining not only the "sexual acceptability" of white women and the "sexual innocence" of white children, but racial and sexual hierarchies, as well.

This is not to say that protections for children should never exist—after all, the Indigenous children who were sexually abused at an industrial scale at state-sponsored boarding schools should have been protected. But because it functions as a technology of racial capitalism, sexual mythmaking interacts with racial mythmaking to render even certain children as always already excess, and the interests of the state as an apparatus to maintain and protect capital has *always* been interested in the project of maintaining antagonistic differences, including and especially racial hierarchy. From its origins in the social purity movement, discourses against sex work and "protecting the children" are fundamentally racial projects. Whether framed as protecting white women from "falling" into sex work, protecting the "purity" of white girls from sexual predation, and protecting white boys from the "contagion" of homosexuality, these

discourses mark some subjects as "sexual innocents" under the broader umbrella of "sexual acceptability." As such, the full power of the state can be mobilized against them—whether that is in the form of legislation protecting from faltering from sexual acceptability and innocence, or in the form of explosive state and vigilante justice meant to destroy the sexually excess. At the heart of these projects against pornography and in protection of the children are the protection of whiteness's capacity to reproduce properly. It is through adding this context to FOSTA-SESTA's legal genealogy—rather than just the immediate legislative context—allows us to understand why those queer- and trans-of-color subjects rendered "sexually excess," those who made their home on Tumblr's queer archipelago were caught in the dragnet of laws not meant to *explicitly* target them. And it is the long life of protecting sexual innocents and whiteness's ability to reproduce itself that FOSTA-SESTA's impact as a legislative tool informed by sexual mythmaking's ability to produce antagonistic differences makes itself legible. And it is also through connecting FOSTA-SESTA to its post-Emancipation roots that allows FOSTA-SESTA's continuing impact on the nature of the internet to be predicted.

FOSTA-SESTA and Its Aftermath

Returning to Tumblr specifically, the site's December 2018 adult content ban was not the direct result of FOSTA-SESTA, and FOSTA-SESTA was not invoked to push the website into changing its policies. Unlike the shutdown of the Craigslist personals page, which explicitly cited FOSTA-SESTA as its reason for closing, Tumblr's change in policy was, at least in the narrative constructed by the site's staff, the result of the need to "change with the times." (Tumblr Staff 2018). Despite this vague justification on the part of Tumblr staff, and an apparent lack of connection to FOSTA-SESTA or its passage, the changes to criminal and civil liability

that FOSTA-SESTA produced played a tremendous role in producing Tumblr's 2018 adult content ban. While Tumblr staff would not confirm a direct connection from the passage of FOSTA-SESTA to the implementation of its "adult content" ban, a direct line can be drawn from the bill's passage, to the Apple app store's removal of Tumblr, which directly led to the quick implementation of Tumblr's policy change. The new legal liabilities inherent to FOSTA-SESTA exposed Tumblr—the owners, staff, and users themselves—and the Apple app store to potential criminal and civil action for *both* evidence of forced sex trafficking *and* the "promotion of prostitution," a nebulous term that could be applied to a wide variety of erotic materials. As corporate entities interested in maintaining their capacity to accumulate capital, FOSTA-SESTA produced the conditions by which over-policing of sex and sexuality online was proven to be the pragmatic approach, if not outright privileged by the text of the legislation itself. FOSTA-SESTA was never used to charge Tumblr or the Apple app store with criminal conduct, but prosecutors did not have to. The chilling effect that it had was enough.

Tumblr's removal from the Apple app store—and the site's subsequent ban on all adult content—was described as the result of child sexual abuse images originating on Tumblr. Under the child sex trafficking statutes in place before FOSTA-SESTA's implementation, the users who uploaded and disseminated these images to Tumblr would be criminally-prosecuted—and in fact, they already were. In their press release for the incident, Tumblr staff took note of the fact that they were cooperating with law enforcement. However, with FOSTA-SESTA, Tumblr and the Apple app store would *also* be held civilly-liable for hosting "original child sex abuse" content. This rendered Tumblr-as-website *and* Tumblr's queer archipelago not as corporate asset, but rather, as a liability. So much is all but stated in the blog post announcing Tumblr's adult content ban: "We've realized that in order to continue to fulfill our promise and place in culture,

especially as it evolves, we must change. Some of that change began with fostering more constructive dialogue among our community members. Today, we're taking another step by no longer allowing adult content, including explicit sexual content and nudity (with some exceptions)" (Tumblr staff 2018). This change to "fulfill our promise and place in culture" was less accountable to Tumblr's users and more to the legal and economic forces newly put into place for enhanced "protections" for children.

After the reason for Tumblr's disappearance from the Apple app store was publicly announced, rumors circulated on Tumblr about the nature of the child sexual abuse photos that led to the adult content ban. Some users used the announcement of child sexual abuse material found on the site as a way to chastise other users' sexual behaviors, while other users speculated that that the offending material might have included sexually explicit pictures of underage users that were made, posted, and circulated by those underage users. The exact nature of the child sexual abuse images has not been detailed or described outside of the fact that the offending materials were original uploads to the site, and I will not speculate in the nature of the images, either. What is notable, though, is how "child sexual abuse" was linked to Tumblr in the mainstream press and by anti-sex trafficking organizations as a particularistic quality of the site, rather than a larger structural and social issue. Sensationalist headlines about Tumblr's ban on adult content highlighted its connection to "child abuse images" and "child porn" (see: Keach

2018[28], Meyer 2018[29], Shugerman 2018[30], Wise 2018[31]), and the National Center on Sexual Exploitation, an organization dedicated to "exposing the links between all forms of sexual abuse and exploitation" and leading in championing FOSTA-SESTA, praised Apple for removing Tumblr from the Apple app store, with its executive director stating, "The National Center on Sexual Exploitation congratulates Apple for taking a bold stand against child sex abuse with its decision to remove Tumblr from its app store" (NCOSE 2018). In this statement, the underlying logic of Tumblr *itself* being a source of child sexual abuse is telling—especially when, as indicated by the *Colbert Report* interview noted in the previous chapter, and the CollegeHumor skit mentioned in this chapter's introduction, Tumblr has *always* been associated with open sexuality, and was a *particularly important* space for queer- and trans-of-color subjects and their own erotic worlds and lives.

Ana Valens, writing on Tumblr, describes its fetish community at length, particularly the ways that the fetish community specific to *Tumblr* offered alternative possibilities to other spaces where erotic content—even deviant erotic content—was shared, produced, and consumed online. It is not simply that the deviant and alternative forms of erotic production found purchase on Tumblr. Instead, the unique combination of Tumblr's community, its infrastructure, and the

[28] "Thumbs Down: Tumblr Bans All Porn Weeks After it was Dropped from iPhone App Store Over Child Abuse Images" for *The Sun.* The second paragraph of this article starts with: "It's estimated that roughly 20% of Tumblr's content base is made up of pornography." The slippage of "content base," meaning the *people* who populate the website, and "pornography," meaning the content that said people create, speaks volumes here.
[29] "Apple Pulled the Tumblr App Without Explanation. Now We Know It Was Due to Child Sex Abuse Photos" for *Fortune*. This article ends with an emphasis of this sensationalist headline: "Tumblr has been involved in several cases of child sexual abuse material being posted online. A recent example included an Ohio police sergeant who used the service to share an image of a naked boy."
[30] "Tumblr Bans Adult Content From Site After Child Porn Controversy," for *The Daily Beast.* Shugerman, for what it's worth, gestures towars who might be impacted by this ban, writing, "The site's relatively lax rules on nudity—compared to other social-media sites like Facebook and Instagram—has until now made it a popular platform for sex workers and erotic artists."
[31] "Tumblr to Ban Adult Content After Issues with Child Pornography on Site," for *The Hill.* Despite this article emphasizing the child sexual abuse images being posted on Tumblr, all but drawing the connection from the images to the adult ban, Wise ends this article with, "Tumblr did not cite the child pornography issue as the reason for banning adult content."

political moment that it took place in oriented it to produce a unique ethos that was shaped and shaped by the deviant, alternative, nonconforming, and *excess* forms of pornography produced and shared on the site. As Valens writes:

> Unlike Pornhub….Tumblr's sizeable fetishism userbase was filled with queer posters, cis women, trans and gender nonconforming folks, independent sex workers, LGBTQ adult content creators, and feminist porn fans. This diversity radically changed not just the basic social norms on Tumblr—like an emphasis on consent before reblogging marginalized bodies onto fetish blogs—but also the *nature* [emphasis mine] of adult content itself. Many kink tags regularly featured porn by and for queers, especially queer women. Nonnormative fetishes like feederism and yiff [furry/anthropomorphic animal-persona pornography] content attracted significant LGBTQ followings….Rarest for its time, Tumblr's open embrace of queerness, gender, and sexuality fostered sexual communities that highly valued (and desired) its trans participants (Valens 2020, 76-77)

As Valens points to, the ethos of Tumblr's queer digital archipelago was indelibly shaped by the norms and mores of developed, in part, out of communities engaging with alternative erotic content. This centrality also made erotic content creators—including those involved in the sex trade—central not only to the kinds of content being produced on the site, but to the many archipelagic populations who populated the site. FOSTA-SESTA and Tumblr's 2018 adult content ban, then, did not simply eliminate one source of content that Tumblr users were frequently engaging with. Instead, it directly alienated and rejected a core demographic whose contributions to the site's "unique ethos" was key to producing that ethos in the first place—and whose positionalities within many-intersecting matrices of oppression made it so that other spaces would not be as welcoming to their work.

Tumblr's relationship to sex workers—particularly sex workers engaged in the production of deviant and alternative forms of erotic content—was a unique one, especially for its time, in that these multiply-marginalized people were central in shaping the ethos of the *whole* site, not *in spite of* their engagement with deviant erotica, but *because of it.* As such, FOSTA-SESTA and the 2018 adult content ban that came out of it had material consequences for this

population especially, but the non-sex worker communities engaging with them as well. Of course, Tumblr's 2018 adult content ban would not be the first nor last attempt at policing sexuality and sex workers online. However, the most notable case after Tumblr—OnlyFans and its attempted 2021 content ban—had a very different outcome compared to Tumblr, one that speaks not to the weakening of FOSTA-SESTA, but to an entrenchment of the logics of "sexual excess" and "sexual acceptability/sexual innocence" in complex, potentially insidious ways in response to economic and cultural crises.

OnlyFans, Sex Work, and FOSTA-SESTA's Shifting Limitations

On August 15, 2021, in a move that echoed Tumblr's own sudden adult content ban, OnlyFans—a website whose business model allows for users to subscribe to individual creators—announced a similar ban on "explicit content" to be implemented in October of that year. Like Tumblr's adult content ban, OnlyFans' explicit content ban would have changed the fundamental nature of the site; OnlyFans, after all, came to prominence because of the sex workers utilizing it to create and distribute erotic content. But unlike Tumblr's 2018 adult content ban, OnlyFans would not hold fast to their policy change, eventually announcing a retraction of the explicit content ban on August 25th, only ten days after the ban was first announced. For many of its consumers and creators, the company's decision not to go through with its adult content ban was good news, though one that many did not take for granted—in the aftermath of FOSTA-SESTA, communities have, understandingly, become wary of the good graces of the platforms on which they gather.

Looking at Tumblr and OnlyFans in retrospect, it is easy to compare them and draw conclusions from them and the differences in their respective approaches to managing erotic content on their sites. On its face, OnlyFans' proposed 2021 explicit content ban is near-identical to Tumblr's 2018 adult content ban. This comparative context did not escape the attention of even lay observers: one article by Justin Curto for *Vulture* described OnlyFans' proposed ban as "pulling a Tumblr," another article by Brett Molina and Josh Rivera for *USA Today* described the decision as OnlyFans "going the way of Tumblr," and Latinx-focused website, *Remezcla,* described it as OnlyFans taking a page from "the Tumblr handbook." This is in addition to the hundreds of Tweets making the same comparison. However, it is important to recognize that OnlyFans' explicit content ban and its retraction happened in a completely different context as

Tumblr's adult content ban: the social, political, and economic forces shaped it so that the overt sexuality linked to OnlyFans was taken in a very different way from the overt sexuality on Tumblr. And it is these different contexts that, in being shaped by racial capitalism, offers us a glimpse of the changing structure of "sexual acceptability" and "sexual excess," especially in times of crisis.

As a website, the infrastructure and intention of OnlyFans is very different from that of Tumblr, and the role that it plays in the larger digital ecosystem is very different. Though in both cases, both sites' economic value as digital commodities developed as a result of their role as *platforms,* not all platforms are created equally. Even if the intended use of platforms deviates from their stated mission, the infrastructure of those platforms shape the possibilities of each site: algorithmic, layout, and interaction are all digital infrastructures that shape sites, but so too is the interpersonal and community ethos that structures how users interact, how posts get traction, and how certain modes of relationality are made possible—or impossible. As is the case with Tumblr, its "unique ethos" was facilitated by a mix of its digital infrastructure and how the site was populated in its beginning days. And while mutual aid posts were part of what would allow Tumblr to was never intended to be a space where currency was exchanged; its economic value came as a result of the niche communities and people who made it their digital home, and Tumblr fame was notoriously difficult—if not outright impossible—to monetize. After all, unlike Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and even OnlyFans, Tumblr is unique insofar as it does not highlight—or even show—how many followers any individual user has. While there is the possibility of influence on the site, to be an *influencer* is near-impossible. There is no native market function possible on Tumblr because it eschews the digital logics necessary to produce itself as a market. OnlyFans, on the other hand, was always imagined as a market. As its very

name makes visible, OnlyFans is predicated upon the producer/fan relationship—a relationship that is always an economic relationship, a market relationship, and leaves little room for a reveral or rethinking of that hierarchy. This difference in ethos makes the two sites two completely different spaces, even despite the fascicle similarities that the shared production and distribution of erotic content might lead one to believe.

Moreover, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, OnlyFans—already ubiquitous for its role in facilitating the rise of sex workers—was catapulted further into the mainstream because of its role as a source of income for a whole slew of workers who entered the sex trade. Though OnlyFans—and the number of people involved in forms of digital sex work—had steadily grown since OnlyFans' inception in 2016, the slew of layoffs that came as a result of COVID-19 lockdowns led to an infusion of new people engaging with the site, both as laborers and as consumers. Quickly, OnlyFans became a household name, with OnlyFans creators gaining sympathy—rather than scorn. With OnlyFans as a specific platform for sex work entering the mainstream, the image of an OnlyFans creator began to change from that of sexually excess degenerates to that of sexually acceptable, even respectable, entrepreneurs, or down-on-their-luck underdogs taking on sex work temporarily as a means to the middle-class "good life." One January 2021 episode of the long-running crime procedural *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit,* for example, focused on the sexual assault of a character whose secondary career as a camgirl was very much an analogue to creators on OnlyFans, with the episode's star sex worker/victim character embodying many familiar cultural scripts associated with OnlyFans creators. Zoey, the camgirl character, is played sympathetically as any other one-episode victim archetype might be, with her career as a sex worker held against how she is struggling with school tuition, works making meals for disadvantaged children for what appears to be a Catholic

charity, and acts as primary caretaker for her ailing father. One exchange even lays out the economic problems of OnlyFans, with one character explaining bluntly, "Technically, the girls are just independent contractors who are paid through the site," and another character replying sarcastically, "What, like Uber drivers?" This portrayal of camworkers is a far cry from the portrayal of online sex workers—and sex workers in general—in the *Law and Order* universe of old, revealing shifting mythologies of online sex workers. Beyond fictional portrayals of OnlyFans and the sex workers who populate it, though, one longform article from *The Guardian* is particularly indicative of this shift.

Published in July 2021, Emma Garland's article, "'Where Else can I Make a Month's Rent in Two Days?': The Unlikely Stars of OnlyFans" plays on both the ubiquity and sensationalism of OnlyFans' reputation as a platform for sex workers. The title itself sets the tone of the article: the people who occupy OnlyFans are not the "expected" sexual degenerates that respectable society has come to associate with digital sex work, but are instead "unlikely stars" and savvy businesspeople whose decision to engage in virtual sex work is a clever economic decision, one that is laudable, respectable, even. This line of thought continues in the beginning by profiling Lex Lederman, described in the article as a sort of American ideal of white masculinity. The very first paragraph of the article starts with a glowing representation of Lederman as a paragon for our day, with Garland writing:

> In many ways, Lex Lederman, 28, is a classic American family man. He owns a farm in New Hampshire, where he lives with his wife and three children (plus a sizable company of chickens, pigs and geese). He's teaching himself home renovation (plumbing, electrics, how to lay floors) and regularly helps out with homeless food charities, refugee relief, and the local high school football team. But this lifestyle has only become possible since he quit his construction job for a full-time career on OnlyFans – the content subscription service where he uploads erotic pictures and videos for his predominantly gay male fanbase (Garland 2021).

Notably, Lederman's leftist politics are left out of this analysis, but without them, the image that Garland is painting is clear: Lederman, as representative of the "unlikely" or "new" class of internet sex workers, is far from the sexual Others one might associate with sex work. Lederman is not only *just like us,* but with his "unattainable family man" persona, as Garland describes him later in the article, he is what we should all aspire to. As the first OnlyFans creator we are introduced to, Lederman—or at least, the Lederman that Garland describes—sets the tone for the piece, one that is making a case for an OnlyFans sex worker's respectability by positioning it as a market towards the middle-class good life. This theme is continued in Garland's framing of Clarita, whose OnlyFans career is described primarily as, "a way to continue putting herself through nursing school in Florida" (Garland 2021). As the article goes on, Garland continues to frame OnlyFans as an avenue by which to earn the middle-class good life: she describes, in detail, the symbols of wealth that one OnlyFans creator, Kaya Corbridge attributes to her OnlyFans career: "…more than $m….buy[ing] a house in Lancashire outright, and travel[ing] the world – Portugal, the Canary Islands, Rome, Malta, Bali" (Garland 2021). And while Garland does allow for some room to critique the exploitative nature of OnlyFans—allowing space for one OnlyFans creator to detail her experience being financially coerced by a high-paying fan, and also allowing for some critique of OnlyFans' lack of benefits structure for its creators—but overall, OnlyFans is framed as a net good, a new market that offers flexible hours, financial benefits, and the chance to make it big. It is a denunciation of the myth of sex work as "sexually excess," and a claim to sex work—or at least, sex work as it looks on OnlyFans—and its sexual acceptability, its lucrative financial possibility, and its respectability. Garland's framing of OnlyFans as a respectable new market for entrepreneurs and fully acceptable members of the body politic—one that disavows those sex workers whose aspirations may not be

higher education, or whose class positions mark them far from the "unattainable family man" archetype—is embodied in a quote from one OnlyFans creator: "The misconception is that anyone who does OnlyFans is uneducated or dumb, and it couldn't be further from the truth" (Garland 2021).

Though some may argue that this normalization of sex work may have net positive effects for sex workers, the shift of this framing almost-completely evacuates the sex workers who cannot frame their work as the lucrative business venture of white, cisgender, all-American, football-playing dads, or the thin, conventionally-attractive Floridian nurse whose venture into erotic production is all in advance of attaining a "respectable" career in nursing. It is this class of sex workers—who are disproportionately Black, transfeminine, working-class, disabled, or all three—who built online sex work, who have a different outlook on sex work, and who are being evacuated and disavowed in OnlyFans' new reputation as a space for "respectable" sex workers to achieve the middle-class good life. This is worlds away from Amanda Duberman's viral 2018 conversation with the late Mistress Velvet for *The Huffington Post*. With the eye-catching title, "Meet The Dominatrix Who Requires the Men who Hire Her to Read Black Feminist Theory," Duberman's article allows Mistress Velvet to describe the explicitly political nature of her work as a Domme in her own words. Mistress Velvet does not shy away from the economic precarity related to sex work: she explicitly connects it to economic precarity, stating, "I was like, I need more money, or I'm going to get evicted" (Duberman 2018). Nor does Mistress Velvet seek to romanticize the prospect of doing sex work. She describes it as exhausting, as requiring work beyond the scene itself, about the anxieties that come with sex work that were only glanced upon in Garland's article. The complex, multifaceted experiences of sex work—and its limitations—are made expressly clear in Mistress Velvet's interview, and even if it does the work of

normalization, it does not make the same appeals to sexual acceptability, respectability, and the flashy potential for class mobility as Garland's article does. Even if it is normalizing sex work, it is doing so through a lens of labor that recognizes power, something very different from the appeals to respectability in Garland's article, and even in the *Law and Order* episode mentioned above. And though Mistress Velvet was not an OnlyFans creator, she is comparable to other sex workers who found relative mainstream attention for the sex work they do, like the OnlyFans creators in Garland's article. Reading Duberman's 2018 with Mistress Velvet against Garland's 2021 profile of the "unlikely" stars of OnlyFans reveals perhaps a slightly greater cultural acceptance of sex work as a whole, but also reveals the privileged position that OnlyFans plays *as* a space in the cultural consciousness—one that renders it, and it specifically, as a more "acceptable" or "respectable" avenue for eroticism, specifically *because* of its economic potential.

Beyond evacuating the marginalized sex workers, Garland's glowing account of the "respectable" creators of OnlyFans does not account for the queer and trans people of color whose modes of erotic production cannot so-easily be slotted legibly into schemas of "labor." Returning to Mark Aguhar, in her practice, Aguhar engaged in—or, at the very least, gestured towards—the production and circulation of erotic images, like many of the OnlyFans creators featured in Garland's article. Aguhar's erotic production could reasonably be part of her artistic practice—and thus, a commodity that could be bought and sold. But her *calloutqueen* blog, though functioning as a performance of a hyperexaggerated version of herself, *also* functioned as a more personal corollary to her "professional" Tumblr blog, simply called *markaguhar*. While *markaguhar.tumblr.com* was a semi-curated collection of Aguhar's artwork, inspirations, and muses, her *calloutqueen* blog was much more intimate, even down to some of the selfies she

posted, embracing the eroticism of her *heavenly brown body.* Mark Aguhar's engagement with the erotic, even and especially on her *calloutqueen* blog, cannot be so-easily slotted into "sex work," just as Tumblr's culture of the creation, circulation and recirculation of erotic materials cannot easily be framed as "sex work." Friendships that begin because of the shared circulation of erotic creations—be those aural, illustrated, or photographed—elude the market logics of OnlyFans' mainstreaming. Similarly, this production of OnlyFans creators *as* creators further renders their work as simple, apolitical products meant to be marketed and sold; as Mark Aguhar's work on Tumblr—equal parts expressly, excessively erotic *and* political—and Mistress Velvet's articulation of her own Domme practice show, neither the creation and recirculation of erotic materials, nor the performance of being a Black Dominatrix, can be so-easily split from power and "the political," especially when these queer-of-color erotic figures *expressly* understand the erotic products they create as a form of political action in itself. This cleaving of the sexual from the political, the furthering of these antagonistic binaries, further allows for OnlyFans to become remythologized as a "sexually acceptable" part of a liberalizing society, while other forms of eroticism—especially eroticism online—are to be surveilled and restricted.

While OnlyFans' pivot from a ban on adult content might reflect the potential failings of FOSTA-SESTA as a legislative tool of discipline, the fact that OnlyFans did not go the way of Tumblr in implementing its adult content ban does not necessarily represent a more open future for sexuality and eroticism on the internet as a whole. As this context shows, the two cases cannot be fully compared, with the sites' respective intentions, contexts, and cultural meanings yielding completely different outcomes. While Tumblr's adult content ban could be viewed as a result of FOSTA-SESTA's shadow purpose, OnlyFans' pivot might be understood within its context as sexual acceptability shifting to maintain racial capitalism by centering sex work's

sexually and socially respectable citizens. As an antagonistic binary, sexual mythmaking is a blunt weapon, one that cannot account for the slippages of reality, especially during crisisAs a project of mythmaking, it cannot account for fugitive modes of being that refuse its organizing power. Moreover, as a technology that helps to maintain racial regimes, sexual mythmaking is fundamentally reflective of what Robinson describes as "unstable truth systems" (Robinson 2007, xii). With the erosion of economic protections and decades of organized political action by sex workers to have their labor recognized *as labor,* the hardline mythologies around sex work and sex workers being always already inherently sexually excess has shifted, if only slightly. The tenuous incorporation of OnlyFans and some of its creators into the mainstream body politic is reflective of such an "unstable truth system" beginning to show signs of wear. The "antagonistic binaries" that produce the "sexually excess" and the "sexually acceptable" or their non-sexualized counterparts, the "sexually innocent" cannot account for the ways in which the crises that capitalism produces, including and especially global pandemics, have led to more people to take on precarious labor—including digital sex work. Like the signs of wear that led to white gay men and lesbians being incorporated into "sexual acceptability" in response to the crisis that HIV/AIDS revealed, *some* sex work done by *some* sexual subjects is finding itself slowly being subsumed into sexual acceptability as a social and economic response to the crisis that capital produced. OnlyFans, in many ways, may be serving the same sort of role as the state-sponsored brothels of the Early Modern Era, which themselves were a response to an economic and moral crisis of ordering. But this partial incorporation continues to leave many out, and even at its most "respectable," remains contested. After all, FOSTA-SESTA is still standing law, even if its supporters believe it needs even further strengthening. Even if OnlyFans stays true to its support for its erotic creators, however, the project of incorporation that it is representative of remains

limited and limiting, leaving out those sexually excess subjects whose erotic productions refuse the ontological binary of the "excess" and the "respectable," the "erotic" and the "political," the "explicit" and the "respectable."

Conclusion

The Fight Online Sex Trafficking-Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act, or FOSTA-SESTA, is often framed as a novel solution to a novel problem: sex trafficking, particularly of children. What FOSTA-SESTA's narrow framing ignores, however, is how anti-sex trade and trafficking legislation has always been written with a specific, racialized subject in mind: the white woman or white child. The historic residue of its legislative precursors reveals how FOSTA-SESTA's explicit intent, fighting sex trafficking of sexual innocents, cannot account for those who projects of sexual mythmaking produce as always already sexually excess—even if not involved in sex trafficking. This failure to account for those always already produced as sexually excess has made it so that those communities outside of sexual mythmaking's paradigmatically-protected subject, especially those who disavow and resist such ordering, can and will become further-marginalized under regimes that utilize otherwise-agreeable scripts to enact sexual control. This failure to account for those outside of the paradigmatic image of sexual innocents can lead to fall through ontological gaps—even, and including, children.

FOSTA-SESTA's proponents claim that the legislative package is intended to "protect children," but as with both historical and other contemporary discourses surrounding the "protection of children," the children that the full force of the state is being mobilized to protect are not *all* children; instead, children who are not "sexually innocent" in sexual mythmaking's antagonistic binary are denied protection and safety. Queer and trans children, especially queer-

and trans-of-color children, may benefit from anonymity and fluidity in digital spaces for reasons including, but not limited to, the possibility of families unaccepting of a child's queerness or transness. Discourses of "protecting the children" that do not recognize the ways that anonymity and spaces removed from indexing and surveillance cannot account for the ways in which social media spaces can act as spaces of refuge, and in some cases, may be the *only* spaces of safety and refuge that queer and trans youths may have from homes that attempt to discipline them into heterosexuality and cisnormativity. Returning back to the case of Leelah Alcorn, the white trans teenager whose death by suicide was in close proximity to Blake Brockington's, and was heavily, publicly, and collectively mourned on Tumblr, though she was protected by her whiteness, and her whiteness facilitated the mechanisms of the state into posthumously protecting her, even *she* is not be accounted for and protected within sociolegal approaches to "protecting the children" that involve the demonization of any degree of anonymity and un-indexable online subjectivity, the promotion and fetishization of tools of surveillance and carceral control, and the heavy policing of spaces that engage in sexual and erotic content online. When Alcorn's parents were the people creating the existential danger and unlivable circumstances for her, legislatively increasing surveillance, control, and a lack of anonymity would simply reinforce the circumstances that led to her death. For Alcorn, the death-producing conditions and discourses that her parents engaged in would extend past the moment of physical death and into the attempted killing of their trans child in the realm of collective queer and trans memory. Soon after Alcorn's death, her parents attempted to delete her Tumblr blog, the only space where Leelah could continue to live *as* Leelah. In response to this, anonymous strangers on the internet—those people who have long been cast as predators, as traffickers, as those who sexually innocent white youth need to stay away from—quickly and collectively took on the

project of archiving her blog, of letting Leelah live, even long past her physical body's death, even when her parents would not let her. This autonomously, anonymously-produced archive now lives on Tumblr as *thelazerprincessarchives-blog*, and though incomplete[32], it offers a challenge to the narratives supplied by those who argue that greater policing at the legislative and parental level is the only way to "protect (white) children" on the internet. Ultimately, what makes Leelah Alcorn interesting for the purposes of this project isn't simply that her death led to legislation and state recognition; instead, Alcorn's life on Tumblr shows how even white children, even white girls, are not protected from material harm by the policing projects that are drafted and passed and enforced in their name.

Moreover, under legislative regimes that are shaped by—and reinforce—the binary antagonisms of "sexual innocents" to be protected against the "sexually excess," children who are always already "sexually excess" because of the intersections of their race and economic status are also rendered culpable for acts of sexual violence, even if such acts of violence are enacted against them, or even if they cannot be bracketed into a pure "victim/victimizer binary." The 2004 case of Cyntoia Brown, a Black 16-year-old sex trafficking survivor sentenced to 51 years for the self-defense murder of a 43-year-old white john, reflects this. Though Brown took responsibility for the self-defense murder of the john, and though she was trafficked as a minor, Brown was sentenced as an adult and framed as fundamentally dangerous to society by the prosecution—by the representative of the state. Just four years after the introduction of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, Brown would find no protections from a punitive justice

[32] In a post that has a permanent link on the sidebar of *thelazerprincess-archives,* the Tumblr user who created Leelah's archive explains the reasons for the Leelah archives' incompleteness, writing: "Because it looks like Leelah's mother finally got her way and had her blog deleted before the archival process could be completed, most of the remaining posts will be reposted, using the wayback machine archives of Leelah's blog provided by [Tumblr user] diamaterialista (2015)."

system that found her always already sexually excess. In the historical, cultural, and legislative scripts that produced the highly racialized, gendered, and classed mythologies of "sexually innocent" victims of sex trafficking and the "sexually excess" perpetrators of sex trafficking, Brown could be considered as a consenting agent in her own trafficking, as Brown's juvenile case manager with the Department of Children's Services testified[33] as part of Brown's trial.

In inducing a fundamental change to how digital platforms can approach content related to sexuality and eroticism, FOSTA-SESTA has led to queer- and trans-of-color oases to fundamentally change in character, like Tumblr has. The ramifications of this change have led to the loss of a specific kind of queer world, not only for those young people who were using the site from 2007 to 2018, but to those young people who needed the kind of anonymous, fluid, anarchic, queer archipelagic space that Tumblr offered in its eleven-year golden age. The spaces that queer- and trans-of-color youth now occupy are much more fraught: TikTok, for example, is seen as a budding space for queer and trans youth to express themselves, but as a video platform whose data-mining algorithm is, as of late 2021, thorough and active, even when users are not using the app, queer and trans youth are exposed to a different and more personal degree of hate and backlash from other users on the one hand, and more extraction from the app, on the other hand. This doesn't even take into account the ways that TikTok's algorithm has been long-known to censor content related to queer and trans issues. Instagram, a Facebook-owned asset worth more than $110 billion dollars as of late 2021, functions in a similar way, with shadowbans a common self-reported experience for users who post material about queer and

[33] As outlined by the court in Brown's 2008 appeal, Martin described Brown as: "very manipulative" and of Brown's experience being trafficked, "if [the man trafficking Brown] had her on the street, I would have to say it was her choice…Her mother was extremely involved with her program….[the defendant] chose to leave a very stable, loving home to be on the streets" (State of Tennessee v. Cyntoia Denise Brown, Appeal from the Criminal Court for Davidson County: 2009).

trans subjects, critiques of race and empire, or who do not fit the racialized visual signifiers of "Instagram Influencer."

In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive,* Lee Edelman argues that the figure of the Child structures politics, what can be thought of as *the political*, and the human/the inhuman divide; it is this "fascism of the baby's face" (2004, 151), Edelman writes, that he means when he describes *reproductive futurity,* which ultimately is a mode of ordering that aspires towards its own reproduction. In his self-described polemic, Edelman suggests that queer subjectivities pose a challenge to—or the end of—reproductive futurity, and such challenge must be taken up or embraced as a mode of resistance. While I agree with Edelman in some places, what Edelman misses in this is the fact that reproductive futurism does not include all children within its ontological bounds. If, as Edelman states, "the future is kids stuff," does this include *all* children? Not for those children who are produced as always already "sexually excess." As the counterhistories of childhood innocence that I have briefly described in this chapter illustrate, not all children are allowed the opportunity to be kids. Like Obama's Fatherhood Speech posits, some children are the foregone conclusion of future "broken families." Some children, like Blake Brockington, like Cyntoia Brown, like the countless Indigenous children abused during the Boarding School era, are not the axis upon which the world according to racial capitalism turns, and instead, are the raw materials to be extracted and disposed of for its operation. As such, in thinking about sexual mythmaking's reproductive impetus, the figure of the child—like all figures in racial regimes structured by racial capitalism—is a racialized figure. It is the white child to whom the future is guaranteed, to whom the future is organized around, and even then, not simply for the child's own sake. Instead, the white child is a hallowed figure for their *future reproductive potential*. And as Leelah Alcorn shows us, even white children are not protected by

the legal and sociocultural regimes that are mean to ensure they are disciplined into proper "sexually acceptable" reproductivity.

In other words, the future is not kid's stuff, not exactly. The future, at least as it is imagined and structured by racial capitalism, is the stuff of difference-making and capital's expansion.

But if *the future*—at least, as it understood by racial capitalism's necessary expansion and reproduction unto eternity—is *not* kid's stuff, then what might a counterimaginary of the future offer us? What political possibilities might the suspended futurity of queer- and trans-of-color imaginaries offer us, if we take to heart that *the future* is not for them? What possibility is there for futurity when queer- and trans-of-color worlds are forced to be at their end? In the next chapter, by means of conclusion, we will turn to that imaginary and the political possibilities it offers. For if *the future is not kid's stuff,* then we might find a path forward that we can call queer futurity *not* in begetting and begetting into an always-promised-present, but instead, in the pits of finality.

We might find queer futurity, however ephemeral, at the party at the end of the world.

CHAPTER FIVE: *…I HAD A CRAZY, CLASSIC LIFE:* JANELLE MONÁE'S "CRAZY, CLASSIC LIFE" AND THE MANY ENDS OF MANY QUEER WORLDS

"Ours was not a political party, like the Communist Party. Political parties endure, but they often endure through coercion, violence, and force. Instead, I mean our communist party as a name for what Souixsie describes as the endlessly renewable chain of events performed into being by a plurality of broken people who are trying to keep each other alive."
—Joshua Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer-of-Color Life* (2018, xv).

"Well, the freak[s] shall inherit the earth now
No matter how well done or rare
And I'm telling you hold on, hold on
Tomorrow we'll be there
We'll build our radioactive castles
Out in the radioactive air
And I'm telling you hold on, hold on
Tomorrow we'll be there"
—Klaus Nomi, "After the Fall" (*Simple Man,* 1982).

Introduction

In taking Tumblr as my primary case study, this project has been about many things: the tangle of state and non-state power in late neoliberalism, the many ways various groups make political appeals to sexual acceptability, the children rendered outside of the hegemonic image of "sexual innocence," the politics that embrace sexual excess as lines of flight and how they orient us away from the organizing ontologies of racial capitalism, and, at the heart of it all, the end of queer- and trans-of-color worlds.

In the aftermath of what is being described as the January 6th Insurrection, much popular and academic punditry has moved away from the optimism or ambivalence towards social media's possibilities; Facebook and Twitter, standing in for all social media spaces and all possibilities of digital interconnectedness, are rendered as spaces of nothing but division and extremism, threatening the stability of the republic. Instagram and TikTok are seen similarly, as

tools that put innocent children in danger, and nothing but. The popularity of Bo Burnham's 2021 confessional stand-up film, *Bo Burnham: Inside* makes palpable the mass ambivalence towards social media; one of his most popular songs, "Welcome to the Internet," is a cynical view of social media and the interconnectivity it provides, bitterly framing the structure of the internet as a form of sexualized predation itself, playing off now-familiar cultural scripts about "strangers on the internet" preying on sexual innocents:

> We set our sights and spent our nights
> Waiting
> For you, you, insatiable you
> Mommy let you use her iPad
> You were barely two
> And it did all the things
> We designed it to do (Burnham 2021).

As one of Netflix's breakout hits of 2021, Burnham's films, the songs contained within it, and the critiques Burnham made within it were seen as representative of the zeitgeist. Burnham, a man who made his living as a teenager and young person on the internet of the mid-2000s to the early 2010s, was quickly souring on it. In his limited—and privileged—position, he was taken to represent all of us. In the necessary critiques that have been opened up about the juggernaut social media platforms of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the internet and all digital spaces are seen as plagues, sores whose capacity for virality infect the real world, rather than develop as extensions of the material conditions of the world that racial capitalism has wrought. In our collective quickness to excise the virus of which the Capitol Insurrection was a symptom, we have misdiagnosed the internet and digital spaces as the sole and primary source of infection. We have excised the possibility of digital spaces providing much-needed lines of flight—or, at least, spaces where we may *imagine otherwise.*

What my chapters on Tumblr offer us, then, is a counternarrative, one that does not excuse multi-billion-dollar digital media corporations from the harms that are done in service of

mining user data and advancing profit margins. And while these chapters make the case for a smaller, more-anonymous internet, this reflection on Tumblr does not, exactly, offer solutions. For now, I cannot offer a way to *live with virality,* to draw from HIV/AIDS scholars and activists. Instead, what I offer here is memorial for the queer archipelago after its end, or at least, during its height. What Tumblr offered for those *heavenly brown bodies* for those *growing up gay on the internet,* as Mark Aguhar succinctly put it, was not simply a refuge from the discourses of gay assimilationism at a time when it was at its height. Instead, what was offered by Tumblr's queer archipelago—elusive, ungovernable, unindexable, leaderless, and excess—was not utopia. But it was an alternative to the organizing structures of "the political" as it is understood under racial capitalism's organizing of "the political." It was a space for feminist political education. It was a never-ending vortex of content. It was all its excess, all its infamous eroticism, and more. It was a fugitive queer-of-color world hiding in plain sight.

All this said, Tumblr's end cannot be reduced so simply its end: the site remains active, even into 2021, with some of its old, ungovernable ethos still present, haunting the ethos of the site to this day. The end of one queer world could not, did not, mean the end of *all* queer worlds, even if the end of queer worlds come with important material consequences. Even still, Tumblr is a quieter site now, not the bustling hub of queer theorizing and politics as it once was. Its alternatives are few and far between: Twitter is an alternative that allows anonymity, one that many Tumblr users went to during the "Tumblr exodus" of December 2018. But is far from a perfect analogue, with character limits, its lack of a central blog functioning as a user's personalized "hub," lack of a community ethos, and the presence of public figures makes the more intimate, flexible, complex interactions that defined Tumblr's "unique ethos" (Cavalcante 2018, 18) much more difficult to cultivate, if not impossible. TikTok and Instagram, as image-

forward services, elude anonymity, and their draconian policing of sexuality and eroticism undermine the capacity for Tumblr to produce spaces for queer- and trans-of-color worlds of resistance that elude sexual mythmaking's ordering. Though some users remain, and innumerable others still were shaped by the impact of Tumblr's queer archipelago at its unruly height, Tumblr's 2018 adult content ban functioned as the end of a queer world. But the end of Tumblr as a queer archipelago does not mean the end of its possibility, nor does it mean the end of how it can act as a generative space for imagining political possibility. The reaction to Tumblr's 2018 adult content ban, in framing it as an end to the world might, in fact, be an incredibly pertinent case study for an era saturated in fears around the end of regimes, the end of precedent, and—in material and metaphorical ways both—the end of the world.

Ours is a time at the end of the world. As a world before COVID-19 recedes further and further back into memory, we also find the late-twentieth century's genteel optics of respectability similarly receding, replaced with the open-fanged nationalism whose spectacular January 6th debut had as its loyal handmaidens both the Trump regime and disciplinary political science to thank for its introduction into the mainstream. And all the while, humming as ever-steady background fuzz, lies the specter of an unlivable planet—twelve more years, ten more years, eight more years, before what has been deemed, in true apocalyptic parlance, as *the catastrophic*. Yes, ours is a time at the end of the world, or perhaps more aptly, at the convergence of the many worlds' many ends: of the mechanics of racial capitalism finally, inevitably, coming home to roost. As Cedric Robinson wrote in the final chapter of his 1984 *Black Marxism*:

> …The clock of "modern times" is running down….what once were faint signs of breakdown are now in bold evidence. Not even the brilliant wizardry of high technological advancement can mute the rumblings from the degenerating mechanism. It

> is the occasion of opposition and contradiction and the moment of opportunity ([1983] 2000, 316).

But notably, what Robinson points to here, is the fact that *the end of the world,* at least, as it has been articulated and understood by the mainstream, has been going on for a long time. In many ways, from Robinson's means of a conclusion, one can posit that racial capitalism, in its never-ending expansion, is fueled by the ending of worlds outside of its own. What is difference-making, after all, if not the destruction of worlds and the imposition of a *particularistic* order?

So, under racial capitalism, the end of the world is not a one-time incident, but a process of dissolution that is necessary for capital to re-establish, reinforce, and remain. As C. Riley Snorton writes, "…worlds end all the time" (2017, 198). Which, like Robinson's provocation, begs the question: *which* worlds are allowed to end, and *who* must endure the end of worlds forevermore?

As Robinson points to, under racial regimes, the end of the world is not a novelty for those outside of the exalted role that is white hegemony. Famously, Christina Sharpe describes *to be in the wake* as, "living the disastrous time and effects of….the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence" (15). Sharpe's conception of *the wake* builds itself on the fertile ground of Black feminist scholarship theorizing chattel slavery's project as a world-breaking project: Dionne Brand's "door of no return" (2001) on hand, or Saidiya Hartman's conception of chattel slavery as a "rupture" and the Middle Passage as a "great event of breach" (Hartman 1997, 74) on the other. Following these scholars, the apocalyptic is not some far-off science fiction possibility, but has already happened, though under white settler-slaver regimes of knowing, it is misnamed as a rightful birth. Under racial capitalism, the difference-making and extraction that was necessary to produce "modern times"

can be described as a mode of creating communities for whom the apocalyptic has already happened—but who found modes of survival after the end of the world.

Out of such conditions, operating in excess of those "antagonistic differences" (Robinson [1983] 2000, 10) that structure racial capitalism's organizing ontology, queer and trans-of-color people operate in the interstices of multiple worlds' ends; when writing about sexuality and Black women, Hortense Spillers writes, "The discourse of sexuality seems another way…that the world divides decisively between the haves/have nots, those who may speak and those who may not, those who…benefit from the dominative mode….Sexuality describes another type of discourse that splits the world between the 'West and the Rest of Us'" (Spillers 1984, 79). To Spillers, then, sexuality as discourse functions as a way to entrench and naturalize difference, along which power can flow. The lexical gaps, or *interstices,* of the article's title refer to what Spillers describes as, "the historical moment at which hierarchies of power…simply run out of terms because the empowered meets in the black female the veritable nemesis of degree and difference" (1984, 77). In other words, to Spillers, the *interstital* refers to both lexical gap *and* those caught within what that lexical gap reveals, that is to say, those who are caught in the tangle of structures of power that displace, obfuscate, and as a result, produce collective understandings of subject positions. Black women are caught in this tangle, reduced to simultaneous hypersexuality and a "disappear[ed]…legitimate subject of female sexuality" (1984, 76) by nature of how they are produced as *Black* before woman, before sexual subject. To Spillers, like Cohen, this renders Black women as outside of sexual or reproductive normativity—to use Cohen's term, it renders Black women as "heterosexuals outside of heteronormativity."

And so, extending Spillers' analysis—not to obfuscate the particular production of Black women as into a "status of non-being" (Spillers 1987, 76) but to take seriously her concluding suggestions that overlapping systems of power produce multiple subjects whose lives take place within the "interstices" ([1981] 2003, 173)—we can understand that life outside of sexual normativity, or living life among the mythologized "sexual excess," produces lives that are built and bloom and grow within those "lexical gaps." Life is made in the gaps, in the fissures, in the interstices, at the end of the world, at the intersection of the many ends of many worlds. And as subjects produced as "sexually excess," as outside of sexuality's "legitimate" subjectivities, making a life at the many ends of many worlds is not unfamiliar to queer and trans of color people. While the gay mainstream marked, marks, and continues to mark HIV/AIDS as a crisis overcome—an apocalypse averted, in many ways—for Black and Indigenous gay men, this crisis is not over. Moreover, for heterosexual, cisgender Black women—a community who fell from mainstream HIV/AIDS organizing—the crisis, too, is not over. And while this mode of biopolitical disposability and ongoing slow violence shows one way in which queer and trans-of-color life is made to occupy conditions of worlds at their end, it is not the only way by which the apocalyptic becomes the everyday for queer and trans-of-color people. Late capitalism's advancement itself is a common avenue for the end of queer- and trans-of-color worlds, destroying worlds of survival and community to advance its own unyielding attempts at reproduction. From physical spaces that existed as their own worlds, like Times Square and the Christopher Street Piers in the late 1990s, to ephemeral, digital worlds like Tumblr and, to some extent, OnlyFans, the queer-of-color worlds that define spaces—that are extracted from and used to produce value—quickly become disposable in the face of gentrification and shifting modes of making value. Queer-of-color life, in many ways, then, is *life at the end of the world.* But as C.

Riley Snorton reminds us, recognizing that queer and trans-of-color life is *life at the end of the world* is not to reify the myth of power's totality. Instead, recognizing that queer- and trans-of-color life is *life at the end of the world* requires refusal: "to refuse the representational structures that present some deaths as the requirement for the optimization of life itself; and to insist on different vocabularies for living, which involves asking more and better questions as well as laying claim to the survival of the damned" (2020, 315). A situatedness within the end of the world produces subjectivities simultaneously exposed to the full vulnerability and bare life of the apocalyptic everyday, *and* open to possibilities elsewhere, beyond the world that racial regimes imagine as *the only possible world.* José Esteban Muñoz, in his transformative *Cruising Utopia,* describes this as "queerness as ideality" ([2009] 2019, 1). For Muñoz, not only is the *form* of queerness utopian ([2009] 2019, 30), but it is necessarily political, a challenge the world that renders queer-of-color life—and trans-of-color life, alongside it—the ample ground for extraction and disposability. For Muñoz, queerness as horizon, as utopian in form, as unruly in its refusal of "pragmatism," offers a break from what Cedric Robinson describes in *Black Marxism* as the "degenerating mechanism" of racial capitalism and its technologies (Robinson [1983] 2000, 316). As Muñoz puts it, "…queerness as horizon rescues and emboldens concepts such as freedom that have been withered by the touch of neoliberal thought and gay assimilationist politics" ([2009] 2019, 32). Or, in other words, queer- and trans-of-color modes of life, survival, resistance, refusal, and memory-making do not fall under conventional definitions of "the political" under racial capitalism—and in many ways, are antagonistic towards the concept of "the political" because of how those produced as "sexually excess" subjectivities are necessarily seen as "antipolitical" to begin with. But despite this—despite how queer- and trans-of-color modes of survival cannot be enclosed under the paucity of "the

political" as a schematic—these ways of living provide lines of flight, moving us towards the horizon that is queerness, towards freedom.

Queer and trans-of-color life is life at the end of the world. But what happens after the end of the world? For one's community to be produced as "excess" in the logics of racial capitalism is to be living in a place where the *forgeries of myth and memory*—those very narratives that, Robinson reminds us, attempt to belie objectivity from a structure of power that is particularistic and flimsy at its core—not only end worlds, but completely obliviate their existence to begin with. Worlds fundamentally incompatible with the world of "order" that racial capitalism posits as the *only* world, worlds of feeling, worlds of endless anonymity and fluidity, worlds that evade indexing, are all made nonexistent in the power of hegemonic memory-making. In the violent process of memory-making under racial capitalism, to say that a world's existence is solely determined by the quantifiable effects is leaves behind is to say it never existed at all.

As such, to uncover these worlds—to see how they persist within, beyond, and through the end of the world—we must return to the ephemeral: to memory and feeling, to ephemeral and eclectic archives, to that which disciplinary political science labels as the "non-political," but could more easily be defined as the specifically "anti-political." In other words, to dance among those queer-of-color worlds that occupy the space between the *here* of modernity's clock quickly running out (Robinson [1983] 2000, 316) and the multifaceted *theres* of Muñoz's horizon, we must familiarize ourselves with the *queer.*

But before that: let's talk about the world.

Sexual Mythmaking and the Party at the End of the World

In his 2018 *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer-of-Color Life,* Joshua Chambers-Letson articulates a party outside of politics, a communism outside of the Marxist tradition and all the particularistic European ontologies that it stemmed from or that stemmed from it. Communism not *communism,* Chambers-Letson argues, writing:

> As the capitalist mode of production drags the world ever closer to the precipice of total destruction, our survival may rely now upon the realization of communism's promise, whether we call it "communism" or by another name….a communism of incommensurability is a sphere of social relation structured less by the social fictions of possession, equality, and exchange, than by collective, entangled, and historically informed practices of sharing out…and being together in difference" (2018, 9).

Party. To commune. As Chambers-Letson so deftly illustrates in both the above quote and the quote at the start of this chapter, the language of gathering, of festivity, of being in community, is language that is also well-used by those institutions of "high politics," the institutions defined against those "excess" positionalities that sexual mythmaking marks as disposable. While "the party" and "communism" functions as language marking the "sexually acceptable" institutions at the height of difference-making's potential and power, at the same time, the specter of the party, of communing, has historically functioned as a marker of the "excess" under regimes of sexual mythmaking. Letson's provocation, then, requires us to return to the party I briefly glanced upon at the beginning of this monograph, the party whose entire existence symbolized the world turned on its head, whose presence in the mythmaking project reflects the reproductive imperative of racial capitalism's project of ordering.

In describing the Sabbat—the figurative nighttime party that, during the height of European witch-trials, was believed to be when and where witches gathered—Federici describes it as thus:

> Class revolt, together with sexual transgression, was a central element in the description of the Sabbat, which was portrayed both as a monstrous sexual orgy and as a subversive political gathering, culminating with an account of the crimes which the participants had committed, and with the devil instructing the witches to rebel against their masters….Parinetto points out that the nocturnal dimension of the Sabbat was a violation of the contemporary capitalist regularization of work-time, and a challenge to private property and sexual orthodoxy, *as the night shadows blurred the distinctions between the sexes and between 'mine and thine….'* (2004, 177).

As Federici describes it, the mythical Sabbat was "subversive" and "utopian," primarily for its function as a space that dismantled hierarchies—its sexual radicalism and political rebellion made it a space of possibility, even if this possibility was contemporaneously understood as enough rationale for sentencing accused witches to death. That said, I contend that it was not just sexual radicalism *and* political rebellion that produced the Sabbat as a dangerous utopia. It is what sexual radicalism and political rebellion represents, what it challenges, and how it rejects the necessary projects of difference-making, that infuse it with potentiality. While Federici seems to imply that the challenge that the Sabbat played in the mythmaking project that was the witch-hunts was the simple inclusion of sexual radicalism, I argue that it was the radical collapse of the erotic and the political, the possibility of fluidity and a refusal of oppositional differences, and this embrace of excess in community is what made the mythological Sabbat simultaneously dangerous and full of rich, utopian, *queer* possibility.

Given racial capitalism's prime ordering ontology is the production and naturalization of "antagonistic differences" for the sake of reproducing unto eternity modes of hierarchical value and order, it is important that the mythology used to discipline subjects into order was an imaginary scene of ungovernability and sexual excess. In other words, in the long genealogy of

racial capitalism's development, parties have served as both cautionary tales and potential utopian imaginaries not *simply* because of their potential for bacchanalian excess, but also because they operate as spaces wherein projects of antagonistic difference-making and the naturalization of hierarchical ordering become unsettled. Federici's figuration of the witch's Sabbat shows us, in no uncertain terms, that it was the very projects of mythmaking that marked subjects as witches—and thus marked them as worthy of both discipline and extraction—that also produced utopian imaginaries of what a world might look like outside of the very modes of ordering that witch trials were used to bring to be.

Tumblr, in this sense, was a million Sabbats at once, a swirling scene lush with excess and exuberance and ungovernability that, if you just kept scrolling down, down, down, never had to end. Cavalcante describes the ambivalent possibilities of this in describing it as Tumblr's *vortextuality,* a space that becomes "queerer as [users] use it" one that can both become a space of possibility *and* one that can become "deeply intense and at times all-consuming" (Cavalcante 2018, 1727-1728). Writing of James Baldwin's writing on Malcolm X, Erica Edwards describes *the kaleidoscopic,* a politics and aesthetics of infinite multiplicity, possibility, and beauty, one that resists the production of hierarchical leadership (Edwards 2013, 233). In its multifaceted and decentralized infrastructure, Tumblr functioned as kaleidoscope, not only resisting the hierarchical modes of ordering the attention economy that define only more popular social media sites—after all, what is an Instagram or TikTok influencer but a leader by other means—but also allowing for alternative possibilities of *being online,* of *being* in general. It is this infrastructure that encouraged anonymity and leaderlessness, combined with what can easily be described as a form of benign neglect on part of the administration team, that allowed for communities and relationships to develop in a way particularistic to the website, one that opened up possibilities

for those so-marginalized by a dangerously-inhospitable internet to flourish. In other words, though Tumblr was not free from the potential dangers that internet communities pose, what it provided was a space where these communities could be *safer,* and as such, one where resistance to racial capitalism's ordering ontology of antagonistic differences and hierarchical leadership was, if not lived, attempted towards: perhaps it was not utopia, but it was glancing towards that horizon.

It was a party, a Sabbat, at the end of the world.

In the aftermath of Tumblr's announced "adult content" ban, there was an affective change in how the community felt. The flippancy that Mark Aguhar embodied and encouraged in her queer-of-color kith and kin was still there, but it was somber, cut with a sense of seriousness. Our ten-year party, it felt, was coming to its end. Daylight was breaking over that queer horizon to which we strived, and with sunrise, this queer-of-color witch's Sabbat would soon dissolve in turn. And if, as Federici notes, the witch's Sabbat in the public imagination of the witch-burning era served as a space wherein rigid modes of ordering were upended, where sexual and gender fluidity reigned supreme, and where everyone—even and especially those naturalized as "abject" or "other" in racial capitalist regimes—were given the sustenance needed to survive, daybreak was less a symbol of new beginnings and more a symbol of power sustaining. It meant a return, but to a world without the oasis that Mark Aguhar and Blake Brockington helped to build.

But even at the end of the party at the end of the world, we will dance and grind and laugh and love together to one last song. In the case of early Tumblr's end, that song was sung by no other than the (An)Archandroid herself, Janelle Monáe.

…And If The World Should End Tonight: "Crazy, Classic, Life" and Representation without Reflection

Janelle Monáe's "Crazy, Classic, Life" video reflects a witch's Sabbat of our times, an erotic, eclectic gathering of Black/brown/queer/genderfuck/punk/femme androids, coming together under the cover of night, lit and color-graded in ways that invoke the 4k-friendly cinemascapes of Wong Kar-wai. It is digital, it is *gif-able*, living in the hyper-reality of an android's dreamscape memories. "Crazy, Classic, Life" simultaneously calls back to generations past while also proposing an image of a future not-yet-but-almost-here, all the while demonstrating modes of survival during—and at the precipice of—the apocalyptic. If queerness, to Muñoz, is a horizon, "the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (Muñoz [2009] 2019, 1), then the life-worlds imagined by Monáe in "Crazy, Classic, Life" are the sunset-drenched pinks, purples, and blues of that queer horizon's edge. And in this way, Monáe's video both *points to* and *functions as* examples of Muñoz's queer horizon in a similar way that the communities of Tumblr's queer-of-color zeitgeist *strived towards being* Muñoz's queer horizon.

I choose to end this brief analysis of Tumblr's queer and trans-of-color communities of resistance on "Crazy, Classic, Life" for more reasons than its aesthetic qualities alone. While the larger project that it was part of, the *Dirty Computer* visual album—described as an "Emotion Picture" by Monáe—was released in April 2018, the individual music video for "Crazy, Classic, Life" was uploaded to Monáe's channel on December 12th of that year, five days before Tumblr's "adult content" ban would be put into effect, and nine days after the policy change was announced. This reupload led to renewed attention paid to "Crazy, Classic Life," and still images and gifs from video were circulated widely during Tumblr's final days before the adult content

ban. And while Monáe's iconicity and the aesthetic qualities of the music video would have led to at least some degree of presence on Tumblr regardless of the context of its release, I believe that the circulation of "Crazy, Classic, Life" during one of Tumblr's ends was the result of how it offered perfect eulogy for a Tumblr at its height—even if it is not *specifically* about Tumblr. Without visually reflecting the myriad communities that made the website their digital home, "Crazy, Classic, Life" represents Tumblr's role as a digital Sabbat, its queer-of-color possibilities of world-making beyond racial capitalism, and the fragile archive of feelings that Tumblr's many fractured communities shaped and were shaped by, moved in and through and against, loved and loathed, and ultimately, for many, left behind.

The "Crazy, Classic, Life" video begins with a series of fragmentary scenes, foreshadowing moments from the rest of the video. In the context of the video watched on its own, these first five seconds acts as a mode of future sight. But within the larger context of the *Dirty Computer* emotion picture taken altogether, these fragmentary memories are just that: memories, and moments long passed. It is important to situate the events of "Crazy, Classic, Life" as acting as memory in the fiction of *Dirty Computer,* especially when relating it back to its role as a eulogy for a form of Tumblr at its end. Like Monáe's android character, Jane 57821, Tumblr's users were looking back on a digital world's end in similarly fragmentary ways: in the form of "best of" posts or flippant reactions to the adult content ban as a public performances of mourning, on one hand; in more quiet, personal, un-indexable ways, on the other.

Moreover, the blurring of past and present and future speak to the disruption of linear time, a concept that Muñoz describes a form of "ecstatic time" (Muñoz [2009] 2019, 32). To Muñoz, part of the role that queerness plays as horizon is a disruption of "straight time," a mapping of the present that, in its linearity, posits futurity as the "province of normative

reproduction" (Muñoz [2009] 2019, 28). In its disruption of straight time, queerness not only pushes us to imagine political possibilities beyond the "meager offerings of pragmatic gay and lesbian politics" (Muñoz [2009] 2019, 32) that the gay mainstream offers as the *only* possibility for queer futurity, but it also disrupts the binary organizing schema that marks the past from the future, those no longer among us from those yet to be born. Such a movement away from straight time extends far beyond the narrative elements that open up this music video. "Crazy, Classic, Life" takes us beyond the mere eclectic and into the multifaceted and the kaleidoscopic, remixing aesthetics and imagery of the past and the present, of seemingly-contradictory youth subcultures, and of pop culture icons. This is not an unusual element of Monáe's work, and in fact, her Afrofuturistic vision has always incorporated and remixed visual elements from eclectic historical moments, icons, and movements. But the assemblage of far-flung pop cultural aesthetics from across place and space in "Crazy, Classic, Life" extends this when it incorporates such eclecticism into a multifaceted vision of community. Monáe/Jane's cohort of Black women dressed in 1980s punk rock-meets-the-Dora Milaje outfits come to dance and writhe and share intimate space with a whole slew of figures of different races, gender presentations, and aesthetic conventions, from a group who looks to be dressed in contemporary club kid fashion to a group all dressed in variations of David Bowie's pantsuit and red mullet from the "Life on Mars" video. This infinity of aesthetic diversity is all in service of imagining a communal future just on the horizon of our current reality, one that calls back to eclectic possibilities of Tumblr. Beyond the political project that Tumblr offered—that is to say, a dismantling of the ways in which "explicit" content and "political" content have been cleaved and organized against one another—this visual representation of eclecticism offers us a way to think about what Alexander Cho describes as Tumblr's ability to forge intimacies not only across space, but across time. In

tracking the Tumblr-life of vintage erotica, Cho writes that the site functions as a circuit by which queer temporality may be generated. Queer temporality is about affect, the lingerings and hauntings that challenge homogenous, linear formations of time (Dinshaw qtd. in Cho 2015, 48). Queer time offers a way to "recuperate time that is not straight" through queer affect: "Embodied experience of the stubborn past….[an affect] that lingers in a stubborn past, one that dwells in cycles and refuses the tidiness of progress, one that skirts through the archive in ephemeral or evasive ways" (Cho 2015, 49). Like Tumblr's assemblage of a stubborn past, Monáe offers an imaginary community where young, queer and trans, disproportionately nonwhite iconoclasts could not only meet, but dance and dine together. The anachronistic assemblage that is "Crazy, Classic, Life," like Tumblr's archipelagic possibilities, draws attention not only to the archival spaces that queer affect fills, but allows us to produce intimacies across time, across space—the same sort of intimacies that are so necessary for the survival of those subjectivities produced as "excess" and expendable under racial capitalism's regimes of ordering and value.

The impact of this, as Monáe illustrates, is a form of kinship of the *right now,* a mode of survival that may not necessarily result in lasting coalitions or political forces, but *matters* in shaping queer- and trans-of-color political life, and, more importantly, in allowing for the possibility of what Joshua Chambers-Letson describes as "More Life," that which moves beyond Snorton's "still life…still being alive" (Chambers-Letson 2018). In both performing and embodying ungovernability, in refusing the ontological ordering schemas at the root of racial capitalism's project of producing "antagonistic differences," in coming together in eclectic, kaleidoscopic kinships of difference, the queer- and trans-of-color people who made Tumblr-as-community produced ways to live within the apocalyptic everyday, pushing to make More Life for those resigned to extraction, disposability, and death.

One line and its variation help to bring to the fore the anarchic politics of Monáe/Jane's queer Black android memories. The first pre-chorus of "Crazy, Classic, Life" is "We don't need another ruler / all of my friends are kings." Though one might easily posit this pre-chorus as one appealing to belonging in the American project, as indicated by her sampling of the Declaration of Independence at the beginning of the song, and the follow-up lines, "I am not America's nightmare / I am the American dream," a fugitive reading requires us to be attuned to how Monáe understands governance and community as a whole, and this lyric offers a direct refusal to be ruled. Such a political orientation is emphasized in this line's repetition in the second pre-chorus. "We don't need another ruler" is repeated here, this time, followed up by, "We don't need another fool." Combined with Monáe's critique of police here, this song articulates a suspicion of authority and of the machinations of rule. But rather than a simple critique, Monáe offers a small-C communist alternative to the mode of Communism that requires coercion and force to rule, Communisms that, Robinson points out, are rooted in the same ontological origins as capitalism—and are limited in their political possibility by playing by racial capitalism's terms. Brockington and Aguhar, in crowning themselves royalty, did not interpellate themselves as part of hierarchy but instead, challenge hierarchical ordering and coercive rule. This trans-of-color appropriation of Western hegemony's terms of rule brings attention to their ungovernability, excess, and illegibility: in their performance of *king* and *queen,* Brockington and Aguhar reveal the fragility of the power of the sovereign, revealing that it is not the apparatuses of rule that they are accountable to. Instead, Aguhar and Brockington reveal to us that, as Monáe reminds us, they—we, *all of their friends and beloved kith and kin,* genderless and genderful—are kings.

As the song begins to end at Monáe shifts to the breakdown, we see the Sabbat elements of this queer-of-color party at the end of the world fully coming to the fore. In a neon-lit, eclectic reproduction of da Vinci's *The Last Supper,* Monáe's Jane 57821 sits in the center of the table, occupying the same seat as Jesus in the original painting. But whereas da Vinci's original work shows a table of simple bread and wine, there is a lushness to Jane's last supper. The table overflows with food, representing the ways in which this party—this illicit, erotic space of possibility—provides more than enough sustenance for everyone. The scarcity and precarity that marks the lives of those rendered excess does not exist here—or, at least, it does not exist during that night. Of course, this can easily be linked to the ways that queer- and trans-of-color people could use Tumblr in the era of gay assimilationism's height. For example, returning to Turner Willman's love letter to Mark Aguhar, they write that Mark Aguhar's presence, "Those of us following you online learned to say FUCK OFF to homonormativity" (Willman 2019). But in addition to this kind of emotional sustenance—which, to be clear, for queer- and trans-of-color people, can be a matter of life and death—there is the more immediate form of sustenance insofar as *queer- and trans-of-color people on Tumblr used it to keep themselves, and each other, fed.* The circulation of GoFundMe links was far from uncommon on Tumblr—campaigns to help pay for someone's gender-affirming surgery, or to pay for someone's rent, for example—but just as common was the circulation of crowdfunding links not associated with specific campaigns. It wasn't uncommon to see people circulating PayPal links, CashApp links, and other one-to-one direct payment links, usually with a disclosure of one's marginal identities and an appeal for digital passers-by to donate, to help the user stay fed, and stay alive[34]. Living in the

[34] One popular Tumblr post written in 2018 even pokes fun at some of the issues trans people face when using these one-to-one direct payment processers, writing: "Me when paypal forces me to see your deadname [a term used for a trans person's name assigned at birth]" with a gif of Paul Rudd sitting at a computer, suddenly yelling "OH SHIT!"

space at the end of the world, within the interstices of systems of power and domination necessary for the churn of racial capitalism to continue, and as such rendered "excess" under sexual mythmaking and thus disposable under racial regimes, queer- and trans-of-color people and their kith and kin made for a world aspiring to provide very material sources of survival for one another on Tumblr.

Janelle Monáe's Last Supper offers a way to materialize a part of the ethos that queer- and trans-of-color people shaped and were shaped by on Tumblr, even if the "Crazy, Classic Life" video not directly represent it. To linger on this specific image and scene further, Monáe/Jane's Last Supper does more than portray the ways that mutual aid became a normalized part of Tumblr. When the camera pulls back to reveal the table in its whole, it becomes clear that, even accounting for the people not seated directly at the table, there are far more than twelve apostles sitting alongside Monáe/Jane. To take this image as a literal portrayal of the phrase, "A seat at the table," at this Sabbat, the proverbial "table" that often symbolizes elite power and "representation" at the highest levels of government, society, and visibility, is not the table that Monáe/Jane sits at. The table is abundant with both sustenance and bodies; there are people, too, who *refuse* to be seated. These figures, standing behind Monáe/Jane, are not outsiders being gatekept. They are equal participants in Monáe/Jane's party; they are still, even as they make the choice not to participate at this Last Supper, still part of the community. In this video, Monáe/Jane's table both invokes and denounces the yearning for elite representation that drives projects of gay assimilationism. Moreover, Monáe/Jane's overflowing table, like Tumblr, does not divorce interconnectivity and non-sexual connection from the erotic. At each end of the

and tightly squeezing his eyes shut attached directly underneath (pochowek 2018). As of October 2021, this post has just shy of 15,000 notes.

table are two nude figures, food piled atop them in the *nyotaimori*[35] style, linking material and erotic sustenance. The food that nourishes Monáe's partygoers, too, is connected to the erotic. Far from the bread and blood of Jesus as portrayed in da Vinci's *Last Supper,* Monáe/Jane's dinner table is populated with fruits and flowers, themselves the product of the sexual lives of plants. Pomegranates bursting with jewel-red seeds, an enduring symbol of fertility[36], appear to be the most common on the table, laying alongside bright green apples, yet another object in Western symbology for temptation and the profane. If it is fruit that will sustain the eclectic apostles of this dinner party at the end of the world, then it is the erotic more broadly that will keep them dancing through to dawn. And it is the erotic that cannot be separated from these people coming together, in all the ways that they do.

This, of course, returns us to Tumblr's erotics, and the ways in which it could not be separated from other, more "legitimate" forms of sociality and politics that developed in those queer- and trans-of-color communities who were indelibly shaped by—and indelibly shaped—the site's ethos. As Aguhar's work shows, the erotic was a part of what helped build communities on Tumblr; while it may not have been the *only* element that built up the site's ethos, it was a central element. This blending and bending of the antagonistic binaries that cleave the "private" realm of the erotic from the "public" realm of the political, this refusal to conform to or make appeals to hegemonic modes of sexual "acceptability," this embrace of the erotic and

[35] Literally translated into "body sushi," this is the practice of serving sushi on a nude body—oftentimes that of a woman. In the case of the *nyotaimori* figures in Monáe's Last Supper, the figures are male and female.
[36] The pomegranate's role as a fertility symbol has a long history in Western symbology; the Metropolitan Museum of Art's description of *The Unicorn Rests in a Garden*, perhaps the most famous of the *Unicorn Tapestries* series, describes the pomegranates in this piece as evidence that the unicorn is happy in its captivity, writing: "The unicorn could escape if he wished. Clearly, however, his confinement is a happy one, to which the ripe, seed-laden pomegranates in the tree—a medieval symbol of fertility and marriage—testify" (The Metropolitan Museum of Art 2021). The extent to which this piece represents "happiness under capture" perhaps speaks to the broader project of the enclosures, and the interlinkages between the making of the conditions through which capitalism could be born, and sexuality, gender, and reproduction during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when the *Unicorn Tapestries* were produced.

sexually "excess," not only challenged the binary antagonisms of difference-making that cleave the "political" from the "excess," but moreover, these modes of being worked to challenge those ontological orders that structure racial capitalism as a whole.

Or, to put it another way: if Tumblr was the table we set for ourselves, a table where we organized, fought, and nourished one another, clear among its offerings was the fleshy erotics of queer and trans-of-color people. And if, as Martin Manalansan IV writes, community is "a fluid movement between subjectivity/identity and collective action….[and] intrinsic to this use of the term 'community' is a sense of dissent and contestation along with a sense of belonging to a group or cause" (Manalansan IV [1994] 1999, 225-226), communities are necessarily coalitional. Like the Sabbat or Tumblr or Monáe/Jane's Last Supper, to be in community, *to commune,* necessarily requires a simple understanding: that we may not all be here at the end of the night. But until then, until we are touched by the *what comes after* of the end of the end of the world, we must commune together, ever-reaching towards queerness's horizon.

Conclusion

Sexual mythmaking, as a technology of racial capitalism, operates with racial mythmaking to reinforce not only hierarchies of difference, but racial capitalism's necessary logics of binary antagonisms that allow for difference-making to structure hierarchies of value and disposability in the first place. Examining Tumblr's role in a time period where sexual mythmaking was shifting and working to redefine those subjects within the categories of "sexually excess" and "sexually acceptable" offers a look at how queer- and trans-of-color subjects have theorized and lived modes of refusal and flight against the binarizing schemas that produce racial capitalism's necessary hierarchies.

Tumblr's end would not be the end of queer- and trans-of-color worldmaking online. Nor would it even be the end of Tumblr itself. The site still exists as of 2021, with a healthy userbase, even in spite of its "adult content" ban. But the *community* that was Tumblr before its adult content ban—the Tumblr of Blake Brockington and Mark Aguhar and all those queer-of-color beloved kith and kin who glanced upon one another—that community does not, cannot, exist. But even in their nonexistence, Tumblr's queer- and trans-of-color communities of the pre-adult content era continue to offer us a chance to glance towards utopia, their projects of quotidian refusal still valuable even if, in many ways, under many registers, these projects might be considered failures. After all, Muñoz himself recognizes the value in "queer failure," writing:

> It is important not to be content to let failed revolutions be merely finite moments. Instead we should consider them to the blueprints to a better world that queer utopian aesthetics supply. Silver clouds, swirls of camouflage, mirrors, as tack of white sheets of paper, and painted flowers are passports allowing us entry to a utopian path, a route that should lead us to heaven or, better yet, to something just like it ([2009] 2019, 146).

Even at its peak, Tumblr—as corporate entity, as digital infrastructure, as queer and trans-of-color community space—would not lead us to heaven. Underneath multicolored lighting and aesthetically-eclectic pornography and pink spinnerooni skirts and endless vortexes of muted blue, danger still churned alongside our digital Sabbat. But in shaping a politics of *communism without Communism* unique for its time, and in shaping, being shaped by, and continuing to shape a politics of refusal that, in refusing sexual mythmaking, opens up new worlds beyond racial captialism's necessary ordering ontologies, Tumblr got us somewhere close. It was just one queer party at the end of the world that produced conditions that allowed us to continue to survive, even if that meant just until the end of the night; even if that meant, for some of us, survival of the no-longer alive.

Let me paint another scene of a queer party at the end of the world, another gathering of queer- and trans-of-color people trying to sustain each other in the ongoing churn of the

apocalyptic. This party, like the queer, Afrofuturistic witch's sabbat of "Crazy, Classic, Life" did not visually reflect Tumblr, but regardless, it shared features of the kinds of worlds that queer- and trans-of-color people created on Tumblr. And it was a party that, like Tumblr in December 2018, would usher in a world's end.

It's March 9, 2020. The evening before, I'd flown back from Boston—another conference, in another life, one before the life of pandemic anxiety and isolation that, as of December 2021, we have long become accustomed to. The sensible part of me knew that I should be resting and recovering from East-to-West coast jet lag, but the sensible part of me has never ever quite won out, not when warring with my sentimental side. And shared queer traditions, even in retrospect, always make me sentimental.

For the third year in a row, my friend Chaz and I are making the long, exhausting drive from the bowels of Orange County and up into Los Angeles to take part in OutFest Fusion. During this year, we decided to watch the *Latinxcellence* short film series. It's the last show of the last night of the festival, and it's a ways away from the main row of West Hollywood tourist trap theaters, the ones where tall, wealthy West Hollywood gays would mingle in the lobbies, looking inconvenienced to even be there. On this night, Chaz and I pull into a parking lot in a sleepy park, a gravel-lined path leading us to Plaza de la Raza in Lincoln Heights. It's misting, rare even in drought-stricken Southern California's early spring, but there's something refreshing about it as we walk to the venue. Once we arrive, it feels less like making our way through a film festival and more like a casual Sunday night party: people are mulling about the Plaza engaged in conversations; there are tacos and horchata provided, unthinkable at such a public event today. It's the exact opposite of our past two Outfest Fusion excursions, which led us through enough of Los Angeles's downtown traffic to induce a stress headache and where the only form of

nourishment either of us could manage was a hasty McDonalds lunch one year and an overpriced, “high-end” Belgian waffle the next.

Though music and conversations surely filled the space, those moments before we entered the theater are quiet and ever warm in my memory, tinged bright and nearly cinematic, as if lit up by the very same colorful mood lighting that would make up a beautiful image set on Tumblr. Someone from the community starts handing out safer sex kits and what would usually be a sobering reminder of a crisis still ongoing, of the apocalyptic still unfolding, becomes a funny joke between Chaz and I. There is laughter. There is community. There is a beautiful butch person in a denim jacket standing two spots in front of us. I think about talking to them. I don’t, and in the back of my mind, I regret it for the rest of the night.

When we are eventually let into the theater, we try to keep our distance from other attendees, the shadow of a then-dismissed pandemic looming large in that room, even still. I flinch at every cough. But even still, even when the organizers politely ask us to squeeze in closer together to accommodate more people, no one argues. In the dark, there is something intimate about squeezing together among strangers on the precipice of a global pandemic. For even if it carried some sort of risk, one that we would recognize much later to be much greater than we had assumed before, it was in service of letting more people in, not *only* for the sake of honoring the cold calculations of film festival ticket sales, not *only* to extend the distribution possibilities of these films, but for collective care, for a form of survival: small, yes. But survival, nonetheless. It wasn’t simply survival to extend the reach of these consumer products, but because these films—written, directed by, and starring queer and trans Latinx people—were stories that needed to be told; they were avenues, in a very limited way, for counternarratives to be given their due.

I am not describing this night only to be saccharine, nor do I wish to overstate the radical or world-making potential of this moment. The question of who was present and who wasn't allowed to be present in this space—an elite space, a space sponsored by one of the largest, best-funded queer film organizations, a space funded by corporate death-bringing entities like Gilead[37] and Bank of America—rings loudly, especially given this screening's locale: Lincoln Heights, even as a community historically populated by Latino people, is quickly gentrifying, just as all of Los Angeles continues to gentrify. Even beyond the ambivalence of our role within the space, this warm, gauzy space was not free of fear; we still were, proverbially, looking over our shoulders. Like all queer- and trans-of-color worlds, the world that we made and moved through during that night was not without danger on the horizon. Though somewhat dismissed, the specter of COVID's long shadow haunted this screening, even long before lockdowns went into effect and the full, long impact of the disease was better-known. Moreover, free "safer sex" kits were distributed among the crowd, gesturing towards another crisis-not-yet-over, another apocalypse yet ongoing in the form of the HIV/AIDS crisis. Even within that space of exuberance and celebration, it was abundantly clear: as queer- and trans-of-color people, we make our lives at the end of the world.

Under conventional understandings of political efficacy, success—and even the political itself—is marked through some sort of tangible change: policy change, the creation of ongoing coalitions and organizations, material changes that, even if against the operations of the state, are legible under the eye of the state, "informal" political projects or not. But for queer- and trans-of-color people, ephemerality, affect, and eroticism is just as important in terms of making and

[37] Upon first writing this, I misspelled "Gilead" as "Gildead." I am leaving this in a note to let the hauntings of Gilead's patent, and those exposed to premature death as a result of it, in—to live with us, to breathe with us, to survive, even if only on-paper.

imagining new ideas of ourselves, our communities, and our political coalitions as is the "real" substance of political organizing. Sometimes, all we have is each other, and even then, only for a moment. Ephemerality—especially the ephemerality of marginalized and fluid communities, spaces, and *people*—cannot be accounted for in a politics that recognizes only that which is legible to the state, capital, and all its arms of ordering.

And what this moment, what Tumblr's queer archipelago, what its swirling vortex, what "Crazy, Classic, Life" shows us, ephemeral though they may all be, is that the lives we make at the end of the world are defined by surviving in community. Queer- and trans-of-color life continues on, glancing and dancing towards Muñoz's horizon that is queerness, not by begging for seats at a table that was never, can never be, big enough for all of us. Nor does queer and trans-of-color life dance on through appeals for imbrication within racial capitalism's ontology of antagonistic binaries, as Mark Aguhar and Blake Brockington show us. Instead, we survive by embracing that kaleidoscopic, leaderless difference of Monáe's Last Supper: by rejecting rulers and vanguards and crowning all of us, each of us, callout queens and prom kings, an infinity of crowns to be worn by, as Ella Baker might term it, our "leaderful" masses. We survive by caring for one another until the night's end. We survive, in many ways, by recognizing our capacity—in many ways, our inevitability—of falling apart.

But until that day of our parting arrives, or at least until the sun rises over queerness's horizon, we survive. Leaderless, excess, erotic, unindexable, kaleidoscopic, and terminally online, we survive.

CODA: ENDS UPON ENDS

As I was finishing up this draft, on December 21, 2021—three years after Tumblr's 2018 adult content ban—Tumblr implemented another policy change, this time, banning keywords from the site. While some of the keywords banned from the site relate back to Tumblr's ban on explicit content—"DILF," "Fucking," and even "Eros" are completely blocked, according to a crowdsourced banned words list—others are more benign, like "girls," "paint mixing," and even "ask to tag." This shift in policy comes in response to Apple's iOS safety policy, echoing Tumblr's brief removal from the Apple app store in 2018. As Nicolás Rivero writes for *Quartz*:

> Apple's safety policy states that iOS apps "should not include content that is offensive, insensitive, upsetting, intended to disgust, in exceptionally poor taste, or just plain creepy," and goes on to detail specific prohibitions on porn, gore, hate speech, content that encourages self-harm, and so on.…With its latest change, Tumblr appears to have taken a very broad interpretation of Apple's rules" (Rivero 2021).

Importantly, banned words list extends beyond sexual content, in accordance with the broad scope of Apple's "safety policy." Terms such as "antiblackness," "donate," "misogyny," "racism," "sex education," "safe sex," "suicide prevention," "transmisogyny," and "transphobia" were the words that are outright banned from being tagged on Tumblr's iOS app, with other tags like "ACAB," "anti native racism," "biphobia," "lesbophobia," "slut shaming," and "trigger warning" yielding empty search results.

As I have noted in the chapters above, before the 2018 adult content ban, Tumblr acted as a central digital space where users of marginalized backgrounds—but especially queer- and trans-of-color users—could discuss issues of power and violence; at its height, Tumblr was a space where political education could and often did happen. From this ban, the subtext of Tumblr's 2018 adult content ban becomes text, and the digital dragnets that coincidentally ended Tumblr's queer- and trans-of-color worlds are now no longer so coincidental. But it is important to remember that Tumblr staff's implementation of new policies is a response to forces much

more expansive than the site itself. Apple's iOS store's draconian "safety" policies are less meant to ensure the safety of all users and more to protect itself from legal liability—which was expanded with FOSTA-SESTA's passage and implementation in early 2018. This focus on "safety," often centered on the focus of protecting children, as I have noted, is less an expansive understanding of "safety" and more an expansion of apparatuses of surveillance and policing—to the detriment of children at the intersection of multiple marginalized social locations.

Tumblr's shift in policy comes as no surprise, given the shift in 2021 to demand more surveillance, more policing, and less anonymity on the internet, and especially given the increased scrutiny being placed on social media and web service companies. But as in 2018, the result of this is that queer- and trans-of-color subjects—especially queer- and trans-of-color youth—bear the brunt of such policing.

Despite the expansiveness of Tumblr's 2021 tag bans, some users have found workarounds, such as including a period after tags to bypass the algorithms that block such tags. This dedication to subverting the digital automations of order reflects an unruly politics that has become normalized on Tumblr, something that has persisted even three years after the adult content ban's implementation. It will be unsurprising if Tumblr halts this workaround, too. But queer and trans-of-color modes of resistance persists. What fugitive worlds may develop out of this shift Tumblr's in policy, though, are yet still to be seen.

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